

## POLICY WATCH

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### Learning Outcomes and Content for the first 5 specialised Diplomas

We now have the Statements of Content for the first five specialised Diplomas. They arrive a few weeks after QCA release an updated 'manual' on the structure, assessment and grading for specialised Diplomas. The broad outlines have thus been set and a frisson of activity around the qualification hangs in the air.

It all points to a pretty frenetic next six months or so. In launching the Statements at the end of July, the Minister talked of "a growing sense of momentum building within schools and colleges keen to get on with delivering reforms." Given that 14 - 19 reform at least in its current form, has been high on the policy priority list since David Blunkett put it there in his speech to the 2000 North of England conference, it's no wonder but the momentum needs careful management. While schools and colleges spend the autumn getting to grips with the self assessment procedures necessary to meet the Gateway criteria, Awarding Bodies, DDPs and qualification writers will be beaver away on the Diploma qualification details. The former has to be completed by the end of December 2006, the latter have to be ready for accreditation by the end of March 2007 with the first of two checkpoint consultations due probably around November 2006. The seasons of autumn mist may rapidly turn blue if things don't go to plan.

It's not easy developing new qualifications especially ones as strategically important as these. On the day that the DfES officially released the Statements with an appropriate fanfare, "the first Diplomas are really taking shape and they provide a vision of the future of learning for 14 - 19 year olds," the *Times Ed* ran with a story about 'signs of trouble over the new Diplomas' and *The Independent* argued that 'new Diplomas are on the wrong track.'

It was ever thus perhaps but these Diplomas do perhaps face three particular hurdles. First they need face down lingering resentment about the abandonment of the more sweeping Tomlinson proposals. Second, they need to be able to satisfy a sweep of competing demands, for example encouraging more youngsters to stay on while at the same time "appeal to gifted and talented students preparing for the most demanding university courses." And third they need to be able to contend with an inevitable advance guard of expectation. 'Innovative, exciting, appealing, aspirational and stretching' are the adjectives used to describe the Diplomas in the DfES press release. Expectations as demanding as these can weigh heavily; just ask the World Cup Team.

So how clear are we now about the broad structure of these qualifications? The QCA 'manual' provides a useful summary of where we're at. The Diploma will have a common structure across all 14 lines of learning based around three familiar components; principal learning, additional/specialist learning and generic learning. Precise weightings of components vary by Level. Thus at Level 1, where the focus is more introductory, principal learning as a proportion of the overall qualification

is set within the range of 30 - 45%, with additional learning 15 - 30% but generic learning at 40%. The driving force of applied learning, "application in work based contexts," is set at a minimum of 20% across the total qualification. The Diploma at Level 1 "also offers 25% of the principal learning for selection by the learner either from the same line or from a different line or sector.

At Level 2, the weighting of principal learning is greater, within the range of 45 - 60% of the overall qualification but that of generic learning lesser at 25%; additional learning remains the same at 15 - 30% of the overall qualification while the minimum percentage of learning across the qualification that must be concerned with applied learning is 27.5%. At Level 3, the weightings are 40 - 60% for principal learning, 20 - 40% for additional learning and 20% for generic learning with at least 25% across the qualification as a whole to be in an applied context. The minimum size of a unit has yet to be determined but for development purposes multiples of 30 guided learning hours (glhs) are being used.

Overall, a Level 1 Diploma requires 600 glhs which puts it broadly comparable in terms of hours of study to 4 -5 D - G GCSEs and allows for inclusion of national curriculum core and entitlement within or alongside. The Level 2 requires 800 glhs and is thus comparable in terms of hours of study to 5 -6 A\* - C GCSEs and may, like the Level 1, be taken over one or two years depending on what's taken with it. The Level 3 at 1,080 glhs is broadly comparable in hours to 3 A levels and can be completed as a 2 year f/t programme but there is also an option of a smaller progression qualification at 720 glhs broadly comparable in study time to 2 A levels. All Diplomas will have external assessment though the proportion may vary by line and they will be graded.

As to what's likely to be in the Diplomas, the Summary of Learning Outcomes provides a glimpse set out under purpose, themes and topics in each case. Details so far cover just the first 5 Diplomas though that for the wide ranging 'lines' of Creative and Media and Health and Social Care are still subject to further consultation up to September/Oct. Generally the Outcomes will be supported by guidance on content and suggested activities and approaches to learning.

In each case, Level 1 is to provide an introductory programme, Level 2 to develop "broad understanding and working knowledge" and Level 3 to develop "a range of analytical and investigative skills and knowledge," to a particular sector. As to the themes and topics, these are still subject to further reworking but it is possible to get a fair sense of what typical programmes might involve from the details so far.

Construction and Built Environment has three principal learning themes; Design, Create and Value/Use of the Built Environment with a range of additional learning options covering construction, building services and management of built assets. Creative and Media has a common core of 4 principal learning themes, Creativity in Context, Thinking and Working Creatively, Principles, Processes and Practice and Creative Businesses which can be developed in a range of disciplines. Engineering a number of principal learning themes, which depending on the Level include The Engineered World, Discovering Engineering Technology, Engineering the Future and Analytical Methods for Engineering with a range of different pathway options. Health and Social Care have a range of 15 principal learning themes depending on the Level also with a number of specialist pathways while IT has 3 principal learning themes, business, people and technology with the focus developing by Level. Only a quick glimpse; there's so much happening between the covers.

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