

The central message - employer engagement

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'Employer engagement is at the heart of what makes the Foundation Degree distinctive.'
(p28, Foundation Degree Taskforce Report to Ministers, September 2004.¹)

The involvement of employers in Foundation Degrees is intended to be a central, distinctive element of this new qualification. Unlike other work-related higher learning programmes, where undergraduate students 'go out' into the workplace to gain work-relevant skills and knowledge (and personal development), here, the workplace lies at the heart of things, an integrated crucial element of the whole higher learning programme (as a general rule, there are, of course, some degree and HN programmes which do this also). But, as is increasingly being recognised, this is a challenging dimension, if not *the* most challenging one, affecting the long-term success of the Foundation degree initiative. While there are many examples of good practice and successful partnerships (see for example: on FdF website, Sector Skills Council (SSC) Frameworks), the overall picture across the 1000+ Foundation degree courses across England is 'mixed' and practice varies enormously.^{1,2}

Various areas need working on. The initial evidence shows some institutions found employer engagement in developing new Foundation Degree programmes relatively easy, due to a number of favourable factors which included: a clear demand from employers for the new qualifications in certain subjects (primarily the public sector, in subjects like health, education, business and admin studies) and good existing employer networks or industry-course links; together with a favourable institutional 'climate' where the development of work-based learning and meeting workforce development needs is taken more seriously and there were some personally committed staff ie Foundation Degree 'champions'. Some of the difficulties and specific barriers people have faced have been the corollary of these, in particular: little demand for shorter cycle (ie 2 year) HE qualification in some subjects and sectors; a lack of awareness and understanding by employers of its benefits, and its advantages over other learning or qualifications already available; and less good existing networks or employer links to courses. Some Foundation Degrees have struggled in institutions which have other priorities than developing new work-based learning markets (eg eyes on the next RAE); and the high costs and resources perceived to be needed (from both institution and employer) have been additional barriers to progress.

The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) has always welcomed the concept of Foundation Degrees and has been a supporter of its development as a new demand-led approach, with HE and employer and SSC partnerships, and with work *based* learning and employer input, as integral components³. In particular, Foundation degrees are seen as offering a new learning option at advanced vocational levels, where previous attempts to make improvements have failed to have much impact. But CIHE has always stressed the importance of employer

involvement in the work-based elements and drawn attention to several areas which need to be addressed. One is the need to distinguish between different markets as they have different issues to be addressed; a second is the role of employers in delivering and in particular, assessing, work-based learning in a HE context; and a third is the need to build on the experiences of Foundation Degrees to help develop a clearer role for HE more generally in the workforce development market.

Different markets for Foundation Degrees

At least three different markets for Foundation degrees have emerged:

- for school leavers who may not feel fully qualified or confident enough to start on an honours degree or want an employment focused award that can incorporate practical work and see benefits in a shorter 2 year programme;
- for successful young advanced apprentices or other work-based learners who are seeking progression to higher levels; Foundation Degrees, with work-based learning an integral component, can be a natural next step for them, to advance their learning and stay in paid work; and
- more mature learners, to help them advance their learning and upgrade their knowledge and skills. It is a vehicle for helping employers to recognise and tap into the potential that exists in their workforce, and develop the skills of their workforce – including the 5 million who are reported to have an NVQ3.

The CIHE suggested to the Government when FDs were but a gleam in its eye that the latter market was the one offering the most potential for employers. The facts seem to have supported that judgement.

Figure 1 Highest qualification of students, aged under 21 years and 21+, on entry to Foundation Degree programmes in HEIs in England in 2002/03 (percentages)

	Aged under 21	Aged 21 or over
A level or equiv	52.3	17.7
BTEC/ONC	13.8	7.6
Professional quals	0.8	9.5
Other L3 equiv	11.4	16.4
Previous HE/level 4+	6.2	13.5
Other quals (at L2 or below)	7.1	24.8

Source: derived from HESA data⁴ (nb this only shows part of the total FD student population, students at HEIs only, and not FECs).

The differentiated nature of the Foundation Degree market is evident from statistics on student participation: for example, older students (aged 21 or over at entry), who are likely to be mostly employees outnumber younger ones by three to one overall on Foundations Degrees. They are much less likely to hold traditional academic entry qualifications to HE. In particular, as Figure 1, indicates, the older (employed) students have a much wide range of academic and vocational qualifications: almost a quarter have relatively low qualifications (below level 3) at entry, while an eighth already have a higher level qualification. Further differentiation can be seen at subject level, with contrasting profiles for example of engineering, business,

healthcare and education Foundation Degree students. However, we need the statistics to cover FECs to get a proper picture.

The different markets should be recognised and need to be addressed differently. Sometimes there can be confusion about different customers and their requirements, and especially, the differences between work-related learning and work-based learning. Young entrants to the workplace need both quality work experience and guidance in developing personal and work-relevant skills (higher level key skills). Existing employees may already have work-based learning that needs to be assessed and accredited, and built on, and may have reasonably developed higher level key skills.

The role of employers in assessment

An integrated approach requires more than employers defining their needs (directly or through SSCs) and then leaving academic institutions to develop an appropriate curriculum and learning framework, it requires employers to be involved in the process of delivering and assessing work-based learning. That way they can have confidence in the appropriateness of the assessment process. The extent of involvement by employers in assessment will, however, vary. Asking too much of employers will be off-putting, especially if the costs involved are not recognised in the partnership. Small employers in particular may lack the ability to assess in such a way as meets the standards required by institutions. We know little at present of how well such workplace assessment is being done, outwith traditional work-based assessment areas of professional practice.

Because of the difficulties in engaging large numbers of employers, in particular the costs involved and specific problems with workplace assessment, there is the temptation to dilute the vital work-based learning components in Foundation Degrees. This needs resisting. Ways need to be found to tackle the difficulties, and spread the costs. Sector Skill Councils may currently be under-resourced for the task; and the premium offered by HEFCE for the development of Foundation Degrees is not large enough to be shared between the players (very few share it with employers at all or recognise their true costs). But the work of FDF and the recent awards of CETL (for example to Westminster University) in this area opens the possibility for new approaches or extensions of existing good practice to be developed.

Work-based learning and HE

The experience of Foundation degrees has shown how the higher and further education sectors can work more closely with employers. But it offers just one variant of partnership and the integration of work-based learning into higher learning programmes. Many of the challenges being faced by Foundation degrees in engaging employers are not new to the HE sector. They need to be included in the wider policy agenda of getting 'greater buy in to higher education'⁵. The HE sector as a whole has a very poor track record on the development of work-based learning generally. Though it is present in most institutions, and has been for many years, it remains a marginal business. And HE sector's share of the employer learning market is thought to be very low, around two per cent of the total £8billion plus spent by employers on training.

The reasons are not difficult to see, and are many. The main themes are:

- Employers do not see the HE sector as a natural provider of learning for their workforce (even at intermediate and higher levels). The general impression is that its products are not bespoke enough to meet its needs, not offered in small enough 'chunks' of learning and too much linked towards specific qualifications which are not seen by employers as particularly relevant (though valued more by the employees). Relatively few employers seem to see the benefits which engaging with HE can offer in terms of added value, stretching and challenging employees within programmes of learning, beyond that which would be available from most private training providers.
- Institutional managers see other priorities than developing new workforce development or employer markets and products, in particular pressures to improve productivity and, for many, to perform well in the next Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). As a consequence, developing work-based learning has not been associated with high rewards within most HE institutions (less so in colleges).
- Traditional institutional approaches to learning are less appropriate to the needs of employers and work-based learners. Work-based learning is less a series of discrete steps, which can easily be assessed as on a course of learning at an institution, and more a continuous process (and through life). The needs of people engaged in demanding jobs and careers while learning, and who may have scarce time (especially if self-employed or in SMEs) need consideration.
- The current sector funding arrangements need to be changed, and embedded in a new sector work-based learning strategy (which currently does not exist in England, though HEFCE is working on one). The lack of a clear definition of work-based learning and use of different terminology (eg work-related learning, workplace learning) is confusing.
- Employers and institutions need to develop a common language for speaking together about skills and learning, in order to get a better mutual understanding of each others needs and offerings. There is little awareness among HE staff, for example, of National Occupational Standards which are widely in use in many business sectors.
- There is no easy to follow vocational ladder to higher levels which includes both academic formal learning and less formal workplace learning and skill acquisition (see recent LSDA research in forthcoming publication⁴). There needs to be a better alignment of the HE qualifications framework with other qualification and credit frameworks, so as to encourage more seamless progression and an easier 'route map' for people to follow

These and other issues are highlighted in a consultation paper by the CIHE on work-based learning and higher education, and how businesses and higher and further education might work closer together to enhance workforce development. Further details can be found on the CIHE website www.cihe-uk.com. The paper will also be available at the *Work Related Learning in Higher Education* conference, supported by UUK and CIHE, on 24th February in London. We would particularly welcome examples from Foundation Degree programmes of innovative approaches to involving employers in delivery and assessment of work-base learning. We will show-

References:

1. *Foundation Degree Task Force Report to Ministers*, September, 2004, produced by Department for Education and Skills (ref FDTF1)
2. Also see research by York Consulting for the Task Force, 2004, in *Evaluation of Foundation Degrees*, published by DFES , September 20004 (RW23)
3. see CIHE submission to the Task Force, 2004 (available on CIHE website, www.cihe-uk.com)
4. Taken from table A1 in *Vocational ladders or crazy paving? Making your way to higher levels*. Connor H and Little B, LSDA, February 2005
5. *DfES (2003) 21st century skills. Realising our potential – individuals, nations, employers*, London , Department for Education and Skills

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