

POLICY WATCH

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Specialised Diplomas move to Stage 2

We're coming up to the next significant stage in the life cycle of the 14 - 19 specialised Diplomas. In the coming months, the next layer of detail will be added to the outline structure of the first five Diploma lines as Awarding Bodies work with Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs) to develop full blown awards. Here begins Stage 2 of the development process.

There may be sector differences in approach but details will be presented on a common template. This will hold important information on agreed learning outcomes by Level and advice and guidance on a range of delivery and assessment issues. The aim, under the terms of the 14 - 19 Implementation Plan, is to have the first five Diploma lines ready by summer 2007 so that providers can start planning for first teaching from September 2008. There's a lot going on besides of course to build the necessary infrastructure that will make these Diplomas a success but all eyes will increasingly be on the first sightings of the overall award.

The original message was that these Diplomas would be very different, "a radical shift" in the words of Ms Kelly, "high quality, high status vocational routes of learning that offer young people real choice and opportunity" according to the DfES press release that accompanied last year's 14 - 19 White Paper. Part of the reason for such lavish language, apart from obvious Government gusto, was the identification of applied learning as a defining characteristic. "At least 50% of principal learning will feature real or realistic sector situations, to ensure it can accurately be described as applied" confirmed QCA's handbook on Diploma Qualification structure earlier this year. Ministers have been equally keen. "What's different about these qualifications" said the Schools Minister in her recent address to the ATL conference before being shuffled off in the latest cabinet changes "is that students won't just learn the theory in the classroom, they will also spend a significant amount of time learning in a more practical and work related way." It will be interesting to see how fully this applied principle remains through Stage 2.

Three further factors have emerged designed to make these Diplomas feel different. First the learner has now clearly shifted centre stage. A good example of this can be seen in the critical success 'wheel' developed for the IT specialised Diploma. This has the learner as the central hub of nine critical success factors and thereby ensures that personalisation becomes a defining factor in Diploma design. Secondly the emphasis on collaborative provision. The reasons for such emphasis may be various, less money in the system, fewer learners coming through, but the logic is irresistible - collaborative provision means greater opportunities for learners and helps spread resources. Unsurprisingly the importance of collaborative provision features heavily in all early Diploma drafts. And third the bringing together of "employers and educators" to develop Diplomas. In truth employers have always been closely involved in the design of traditional vocational qualifications but the creation of national system of Sector Skill Agreements has formalised this. The impact can be seen in the draft for the Creative and Media

Diploma where “we have asked industry to articulate the essential knowledge and skills that young people should develop at this age and level of learning.”

So how are things shaping up? The recent Gateway Note from the DfES lifted the lid a little. “Content continues to emerge and develop but these outlines should give a flavour of what will be in the first five Diplomas.” In fact flavour is a bit ambitious; some models are more advanced than others and there are still some difficult questions to resolve. It is possible however to get a taste by piecing together ingredients from the QCA handbook and the Gateway Paper.

The QCA handbook confirmed the basic model of a specialised Diploma as the familiar blend of principal learning, additional/specialist learning and generic learning though with differing proportions at each Level. Thus the weighting of principal learning at Levels 1, 2 and 3 respectively is 40%, 56% and 48% reflecting the changing importance of sector specific learning at each stage. Elsewhere there’s a greater emphasis on generic learning, 40% at Level 1 because this is “critical to successful progress to Level 2” but a greater weighting, 33%, of specialist learning at Level 3 to prepare learners for progression to employment or HE. These and other details, many based on work undertaken by Warwick University, can all be found in the QCA publication.

Early structures seem to be reflecting these principles. For instance, the proposed structure for the IT Diploma at Levels 3 and 2 is 2/3 principal learning and 1/3 additional learning and at Level 1, 1/3 functional skills, 1/3 principal learning and 1/3 options. The principal learning at Levels 2 and 3 concentrates on Business and Technology and has 8 modules. At Level 3 these are likely to include ‘People and Organisations,’ ‘IT solutions,’ ‘Business Communications’ and of course an Extended Project. Level 2 functional skills will be required, maths will be embedded and work experience will be incorporated. Level 1 will take up 600 guided learning hours (glh,) equivalent in time to 4 - 5 GCSEs and could be completed in one or two years alongside the national curriculum. Level 2 requires 800 glh, equivalent in time to 5 - 6 GCSEs and could be completed in two years alongside national curriculum requirements or one year post 16. Level 3 requires 1,080 glh, so equivalent in time to 3 A levels and would take 2 years full time.

Health and Social Care has been looking at a number of common themes across the health and social care, children’s workforce and community justice sectors. Some core themes are emerging, such as Welfare and Justice Developments which will be reflected in the Diplomas. Similarly Construction and the Built Environment has been looking at management, enterprise, maths, materials, science and design. Engineering is likely to focus on three ‘key elements;’ people, process and systems. 10 themes are emerging at Level 3 including Design Principles for CAE, Materials Technology, Contracting and Tendering, Process Control Systems and Business Improvement. Finally Creative and Media has been looking at a range of sectors including the Arts, Media and Design and building a common core through these comprising understanding the industry, thinking creatively and industry context.

There’s clearly still a lot to resolve, not least in the relationship with existing vocational qualifications. As the Gateway Paper explains “the process of creating Diplomas requires a review of existing qualifications and Diplomas will include these (or units) where they meet employer and HE requirements.” This will become more apparent during Stage 2 but babies and bath water spring to mind.

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