

Facilitating an Understanding of a New Qualification: The Linking London Response to the Advanced Diploma

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Introduction

A focus for the Diploma team at Linking London from early 2008 was responding to the needs of Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) partners in relation to understanding the complex curriculum content of the new Advanced Diplomas and what it means for student progression. Given that the first tranche of Advanced Diploma students would be arriving in Higher Education (HE) from September 2010, as a Network we considered it imperative that staff in both sending and receiving institutions were clear about what learning, skills and attributes these learners would be bringing with them, when applying to HE.

Now that the post-election landscape has brought the long-term future of this qualification into doubt – we already know, for example, that the Phase 4 Diplomas in Science, Humanities and Languages will not now go ahead, that the notion of learner entitlement has disappeared and that the Diploma Development Partnerships for Phases 1, 2 and 3, led by Sector Skills Councils, will cease work from September – these issues may, in some quarters, no longer seem so pressing. The number of Advanced Diploma learners nationally are still relatively small (just over 1400 in 2008/09, according to DCSF figures)¹ and in future, market forces alone will decide whether the Advanced Diplomas survive or give ground to other more long-standing non-traditional qualifications, such as Access to HE Diplomas and BTECs. However, while it is impossible at this point in time to predict what will happen, the learning from our work in this area with partners has been invaluable and we feel that there are lessons which may be transferable to other Networks faced with the challenge of embedding responsiveness to this or other new qualifications amongst partners.

In this chapter, we will discuss the support package that we put in place for LLN partners engaged in supporting Advanced Diploma learners progressing from FE to HE. We will discuss our work in setting up the Diploma Delivery Partnership group to support 14 – 19 staff in related London boroughs and the development of bespoke staff development events and publications for partners, designed to assist both academic and non-academic staff in understanding this new qualification. We will also describe the support we put in place for HEIs in developing their UCAS entry profiles to take account of Diploma requirements and the role that we have played recently, in highlighting potential progression issues to Government.

The account is underpinned by an action learning and action research approach. The experiences and learning which we will describe have been achieved through a robust process of peer / partner evaluation within the context of ongoing formative feedback both at meetings, at events and via the web. We have worked in consultation with a

¹ DCSF: *Participation and achievement for the first year of national diploma provision*, England, 2008/09

range of partners, at local and national level, and the importance of active networking and ongoing dialogue with key stakeholders to ensure successful outcomes will be highlighted.

Diploma Delivery Partnership meetings

Our involvement in the London Gateway Diploma Approval Board at the Government Office made clear to us early on, that there was a lack of planning for evaluation built into consortia approval processes. This highlighted a potential role for us as an LLN, in supporting 14 – 19 Diploma consortia in taking forward their work. Following on from visits to 14 – 19 Diploma consortia leads in June 2008, the Linking London Diploma Delivery Partnership group was set up, with the aim of examining progression from the Advanced Diploma to HE in the Linking London area and identifying potential support needs. Representatives from eight of the thirteen 14 –19 Diploma consortia in the Linking London area have attended these meetings and to date eight meetings have been held, focusing on a variety of topics. These have included establishing links with HEIs; the extended project; engagement with education business partnerships; CPD for staff delivering the Diplomas; and progression issues. The meetings have provided an opportunity for 14 – 19 Diploma coordinators and managers in partner boroughs to network and share good practice and have included attendance from several HEIs in the Network.

What has become clear from involvement in these meetings has been the complexity of work undertaken by consortia staff as they attempted to bring individual learning lines on stream. Progress across the implementation of individual learning lines has been uneven, which may reflect the difficulties faced by consortia in engaging across so many sectors. Most recruitment of learners across the Network has been at levels 1 and 2, which is indicative, perhaps, of consortia concern to ‘get it right’ at these levels, before attempting the Advanced Diploma. However, mapping of borough provision undertaken by Linking London in December 2009, indicated that deliveries at level 3 are now occurring in all but one of the thirteen boroughs in the Network and it will be interesting to see which of these survive.

Building on from our own work with the Diploma Development Partnership group, those staff in FECs / HEIs involved in supporting and planning for Advanced Diploma progression may similarly find it useful to set up meetings with their own borough 14 – 19 leads, particularly in the light of their changing roles. This will facilitate both local intelligence gathering and provide a focus to discuss ways in which local partners can best work together to support key aspects of the Advanced Diploma qualification, such as the extended project, work experience and Additional & Specialist Learning (ASL). There are signs that this is already starting to happen in many London boroughs and this can only be welcomed if the Diploma is to be embedded in national qualification structures and successful learner progression achieved. For example, the University of East London, as part of a multi borough progression agreement from the Construction and the Built Environment and Engineering Advanced Diplomas, is looking into the feasibility of providing space and expertise to deliver part of the qualification on campus, using HEI facilities.

Staff Development and Publications

Engaging with 14 – 19 Diploma consortia through the Diploma Delivery Partnership meetings enabled us to get a firmer handle on issues being experienced by learners / staff on this qualification as they emerged and we were able to feed this into our planning of publications and events. For example, last year it became clear that consortia were finding that difficulties were occurring in the Functional Skills component, particularly in the area of maths and we were able to put on an event for partners, aimed at providing an overview of current issues. The Head of Functional Skills at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency attended and was able to answer questions, as well as draw on the perspective of delegates. Being based in London made it easier for us to gain access to specialists like this, but we would recommend that other networks similarly tap into support and expertise in this way as, in our experience, stakeholder organisations are usually more than keen to have access to professional networks with which they do not have links.

Similarly, an event on the 'Additional and Specialist Learning' (ASL) strand of the Diplomas held in November last year, allowed us to gather together a range of key stakeholders, which included representatives from FE, HE, 14 –19 Diploma consortia, DCSF, Sector Skills Councils and Awarding Bodies, to discuss issues emerging in relation to this part of the qualification. A list of issues was generated from this meeting, which were raised with Iain Wright, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the DCSF later that month. At the meeting we also discussed further issues in relation to ASL already highlighted in our letter on the Diplomas in June in the *Times Educational Supplement*. At a subsequent meeting with senior civil servants at the DCSF, the issue of the quality of information on UCAS entry profiles was also raised. Such meetings highlight the benefit of bringing together key stakeholders to discuss issues of mutual concern, as they arise and, as in this case, so ensure that messages relating to progression are fed back at the highest level.

In our work, we have always tried to be proactive and to generate the capacity to react to needs as they arise. A good example of this is the *Diploma Roadshow*, a series of development events aimed at staff involved in advice and guidance in FECs and sixth forms, Connexions and 14 – 19 Diploma consortia staff in the London region. This provided an overview of the level 3 Diplomas in the context of UCAS / university entry requirements. We have also actively supported the staff development work of our partners, notably the seminar series offered last year by the Institute of Education which focussed on HE preparations for applications from Diploma students. These events have all been very well received and again highlight the value of offering a bespoke, tailored response.

As noted earlier, developing publications has been a key part of our work and feedback from partners has highlighted that they have valued the opportunity to access short publications which are well researched, focussed and timely. In our planning, we became aware, early on, of the lack of publications on the Advanced Diploma aimed at HE staff and potential students, in particular, and to fill this gap we wrote a number of publications, aimed at developing knowledge and understanding across a range of key areas. These have included:

- The New Advanced Diplomas: What they mean for HE in Curriculum Terms
- The Extended Project: 14 – 19 Reform – Key Principles & Processes
- The New Advanced Diplomas: Emergent issues and Priorities from Gateway 1

- The New Additional & Specialist Learning Strand of the New Advanced Diplomas: Updated Perspectives
- Progression from the 14 – 19 Advanced Diplomas to Higher Education: A Guide for Learners

These are all available to download from the Linking London website (www.linkinglondon.ac.uk) and have been circulated widely to partners and other key stakeholders.

Web Developmental Work

As we developed publications, the need to have a well organised, easily navigable website became increasingly evident. Investing in our website has enabled us to keep printing costs down and also to provide a place where items, as well as publicity relating to events, can be stored safely and accessed easily by partners.

We have found it useful to provide a webpage relating to particular qualifications within our portfolio and the Diploma page is available from www.linkinglondon.ac.uk/resources/diplomas/. On these pages are listed all the resources we have developed in support of our work; there is also a dedicated FAQs section, which includes further links, at www.linkinglondon.ac.uk/faqs/diplomas/. We created this resource because felt that it was important that partners should find it easy to locate information in one place. Monitoring of the 'hits' on these sites indicates that the resource has been well used by partners and this has, usefully, fed back into our planning.

2.4 Entry Profile Mapping and Progression Database

2009 saw an abundance of information about the opportunities offered by studying an Advanced Diploma on Government², Local Authority, Sector Skills Councils and other websites being produced, aimed at potential learners and their parents. However, it was our perception that there was a lack of guidance in relation to opportunities for progression following Diploma study. Since HE Entry Profile information is a key resource for applicants seeking places in HE, as part of our work in supporting Diploma learners, we invited partners to bid for development funds to take forward their work in mapping their curricula against the first five Advanced Diploma lines. This invitation highlighted the lack of preparedness of many institutions in articulating clear entry criteria for these learners.

To help fill this gap, we worked with our 14-19 Diploma consortia group members across the Network to produce an IAG resource aimed at both IAG advisers and learners. This resource, the *Progression Routes Database* provides an on-line, information tool which details current potential progression routes from each of the first five Diploma lines to HEIs in the Network, together with the specific ASL required for entry on to particular programmes. Included within the database is also a 'lucky dip' section, which identifies HE Diploma progression routes that do not require a specific line of learning. This resource has been well received by partner FECs and boroughs and has provided a useful stimulus to HE partners to review their entry profile information. Leading on from

² www.direct.gov.uk/diploma

this, we have completed a further piece of work which involved sampling UCAS entry profile information for all non A level qualifications at 10% of HEIs in England. (See *Quality of admissions information for applicants to full-time undergraduate study, Linking London Lifelong Learning Network*, February 2010). This work has recently been shared with key stakeholders including the Department for Children, Schools and Families; The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; Supporting Professionalism in Admissions; UCAS and the LLN National Forum.

Such work, again, highlights the value of collaborative working and how working proactively, we have been able to develop bespoke solutions to locally identified problems as they emerge. It also highlights the valuable perspective that LLNs, working regionally and nationally, have been able to bring to bear on issues of vocational progression. As neutral and independent organisations not directly involved with issues of day-to-day delivery, we have had the time, energy and resource to tackle some of the challenges currently facing partners, to create innovative and lasting results.

Creating Progression Agreements from the Advanced Diplomas

Many of our HE partners were unfamiliar with this new qualification. Our work on HEI's UCAS Entry Profiles showed that many were asking for A-Levels as part of the ASL requirement when, in fact, not all FE partners were making this option available to their learners. We therefore felt it vitally important to ensure that progression agreements were brokered from the first five Diploma lines to ensure successful progression.

To date, a range of agreements have been signed, which include:

- Society, Health & Development and Construction & the Built Environment Advanced Diplomas (Hackney Community College) on to 18 courses at London Metropolitan University
- Construction & the Built Environment and Engineering Advanced Diplomas (London Boroughs of Haringey, Enfield, Hackney, Thurrock, Tower Hamlets and Newham College of Further Education) on to 10 programmes at the University of East London
- Information & Technology Advanced Diploma (London Boroughs of Enfield and Barking & Dagenham College) on to 10 programmes in ICT at the University of East London
- Society Health & Development Advanced Diploma (London Boroughs of Lambeth, Enfield, Thurrock, Haringey and Newham and Barking & Dagenham College) to a variety of programmes in the School of Health and Bioscience and the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of East London (UEL)
- Business & Finance Advanced Diploma (Tower Hamlets College, City & Islington College and Lewisham College) on to all undergraduate courses in the Business School at London Metropolitan University

As well as continuing to broker further PAs from other lines of learning and adding boroughs and receiving courses to existing agreements, we have used the opportunity of working on progression agreements to develop progression agreement flyers aimed at potential learners, and this has proved to be a useful marketing tool for partners.

The Progression Advice Line

We launched an advice line in September 2009 in response to a number of requests for information on various aspects of the Advanced Diplomas, and in an attempt to predict the information needs of partners supporting year 2, level 3 learners with progression. Designed, initially, to support Diploma learners only, it now offers a one-stop shop for queries about non-traditional qualifications, which can be submitted either by phone or by email, by any staff within the Network. Use of the advice line has so far been limited, which is probably reflective of the fact that number of Advanced Diploma learners across the Network completing this year is still relatively small. However, we intend to continue this service for the foreseeable future, as more Advanced Diploma learners progress to year two. We are aware that the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and Specialist Schools and Academies Trust's support for Diploma deliverers is time limited, and that funds will not be available in future years. FECs / HEIs may also, therefore, wish to consider whether providing such an advice line might be an appropriate support tool to offer learners engaged on a range of vocational / non-traditional qualifications.

Tracking Learners

Early on, it was decided that it would be useful to monitor the experience of Advanced Diploma learners on individual learning lines, to gauge their perceptions of the qualification and their own experience of planning for progression. It has not been particularly easy finding partners delivering at level 3 on the first five learning lines and, initially, we were only able to meet with a relatively small number of students on the Creative & Media and Society, Health & Development lines. However, this year, we have become aware of at least 100 learners within the Network who will be completing their Advanced Diploma studies and we have recently conducted a short questionnaire survey aimed at eliciting their feedback (See the publication *What we have learnt from students on the new Diplomas 2008 – 10*, June 2010, on our website).

Our work here highlights the difficulties involved in monitoring developments on any new qualification. Staff in schools / FECs are extremely busy and have their own priorities. Our work necessarily, therefore, has had to be based on a pragmatic, flexible approach. However, we recognise the importance of supporting this first tranche of Diploma learners and would recommend that other Networks consider undertaking similar work, to ensure that these learners are supported both into and through HE. All LLNs will be aware that, following the meeting early this Spring at the DCSF, which was attended by UCAS and SPA, the LLN National Forum has committed LLNs to providing this support to partners, wherever possible.

Conclusions

As our analysis above highlights, supporting developments across any new curriculum initiative requires creativity, hard work and, above all, perseverance. It takes time to gauge where interventions will be most effective and partners will also need help in understanding what it is they need to know. The Diplomas have presented a particularly testing learning curve for partners and only time will tell which Diploma lines will become embedded in the new market-driven educational landscape.

Despite the complexity of the Advanced Diploma, our work has probably been helped by the fact that it is a new qualification. Because of this, there has been a wide range of events and publications for partners to access. Equally, given the fact that many of our

other qualifications such as Access and BTEC have been around for such a long time, there hasn't been the same complacency and established mindsets to overcome.

Our experience working in this area has been a very positive one and the team have built on and used a wide range of skills, as we have developed our approach. The ability to offer support on a range of fronts has, perhaps, been our greatest strength and the reason why our work has been successful. For example, our recent work in the area of UCAS Entry Profiles, in particular, has meant that we have been able to identify potential issues in relation to ASL that have been fed back to partners, the DCSF and other key stakeholders and is indicative, perhaps, of the value of carrying out small-scale research in a timely fashion. Our role as a conduit for the dissemination of issues, trends and cases for concern has already been highlighted and every effort has been made to take advantage of opportunities to contribute to national conferences such as Aimhigher, Action on Access and the Forum for Access and Continuing Education. We have also obtained representation on four national and regional HE Diploma advisory and steering groups, although these groups may not continue and so not afford the same opportunities for Network partners in the future.

In many ways, working to embed progression from the new Advanced Diplomas has thrown up many of the issues that colleagues will have encountered with other established qualifications, such as Access and BTEC and, given that these are themselves going through a period of change currently, it may be that some of the approaches highlighted above, are equally applicable to these and new ones, such as Advanced Apprenticeships. Notwithstanding current changes to these established qualifications, the Diplomas themselves have constituted the most significant curriculum reform for over a decade. This major change was implemented speedily, within a politically driven educational agenda and, not surprisingly, there have been significant teething problems, not least the challenge of addressing HE responsiveness.

Our work has highlighted that communicating clearly and effectively with staff, learners and their parents will be intrinsic to the future success of this qualification and that this will only be possible if all key stakeholders are clear about both what the qualification consists of and the nature of student learning that will be achieved. Our experience in working to develop an understanding of the Advanced Diploma across the Linking London region has also demonstrated to us the paramount importance of partnership working across boroughs, schools, FECs and HEIs and this will need to continue if the Advanced Diploma is to emerge as a preferred qualification of choice for learners over coming years.