Successful Foundation Degrees
A Study of the Role of Employers and Other Key Factors

Final Report
Executive Summary

John Benyon and Belinda Mckee
with
Elain Crewe and Katie Morris
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- Widen access to, and increase and enable participation in, further and higher education;
- Bring to bear differing perspectives on common issues such as foundation degrees;
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The working groups are set up according to identified needs. There are currently 18 working groups, some of which are based on subject and curriculum needs (such as English, Geography, Chemistry) while others focus on cross-cutting themes (for example, FE/HE research, sustainable development, and libraries and resources). The groups help to identify how the different sectors can work together to share good practice, enhance students’ learning, and organise appropriate continuing professional development for staff.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Institute of Lifelong Learning at the University of Leicester was awarded a grant in October 2007 by Foundation Degree Forward (fdf) to undertake a study looking at the factors influencing the success of foundation degrees developed locally by members of the Colleges–University of Leicester Network (CULN). The research was particularly interested in exploring the role of employers in successful foundation degrees.

1.2 The CULN group is a dynamic partnership of 18 further education and sixth-form colleges and 3 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the East and West Midlands. They work together to promote co-operation between members and to increase access for learners and progression in to higher education. It has a two-tier structure with a committee chaired by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester and 18 operational working groups.

1.3 The two CULN working groups most closely identified with the project, the Employer Engagement and Foundation Degree groups, were brought together to form the Steering Group for the project. As well as receiving regular updates on the progress of the project, the Steering Group has been closely involved in influencing the direction of the study and the research methods and instruments.

1.4 The project was carried out in three phases. The first involved a review of major documentary sources and a survey of all CULN members about the foundation degrees in which they were involved. The survey collected key information on both active and non-active foundation degrees that had been developed over the past four years. Phases 2 and 3 of the project entailed detailed action-based research into five case studies of foundation degrees, including focused interviews with employers, college staff and students. The interviews asked about the role of employers, from first initial concept through to shared delivery of programmes, and provided an opportunity to reflect on how employers’ involvement may have changed over time.

1.5 ‘Successful’ foundation degrees were taken to mean courses with viable numbers of students enrolled, where the majority of students completed their programme of study, and where students had access to effective progression routes.

1.6 The research took place between November 2007 and September 2008. There have been two interim reports produced in June 2008 and September 2008 respectively. This summary is for the final report.
2. Research methods

2.1 Literature review

2.1.1 A number (23) of key periodicals, articles, research reports and journals relating to the development of foundation degrees were examined. These provided a national picture of the distinctive features of foundation degrees and views on how employers contributed to their success.

2.2 Survey of CULN partners

2.2.1 A short questionnaire was prepared, piloted and discussed with the Steering Group. After agreement, it was circulated to all CULN members to gain an overview of the types of foundation degrees that had been developed, their key statistics, the role of employers, and their success. After some follow-ups by email and phone, a response rate of 67 (73%) was achieved. The survey provided much valuable information.

2.3 Case studies

2.3.1 The 67 completed questionnaires that were received were each analysed to assess their suitability for further investigation. A number of criteria were applied to select the case studies and these included:

- Availability of at least 3 years of data on the foundation degree;
- Student numbers of above 10 per intake over a three-year period;
- A fully completed survey;
- Scores of 3 or higher (out of 5) in the employer involvement section.

2.3.2 The following five case studies were selected:

Phase 1 – *FdA in Families, Parenting and Communities* – Leicester College
(Pilot Case Study)

Phase 2 – *FdSc in Sport and Exercise Development* – Lincoln College
*FdA in Leadership and Management (Late-Night Entertainment)* – Loughborough College

Phase 3 – *FdSc in IT and Technical Support* – Newman University College, Birmingham
*FdA in Managing Voluntary and Community Organisations (MVCO)* – University of Leicester
3. Research findings

3.1 Employers’ involvement

3.1.1 The role of employers in foundation degrees emerged as a complex and varied theme. The survey showed that active foundation degrees had significantly higher employer involvement than those that were not running, indicating a correlation between employer involvement and viable courses. Employers were mainly involved in the provision of work experience and were involved relatively little in course delivery or assessing student work.

3.1.2 There were exceptions, though, including the FdA in Leadership and Management (Late-Night Entertainment) and the FdA in Managing Voluntary and Community Organisations. The former was jointly delivered by Loughborough College and the employer (Luminar plc) and the latter employed specialists from the voluntary sector to assist in delivering the course. There was only one example where the first approach had come from an employer and that was the FdA in Leadership and Management (Late-Night Entertainment). 20 per cent of survey respondents said that they had ongoing employer participation, but only six per cent said that they had more involvement at the point of the survey than when the course first started.

3.1.3 Once involved, the employers in the case studies were highly positive about foundation degrees. They reported that the content of the curriculum was relevant to the needs of their businesses and they were consistent in their praise of how the course was of benefit to their employees. Few employers were involved in marketing activities and it emerged from the case studies that marketing was often a neglected area.

3.1.4 Although employers generally enjoyed good relations with colleges and universities, there did appear to be a number of missed opportunities for improved contact with employers. Many of the employers interviewed wanted more contact, such as feedback on the progress of their employees who were students on a foundation degree. Many employers received no regular information from the college or university. They were not asking for meetings, but informal phone or email contact and brief written reports.

3.1.5 Feedback from the Steering Group suggested that a sensitive approach was needed when contacting potential employers, who were often overloaded with contacts from different training agencies. It was suggested that it was better to talk to them about their continuing professional development requirements rather than initially trying to engage them in a
The case studies showed that modular validation was often not available, and some colleges and employers found the process of making changes to courses, once they were developed, difficult and cumbersome.

3.1.6 Many students who were on part-time foundation degrees benefited from employer financial support or assistance in other ways, such as time off for study and help with travel expenses. In the case studies, the proportion of students receiving support from employers ranged from 18 per cent to 100 per cent.

3.2 Course/programme viability and sustainability

3.2.1 One of the measures of success of a foundation degree is the number of students enrolled on the programme. The survey data provided the opportunity to examine this and showed that the number of courses with 11 to 50 students enrolled on them had increased year-on-year since 2004. However, there were still a number of courses with between six and ten students enrolled (10 courses out of 67 in 2007–08), which raised questions about their viability.

3.2.2 The survey data revealed that it was common for course numbers to fluctuate year-on-year. In some cases there had been a ‘honeymoon period’ during which numbers had initially been robust but had then tailed off, possibly after many of those needing or wanting the qualification had enrolled on the course. In other cases, legislative or occupational changes had affected the relevance of the course, and there were also examples of competition affecting student numbers. One foundation degree had introduced a distance-learning mode of study and had recruited students on an international basis. This was proving successful and helpful in combating reducing student numbers on the original face-to-face course.

3.2.3 The survey showed that 28 per cent of the courses developed by CULN members were not currently active – either not running yet, or abandoned and not likely to run. The main reasons provided were poor enrolment, that the course was not yet validated, or that the course was still in development. Some subject areas posed a higher risk of not being active than others, with courses in media and business running the highest risk and sport and education the lowest risk of not running.

3.2.4 The data showed that student non-completion of foundation degrees could be quite significant. Some of the case studies provided examples of the measures that had been put in place to try to reduce this. These included providing enhanced student support systems at the first stages of the foundation degree and dividing early modules into short assessed
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blocks. Increasing the flexibility of a foundation degree was shown to help with retention, but there was an inevitable trade off between flexibility and viability as sometimes it was not cost-effective to offer a wider range of delivery modes, venues or times of study.

3.2.5 The proportion of students on full-time foundation degrees nationally was considerably higher than on foundation degrees run by CULN members. This could be indicative of greater flexibility provided by CULN members than is available nationally:

   HEFCE 2006–07 – 58 per cent full-time
   CULN 2006–07 – 21 per cent full-time

3.2.6 A common theme that emerged was that there were considerable variations in the ability and knowledge levels of students enrolling on foundation degrees. Many students fitted the profile of not having undertaken any academic study for several years and being unsure of how they would cope with academic study. Some course managers were developing strategies to cope with groups of such mixed ability and knowledge levels.
4. Conclusions

4.1 The study found that developing and delivering a successful foundation degree requires considerable ongoing management. There can be no room for complacency. If a course is to be responsive to the needs of employers then it is likely to require fairly frequent changes to the curriculum. Colleges and universities need to keep ahead of new requirements and be alert for new markets if they are to maintain viable student numbers.

4.2 The research demonstrated that the benefits of foundation degrees for both employers and students were considerable. Many students said that studying for the foundation degree had been a life-changing experience for them. They praised the quality of teaching and facilities and the increase in their technical expertise.

4.3 Both employers and students particularly singled out how the course had improved their levels of confidence and employability. There were many examples of students taking on new roles or getting promoted as a result of undertaking the foundation degree. One employer found that having students on the course had dramatically reduced staff turnover which had previously been a major issue.

4.4 In summary, the research concluded that successful foundation degrees share a number of common features, both in terms of outcomes and inputs:

- Improved confidence levels of graduates
- Positive effects on the workplace and improved employability
- Life-changing experience for many students
- Employers who are engaged with foundation degrees are highly supportive of their benefits
- A curriculum that is highly relevant to the world of work brings success
- Evidence of considerable workplace improvements
- Reduced turnover of employees
- Good student evaluation of the quality of the teaching and facilities
- Flexible approach to the design and delivery of programmes
- Onward progression of graduates, both academic and work-related
- Effective, fully-functioning partnerships between the employers and education providers usually lead to successful foundation degrees
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5. Recommendations

5.1 The study made a number of generic recommendations which were aimed at maximising the sustainability, viability and success of foundation degrees:

- Embed an employer–education provided communications strategy that facilitates regular, ongoing communication between employers and the college staff.
- Wherever possible, establish employer–education partnerships that have agreed numbers of students to be sent by the employer on a regular basis.
- Carry out regular updating of the curriculum content to ensure that it is meeting changing employer and environmental needs.
- As far as possible, develop flexible timetabling to allow for varying work and family commitments, making use of student and employer feedback.
- Develop new modes of study, such as distance-learning, where appropriate. The FdA in Managing Voluntary and Community Organisations is a good example of this, and the DL mode of study has enabled the recruitment of international students.
- With the validating partner, explore opportunities to offer a modular approach that facilitates student achievement step-by-step using ‘small bites of learning’.
- Establish a comprehensive marketing and publicity strategy and ensure that it is continued on an ongoing basis each year.
- Provide a stimulating delivery of curriculum by professionals who have industry experience.
- Embed support and welfare systems for students, particularly to cover study support in the early stages of the course.
- Develop a clearly-defined and available ladder of progression from level 3 courses through the foundation degree to honours degree level.
- Respond to students and employer feedback and show sensitivity in pitching fee levels to take account of market tolerance and affordability.
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