

## CAMPAIGN FOR LEARNING POLICY BRIEFING NOTE

### IMPLEMENTING 14-19 QUALIFICATION AND CURRICULUM REFORM

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15<sup>th</sup> April 2008, 10.30pm - 12.30pm, Campaign for Learning, London, WC1N 6EF

*The Campaign for Learning's policy briefings respond quickly to the publication of key papers and leading policy issues and offer essential information and analysis to inform the whole work of policy makers. This Paper summarises a recent seminar hosted by the Campaign looking at the recent DCSF Paper on a 'Strategy for 14 - 19 Qualifications' in England. The seminar consisted of two presentations, one summarising the Strategy Paper as a whole and the other commenting on aspects of it along with roundtable discussion.*

#### INTRODUCTION

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One of the questions that has dogged 14-19 Diplomas from the start, and there've been quite a few, is just what relationship they should have with other established qualifications such as A' levels and BTECs. This latest Paper from the DCSF sets out some principles for determining that relationship and introduces a new body, the Joint Advisory Committee for Qualifications Approval to operate them. It may seem like yet another 14-19 announcement but this one matters.

The relationship between Diplomas and other qualifications matters for a number of reasons.

Firstly because uncertainty is the enemy of curriculum planning, it stymies curriculum reform and makes change, particularly of the magnitude of Diplomas, even harder to achieve.

Secondly because part of the drive behind curriculum reform at 14-19 is to bring a better sense of order and simplicity to the qualification system. The qualification system is not always as complicated as headlines would have it - the figure of 6,500 qualifications available at 14-19 for instance identified by the *Education Guardian* is pretty accurate but misses the point that many of these cater for a specialist need, though the point remains - young people need clear and progressive options and a cluttered system hinders this. As Ed Balls told the ASCL conference the other week, "*it is vital that we have not only a more comprehensive, but also a more simple and coherent qualification system for young people;*" comprehensive and simple don't always sit well together but we get the point.

Thirdly because since Ed Balls declared last autumn that he wanted to see Diplomas as the qualification of choice for young people, there has been increasing debate about what happens to other current qualifications of choice, notably BTECs which have proved enduringly popular and provoked considerable discussion in last year's Select Committee Inquiry, and A' levels, still regarded as the major route into higher education and, despite mutterings off stage each summer, still offered by most schools and colleges.

## A SUMMARY OF THE 14 - 19 QUALIFICATION STRATEGY PAPER

STEVE BESLEY, HEAD OF POLICY, EDEXCEL

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Steve began by outlining two contextual pointers to the Paper.

First that there has been considerable development of the Diploma concept over the last six months. Much of this has come from Ed Balls, who since he was appointed Secretary of State last summer, has made 14-19 reform central to his long-term children and young people's agenda. This has resulted in Diplomas being carefully positioned as the 'long-term qualification of choice,' in further options being added to the Diploma portfolio through new 'lines,' and in new funding and planning mechanisms being proposed as part of the Machinery of Government changes. A critical part of these changes, and one less well recognised, is the increasing emphasis being placed on getting a balance of provision under the Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL) component of the Diploma. ASL opportunities need to be 'right' because they provide the progression opportunities for young people.

Second, that despite all this activity, or possibly because of it, considerable unease remains about how far Diplomas will take off. There were perhaps a number of reasons for this nagging feeling of unease not least the growing burden of expectation placed on the Diploma, difficulties in understanding just what it is, even a perverse form of pleasure in seeing things go wrong first but principally because there has been so much uncertainty about just where the Diploma should sit in the qualification framework and what impact this might have on other qualifications. This positioning issue was raised in the Select Committee Inquiry into Diplomas last year and this latest Strategy is seen as a response to that concern.

Turning to the Strategy, two features are worth noting from the start. First that it is based on advice from the 14-19 Expert Advisory Group, which has been advising Ed Balls on 14-19 policy since last autumn and has now completed its brief. Second that in tone and approach, it appears more cautious than previous announcements on 14-19 reform. "We are committed" it says from the start, "to managing the change carefully, building a strong evidence base and listening to views." As for what it is trying to do, four objectives stand out: tidy up the current qualification framework, hence the dropping of Applied A levels and the Advanced Extension Award; streamline the future 14-19 qualification framework, hence the proposal to move to four qualification 'suites'; ensure choice but within planned conditions, hence the emphasis on ensuring choice and entitlement is preserved; set the conditions for the 2013 review, hence the determining of criteria for public funding until the review is completed.

There are some interesting asides to the Strategy such as the removal of the Blair funding pledge supporting IB expansion, the proposal to commit to a credit-based framework for 14-19 qualifications in due course, and the expansion of 'elite' provision at level 3 in the form of the Pre-U at the same time as streamlining provision elsewhere.

But the "two key elements" in the Strategy are the new criteria for determining which qualifications will be funded at least in the short-term and the new machinery being introduced to operate the criteria.

The criteria are spelt out in an Annex in the Paper and in summary are as follows. Qualifications that form part of the nation suites, that's A levels, GCSEs, Diplomas, Apprenticeships and the Foundation Learning Tier, will "generally" be funded. There will be a presumption against approving new free-standing qualifications unless a clear case can be proven. As for other existing qualifications, in effect they will have to pass a series of 'tests' to qualify for funding. These tests are **volume**, will there be at least 100 certifications in a year; **need**, are needs not being met through existing suites; **effectiveness**, are needs not being effectively met through existing needs; **availability**, are parts of the national suite not available in parts of the country; and finally **value for money**?

As for the new machinery introduced to operate this system, there are three aspects. First a new 'independent body,' the Joint Advisory Committee for Qualifications Approval (JACQA). This will be a nominated body, convened by the new Curriculum Development and Qualifications Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency and it will consider

qualifications put forward by awarding bodies on a case-by-case basis. Second, a new biennial sweep of the system, looking across the board at the offer, how well it's meeting needs, how far it's supporting achievement and whether there are any gaps. This will include now formal input through their Qualification Strategies from SSCs. This series of reviews will begin in 2009 and lay the basis for the 2013 review. And third, qualifications will now be subject to a new regulatory body in the shape of Ofqual which in the first instance will apply similar approval systems as QCA but which over time may focus more on high profile and poorly performing qualification suites. As it stands, Ofqual will consider qualifications before JACQA but arguably this should be the other way round.

## COMMENTARY ON THE 14 - 19 QUALIFICATIONS STRATEGY

**MARK CORNEY, POLICY ADVISER, CAMPAIGN FOR LEARNING**

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Mark first of all considered the 'national suite' diagram in the Paper and argued that there might be other, perhaps better, ways of presenting what's on offer. It's arguable, for instance, that Functional Skills should be positioned as line across all suites, that the Foundation Learning Tier would be better positioned as stepping stone into the framework rather than on a parallel line within it, and perhaps that the Apprenticeship box should be split into two to reflect work-based and programme-led options.

Second, that the focus still seemed to be on the upper end of the provision yet the more challenging needs and issues were at the lower end. The Foundation Learning Tier appeared 'hastily put together' and it was uncertain where in the three pathways under consideration, the needs of the NEET group and those 'in jobs without training' would best be served. In addition, the Independent Living Pathway is more of a support programme than a learning programme. The Strategy appears not to have understood labour market incentives particularly well, what it is that incentivises young, often disaffected, people to learn.

Third, that the Strategy can be seen to tie in with the major policy drive in this area at present, namely the raising of the learning leaving age. In terms of cohort management, a number of features are being positioned to support the group starting secondary school this September who will be the first recipients of the new staying on policy when they reach 17. These features include the introduction of a revised Key Stage 3 to coincide with this cohort's arrival in secondary school this September, the progressive implementation of new Diploma lines and Apprenticeship entitlement through to 2012, the 2013 review and hence a revamped system in place from 2013 ready to support those staying on perhaps for the first time.