



QAA

Foundation Degree qualification benchmark

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Contents

Preface	1
Qualifications benchmarks within the Academic Infrastructure	1
Introduction	4
What are Foundation Degrees	4
The design of Foundation Degree programmes	5
Defining characteristics of Foundation Degrees	7
Employer involvement	7
Accessibility	7
Articulation and progression	8
Flexibility	10
Partnership	10
Knowledge, understanding and skills	12
Assessment	14
Monitoring and review	15
Appendix 1	17
Acknowledgement	17

Foundation Degree qualification benchmark

Preface

1 Foundation Degrees were introduced by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2000 to provide graduates who are needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills. Foundation Degrees also aim to contribute to widening participation and lifelong learning by encouraging participation by learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher level qualification.

2 Foundation Degrees are located within level 5 of The *framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, and are recognised as an award that would be generally equivalent to level 5 (of 8) within the *Qualifications and Curriculum Framework (QCF)*.¹ Foundation Degrees do not however, represent an end of first cycle higher education qualification in terms of the Bologna declaration;² further study and assessments are required to complete the first cycle, which in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is typically represented by the award of a bachelors degree with honours.

Qualification benchmarks within the Academic Infrastructure

3 A qualification benchmark describes the distinctive features of an individual qualification at a particular level within the FHEQ. It describes the qualification in terms of its particular purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes, but it does not include subject-level detail.

4 A qualification benchmark should be regarded as an important reference point in setting and assessing standards,

¹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/qualification-and-assessment-framework/89-articles/250-explaining-the-national-qualifications-framework

² www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/

and should be considered alongside the other elements of the Academic Infrastructure.

5 The Academic Infrastructure provides a means of describing academic standards and assuring their quality, through use of a series of components that allow for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. The components of the Academic Infrastructure are:

- the FHEQ
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications
- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*.

The components are not designed to be used prescriptively.

6 The FHEQ was developed through national consultations and agreement, and identifies a series of levels within which HE institutions locate their awards. The associated qualification descriptors exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each of the five levels within the framework (4, 5, 6, 7 and 8).

7 Subject benchmark statements are written by specialists within academic communities; they describe the general characteristics, attributes, capabilities and standards associated with specific levels of award in a particular subject area.

8 Programme specifications are concise descriptions of the intended learning outcomes of a higher education programme. Each specification clarifies the knowledge, understanding, skills and other attributes a student will have developed on successful completion of that programme. It also provides details of teaching and learning methods,

assessment and how the programme relates to the qualifications framework.

9 The *Code of practice* sets out guidelines on good practice relating to the management of academic standards and quality. The sections of the *Code of practice* include precepts (principles) and explanatory text that an institution should consider within its quality assurance processes.

10 This Foundation Degree qualification benchmark is designed to be used as a 'reference point'. It does not expect or require compliance and it should not be used to prescribe or to regulate. Rather, it should be used with other reference points to inform and clarify matters concerning purposes, expectations and achievements, and quality assurance.

11 Other documents that are likely to be of particular importance as further reference points for those concerned with the design, delivery and quality assurance of Foundation Degrees include:

- the prospectuses on Foundation Degrees provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and for Wales (HEFCW)
- the frameworks for Foundation Degrees developed by some Sector Skills Councils
- the Guidelines for preparing programme specifications (QAA, 2006)
- the requirements of professional bodies, where relevant
- National Occupational Standards.

Further information on the use of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) reference points is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure.

Introduction

12 At the request of the DfES, a Foundation Degree qualification benchmark (final draft) was developed and published by QAA, in November 2002. This document is a revision (second edition) of that draft and supersedes it.

13 This qualification benchmark describes the distinctive features of a Foundation Degree in terms of its purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes. In doing so it provides a reference point to:

- assist those directly involved in designing or validating Foundation Degree programmes³
- provide general guidance for describing the generic learning outcomes for the Foundation Degree
- provide general guidance for strategies on teaching, learning and assessment
- support internal and external quality assurance
- help interested parties to understand the purpose, generic content and outcomes of Foundation Degree programmes

and to answer the question: what are Foundation Degrees?

What are Foundation Degrees?

14 Foundation Degrees integrate academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and programme providers. They build upon a long history of design and delivery of vocational qualifications in higher education, and are intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment, so satisfying the needs of employees and employers.

³ fdf is a national support network offering advice and guidance on designing and validating foundation degree programmes (www.fdf.ac.uk)

15 Foundation Degrees are designed to appeal to learners wishing to enter a profession as well as those seeking continuing professional development. They can also provide pathways for lifelong learning and the opportunity to progress to other qualifications. The qualification may be offered through flexible modes of learning enabling learners to 'earn and learn' and accommodate the learning needs of different types of students.

16 The design and delivery of Foundation Degrees are likely to be informed by the Framework(s) for Foundation Degrees of appropriate Sector Skills Council(s). Although many Foundation Degree programmes are designed to meet the needs of the local employment market, some Foundation Degree programmes are targeted at national and international employment needs.

17 Foundation Degrees provide self-standing qualifications of specific value, but are also expected to provide for opportunities for further (lifelong) study which could take a number of different forms (for example, professional body qualifications, higher level NVQs, etc). In addition, Foundation Degrees will normally link to at least one programme leading to a bachelors degree with honours.

18 Foundation Degrees thus have a range of distinctive characteristics not necessarily present in other qualifications at level 5, nor found in the initial parts of programmes that lead directly to bachelors degrees with honours.

The design of Foundation Degree programmes

19 It is important that the balance of intellectual and practical skills, and the related opportunities to apply such learning within the workplace, are considered carefully when designing a curriculum which has clearly defined intended learning outcomes, that are supported by the provision of experiences to enable these to be achieved.

20 Learning and work are closely interlinked within Foundation Degree programmes. Learning in the work place can take many forms and serves a variety of purposes. When designing Foundation Degrees it is important that consideration is given to the ways in which the work-based learning is appropriate to the particular needs of the relevant employment sector or type of employer, and how the programme helps to provide the knowledge and transferable skills needed for employment.

21 In Foundation Degree programmes, academic knowledge and understanding integrate with, and support the development of, vocational skills and competencies, taking account of the need for appropriate academic rigour. External reference points such as the FHEQ, the QCF, subject benchmark statements, National Occupational Standards, Sector Skills Council frameworks, and the HEFCE prospectus (HEFCE 00/27) are important reference points, and should be considered during the design and validation of Foundation Degrees.

22 Programme specifications for Foundation Degrees should include the intended learning outcomes, and the appropriate balance between intellectual and practical skills, and show that these are set appropriately for a qualification that falls within level 5 of the FHEQ.

23 Authentic and innovative work-based learning is an integral part of Foundation Degrees and their design. It enables learners to take on appropriate role(s) within the workplace, giving them the opportunity to learn and apply the skills and knowledge they have acquired as an integrated element of the programme. It involves the development of higher-level learning within both the institution and the workplace. It should be a two-way process, where the learning in one environment is applied in the other. Work-based learning can be achieved through many forms,

including full-time or part-time work, integrated work placements, and real work environments. Payment is not a defining characteristic of the work, and 'working' is in itself not sufficient. Work-based learning requires the identification and achievement of defined and related learning outcomes.

Defining characteristics of Foundation Degrees

24 The distinctiveness of Foundation Degrees depends upon the integration of the following characteristics: employer involvement; accessibility; articulation and progression; flexibility; and partnership. While none of these attributes is unique to Foundation Degrees, their clear and planned integration within a single award, underpinned by work-based learning, makes the award very distinctive.

Employer involvement

25 Foundation Degrees are intended to provide students with the knowledge, understanding and skills that employers need. In order to achieve this it is important that employers are fully involved in the design and regular review of Foundation Degree programmes. It is beneficial if employers are involved, where possible, in the delivery and assessment of the programme and the monitoring of students, particularly within the workplace.

Accessibility

26 Foundation Degrees are intended to increase access and widen participation into higher education with programmes of study that are designed with work based learning as an integral part of their programmes. The accessibility of Foundation Degree programmes should increase opportunities for learning since they can enable learners to 'earn and learn'.

27 Further education colleges can play an important role in the recruitment into, and the delivery of, Foundation Degree programmes. They can also provide valuable links with local communities, and the knowledge and skills needs of their employment markets.

Articulation and progression

28 Foundation Degrees are intended to make a valuable contribution to lifelong learning by providing access to higher education for learners from different starting points and with different entry qualifications, eg apprenticeships, access programmes, NVQs and diplomas. They can provide opportunities for progression to other higher education, including bachelors degrees with honours, professional qualifications, and/or higher NVQs.

29 It is important that recognition is given to the knowledge, skills and understanding that an applicant for a Foundation Degree has already developed. These may have come as a result of learning through work, that may have been paid or unpaid, and through other individual activities and interests. Such knowledge, skills and understanding can include certificated, non-certificated and experiential learning. It is important that rigorous arrangements for the accreditation of prior experiential and/or certificated learning (APE/CL) are established and fully used to accredit the variety of learning and to assist learners in their entry to Foundation Degree programmes. Further information on APE/CL is available in the Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning (QAA, 2004).

30 Clear routes that facilitate opportunities for successful progression from Foundation Degrees towards another qualification are an important feature of Foundation Degrees. Such routes should be established when Foundation Degrees

are validated, and identify the link(s) between the Foundation Degree and other qualification(s). Such links may be to programmes validated by higher education institutions and/or by professional and other educational bodies. Institutions awarding Foundation Degrees normally guarantee progression to at least one bachelors degree with honours, with an expectation that this should not normally exceed 1.3 years for a full time equivalent student in England, and two years in Northern Ireland.⁴ Progression from Foundation Degrees to another qualification may require a bridging programme. Such arrangements, when established at validation, can ensure that learners progressing onto the next programme are adequately prepared.

31 The arrangements for progression, which are determined by the awarding bodies through their admissions policies and procedures, should be implemented consistently and fairly. The identification of explicit progression arrangements should be available to learners on Foundation Degree programmes through course handbooks and prospectuses.

32 In cases where a learner could gain additional professional accreditation and/or qualifications in the course of studying for a Foundation Degree, institutions should include the requirements of professional and vocational bodies as part of the validation process.

33 Foundation Degrees are intended to provide the knowledge and skills that are necessary to enable employees to be versatile and adaptable in progressing to and within work. Employability is a key aspect in Foundation Degree programmes and its inclusion should equip and assist learners to enhance their employment opportunities, and/or allow them to prepare for a career change.

⁴ Further information is available in HEFCE 00/27

34 Careers guidance is important in enabling learners to take responsibility for managing their own careers and lifelong learning. For more information on careers guidance see *Code of practice, Section 8: Career education, information, advice and guidance*.

Flexibility

35 Flexibility on the part of the institution, the learner and the employer is central to many aspects of Foundation Degrees. It facilitates responsiveness to, for example, the needs of learners from a variety of backgrounds and to the progressive and changing demands of employment. It is important that institutions delivering Foundation Degrees consider the range of requirements of the learners likely to enter their programmes. These requirements may include:

- flexible delivery modes and study patterns, including full time, part-time, distance, work-based, and web-based learning, with the flexibility to study, within reasonable limits, when and where it best suits the learner
- flexible progression routes, including links with other professional awards and with at least one identified honours degree programme; flexible admissions requirements, including the establishment of effective APE/CL procedures to assist applicants from diverse backgrounds who may be able to demonstrate their suitability for entry onto a Foundation Degree in a variety of ways.

Partnership

36 Partnerships between employers, HEIs, further education colleges and Sector Skills Councils are central to the concept

of Foundation Degrees, and vital in providing programmes that are relevant, valid and responsive to the needs of learners and employers. Effective partnerships, which are strategic and sustainable, should foster broad acceptance of the Foundation Degree, reinforce ownership of the qualification among all stakeholders and establish the currency of the award.

37 It is important that partnership agreements clearly identify the needs and expectations of all parties. Additional information on aspects of such partnerships is available through HEFCE (for example, Indirectly funded partnerships: codes of practice for franchise and consortia arrangements HEFCE 00/54) and QAA (for example, *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*).

38 Each Foundation Degree must be validated and awarded by an institution with degree awarding powers. It is this institution that has the responsibility for assuring the standards of the award, and also for ensuring that the quality of the learning opportunities leading to its awards are managed effectively, even when this is delegated to a partner. The institution will need to be able to satisfy itself that the terms and conditions under which their Foundation Degree was originally approved have been, and continue to be, met.

39 The successful delivery of Foundation Degree programmes can depend upon a range of partnerships that may include higher and further education institutions, employers and employer bodies, professional bodies, Sector Skills Councils, Regional Development Agencies, Learning and Skills Councils, and others. It is important that all involved recognise the primary responsibilities of the awarding institution for the standards and quality of the degree programmes offered under its powers.

40 Students can have an important part in negotiating programmes of study to meet their own learning needs in both the work and academic learning environments. These learning needs can be achieved, with guidance and agreement from the institution and employer, through learning contracts.

Knowledge, understanding and skills

41 Foundation Degree programmes are designed to enable learners to benefit from the interpretation of ideas and the experience of practice, within the wider context of employment and one in which knowledge, understanding and skills are clearly integrated. By focusing on learning within a work context, that is underpinned by both vocational and academic understanding Foundation Degrees should demonstrate learning outcomes that are explicitly relevant to both employers', and perhaps also professional, needs. Furthermore, consideration of sustainability in the application of the knowledge, understanding and skills achieved should enable successful progression both within employment and to honours level or to other qualifications.

42 The generic outcomes identified below are taken from the descriptor for the qualification that has been used to represent the level 5 within the FHEQ. By comparison, holders of Foundation Degrees should be able to demonstrate:

- knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles in their field of study and the way in which those principles have developed
- successful application in the workplace of the range of knowledge and skills learnt throughout the programme
- ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, and the application of those principles in a work context

- knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s), and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in their field of study and apply these in a work context
- an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge in their field of study and in a work context.

Typically, holders of Foundation Degrees would be able to:

- use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis in their field of study and in a work context
- effectively communicate information, arguments, and analysis, in a variety of forms, to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively in their field of study and in a work context
- undertake further training, develop existing skills, and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume responsibility within organisations

and have:

- qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment and progression to other qualifications requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making
- the ability to utilise opportunities for lifelong learning.

43 The knowledge, understanding and skills associated with Foundation Degrees may be delivered through a diverse and innovative range of methods that will reflect the diversity of learners' needs. The providing institution's teaching and

learning strategy should identify appropriate teaching styles and learning opportunities for Foundation Degree learners as well as elements that may require additional resources, for example the management of work-based learning.

44 Foundation Degree programmes should encourage lifelong learning by providing sufficient opportunity for self-directed learning and reflection. This may be achieved by supporting learners to develop action plans to assist the learning process, and demonstrate that their learning outcomes have been achieved.

45 In the interests of lifelong learning students should be encouraged to use personal development plans, in conjunction with learning agreements where relevant, as a reflective learning tool throughout the programme. They should also be provided with a record of the learning and achievement in the form of a transcript.

46 Where learning contracts are agreed between the learner and the provider, they should refer to expectations regarding knowledge, skills and understanding.

Assessment

47 The assessment of each element of study within Foundation Degree programmes, including the assessment of work-based learning, should be specified at the time of validation. An assessment strategy should reflect the type of learning/learner and the nature of each element of study within the qualification. Assessment may include a variety of formal and informal, and formative and summative techniques, provided that they are all capable of rigorous testing and independent verification. Through the combination of assessment of work-based learning and other more traditional means of assessment, Foundation Degrees can integrate a variety of delivery modes and assessments undertaken by institutions and employers.

48 Employers should, where possible, be involved in the assessment of work-based learning. Arrangements between institutions and employers should be specified fully at the outset of any partnership, and should include any training for employers that may be required in, for example, assessment procedures. Such arrangements should be reviewed regularly as part of the ongoing monitoring and review of the programme. In cases where employers are involved in the support of the learner and in their assessment it may be necessary to provide support in the form of mentoring or other types of professional development.

49 The awarding institution and the provider are responsible for ensuring that all assessment, including that of work based learning, is applied consistently and is appropriate to the expected learning outcomes relevant to a qualification that is located within level 5 of the FHEQ.

50 Appeals procedures and mechanisms to resolve disputes on academic matters should be explicit and available to all, including learners.

51 For further information and guidance see *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students* and *Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*.

Monitoring and Review

52 Employers should participate in the regular review of those Foundation Degree programmes that they are involved in. Review procedures should ensure that evaluation of the provision of all work-based learning is undertaken as part of the review, and involves feedback from all work-based learning providers. There should also be opportunities for the learners to comment on their work-based learning experiences, and their comments should be considered in annual monitoring processes. Additional guidance may be found in the section of the *Code of practice, Section 9*.

53 General and specific guidance on this area is provided in *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*.

Appendix 1

Acknowledgement

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