

Diploma readiness report

Summer 2009



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Summary

Ofqual, as the independent regulator of qualifications and examinations, needs to be able to assure students and the public that qualification results are fair and accurate and that standards are appropriately established and comparable across awarding bodies. This is especially important for new qualifications like the Diploma.

This report outlines the requirements of the Diploma and describes Ofqual's work to date in regulating the Diploma. It considers risks to the first delivery of awards in summer 2009 and provides Ofqual's view on the readiness of the system to deliver those awards.

The Diploma is a new composite qualification, consisting of a number of components, many of which are qualifications in their own right. Some of the component qualifications, principal learning for example, are also new and being awarded for the first time. Functional skills qualifications, which are also components of the Diploma, are approaching the end of the second year of a three-year pilot. Robust standards for all the component qualifications must be established and carried forward in future years. Delivery of Diploma results is dependent on a number of interdependent IT systems in schools, colleges, government and awarding bodies.

There will, therefore, be challenges in delivering timely, reliable results this summer, but all organisations involved are working together to minimise risks and establish a secure standard for the qualification. Great care has been taken to make sure that all students who complete the requirements of the Diploma this summer will get their awards. There remain some issues that will require further work to ensure delivery of awards in much larger numbers in future years.

Ofqual is content that the systems and contingencies in place across the organisations involved will facilitate the delivery of Diploma results in summer 2009.

An introduction to the Diploma

This summer sees the first awards of the Diploma qualification at foundation and higher levels (GCSE equivalents). Plans for the Diplomas were first announced in the white paper *14–19 Education and Skills* (The Stationery Office Limited 2005), and they were introduced for first teaching in September 2008.

Diplomas are designed, with the help of employers and industry groups working with the education sectors, for 14- to 19-year-olds. They bring an innovative approach to teaching and learning. Presently Diplomas are available in five lines of learning:

- construction and the built environment
- creative and media

- engineering
- information technology
- society, health and development.

Subsequent lines of learning will be introduced for first teaching in 2009, 2010 and 2011. The Advanced Science Diploma will be introduced in 2012.

To achieve a Diploma, students must:

- take a principal learning qualification, which provides them with the opportunity to study sector- and subject-related material in an applied context
- pass functional skills assessments in English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT)
- complete a project qualification, which offers the opportunity for personalised learning
- undertake additional and specialist learning (ASL) appropriate to their chosen line of learning
- complete a period of work experience
- demonstrate development of their personal, learning and thinking skills.

All aspects of the Diploma must be completed before the qualification can be awarded. The overall grade a candidate receives is dependent on their performance in the principal learning and project qualifications.

The Diploma aggregation service

Diplomas are awarded by Diploma awarding bodies (DABs). The constituent qualifications that contribute to the Diploma, such as principal learning or functional skills, are awarded by component awarding bodies (CABs). At present, all awarding organisations that can award Diplomas can also award constituent or component qualifications, that is, they are both CABs and DABs.

Students will be taking a variety of components and qualifications as part of their Diploma programme. These can be awarded by any CAB. Teachers will record student achievements for work experience and the development of personal, learning and thinking skills. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) developed an IT service known as the *Diploma aggregation service* to record students' achievements. Successful use of the service relies on each student having a unique learner number (ULN) provided by Managing Information Across Partners (MIAP).

Using the ULN means that the *Diploma aggregation service* can identify students, record their achievements and aggregate their final grade.

The role of Ofqual

Ofqual's key objective with the Diploma, as with any other qualification, is to protect the interests of students by:

- checking the competency of the awarding organisations delivering the qualifications
- regulating the criteria used by awarding organisations to develop qualifications
- ensuring that assessment is fair and accessible
- checking the appropriateness and consistency of grades awarded
- ensuring that delivery is effective and on time
- providing taxpayers with value for money for the qualification.

Ofqual's priority is to make sure that students are treated fairly and receive appropriate grades. The first students for the Diploma will rightly look to Ofqual for assurance that the new qualification reliably reflects their achievement.

Regulatory work to support phase 1 Diplomas

Ofqual's early regulatory work focused on supporting the introduction of the Phase 1 Diplomas for first teaching in 2008. This regulatory work included the following.

1. Developing regulatory arrangements for the Diploma

Ofqual developed *Regulatory arrangements for component and Diploma awarding bodies*, version 2 (Ofqual/08/3761), that were published in August 2008 following extensive consultation. The regulatory arrangements consist of recognition criteria and operating rules for awarding organisations wishing to offer Diploma qualifications.

The recognition criteria set out the requirements that awarding bodies must meet to be allowed to offer Diploma qualifications. The operating rules specify the underpinning rules that awarding bodies must follow. These rules include information on what awarding bodies should require of centres to ensure the Diploma can operate effectively.

2. Recognising awarding organisations as DABs and CABs

In July 2007, criteria were published for Diplomas in the first five lines of learning, and awarding organisations were invited to submit applications to be DABs and/or principal learning and/or project CABs. Between then and summer 2008, awarding organisations also applied to be recognised to submit qualifications for ASL. All the awarding organisations recognised to operate within the Diploma were subject to the condition that they complied with the requirements of the *Diploma aggregation service*. Those operating for the first awarding in 2009 have all fulfilled this condition.

3. Accrediting Diploma, principal learning, ASL and functional skills qualifications

Principal learning and project qualifications are developed by recognised CABs with support from QCA and the relevant Diploma development partnership. They are then submitted to the regulators for accreditation in time to make sure that all qualifications fully compliant with the criteria are available to centres for planning purposes a year before they are due for first teaching.

Qualifications that can count as ASL in Diplomas are listed in a catalogue published three times a year.

The following principal learning qualifications were accredited for first teaching in September 2008:

- construction and the built environment, offered by AQA-City & Guilds and Edexcel
- creative and media, offered by AQA-City & Guilds, Edexcel and Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)
- engineering, offered by AQA-City & Guilds, Edexcel and OCR
- IT, offered by AQA-City & Guilds, Edexcel and OCR
- society, health and development, offered by Edexcel and OCR.

Eleven awarding organisations are part of the functional skills pilot at levels 1 and 2, and their functional skills qualifications in English, mathematics and IT were accredited in July 2007. These are all available for students to use as part of their Diploma.

Qualifications that could be used for ASL in phase 1 Diplomas were identified in summer 2007 and first published in the Diploma catalogues in September 2007. Since then, there have been a number of updates to allow the inclusion of further qualifications. There are more than 1,000 qualifications in each catalogue, thereby allowing students a wide choice of options to increase the

breadth or depth (or both) of their Diploma studies. The Diploma catalogues can be viewed at: www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/DiplomaCatalogueSelection.

Foundation, Higher, Progression and Advanced Diploma qualifications were accredited from the following awarding bodies, allowing them to award a full Diploma made up of qualifications in the relevant Diploma catalogues:

- construction and the built environment, offered by AQA-City & Guilds, Edexcel and OCR
- creative and media, offered by AQA-City & Guilds, Edexcel, OCR and Rockscool
- engineering, offered by AQA-City & Guilds, Edexcel and OCR
- IT offered by AQA-City & Guilds, Edexcel and OCR
- society, health and development, offered by AQA-City & Guilds, Edexcel, EDI and OCR.

4. Supporting awarding organisations in standards setting

Principal learning qualifications will be awarded for the first time this summer. In August 2008, Ofqual published *Arrangements for awarding and setting standards in the Diploma* (Ofqual/08/3865), the final report of the Diploma Awarding and Standards Group. This report set out a process to support awarding bodies in their task of ensuring that they set fair and consistent standards in the Diploma principal learning qualifications. The activities in the process require the awarding bodies involved in each line of learning to cooperate with each other and Ofqual.

Before the first awards are made this summer, Ofqual will meet the awarding organisations to check the standards, using real examples judged worthy of key grades. In addition, awarding body staff will observe meetings in other awarding bodies.

Ofqual took the lead in organising these activities for phase 1 lines of learning at all three levels. The work carried out involved both preparation for the February 2009 awards and subsequent reviews to inform the July 2009 awards. Similar work also took place for the project qualifications.

Functional skills are pilot qualifications. Ofqual carried out a number of activities designed to judge the quality, consistency and comparability of the functional skills qualifications across awarding organisations. A comparability study of materials from the summer 2008 examinations used independent consultants with subject and assessment expertise to review the assessment instruments

and students' work. Findings from this work were communicated to QCA and the awarding organisations. Consultants then reviewed the winter 2009 examinations.

Plans are in place to extend the review of the winter 2009 series to include students' work to check on grading standards, as well as the form of the assessment. There will be a further review of students' work from the summer 2009 series to ensure that the process of setting standards in the final pilot series is robust, and that the subsequent development and accreditation process is informed by as full a range of evidence as possible.

5. Facilitating consistency across awarding organisations

The Diploma Operations Committee was established in 2006 to provide a forum for awarding organisations offering principal learning and the project to obtain a common, consistent approach on key operational and quality assurance issues for phase 1 Diplomas. Ofqual replaced the Diploma Operations Committee with a series of business meetings with awarding bodies covering functional skills, principal learning and the project. These meetings make sure that technical, administrative and operational matters are handled consistently and appropriately.

Awarding the Diploma in summer 2009

Several hundred students have expressed an intention to claim a Diploma award this summer. Most of them are post-16 students who studied the qualification in one year. They are likely to be atypical of the cohorts coming forward in future years. Most of the students entered for the Higher Diploma (equivalent to seven GCSEs grades A to C) and the minority for the Foundation Diploma (equivalent to five GCSEs grades D to G).

The successful award of the Diploma in summer 2009 will depend on key agencies working together to ensure that processes and procedures work efficiently.

- Centres and consortia are responsible for preparing students for the qualification, making entries for the component qualifications, ensuring that component combinations are valid, opening a student account and registering students' intention to claim with a DAB.
- The *Learner registration service* is responsible for providing students with a ULN when requested.
- CABs are responsible for assessing individual qualifications and for uploading students' results into the *Diploma aggregation service* in a timely manner.

- QCA is responsible for the *Diploma aggregation service*, which collects students' results at an individual qualification level, as well as confirmation that students have completed the required work experience and developed their personal, learning and thinking skills.
- DABs are responsible for awarding the overall Diploma grade which is calculated by the Diploma aggregation service once a student has completed all the components. The grade is based on the combined scores obtained for principal learning and the project.
- The Department for Children, Schools and Families is coordinating the work of the organisations responsible for the accurate and timely delivery of results on 27 August 2009.
- Ofqual is responsible for ensuring that reliable grades are awarded and that these are consistent across awarding organisations. Ofqual is also responsible for identifying and, where appropriate, monitoring potential risks to delivery and standards. Ofqual must be satisfied that the organisations responsible have appropriate contingencies in place to deal with these. Where Ofqual identifies risks in organisations for which they do not have regulatory responsibility, Ofqual will tell the organisation concerned.

Ofqual has identified some potential risks in the areas set out below. In each case, mitigation strategies have been put in place to support delivery of the qualifications this summer.

1. Accuracy of data used to support the *Diploma aggregation service*

Ofqual has undertaken a number of activities to check that the data needed for aggregation is accurate. Ofqual agreed to check any issues of non-aggregation following a trial run with student data in early June 2009. However, the necessary data is not yet available, and this check will now take place by early July. If there are live delivery problems, manual checking will be possible, and Ofqual is satisfied that arrangements are in place to ensure that all the students who may claim awards this summer will receive them if they complete the requirements of the Diploma.

2. Reliance on interdependent IT systems in centres, government and awarding organisations

Potential IT risks have been identified that could pose a threat to Diploma awarding, if adequate contingencies are not in place. These come as a result of reliance on the *Learner registration service*, and the *Diploma aggregation service*, the central IT systems for allocating ULNs and aggregating Diploma results. The *Diploma aggregation service* relies on the accredited qualification

information held on the qualifications management information system, operated by QCA.

Ofqual does not own or regulate the *Learner registration service* or the *Diploma aggregation service* but requires CABs and DABs to use those systems. Ofqual is establishing reporting and monitoring arrangements with the relevant service providers to report any risks for Ofqual or awarding organisations. These arrangements, together with the appointment of an Ofqual risk manager to liaise with service providers and awarding bodies, will raise the visibility of those risks and enable Ofqual to make sure that the different organisations involved take appropriate action to protect the interests of students.

3. Standards comparability in principal learning and project qualifications

Ofqual is carrying out scrutinies (in-depth studies) of one principal learning qualification at each awarding organisation, covering three lines of learning overall. We will be monitoring key examining meetings and using experts to evaluate the quality of the assessment instruments and the standard of students' work. Additional monitoring activities will give Ofqual a broader overview of how principal learning units are working. At the same time Ofqual will be monitoring the project.

4. Consistency across functional skills assessments

Functional skills are pilot qualifications and as such are subject to review and amendment. The functional skills assessments this summer are of particular importance, given their contribution to the first Diploma awards.

There is a significant programme of monitoring covering the awarding of functional skills qualifications and associated activity looking at the comparability of standards across the awarding organisations involved. As part of its ongoing monitoring, Ofqual will attend awarding meetings for all subjects at all functional skills awarding bodies this summer. This will provide Ofqual with evidence of the consistency of demand across the awarding organisations.

All organisations involved in Diploma delivery have established procedures to deal with any incidents that may affect the delivery of results. To support these individual organisational approaches to incident management, Ofqual has set up a coordinated incident management system. Any incident that cannot be resolved within a particular organisation or within given timescales will be reported to Ofqual and we will make sure that appropriate resources are coordinated for efficient resolution.

Conclusion

This report describes the extensive work Ofqual has in place to help ensure the first students who complete their Diplomas in summer 2009 get the results they deserve. Working with awarding organisations and other national organisations supporting the Diploma, Ofqual has given priority to ensuring that the first students are protected, and that any identified potential risks are appropriately mitigated.

Ofqual is content that the systems and contingencies in place across the organisations involved will facilitate the delivery of Diploma results in summer 2009.

Further reading

14–19 Education and Skills. London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2005.
www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications/14-19educationandskills.

Arrangements for awarding and setting standards in the Diploma: Principal learning, project and Diploma. Coventry: Ofqual, 2008. www.ofqual.gov.uk (enter Ofqual/08/3761 into the search field).

Regulatory arrangements for component and Diploma awarding bodies: Recognition criteria and operating rules, version 2. Coventry: Ofqual, 2008. www.ofqual.gov.uk (enter Ofqual/08/3865 into the search field).

Glossary

additional and specialist learning (ASL)

Qualifications that students choose to include in their Diploma that are complementary or specialised in character. Additional and specialist learning must provide high-quality breadth and/or depth of curriculum experience, without duplication of principal learning, and be based on a solid evidence-base of progression opportunities for learners who want to progress into immediate employment with training, or full-time further and/or higher education.

component awarding body (CAB)

An awarding body or organisation offering constituent qualifications for the Diploma, which may include principal learning, foundation, higher and extended project, functional skills and/or additional and specialist learning qualifications.

component qualifications

Diplomas are made up of constituent qualifications that are organised in terms of the following three components:

- principal learning
- generic learning
- additional and specialist learning.

Diploma awarding body (DAB)

An awarding body or organisation that awards the overall Diploma qualification, issuing a transcript and certificate.

Diploma aggregation service

The *Diploma aggregation service* supports the awarding of the Diploma to the student. It must be used by centres and awarding bodies involved in the delivery of the Diploma to share data and record a student's progress towards a Diploma award. As well as recording constituent qualification results against each learner, the service aggregates these results and applies rules of combination to determine whether the whole Diploma can be awarded and produces a trial grade.

Learner registration service

The *Learner registration service* is an internet-based service capable of providing a unique learner number for every person in education and training in the UK. This will allow people to build a lifelong record of their learning participation and achievements, which they can access and share if they choose. It is part of the Managing Information Across Partners programme of work, and further information can be found at www.miap.gov.uk/services.

qualifications management information system (QMIS)

The database of all accredited qualifications.

unique learner number (ULN)

The unique number that identifies a student, supported by Managing Information Across Partners and the *Learner registration service*.

A full glossary of terms used within the Diploma can be found at www.qca.org.uk/diploma.

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