

POLICY WATCH

2007/29

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The latest burst of 14 - 19 developments: An Update

38: that's the number of things on the 'to do' list that the 92 consortia in Category 1 (approved without condition to offer Diplomas from September 2008) and the 53 in Category 2, (also approved to offer Diplomas from September 2008 but with conditions) need to have sorted between now and September 2007. And that's just for starters.

The full details are set out in a Summary Checklist included in the Information Pack provided as part of the recent Gateway announcements. No doubt the list is already pinned up on many co ordinators' walls but that's not all; for the Gateway results signal another burst of activity around 14 - 19 learning.

Not in the Pack for instance but very useful is the recent paper from QCA on '*Assessment and Grading of the Diploma.*' This confirms the principles established so far and identifies where further work is needed.

In terms of principles established so far, the Paper underlines that the overall grade will be drawn only from the Principal Learning (including the PLTS) and the Project and that with no requirement to separately pass all or specific units "good performance within one unit can compensate for poor performance within another." In a move which signifies the importance of the six Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS,) those wider skills that employers often value so highly but which can be difficult to embed and assess, they will be assessed within the Principal Learning units but separately recorded on the Diploma transcript.

While the overall grade will be drawn from the 3 Ps (Principal Learning, PLTS and Project,) the overall Diploma cannot be awarded until the other requirements have been met. These include the requisite level in Functional Skills, related achievement in Additional and Specialist Learning and the 10 days minimum of work experience. The actual descriptors to be used for grading purposes remain at present under further consultation. At Level 1 there will be 3 grades + Fail, at Level 2, 4 grades + Fail and at Level 3, 6 grades + Fail. The initial intention had been to consider the use of the current GCE/GCSE A* - F grading letters but the worry is that this might mean the Diploma would lose some of its distinctive identity, seem like an alternative form of GCSE for instance, so consultation will follow to determine a different set of "signifiers."

Grading descriptors is therefore one area where further work is needed. Other areas include the setting of national standards for which a national Marking Criteria and Comparability Technical Group is proposed. Another is how best to support internal assessment where a system of trained chartered assessors is favoured. This is a concept that's been around for some time and is now under the remit of the Institute of Education Assessors.



A particular problem is how to ensure consistency of demand especially where there are different suppliers and packages. "The Grading Group have concerns that existing volume measures are not consistent across the different qualification types and that this presents difficulties in establishing the requirement for the Additional and Specialist Learning." Eventually this is to be defined in terms of credit as part of the QCF but as this Framework will not be sufficiently operative until 2008, an interim measure is needed, possibly guided learning hours. QCA will release further details in July 2007 in what's being called the Diploma Catalogue.

Many teachers will need careful help and support in operating the assessment and grading system for Diplomas and the DfES has confirmed that "each successful consortium will receive £30,000 for each type of Diploma they will offer, to help them train and recruit staff." In fact, staff training is one of the major headings on the 'to do' list. Over the next few months successful consortia will need to have carried out a training needs audit, identified staff for Diploma and Functional Skills training, identified support for Exams Officers and investigated the support available from the NCSL/CEL for managers and leaders.

Another important area on the 'to do' list is that of employer engagement. The recent CBI Report '*Time Well Spent*' might prove useful here especially to those consortia worried about work experience. Aimed mainly at employers, the Report sets out a list of competencies that the CBI consider make up employability and which can usefully be developed during work experience. There are seven: self - management, team working, business and customer awareness, problem solving, communication and literacy, application of numeracy and application IT.

Running through all of these and emphasised in the Report is the importance of a 'can do' approach, "a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make those ideas happen." The Report includes a number of case studies illustrating how different employers are currently providing work experience as well as a section on how these competencies can be embedded in work experience programmes. At Boots, for instance, students "receive coaching from store team members on appropriate ways to deal with customers" as part of their Business and Customer Awareness competency.

A central message here is the importance of proper planning for work experience; the better it's planned the more employers are able to help and the more youngsters get out of it. It's a point that employers have been making for some time and was highlighted for instance in the recent Trident report for the DfES on work experience. As the Minister said in launching the Report, "the old standard of ten days making tea, unpicking staples and becoming intimately acquainted with the filing cabinet must be banished forever."

Work experience and assessment/grading are just two areas where activity is intense at present. There is plenty more. This month the CABs and DABs have been announced, that's the Component Awarding Bodies and the Diploma Awarding Bodies for the first five lines. In addition, the Functional Skills qualifications are being accredited and pilot centres confirmed. Next month the quality standards for the commissioning and delivering of Information, Advice and Guidance are released and of course the first five Diploma lines shipped off for accreditation.

'30 days hath September, April, June and November.' Why didn't they think about Diplomas and add more days when they were devising the Gregorian calendar?

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