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Evaluation of Foundation Degree Forward

A report to HEFCE by Russell Moseley and Stephen Hill

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Methodology

This evaluation of Foundation Degree Forward (**fdf**) was commissioned by HEFCE and was undertaken in the period late July to mid October 2005. The purpose of the exercise was fourfold:

- to evaluate the extent to which **fdf** has met its strategic aims and objectives;
- to evaluate the operation of the funding agreement between HEFCE and Staffordshire University;
- to identify areas of **fdf**'s current good practice and areas for development;
- to make recommendations about the need for support to help build the long-term success of Foundation degrees.

The evaluation had to be conducted in a very brief space of time and had to respect the newness of **fdf** and its need to work in partnership with a very wide range of agencies. The approach adopted was to identify the key stakeholders (and relevant agencies) and to consult providers of Foundation degrees (FDs) (FE colleges, HEIs and FD consortia) through questionnaire (using the **fdf** database) and telephone interviews, and to conduct interviews with other agencies which had contact with **fdf** and/or are represented on the **fdf** board.

The extent to which *fdf* has met its strategic aims and objectives

A network of expertise. **fdf** has established an accessible and substantial resource which supports networking, though it is not clear that a <u>network</u> of expertise best describes what **fdf** has achieved. **fdf** has been extremely successful in building up a substantial base of contacts in FE colleges and HEIs, in establishing itself as a valued source of expertise and advice; and in disseminating information on 'design, development and delivery' through its staff, its journal, website and conferences. This resource is greatly appreciated by FD providers.

Partnership working to create Foundation degree frameworks. **fdf** has concentrated on those Sector Skills Councils which see FDs as crucial to their sector, and will need to think carefully about appropriate engagement strategies to extend these early successes. **fdf** has made significant progress towards achieving its aim of ensuring that FDs meet generic and sector-specific requirements and of articulating vocational and academic frameworks.

Creating a validation and quality assurance service. The validation service was an expectation of **fdf** at its inception and has been achieved. There were divergent views about the need for and utility of the service which some saw as unnecessary, trespassing on their awarding powers, or introducing an extra element of complexity in terms of quality assurance and external review of FDs. The linking of quality assurance to the validation service was viewed much more positively, and it is clear that **fdf** performs a vital quality enhancement role. It would be worth considering moving the emphasis explicitly to enhancement to secure wider support for this activity.

Supporting aims: working inclusively and in partnership, efficiently and accountably. The range of organisations with which **fdf** works is testimony to its inclusiveness. Evidence of genuine partnership working was abundant, and correspondents almost universally commended this dimension of **fdf**'s activities. Minor criticisms mainly related to communication issues which perhaps reflected the regional structure and the need to consult so many organisations. **fdf** will need to continue to work inclusively whilst taking care to ensure that the strategic dimension of its work is not obscured.

Areas of good practice and areas for development

Good practice. The creation of a source of advice, expertise, *etc* has been crucial and is much appreciated and still needed. The journal, publications, website and conferences are highly valued by providers, who look forward to their continued development. The staff are also seen as a valuable and effective resource and the regional structure and work of Regional Development Managers (RDMs) is seen as very helpful, enabling **fdf** to act as broker between agencies and providers to the benefit of all concerned.

Areas for development. The British Chambers of Commerce project was often identified by respondents as an extremely positive development, and there was a strong prevailing view that employer engagement must be a major focus for future work. Further development of resources relating to work-based learning (WBL) and accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (AP(E)L) was also identified as necessary.

The funding agreement

There appear to have been operational difficulties at first, but these were reported to be being resolved. Setting up **fdf** as a separate entity is not seen as realistic.

Future support

There was an almost unanimous view that there is a need for an organisation such as **fdf** to continue and that if it didn't exist it would have to be invented, at least until FDs become fully embedded in the vocational and educational landscapes; and there is a need for **fdf** to increase its activity on employer engagement and related matters.

Other issues

Other issues raised by correspondents were:

- the need for greater clarity about the research function;
- the need for more demonstration of the strategic dimension of the **fdf** board and a new strategic plan to present and explain **fdf** and its activities to stakeholders;
- divergent views about whether **fdf** should put its resource into supporting programmes, in response to the recent QAA review cycle, or into developing resources relating to generic issues identified in the reviews such as WBL and APEL;
- refining the regional model to maintain closeness to providers and brokerage roles whilst sustaining consistency and effective lines of communication between national and regional officers.

Evaluation of Foundation Degree Forward

1.   Introduction and Background

This evaluation of Foundation Degree Forward (*fdf*) was commissioned by HEFCE and undertaken in the period late July to mid October 2005 by Russell Moseley, Director of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick and Stephen Hill, Director of Flexible Learning and Community Engagement at the University of Bristol. In the interests of brevity it is assumed that matters relating to the creation and development of *fdf* over the past two years are familiar to the readers of this report.

The purpose of the exercise was fourfold:

- to evaluate the extent to which *fdf* has met its strategic aims and objectives;
- to identify areas of *fdf*'s current good practice and areas for development;
- to evaluate the operation of the funding agreement between HEFCE and Staffordshire University;
- to make recommendations about the need for support to help build the long-term success of Foundation degrees.

After section 2 below on the approach adopted, the report takes each of these aims in turn then concludes with a discussion of additional matters which emerged during the evaluation.

2.   Methodology

There are several constraints on undertaking a comprehensive evaluation of *fdf* at this time and over this particular period:

a. Firstly, it is still a very young organisation having been in existence for only two years and with many of its staff having been in post for a much shorter time than that. Any attempt to undertake a summative evaluation of the organisation's impact at this stage of its evolution would, we believe, be premature.

b. Secondly, a defining characteristic of *fdf*'s *modus operandi* is working in partnership with a very wide range of agencies – including colleges, universities, statutory bodies, employers, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), various regional bodies, membership organisations and numerous quangos. There are, therefore, literally hundreds of organisations which have worked, or had contact, with *fdf* over the past two years and whose views might be sought in any evaluation (the vast majority being FE colleges).

c. Thirdly, the difficulties of effectively consulting this range of interested parties was made more acute given the short timescale of the evaluation, especially as it coincided with the summer holiday period during which many of those with whom we wished to speak were on annual leave.

The approach we adopted was to identify, through discussions with HEFCE and *fdf* colleagues, the key stakeholders. We focused our attention on these and sought their views on their interactions with *fdf* and the extent to which, on the basis of their experience, they believed the organisation was meeting its stated aims. This constituency was divided into:

- providers – colleges and HEIs which had worked or had contact with *fdf* in some way;

- other stakeholders including almost all those represented on the *fdf* Management Board together with a range of other agencies which had worked with *fdf* in one capacity or another at some point over the previous two years.

Rather than select a small (and therefore possibly unrepresentative) sample of colleges and HEIs to interview, we decided to use *fdf*'s list of FE and HE contacts. Using this resource we distributed by email to the 200 members of the list a short questionnaire seeking, in confidence, information on the nature of respondents' involvement with *fdf*, their reasons for working with *fdf*, the services they had made use of, and their assessment of the impact the contact had made.

Views of the non-provider stakeholders were obtained through a series of open-ended interviews, some carried out by telephone and a larger number through face to face meetings. Interviews were also carried out with a number of *fdf* staff.

Finally, a small number of group discussions were carried out with members of FE/HE consortia which had been involved in Foundation degree development. The evaluation also involved desk-based scrutiny of a range of literature including a self-assessment prepared by *fdf* for this exercise.

We would like to thank colleagues at *fdf* for providing this and a wide range of supporting papers, and for help in circulating the questionnaire to colleges and HEIs.

3.   The extent to which *fdf* has met its strategic aims and objectives

The first of the four purposes of this evaluation was to assess the extent to which *fdf* has met its strategic aims and objectives. In its strategic plan *fdf* sets out for itself three core strategic aims:

- Establishing a network of expertise in Foundation degree development, validation and delivery;

- Working in partnership with Sector Skills Councils, the Skills for Business Network and professional bodies to contract and evaluate Foundation degree frameworks;

- Establishing a validation and quality assurance service to support Foundation degree developments.

and two supporting aims:

- Establishing *fdf* as an inclusive organisation that works in partnership to pursue coherent and coordinated strategic objectives in support of Foundation degree provision;

- To deliver these aims and objectives efficiently and effectively, demonstrating accountability to stakeholders and funding bodies.

(i) A network of expertise
Whilst the evidence we gathered supported the conclusion that *fdf* has established an accessible and substantial resource which supports networking, to call it a <u>network</u> of expertise may not best describe what *fdf* has achieved under its first strategic aim. This may be simply a matter of terminology, since the stated objectives which support this first aim – sharing good practice, supporting high quality innovation, publishing data and providing consultancy and expertise – refer principally to activities which, while they may require a high degree of <u>networking</u> on *fdf*'s part do not suggest the need for a creation of a physical network as such. What *fdf* has been extremely successful in doing under this broad heading is: firstly, building up a substantial base of contacts in FE colleges and HEIs; secondly, establishing itself as a valued source of expertise and advice; and thirdly, disseminating information on 'design, development and delivery' through its staff (both at Lichfield and regionally based), its journal, website and conferences. These elements, of course, are vital prerequisites for establishing a successful and effective network of expertise.

From a provider perspective this is clearly appreciated. Feedback from FD providers who have had contact with *fdf* was overwhelmingly positive both in terms of the quality of advice, the assistance that was received and also in the collaborative, partnership-based way of working. Over 80% of our respondents rated their contact with *fdf* to be either 'helpful' or 'very helpful'. Typical comments included:

- 'particularly [helpful] in providing an external perspective as a critical friend and providing information on wider developments and links to other Foundation degrees';

- 'provided informed and critical support and guidance at a crucial stage…an authoritative voice';

- 'assisted my work as validation officer at X no end. I find all the staff very helpful and they will give freely of their time. In terms of raising the profile of FDs in the region and brokering relationships they have been invaluable';

- 'felt my query and my institution mattered';

- '[working with *fdf*] is a two way process'.

In a majority of cases respondents to our questionnaire had approached *fdf* in the first instance, although in a sizeable minority of cases the initiative had come from *fdf*. In around a third of cases the provider had originally approached another organisation before contacting *fdf*. The areas of interest which gave rise to the contact with *fdf* were,

in descending numerical significance, work-based learning, curriculum development and employer involvement (joint second), funding, quality assurance and validation, AP(E)L, teaching and learning, academic/vocational balance, articulation/progression, assessment and student support.

(ii) Partnership working to create Foundation degree frameworks
The collaborative approach to working that was evident from providers' comments was also reflected in the views of the representatives of Sector Skills Councils with whom we spoke. Not unreasonably, *fdf* has concentrated on those SSCs which see FDs as crucial to their sector qualification strategies, and there are others which have not yet registered FDs on their radar screens. *fdf* will need to think carefully about appropriate engagement strategies in those more difficult cases. But for those SSCs which have engaged with FDs the judgement must be that *fdf* has made significant progress towards achieving its aim. That progress may have been slower in some cases than originally hoped, and the budget allocated for this work may have been underspent, but those we spoke to were clear that *fdf*'s approach to ensuring that the end product was suitable in terms of generic and sector-specific requirements and in establishing required outcomes during the development process were appropriate given the scale of investment in this work. Correspondents also drew attention to the tensions which arise in terms of reconciling vocational and academic requirements within frameworks, and clearly saw *fdf* as playing a vital role in mediation and development work in this aspect of FD curriculum development and delivery.

In the context of working with SSCs this 'bridging' role of *fdf* was commented on frequently. One interviewee saw *fdf* providing 'the join between education and employers', another spoke about *fdf* 'Providing the glue which held the joints together more securely'. Not everyone we spoke to saw *fdf* occupying this position – some saw it as too provider-led and therefore disposed too far towards the academic end of the spectrum. We return to this later in the report, and *fdf* should continue to be sensitive to the fact that outside the direct *fdf*/SSC relationship there is a range of players with interests in the development of the frameworks, and that it is vitally important that they are kept in the loop and feel some degree of involvement in the whole process. From this observation it follows that there is a continuing need for information gathering and dissemination (focussed on facilitating understanding of the key features of FDs for all stakeholders, including employers), where *fdf* can provide a valuable developmental and facilitation service.

(iii) Creating a validation and quality assurance service
fdf's first strategic aim refers to 'FD development, validation and delivery', but the validation aspect is really picked up in the context of its third strategic aim. This was probably the most problematic area we encountered in the evaluation. Given the explicit reference to this role in the 2003 White Paper on the future of HE which gave rise to the creation of *fdf* it was inevitable that it would feature prominently in the organisation's strategic aims. Indeed, paragraph 5.23 of the White Paper can be read in such a way that the principal *raison d'être* of the new body was 'to offer a dedicated validation service for Foundation Degrees', with the creation of a centre of expertise and 'liaising' with SSCs

following in its wake. At face value then it is possible to offer an unqualified verdict of success in respect of *fdf*'s third strategic aim since it has certainly created such a service, and has done so through working in partnership with those institutions it set out to involve.

However, this remains the most contentious of *fdf*'s activities and the one which attracted most critical comment in this evaluation. The fact that *fdf* was set up, and required, to establish a validation service appears to cut little ice with critics who see it as either trespassing on their own territory or interfering in an unwarranted way in affairs which should not be the concern of *fdf*. It is outside our brief to venture into these discussions and we could simply assert, from the point of view of this evaluation, that this strategic aim has been successfully achieved. The service is currently formed by 40 HEIs that have agreed to provide validation to institutions without degree awarding powers, and *fdf* has worked with them to provide a number of models for quality management to meet the needs of those involved in the provision of FDs. However, it might be helpful to reflect some of the other, less partisan, views we heard in the course of this exercise. Firstly, there is fairly widespread scepticism that there is a significant demand for the kind of validation service suggested in the White Paper. Imperfect though the relationships between some FE colleges and HEIs might be, there is, as yet, little evidence of large numbers of colleges wishing to seek alternative arrangements. It is acknowledged that there may be occasions when this is the case or when another kind of organisation without degree awarding powers might find the service of value, but the view we heard was that this is unlikely to be a frequent occurrence. For the majority of those with whom we spoke the validation service was at most a 'safety net'. The other significant concern which was aired related to the technical issue of ownership of validation. Representatives of HEIs in particular expressed concern not only that their degree-awarding powers might somehow be compromised by validation through *fdf*, but also that they saw such an arrangement as introducing an undesirable element of complexity when FDs were subject to external review.

On the other hand the linking of quality assurance to the validation service was viewed rather differently. Interestingly, *fdf*'s publication setting out its work in this area bears the title 'National Validation Service' but has a sub-title which refers to a 'Validation and Quality Assurance Service'. Much of the document sets out a range of benefits of working with *fdf* which are far broader than a validation service and clearly relate to a wider quality agenda. While some stakeholders still saw this as unnecessary intervention, others saw it as having potential benefit and, indeed, being much closer to the primary purpose and many of the other functions of *fdf*. All we would add is that quality <u>assurance</u> in this context might be a less appropriate descriptor than quality <u>enhancement</u> and a greater emphasis on the latter might meet some of the criticisms that have been levelled at this aspect of *fdf*'s work.

(iv) Supporting aims: working inclusively and in partnership, efficiently and accountably
The three key strategic aims discussed above are supported by two others, the first of which sees *fdf* as an inclusive organisation working in partnership, and the second which

requires efficient and effective delivery of aims and objectives with appropriate accountability. In our discussions with stakeholders we found nothing that would suggest that *fdf* was failing to meet its aims in these respects (although a minority of those with whom we spoke believed that *fdf* had been less well disposed towards them than they felt it should have been). The range of organisations with which *fdf* works is testimony to its inclusiveness, and the evidence of genuine partnership working was abundant. The sheer number of partners and the range of resulting activities of course is not unproblematic, and on occasion we were told of decisions that had been taken which affected others at one remove who then felt aggrieved that they had not been adequately consulted. In such a complex operation (compounded by a regional structure) it is difficult to avoid this other than by continuing consciously to involve as many interested parties as possible in the process without decision-making grinding to a halt as a result. The other observation we would offer is that success in working with many different kinds of organisation on a very wide range of diverse activities does run the risk of presenting an overall picture which, while undoubtedly busy, is interpreted as *ad hoc* and disjointed, thus rendering it harder to identify the strategic dimension. We return to this later in the report.

4.   Areas of good practice and areas for development

A range of examples of *fdf*'s good practice (as broadly defined) was identified by stakeholders, some examples being specific to a particular stakeholder's perspective, others having more general support. In the latter category the area most frequently mentioned, and to which we have already referred, was *fdf*'s successful creation of a responsive source of advice and expertise. This was seen as an essential part of *fdf*'s first phase of development and a prerequisite for any further development of the organisation's activities. There was overwhelming support for the proposal, given that FDs were not yet firmly established features in the landscape, that this aspect of *fdf*'s work should continue and, indeed develop. It was striking that the range of those who found *fdf*'s work in this regard to be of value extended well beyond the providers – stakeholders outside the education system were equally positive about the existence of a source of knowledge about FDs and related matters.

Support for the regional structure that has been put in place was also welcomed, and the work of the Regional Development Managers (RDMs) received frequent praise. They too were seen as helpful sources of advice and expertise, tempered with 'local' as well as national knowledge, but their role as brokers was equally valued. Their contributions in this respect reflect in part the inclusive, partnership approach to working that *fdf* has, for the most part, been successful in developing. This has meant that RDMs work with a wide range of other regional players and are ideally placed to play a valuable brokering or catalytic role which can have significant benefits (beyond FD development) at a regional level. It does appear that the location of the RDMs is important in this respect, and that those who are based in Regional Development Agencies for example are particularly well placed to exploit this potential. As an example of good practice, we note that the regional brokering role has a national counterpart as well – the range of national agencies with which *fdf* works has meant that in some cases it has been able to create

linkages between its partners who might not otherwise have had such direct communication with each other.

Although some RDMs have been in post for only a short time, so there is still limited experience of operating with the full network, we were aware of emerging good practice in establishing effective teamwork in a disaggregated and geographically separated group of colleagues. Some interviewees commented favourably on the way RDMs communicated with each other and referred providers to other RDMs with specialist knowledge and experience in particular aspects of FD development. The RDMs were also seen by correspondents in both FE and HE as playing an important facilitating role: bringing institutions together, assisting the developments of links with employers, and helping to forge a common language between actors in different sectors. A not uncommon comment related to surprise (and delight) on the part of providers in FE that the RDMs suggested that they could become involved in research and development which could be of national as well as local significance.

fdf's partnership approach to working with others has already been mentioned several times and, with very few exceptions, this was seen as an area of good practice. The views of some providers of FDs were quoted earlier, and several other categories of stakeholder expressed appreciation that, as one of them put it, *fdf* was 'collaborative not prescriptive' in its outlook.

The final area of good practice frequently referred to was *fdf*'s production of data and statistics. In view of the paucity of information about FDs and the students they attracted, this was seen as an important part of *fdf*'s work and one which could be developed further. The direction this work might take touches on more general issues around *fdf*'s research function, to which we return in the final section. Particular significance was attached to the capacity of *fdf* to fill a gap in information about part-time applications to study FDs given that most national statistics (particularly those available from UCAS) related to full-time applications.

In terms of areas for development there was a unanimous consensus that employer engagement must be *fdf*'s top priority in any further phase of development. It was acknowledged that the involvement of employers is an issue for HE more generally, but the need for greater engagement is especially acute in the case of FDs because of their key defining features. As one interviewee put it: 'FDs will be the primary way in which the relationship between HE and the economy is manifest at a local and regional level'. There was a widespread belief among those with whom we spoke that the projected expansion of FD numbers would not be achieved without significant progress being made in increasing employer engagement with FDs. Clearly, *fdf* has achieved much in this regard already and the initiative undertaken with the British Chambers of Commerce is the most recent of many attempts to bring about a higher degree of employer awareness of, engagement with, and commitment to FDs. However, the view we heard consistently was that welcome though these previous efforts were, what is now needed is a step-change if this crucial issue for the future of FDs is to be tackled successfully. In turn this

has implications for almost all aspects of *fdf*, from its strategic plan, through its staffing structure and staff profiles to its research focus.

The need for *fdf* to increase its work to secure greater employer engagement was overwhelmingly the area for development most frequently identified. Other areas also had an employer/employment dimension, in particular work-based learning which was seen by most stakeholders as posing particular problems (reflected in the most recent round of FD reviews by the QAA) while being absolutely central to the identity of FDs. Progression issues were seen by some as an area that required more work, and APEL in the context of FDs was frequently mentioned as a highly significant area for development, since it is not only a key characteristic of FDs but raises fundamental issues about the academic/vocational balance in this particular kind of provision. APEL was seen by some as being a potential means of enabling students on FDs to complete more quickly whilst maintaining their employment activity. 'We see it as the key to accelerating progression for experienced members of the workforce. It's just that we need help turning the key in the lock.'

Underlying these specific topics that were suggested for development was the more general proposition that *fdf* should place greater emphasis than hitherto on provision of information and dissemination of good practice – people want to know 'what works'. It was suggested that there is now considerable experience of designing, delivering and assessing FDs out in the field and that in most if not all of those areas where problems had been encountered – WBL, progression, APEL as mentioned above – there was experience that could be shared and that would be useful to others. The potential of the journal, the website and both national and regional events were mentioned in this context. However, several correspondents pointed out that much useful work had already been carried out on these topics by others and that *fdf* should make use of this and be careful not to duplicate activity that was already in the public domain.

Some of those we spoke to warned against too naïve a view of the value of sharing experience, and pointed out that FDs could be highly context-specific and that a simple transfer of practice, no matter how successful, from one setting to a quite different one could be highly problematic. This is probably a useful health warning, but the impression we were left with was that sharing of information and dissemination should nonetheless be a key area for future development.

5.   The funding agreement

Funds are paid to *fdf* through a formal funding agreement, signed in January 2004, between HEFCE and Staffordshire University. The model adopted means that the Funding Council can be assured that the payments it makes to the university for *fdf* are consistent with the purpose for which they were given and that the university's corporate governance, risk management, auditing and internal control systems ensure the safeguarding of these public funds. In practice this has meant that *fdf* is treated as a cost centre within the university. In terms of accountability and the production of appropriate

financial information as required by HEFCE this arrangement now appears to operate satisfactorily.

However, at an operational level the arrangement has been problematic. Because *fdf* is treated as any other cost centre of the university it is required to operate within an institution-wide framework defined by institutional financial regulations and procedures. The problems this poses are twofold. Firstly, *fdf* is not like any other part of the university and may have legitimate requirements which would not be considered acceptable in the institution more generally. Two particular examples of this have been the need for a different class of rail travel for *fdf* staff in light of their need to work during their extensive travelling time, and the need for a contract with a different communications provider from that used by the university in order to meet the needs of staff who are required to travel. Secondly, decisions taken by the university to make changes in certain areas, while being wholly straightforward for more conventional areas of the institution, can have serious consequences for *fdf*. A case in point is the recent decision by the university to change its travel agent arrangements.

These kinds of disruption are eventually resolved but they cause considerable frustration and aggravation and they contribute to a sense among staff at the 'sharp end' that the university doesn't always see *fdf* as a paying customer. As long as the present arrangement remains in force there is no obvious solution to this problem other than to attempt to increase knowledge and awareness of *fdf* and its different needs more widely within the university and to encourage flexibility in its operation of institution-wide procedures. The alternative of establishing *fdf* as a separate and independent organisation, while it might avoid some operational difficulties, is not seen as a realistic alternative either on grounds of cost (the management charges of the university at present are generously low) or in terms of providing the accountability required by HEFCE in such a relatively straightforward way as under the existing arrangement.

6.   Future support

We found an almost unanimous view that there was a continuing need for an organisation with the broad aims of *fdf*. On numerous occasions it was put to us that if *fdf* did not exist then it would have to be invented. The caveat that was most often added was that this need would only exist as long as FDs remained high on the policy agenda, and we encountered a wide range of views among those with whom we spoke about the robustness/fragility of FDs and their likely future. Although we gathered some interesting information on this topic it belongs to an evaluation of FDs rather than of *fdf* and we do not pursue it further here.

There was consensus too on the continuing need for an authoritative source of advice and expertise and the dissemination of information and good practice. The ultimate success of *fdf* would be of course that this activity was no longer required since it had been successful in achieving its aims and this aspect of its work could be mainstreamed into, for example, the Higher Education Academy. We conclude, however, that we are

some way away from that point and that in the short term there is still a strong need for a distinct, separate focus for this activity.

Reflecting the strength of views on the need for a concerted effort to increase the level of employer engagement we also conclude that there is a continuing role here for *fdf* (although we acknowledge the strongly held minority view that this is essentially a matter for individual education institutions and not a publicly funded body such as *fdf*) and in developing further those areas discussed in section 4 which stakeholders considered important for the future success of FDs.

The principal danger identified by those with whom we spoke is that the sheer range and diversity of activities that *fdf* is involved in, and the number of partners and agencies with which it works, makes it difficult to see the full picture or to know, as one respondent put it, 'that the total adds up to more than the sum of the parts'. We suggest that in its next phase *fdf* will need to give careful thought to retaining the impressive responsiveness which it has developed in its first two years while at the same time looking ahead proactively, selectively and above all strategically, with any new strategic plan being supported by a clear operational plan and agreed targets for delivery.

7.   Some concluding remarks

The research function of *fdf* was raised in a number of the interviews we carried out. Overall there was a lack of clarity over what this involved. As we have noted earlier, there was great enthusiasm for the production of data and information about FDs and their students but those we spoke to were less clear about what a wider *fdf* research capability might involve. There was no disputing the need for research on a wide range of topics – not least to generate the kind of data and information that is proving so useful – but there was little support for *fdf* itself building up its own policy research capabilities when numerous external agencies and HEIs with the capacity to undertake relevant work already exist. And, as we noted earlier, much existing work on topics of relevance to FDs could be exploited without initiating new projects. On the other hand there was support for the view that the role of *fdf* might usefully be to identify gaps in existing research and to commission work as appropriate rather than undertake policy research itself. Since the number of *fdf* staff with a research brief is small it may be that the creation of a research advisory group would be helpful in this respect.

We were struck by the divergent views on the strategic role of the management board. There was broad agreement on its efficient working as a committee, but no consensus on how well it discharged its strategic role. Some board members believed it functioned well in this respect while others felt that, although it received a great deal of information, its strategic consideration of issues was less apparent than it might have been. It is difficult for us to do more than present these contradictory views, but in light of the recommendations we make in the previous section, it is clear that the management board will have to play a key strategic role as *fdf* considers its activities and priorities. It may be, in this context, that a review of the board's membership is timely. There will be a need, in any event, to consider how the board should be constituted to reflect changes in *fdf's*

strategic direction as the issues which *fdf* has to confront change and the focus shifts from initial development and establishment to embedding and achieving a steady state in national provision. As was suggested by several interviewees, it might be helpful to have more employers and more providers and fewer other/intermediary bodies on the Board. However, it was also acknowledged that this might encourage greater polarisation around the academic/employer divide and that the other agencies represented on the Board could play a useful mediating role.

Some interesting questions were raised during the evaluation about the role of *fdf* in the wake of the recent QAA reviews of FDs. There was universal support for the desirability of *fdf* working with QAA to disseminate good practice identified in the reviews (this is already in hand) but quite divergent views about whether *fdf* should work with institutions which might receive 'no confidence' judgements. In the Darwinian corner were those who argued that if any institutions 'failed' to achieve appropriate quality and/or standards they should be left well alone since their FDs were unlikely to survive; on the other hand there was support for *fdf* working with those same institutions since they would be clearly most in need of assistance. Our sense is that the most appropriate course of action lies somewhere between these two positions – following publication of a `no-confidence' report by the QAA, *fdf* could take an initial, informed view as to whether it thought the provision in question is worth saving and/or is capable of being saved. It may be that some FDs were ill thought out, failed to meet employer needs, were inadequately resourced, or may have lost currency in curriculum terms. In these extreme cases those who suggest that *fdf*'s resources might be better deployed elsewhere probably have a point. On the other hand there may be cases where some remedial action can rescue a perfectly viable proposition.

Finally, the contributions of the staff of *fdf* featured prominently both in our interviews and in the questionnaire returns we received from colleges and HEIs. The greater part of what *fdf* has achieved was attributed, rightly in our view, to the quality, expertise and the personal skills of the staff that the organisation has been able to attract. For this first phase of *fdf*'s development, especially in the key task of establishing an authoritative central source of expertise on the design and delivery of FDs, the largely 'provider' profile of the staff has probably been entirely appropriate in establishing the credibility of the organisation with FE colleges and HEIs (without which there would be no FDs). However, it was suggested to us that perhaps there was now too strong an educational background in the staff profile as a whole; if employer involvement and engagement is to be a priority in *fdf*'s next phase of activity, this needs to be reflected in the backgrounds of those working for the organisation. We suggest that if, as we recommend above, *fdf* is to continue its work and develop a new strategic plan, this will require careful consideration of a range of staffing matters including staff profiles and appropriate structures to take forward the work of the organisation.

List of abbreviations

APEL   Accreditation of prior experiential learning

FD   Foundation degree

fdf   Foundation Degree Forward

FE   Further education

HE   Higher education

HEFCE   Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI   Higher education institution

QAA   Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

RDM   Regional Development Manager

SSC   Sector Skills Council

WBL   Work-based learning