



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Assessment and grading of the Diploma

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QCA published the *'Criteria for Accreditation of Diploma Qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 3'* in November 2006. This sets out the assessment principles for all levels of the Diploma, including the proportion of Principal Learning that is to be externally assessed and the design parameters for Principal Learning, the Project and Additional and Specialist Learning. It states that Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) are to be assessed through Principal Learning. However, given the importance of these skills, and to ensure that their application in a wide range of contexts is understood, PLTS achievement will be separately recorded on the Diploma Transcript.

The Diploma is a composite qualification made up of a combination of new and existing qualifications. The inclusion of existing qualifications with different grading scales within Additional and Specialist Learning means that there are difficulties in establishing a grading system that uses results from the full range of units within the three components of Generic, Principal and Additional and Specialist Learning, because the outcomes would not be reliable.

Therefore, in order to secure Diploma grades that are comparable at a given level, within and across lines of learning, the overall grade for the Diploma should be drawn from Principal Learning (including PLTS) and the Project only. However, achievements drawn from **all** components within the Diploma will be required in order to gain the Diploma qualification. This means that the Diploma cannot be awarded if a learner has not achieved at the required level across the three Functional Skills and in Additional and Specialist Learning as well as Principal Learning and the Project. In addition, there is a requirement for a learner to undertake a minimum of 10 days' work experience for the award of the Diploma. This combination of requirements and grades within the Diploma will provide assurance to employers, further and higher education, and parents and young people, that achievement of the Diploma represents both the grade standard and a balance of skills at the level of the Diploma.

Functional Skills Requirement

At Level 1, the three Functional Skills should be achieved at Level 1.

At Level 2, the three Functional Skills should be achieved at Level 2.

At Level 3, the three Functional Skills should be achieved at Level 2.

QCA is already working with the DfES and other key partners to develop a Functional Skills strategy, including a focus on teaching and learning, which will help ensure that achievement levels in Functional Skills are maximised. An early evaluation during the first year of the Functional Skills pilots, 2007/2008, will inform future practice and strengthen the position for the introduction of Diplomas from September 2008.

Principal Learning and Project Requirement

The combined results from Principal Learning and the Project should be achieved at pass or above. However, there should be no requirement to separately pass all or specific units within Principal Learning or the Project. This means that good performance within one unit can compensate for poorer performance within another unit. Principal Learning grades will be reported at unit and qualification level.

Additional and Specialist Learning Requirement

A defined amount of Additional and Specialist Learning (ASL) at a satisfactory level of attainment should be achieved at all levels. This may involve success in whole qualifications or units. The Grading Group have concerns that existing volume measures are not consistent across the different qualification types and that this presents significant difficulties in establishing the requirement for ASL. Within a fully developed Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), the requirement would be expressed as a minimum number of credits from available credits within ASL. The current QCF trials are beginning to populate the Framework, but will not have produced sufficient ASL content by 2008.

Therefore, although credit provides a satisfactory solution to the consistent definition of volume/level for the ASL requirement in the longer term, an interim solution is required for the first three years of Diploma delivery. QCA is undertaking further work to determine appropriate measures for this interim period, building on existing volume measures such as Guided Learning Hours or the SCAAT size indicator. The initial outcomes of this work will be available in July 2007 in time for the first release of the Diploma catalogue in August this year. It is likely that any interim volume measures will limit the number of qualifications and units that can be included within ASL for first teaching in 2008, but QCA is confident that there will still be sufficient choice within each line of learning.

Grading the Diploma

All levels of the Diploma will be graded.

At level 3, there should be six grades plus Fail.

At level 2, there should be four grades plus Fail.

At level 1, there should be three grades plus Fail.

QCA has considered the use of signifiers that correspond to A*, A to E plus Fail at Level 3, A*, A to C plus Fail at Level 2 and A to C plus Fail at Level 1. These signifiers have the advantage that they are commonly understood. However, the close association of these grades with general qualifications

may not signal the unique, innovative and applied nature of the Diploma. QCA proposes to undertake a consultation on the notation for the grade.

Principal Learning units and the Project will be graded using the same grading system as the Diploma, at each level.

Attainment in each unit of Principal Learning, and in the Project, should be expressed in unit **marks** that will be reported as unit **grades**. Unit grades will be used primarily for reporting to users on unit achievement.

To permit the aggregation of unit results, unit grades will be converted to **points**. Points represent a finer division than grades, and the aggregation of points (rather than grades) will improve the accuracy of the overall Diploma grade.

Unit marks will be converted to unit grades/points during awarding meetings (for each unit).

The maximum mark available for each unit will be substantially higher than the number of points available. The number of points will be no more than 20. Unit marks will be awarded according to mark criteria that do not bear a direct relationship to grading bands; that is, markers should be clear that they are simply awarding marks and are not directly grading students. The mark scale for units will be set by Awarding Bodies but needs to be greater than 20.

Points for Principal Learning units (weighted as appropriate) will be added to points for the Project to derive a Diploma **score**. Using appropriate thresholds, the Diploma score will be converted into a Diploma grade.

It is intended that these Principal Learning and Diploma grade thresholds will be the same across all Diplomas at a given level and from year to year. It is also intended that both Principal Learning and Diploma grade thresholds will be published in advance. During the pilot however, it will be important to manage the award of unit grades in the period before points are aggregated towards the full Diploma grade.

Grading standards in the units, as well as Principal Learning and Diploma grade thresholds, will be reviewed and if necessary re-aligned during the first few grading sessions of the pilot years. This will be necessary because this is a new qualification with innovative and applied content.

Initial monitoring of the Diploma must pay particularly close attention to implications for aggregate outcomes and to comparability across different units across Awarding Bodies in the same line of learning and units across different lines of learning.

Assessment

Within all of the components of the Diploma these arrangements for assessment and grading focuses specifically on that relating to the Principal Learning and the Project. Other components will either be assessed separately or achievements recorded in the transcript.

The applied nature of much of the learning in the Diploma gives rise to a strong emphasis on internal assessment, the validity and reliability of which must be assured so that there can be no question about the awarding and reporting of results. The development of assessment expertise will be a key factor in the success of the Diploma and must be a significant part of the programme of work related to workforce development for the Diploma.

The intended strategy includes further work in a range of areas critical to the success of the Diploma. A high priority is the need to have clear and agreed national marking criteria at the launch of the qualification. This would best be delivered by establishing a national 'Marking Criteria and Comparability Technical Group' through which all relevant Awarding Bodies (with support from QCA) could agree on appropriate mechanisms for ensuring consistent marking. The marking criteria will be designed with a view to enabling comparability of standards across Diploma units, although standards will ultimately not be determined until the first grading sessions. The Marking Criteria and Comparability Technical Group will also establish procedures to help ensure the appropriate application of grading standards across multiple new providers (some of whom will not necessarily be familiar with grade awarding); this will include the original setting of standards, as well as the ongoing maintenance.

The other key assessment objective is to recognise the vital contribution that local assessment will make to learners' experience and to marking consistency. In order to achieve validity and reliability of local assessment, QCA needs to ensure local marking consistency is high. To achieve this, those in key roles i.e. those of assessors, moderators and verifiers, must be trained to apply and standardise the national criteria. This will result in expanded roles for teachers to become teacher/assessors or for moderation to be included in enhanced roles of senior managers within schools and colleges.

QCA sees the development of 'recognised' or 'chartered' assessors as critical to the building of local assessment arrangements that can underpin the delivery of Diplomas across Lines of Learning and across Awarding Bodies. By adopting such an approach, it will be possible to give added status and professionalism to the work of assessors. This is in addition to, and supports, the specific training and development provided by Awarding Bodies and points to a significant new role for the Institute of Educational Assessors alongside other key partners.

Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills

With the assessment of Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) QCA is concerned about avoiding unnecessary additional burdens placed on teachers and about the possibility of detracting from local innovation and ownership.

Opportunities to develop and apply all six PLTS must be available within Principal Learning. PLTS must be integrated within the assessment criteria for Principal Learning to explicitly recognize these skills in sector-related contexts. PLTS are seen by many employers to be at the heart of what the Diploma is about. In this context, legitimate concerns have been expressed that the integrated nature of the approach to PLTS (for which there is strong overall support) could lead to a dilution of these skills. To address this, PLTS must be separately recorded and must be reported distinctively in the Diploma transcript.

QCA believe that the most effective recording systems will be those developed by centres with support and advice from the relevant Awarding Bodies. This will allow PLTS evidence to be drawn from the most relevant contexts, including Principal Learning.