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## **Relevant & Rigorous? The Work-Study Balance Conundrum in Foundation Degrees: An Exploratory Study.**

### **Summary**

Launched in 2001, there are currently around 61,000 students enrolled on Foundation Degrees in the UK (HESA, 2008). Such Degrees aim to address perceived skills shortages at intermediate professional levels within the workforce (DfEE, 1999; Foskett, 2005, Wilson et al, 2005). The emphasis on work-based learning and the possibility of accrediting prior vocational learning make Foundation Degrees (FDs) distinctive within an academic setting. Such distinctiveness, whilst a defining characteristic of FDs, is difficult to conceptualise and define. In critiquing the early stages of a longitudinal study aimed at analyzing the determining characteristics of FDs, this discussion paper contributes to academic and vocational debates about the relevance of Foundation Degree level higher education and its role in promoting a knowledge based economy. From a theoretical perspective, the paper begins to address pedagogical questions around FDs in terms of work-based learning, accredited prior learning and the widening participation agenda.

### **Introduction:**

Launched in 2001, there are currently around 61,000 students enrolled on Foundation Degrees in the UK (HESA, 2008). Such Degrees aim to address perceived skills shortages at intermediate professional levels within the workforce (DfEE, 1999; Foskett, 2005, Wilson et al, 2005). Thus, in developing new Foundation Degrees (FDs), Higher and Further Education Institutions are required to work closely with employers to make sure that the content and the context of the programme is relevant in terms of meeting the needs of the workplace whilst also being academically rigorous (Edmond et al, 2007; Talbot, 2007). The emphasis on work-based learning and the possibility of accrediting prior vocational learning make Foundation Degrees (FDs) distinctive within an academic setting. Such distinctiveness, whilst a defining characteristic of FDs, is difficult to conceptualise and define. Moreover, the 'newness' of FDs means that there is little empirical evidence to support arguments that FDs are meeting the needs of the workplace and, in doing so, are providing an academically grounded but 'work-relevant' qualification. In critiquing the early stages of a longitudinal study aimed at analyzing the determining characteristics of FDs, this discussion paper contributes to academic and vocational debates about the relevance of Foundation Degree level higher education and its role in promoting a knowledge based economy. From a theoretical perspective, the paper

begins to address pedagogical questions around FDs in terms of work-based learning, accredited prior learning and the widening participation agenda.

### **Background:**

Across the globe, there is a growing awareness of the importance of higher education to the development of a knowledge-based economy (Beerkens, 2008, Drucker & Goldstein, 2007, Dunning, 2002). Moreover, universities are increasingly required to produce highly skilled graduates who are able to respond to the ever changing and complex needs of the contemporary workplace (Hynes & Richardson, 2007; Cox & King, 2006). Conversely, despite the rapid expansion of higher education across the UK over the past two decades, questions about the quality of the graduate labour market and the ability of graduates to meet the employers' needs and expectations (Elias & Purcell, 2004; Mason, 2004, O'Hara, 2007) make uncomfortable reading for policy makers and educators alike. However, whilst serious concerns have been expressed about an increasingly wide 'gap' between the skills and capabilities of graduates, and the requirements and demands of the work environment (King, 2003; Dacko, 2006), other literature points to the wider problem faced by employers experiencing skills shortages at the intermediate or technician levels (DWP, 2008; Dainty et al, 2007; Woolnough, 2006).

It was to address this more generic skills gap that Foundation Degrees (FDs) were launched in 2001 (Wilson et al, 2005). With the main objective of addressing perceived skills shortages at intermediate professional levels within the workforce (DfEE, 1999; Foskett, 2005), it was anticipated that FDs would provide a clearly defined route upon which students could progress to Bachelors (Honours) Degrees (DfEE, 2000) – thereby addressing both short term intermediate skills shortages and long term issues around graduate employability. In addition to the focus on meeting the needs of the employer, one of the defining features of FDs is the contribution to the current widening participation agenda; indeed such programmes attract mature and other students from 'non-traditional' groups currently under-represented in higher education (HEFCE, 2000; DfES, 2003; Dodgson and Whitham, 2005).

The 'newness' of Foundation Degrees means there has been little empirical investigation into the extent to which they are meeting government objectives and employers needs. Likewise, there is little evidence regarding the academic rigour and validity of such programmes. By discussing the emergent findings of our research into the determining characteristics of Foundation Degrees, this paper goes

someway to addressing this issue and in doing so adds to academic, employer and policy debates in this area.

### **Study Approach:**

Commencing with the thesis that Foundation Degrees aim to encapsulate the needs of the workplace environment in a manner that is pedagogically and academically rigorous; the study focuses upon empirical research into the perceptions of Foundation Degree students, their employers, lecturers and managers from one University and its partner colleges (currently seven Further Education Institutions). Prior to commencing the study a conceptual framework was developed that modelled the methodological and theoretical concepts upon which the project was to be framed. This framework, whilst incorporating pedagogical and andragogical theories and debates (Forrest & Peterson, 2006; Knowles, 1980, 1984), brought together two different methodological approaches; Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and Action Research (Cairns et al, 2006; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Salipante & Aram, 2003). The lack of previous empirical investigation in this area means that an approach following Grounded Theory methodology is particularly suitable as it allows the research team to make a distinctive contribution to what is a 'newly-emerging' body of knowledge. Furthermore, a research strategy guided by the principles of Action Research affords the opportunity to develop an innovative approach to the research in which the study participants are encouraged to become fully involved as collaborative partners within the study (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Having commenced in October 2007, it is anticipated that the study will be longitudinal in nature, tracking Foundation Degree cohorts from initial enrolment through to graduation firstly at FD level and then at Bachelors level. Academic rigour will be measured using QAA and University benchmarks, whilst workplace relevance will be evaluated by interviewing students and employers about the validity of the FD to their work environment.

A mixed methodological approach will be adopted involving the administration of an electronic survey to all students, follow-up qualitative interviews with students, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with lecturers, managers and employers. To date an exploratory study involving the administration of qualitative surveys to three cohorts of students (45 in total), and in-depth interviews with five lecturers, two managers and one administrator have been undertaken. The findings of this exploratory study, which are highlighted in the next section, will be used to shape the subsequent fieldwork and investigation. This will initially take the form of a large

quantitative survey focusing upon the issues raised in the exploratory study and follow up in-depth interviews. It is proposed to undertake 'panel' surveys with the participants at frequent intervals during the FD experience.

### **Exploratory study findings.**

The analysis of the exploratory study has raised some interesting points around the relevance of FDs in relation to academic rigour and validity and work-place requirements. The emergent findings may be summarized thus:

1. **Academic Background & Demography:** The student participants represent a wide demographic sample with ages ranging from 21 to 45. Academically, students possessed varying qualifications: Some had left school at 16 but had several years work-based learning; others had Bachelors level Degrees (and beyond) but little prior work-based learning.
2. **Technical Content:** Students across all FD subject areas experienced similar difficulties with some of the technical aspects of the curriculum. The nature and complexity of the problems experienced by the students reflected prior academic and work-based learning; those students who indicated they had struggled greatly at the beginning of the Degree felt that additional classroom time should be written into the programme to take account of their varied academic and work backgrounds and prior learning. Employers were mostly concerned that the academic content of the FDs should encapsulate technical work-based requirements and expand employee (student) knowledge and competencies.
3. **Pedagogy:** The pedagogical issues reflective of different student apriori experiences suggested the need for clear 'benchmarking' of student knowledge and ability. Lecturing staff indicated that the need to tailor FDs to a **specific** work environment meant that flexible teaching and learning strategies were adopted across all FD programmes in order to promote relevant industrial and academic experiences.
4. **Work-Life-Study Balance:** Almost all of the student participants identified difficulties maintaining a work-life-study balance with many developing distinctive coping strategies to achieve academic deadlines and goals. Problems with time management were augmented by the 'block-learning' structure of some of the programmes – some students found it particularly difficult to take 'two weeks' out of their lives to attend a residential course at university or college. Whilst most employers supported student learning and

participation on the FD, study leave was generally limited to the time spent in the classroom with little time allocated to individual study.

5. Industrial and Professional Relevance: The importance of tailoring Foundation Degrees so that they provide high quality education relevant to a particular industry or employer was noted by all of the participants. The student participants were particularly concerned that the FD should equip them with the relevant skills required for career enhancement. Employers' perspectives varied; most stressed the need to equip students with industry specific skills and abilities, whilst others also discussed the need for FDs to develop students' more generic employability competencies such as communication and presentation skills.

### **Conclusion:**

The analysis undertaken thus far has found that many of the Foundation Degree student participants experience difficulties in conceptualising linkages between theories learnt in the classroom and the wider context of their work environment. From a pedagogical perspective, it may be theorized that such difficulties reflect issues around the need to balance employers' requirements in terms of industrial relevance, educational concerns about academic rigour and student abilities and perceptions of their work environment and education. Indeed, for lecturing staff, FDs represent a distinctive challenge in which academic values and employer requirements need to be finely attuned within a blended learning environment.

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the findings of the exploratory stages of a longitudinal study aimed at analyzing the determining characteristics of Foundation Degrees. In doing so it has begun to identify and discuss the distinctive challenges associated with the need to assure that Foundation Degrees provide a 'work' relevant and academically rigorous education. It is anticipated that the longitudinal study upon which this paper is based will provide an empirical analysis regarding the distinctiveness of the Foundation Degree in relation to its being a relevant and rigorous vocational **and** academic qualification.

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