

POLICY WATCH

2008/50

10 August 2008

The DCSF reports back on the 14 - 19 qualification strategy

The consultation earlier this year on a 14 - 19 qualification strategy, '[Promoting achievement, valuing success](#)' was intended to tidy up the qualification framework around a number of defined 'suites' in preparation for the introduction of Diplomas. In the words of the Secretary of State, *"as we begin to roll out our reforms this year, we want young people, parents and awarding bodies to be clear about how we will deliver this change so they can plan effectively for the future."*

The consultation closed on 23 June so how is it all looking? We don't yet have the full Report on the series of conferences that ran alongside the consultation but we do now have the [summary](#) from the DCSF of the 173 responses to the web - based consultation.

These responses suggest that planning will be easier in some areas than in others. For example, *"a majority of respondents were supportive of the proposed approaches towards Applied GCSEs and Applied A levels"* which would see the former remaining but in due course re - aligning and the latter withering away. So things a bit clearer there. But elsewhere, respondents (25%) were concerned about *'ensuring that the four qualification suites approach didn't restrict learner choice'* and about the positioning of particular qualifications. To take the most commonly quoted example, *"BTECs were viewed as a valuable and successful qualification, holding currency with employers and HE"* and their value should not be lost. So planning still open to developments here.

But of course these are early days. The first Diploma learners have yet to trundle through the doors, consultations continue on some GCSE developments and on strengthening Apprenticeships, submissions for sub - regional planning groups are being worked on and models for commissioning being developed. Next month's revised 14 - 19 Implementation Plan may make things clearer but for the moment, when it comes to 14 - 19 qualifications, this consultation provides the pointers.

Of the eight questions asked in the consultation, the three that generated the most support were on the Progression Pathway in the Foundation Learning Tier, on the potential for a credit - based system and on simplifying the qualification system. Each attracting popular appeal but each still requiring a lot of work.

On the first of these, there was strong (88%) support for all young people at Entry and Level 1 to have access to an appropriate Progression Pathway within the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT) but some unease about how the diversity of learners at this stage might be met. Phased implementation of FLT pathways runs up to 2010 whence legacy provision will be all but replaced but being able to provide an effective Foundation Learning Tier remains a key test for the success of the overall reform programme.

On the credit framework, the proposal had been that the Government should consider the case for introducing a credit - based system for 14 - 19 qualifications, arguably linked to the emerging system for adult qualifications and to have this in place by 2013. There was broad (77%) support for this in theory but some unease about how things might work out in practice: would it be easily understood, how would it fit with existing frameworks such as that in HE and adult learning let alone the UCAS tariff and performance tables and was a start date of 2013 really practical? Interestingly, respondents felt that traditional knowledge based qualifications such as GCSE and A levels should also be included in any credit - based framework, not a feature that has been part of the adult framework so far. QCA has the remit to investigate the implications of all this. It will be interesting to see how this one ends up.

On simplifying the qualification system, there was inevitable (34%) support for anything that made the qualification system for young people simpler, more coherent and easier to understand but some notable caveats as well. For example, 25% of respondents were concerned that in aiming to simplify the qualification system, '*choice and personalised learning might be limited;*' 14% thought that some of the changes - functional skills, extended project and so on - might end up confusing people; 13% that "*there were too many options and variables within the proposals;*" 11% that vocational qualifications should be retained in their own right and 10% that BTECs in particular should be retained in some form. Clearly building learner choice within prescribed limits remains a delicate balancing act.

If those were the three questions that attracted the most support, the one that attracted the least, 45% for as against 22% disagreeing and 33% being unsure, was the proposition about "*bringing the best of the existing qualifications offer within Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL)*" The ASL bit of the Diploma is in many ways the most important bit in that it personalises the learning and helps distinguish one learner profile from another but as many respondents recognised, getting the right mix can be difficult: too much choice and it becomes unworkable, too little and options could be closed off. Most of the comments were about how best to fit vocational choices in the ASL component. There was considerable support for retaining some well - known vocational brands but little clarity as to how best to do this. There has been considerable debate about the nature of the ASL component over the year, how to balance the additional with the specialist options, whether to allow qualifications at a different level and how far to structure the choice. ASL remains an area likely to evolve for some time.

As to the other questions, one each concerned the respective position on Applied GCSEs and Applied A levels, one concerned the criteria to be used when making decisions about which qualifications to fund and the other two covered the Extended Project and the relationship between Diplomas and Apprenticeships.

On the qualification approval criteria, set out in Annex A of the consultation, there was moderate (50%) support but natural concern about how the different bodies involved might work and how to avoid unnecessary red tape. On the Extended Project and how to make this widely available, there were obvious concerns about work loads and assessment issues but the key issue was about securing HE buy - in perhaps through the UCAS tariff. While on the question as to how to support progression between Diplomas and Apprenticeships, most (56%) respondents felt it was down to that old favourite - better information, advice and guidance. Plenty of which will be needed over coming years.

Edexcel Policy Watches are intended to help colleagues keep up to date with national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.