

POLICY WATCH

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The Specialised Diploma Gateway. 14 - 19 Reform Group

Not quite an MOT or even a health check yet there's a touch of both in the Gateway process, the process that will be used to determine which providers are fit, able and in sound working order to offer specialised Diplomas from 2008 on. This Paper begins to spell out some of the detail about the criteria to be used.

The Gateway process was first outlined in last December's 14 - 19 Implementation Plan. In a word it's a bit like a centre approval process, 'designed to test out the readiness of providers to be able to offer specialised Diplomas' and to identify where more help and support might be needed. Only those providers who pass through the Gateway process will be able to take part in the Diploma pilot and offer Diplomas in 2008, a sifting process that's likely to operate for successive waves in 2009 and 2010 as well. In a new development on the original Gateway model, ultimate decisions on eligibility will be taken by regional panels comprising Government Offices, LSCs, DDPs, QCA and Awarding Bodies.

Early drafts indicated that it would be most unusual for providers to operate on their own and this expectation remains. "Schools, colleges and others are expected to deliver specialised Diplomas as part of a collaborative local partnership, rather than acting independently." So it will be consortia who are expected to show they can meet the criteria rather than individual institutions. Many local areas already have well established local partnership arrangements perhaps built under Increased Flexibility, Pathfinder or other local arrangements. However new and other forms of partnership will also be considered. Not every partnership will want offer everything, some may want to concentrate on just a few Diploma 'lines,' some may want to phase in gradually; what matters is the quality of what's on offer not the extent. That said the Paper is "keen to select some consortia who will deliver all five lines" and in a point that makes sense in terms of progression "we are keen that consortia should begin to offer all levels of a Diploma."

There's one other important caveat to be aware of and that is about functional skills. Although not part of the Gateway process, consortia proposing to submit under the Gateway will be expected to pick up on the functional skills pilots as well. These are being run by QCA and the Awarding Bodies initially from this September and more fully from September 2007. As an integral part of the overall Diploma, it's important that such skills are included in the planning from the start.

So what of the criteria that consortia will be expected to meet? There are five.

First of all providers are to be working together as part of a local consortium "with firm collaborative arrangements in place." Apart from new partnerships which the Paper recognises take some time to bed down, the key word here is "firm." This suggests a degree of maturity in working arrangements and on that basis would be evidenced by features like a mission statement, the setting out of roles and responsibilities and established processes for joint planning, funding and

communication. Consortia will also be expected to be working together on wider fronts such as curriculum development, progression opportunities and professional development. In many cases work that has gone into developing local prospectuses and due to be fully available in all areas by autumn 2007 may well prove invaluable here. More difficult may be the building of links with other partners - employers, Centres of Excellence, universities and so on which are easier to establish in some areas than others but which have featured prominently in the schools and FE White Papers of late and are stressed again here.

Second, advice and guidance. "Consortia should be able to demonstrate that they have in place, or are able to develop, effective collaborative delivery of impartial information, advice and guidance." The slight hesitation in here, the 'or are able to develop' reflects the transitional phase that advice and guidance is currently in following last year's Green Paper on Youth Matters which opened the door to a tendered service. The Government issued its response to this Paper in March and while it suggested that the Connexions brand might remain, it broadly supported the commissioning model. Picking through the bones of this one is therefore not easy but the sorts of things that will be looked for include effective information, marketing and support for young people and the inclusion of 14 - 19 progression opportunities within Local Authority Children and Young People's Plans.

The third and fourth criteria deal with resources, physical and then human. On physical resources it's difficult to know exactly what might be needed in advance of the detailed specs but two points are worth noting here. Firstly that any consortia worth its salt is expected to be undertaking some analysis of learning need and matching it against equipment needed, resource planning in other words. And secondly this is where the strength of collaborative arrangements come in because what one provider might not have, another might and very often this will be the local college, so careful asset planning is called for. On the human resource side, there are two issues; deployment and development of staff and how consortia undertake this. A lot of the training will be delivered through national bodies so it's not so much the actual training that's being sought but support for. In addition, consortia will need to have a "fully functioning exams office," a central hub for all the admin side.

Finally "effective links with both employers and HE." Again consortia must be able to demonstrate that they either have these already "or are able to develop them." These can be notoriously time consuming to nurture and in rural areas, difficult to establish. However working through consortia rather than as individuals can save time and costs, many colleges, consortia and Local Authorities already have established relationships and it will be the plans being laid down for such engagement that will be sought rather than a fully fledged engagement calendar.

What happens next? At the moment these are only "outline criteria," offered to help with local planning; further guidance will follow this September. Interested consortia should submit an expression of interest listing consortia make up, the Diplomas they might offer and some idea of student numbers all squeezed on to one side of A4, to their Local Authority in time for these to be collated and passed on to the DfES by 30 June 2006. Detailed bids will need to be submitted by those consortia who still want to go for it by December 2006 and decisions will be made early in 2007. These will then be picked up by Awarding Bodies from September 2007 to ensure they meet approval requirements. This feels like a lengthy medical.

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