

POLICY WATCH

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14 - 19 Diplomas face the weight of expectation

"For now sits Expectation in the air." How far are Shakespeare's words becoming an issue for 14 - 19 reform?

Any high profile education reform these days comes accompanied with full orchestration but the noise of the fanfare announcing the advance of 14 - 19 reform has perhaps been more clamorous than many.

Three months ago, the DfES announced the release of the draft Learning Outcomes for the first five Lines of Learning in a press release that used not one but five different adjectives to describe the specialised Diplomas; "innovative, exciting, aspirational, stretching and appealing." They may well be, but the point is that they haven't actually been written up as full qualifications yet. What we have at the moment are the criteria, firstly for the Diploma itself and secondly for each of the five Lines of Learning at three levels. "These criteria" according to the details now on the QCA website, "provide the framework within which the Awarding Bodies create the details of the specifications and set out its requirements for how the qualification operates."

In other words, these criteria provide the all important first step for the detailed development work to be undertaken - the qualification now has to be written. Yet last week, the Schools Minister was banging the drum again in his address to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. "This is so exciting" he raved "because it's a brand new approach - these qualifications aren't like anything we've seen before." He went on to describe how "Doctors may talk to young people on health care Diplomas about the realities of life in hospitals or the GP surgery" and drew the comparison with current learning whereby "instead of wearily dusting off their textbooks young people will be able to put their learning into practice in a whole range of ways." He did admit to "feeling a bit evangelical this morning" but the phrase, 'dusty textbooks,' suggests he was feeling a bit nostalgic as well.

A day later, his boss, the Education Secretary was also on song arguing that "this (Diploma) programme has the potential to bring down the barriers which have stood between vocational training and professional qualifications, which has proved so distractive to our nation for so long."

Of course the Government's unbridled enthusiasm for applied or practical or vocational education is to be welcomed, there's a lot of catching up to be done but there are at least three worries in this rush of excitement.

One is that it's extremely difficult for any qualification to become an overnight success, the rule of thumb always used to be that it took a generation for a qualification to become fully accepted. In the case of such an important qualification as the specialised Diploma which has a lot of baggage to contend with and a completely new system that needs building, it may take even longer. As Ken

Boston explained in his recent speech to the Nuffield Review, "no university or employer can be expected to confirm today that they will give equal status to both GCEs and Diplomas. The Diplomas must earn their spurs."

Secondly that while any new qualification inevitably feels more exciting and its challenges fresher, that shouldn't mean ignoring what's already out there. In this case the whole bedrock of vocational education that has been carefully built up, often at grass roots level against the odds and currently providing successfully for many. The new kid may have a lot to learn from such wise, old shoulders. And thirdly, focusing solely on the end product and its potential benefits runs the risk of minimising the often intensive developmental and implementation stages that need to be gone through first to get to those benefits; the pain before the gain.

So perhaps a check on the current picture around specialised Diplomas is in order.

First, as mentioned earlier, most of the recent weeks have been spent getting the criteria for the first five Lines of Learning and the Diploma itself sorted out. Pressure points have included agreeing a standard size for the Principal Learning in each Line, not easy when Creative and Media for instance has to embrace up to 22 different disciplines; providing opportunities to develop the six skills under Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills, and sorting out the procedures for identifying Additional/Specialist Learning. The criteria will soon be finished and can be seen currently in draft form on QCA's website.

Second, and as part of the framework for regulations, the criteria for what's known as the CABs and DABs has been developed. CABs are Awarding Bodies that offer components for the Diploma while a DAB stands for a (full) Diploma Awarding Body. The full set of responsibilities that goes with each can again be seen in a draft Paper on the QCA website.

Third, intensive work is under way on the development of a central IT system, one that can manage the collection and aggregation of learner data and confirm achievement. At present the system resides under the name of the Greek goddess of wisdom - Minerva.

Fourth, in the area of Functional Skills, preparation is in hand for trialling of the standards and test, task and portfolio items from January 2007 prior to a controlled pilot from September 2007.

Fifth, two year piloting of the Extended Project at Level 3 has now begun with full roll out due from Sept 2008.

Sixth, the position on overall grading is due to be confirmed around the end of the year.

For those with limited experience of the joys of qualification development of such magnitude, the experience can be a roller coaster ride of both pleasant surprises and unforeseen disappointments. Which it ultimately is, often depends on how much expectation is built up in advance.

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