



Foundation Degree Characteristics

Draft for consultation

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**UK Quality Code for Higher Education,
Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards**

Contents

About this Statement.....	1
How can I use this document?.....	1
Equality and diversity.....	1
Relationship to legislation.....	1
Introduction.....	2
1 Context and purposes of foundation degrees.....	3
1.1 Context.....	3
1.2 Purposes of the foundation degree.....	3
2 Design of foundation degrees.....	4
2.1 Overview.....	4
2.2 Employer involvement.....	4
2.3 Accessibility.....	4
2.4 Articulation and progression.....	5
2.5 Flexibility.....	5
2.6 Partnership.....	6
2.7 Monitoring and review.....	6
3 Content, structure and delivery of foundation degrees.....	7
3.1 Content.....	7
3.2 Teaching and learning.....	7
3.3 Assessment.....	7
4 Characteristics of foundation degree graduates.....	9
Appendix: Members of the review groups for Foundation Degree Characteristics.....	11

About this Statement

The Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark was originally developed and published by QAA in November 2002, at the request of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). A revision of that draft was published in May 2010. This statement forms the third edition and is published as a statement about foundation degree characteristics. It supersedes all previous versions of the Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark.

How can I use this document?

This document is a statement about the characteristics of foundation degrees. It describes the distinctive features of the foundation degree in the UK.

You may want to read this document if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of foundation degree programmes
- a prospective student thinking about undertaking a foundation degree
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of foundation degree graduates.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this statement can be found in QAA's glossary.¹ QAA has also published a general guide to quality assurance in higher education.²

Equality and diversity

The statement about the characteristics of foundation degrees forms part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). The Quality Code embeds consideration of equality and diversity matters throughout. Promoting equality involves treating everyone with equal dignity and worth, while also raising aspirations and supporting achievement for people with diverse requirements, entitlements and backgrounds. An inclusive environment for learning anticipates the varied requirements of learners, and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Higher education providers, staff and students all have a role in, and responsibility for, promoting equality.

Relationship to legislation

Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. The Quality Code does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within this statement where appropriate. Higher education providers are responsible for how they use these resources. QAA takes no responsibility for the content of external websites.

¹ The QAA glossary is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary

² A general guide to quality assurance can be found at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality

Introduction

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.

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.

The distinctiveness of foundation degrees depends upon the integration of the following characteristics: employer involvement; accessibility; articulation and progression with or through higher education or further higher education awards; 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.

This document is intended as a practical reference text that describes the key characteristics of all foundation degree programmes in the UK and of graduates of foundation degrees.

1 Context and purposes of foundation degrees

1.1 Context

Foundation degrees were introduced by the DfES in 2000 to provide graduates needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills.

Foundation degrees sit at level 5 qualification on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). They are 'short-cycle' (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA).

Foundation degrees are offered by many higher education providers. Further education colleges can play an important role in providing foundation degrees. Some further education colleges have foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP). FDAP give further education colleges in England and Wales the right to award foundation degrees at level 5 of the FHEQ. These powers are granted on a six-year renewable basis.

1.2 Purposes of the foundation degree

The purposes 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.

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 can lead to a bachelor's degree with honours. Foundation degrees thus have a range of distinctive characteristics not necessarily present in other qualifications at level 5, or found in the initial parts of programmes that lead directly to bachelor's degrees with honours.

Foundation degrees can fulfil the academic qualification for a Higher Apprenticeship.

2 Design of foundation degrees

2.1 Overview

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 Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), Subject Benchmark Statements, National Occupational Standards, Apprenticeship Frameworks and Sector Skills Council frameworks are an important consideration in the design and validation of foundation degrees.

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.

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 is 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. 'Working' in itself is not sufficient. Work-based learning requires the identification and achievement of defined and related learning outcomes.

2.2 Employer involvement

Foundation degrees are intended to provide students with the knowledge, understanding and skills that employers need. In order to achieve this, employers are fully involved in the design and regular review of foundation degree programmes. Employers are also involved in the delivery and assessment of the programme and the monitoring of students, particularly within the workplace. For further information see the Quality Code, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

2.3 Accessibility

Foundation degrees increase access and widen participation into higher education. Programmes of study are designed with work-based learning as an integral part of the programme, enabling learners to 'earn and learn'. Learners can access foundation degrees from a range of starting points and with different entry qualifications, for example apprenticeships, access programmes, NVQs and diplomas.

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. Rigorous arrangements for the recognition of prior experiential and/or certificated learning 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 the recognition of prior learning is available in the Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*.

Further education colleges play an important role in the recruitment into, and the delivery of, foundation degree programmes. They also provide valuable links with local communities, and the knowledge and skill needs of their employment markets.

2.4 Articulation and progression

Clear routes that facilitate opportunities for successful progression from foundation degrees towards another qualification are an important feature of foundation degrees. Such routes are established when foundation degrees are approved, and identify the link(s) between the foundation degree and other qualification(s). Such links may be to programmes offered by higher education providers and/or by professional and other educational organisations.

Higher education providers awarding foundation degrees may guarantee progression to at least one bachelor degree with honours programme, with length of completion not usually exceeding the requirements of those of a full time equivalent student. 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.

A range of routes may be available, some of which are more commonly used than others. Information for students about progression arrangements is available through course handbooks and prospectuses.

In cases where a learner could gain additional professional accreditation and/or qualifications in the course of studying for a foundation degree, the requirements of professional and vocational bodies are included as part of the approval process.

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 equips and assists learners to enhance their employment opportunities, and/or allow them to prepare for a career change.

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 *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*.

2.5 Flexibility

Flexibility on the part of the higher education provider, 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 higher education providers 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 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.

2.6 Partnership

Partnerships between employers, degree-awarding bodies or other higher education providers, 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.

It is important that partnership agreements clearly identify the needs and expectations of all parties. Information on aspects of such partnerships is available through the Quality Code, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

Each foundation degree must be approved and awarded by a degree-awarding body. Degree-awarding bodies have the responsibility for assuring the standards of their awards, and also for ensuring that the quality of the learning opportunities leading to their awards are managed effectively, irrespective of who delivers them and where they are provided (see *Chapter B10*). The degree-awarding body 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.

The successful delivery of foundation degree programmes can depend upon a range of partnerships that may include degree-awarding bodies, further education colleges or other higher education providers, employers and employer bodies, professional bodies, Sector Skills Councils, Local Enterprise Partnerships, Learning and Skills Councils, and others. It is important that all involved recognise the primary responsibilities of the degree-awarding body for the standards and quality of the degree programmes offered under its powers.

Students can play 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 higher education provider and employer, through learning contracts.

2.7 Monitoring and review

Review procedures 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. Employers participate in the regular monitoring and review of those foundation degree programmes that they are involved in. There are also opportunities for the learners to comment on their work-based learning experiences, and their comments are considered in annual monitoring processes. Additional guidance may be found in *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* of the Quality Code.

3 Content, structure and delivery of foundation degrees

3.1 Content

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, in which knowledge, understanding and skills are clearly integrated. By focusing on learning within a work context, this is underpinned by both vocational and academic understanding. Foundation degrees demonstrate learning outcomes that are explicitly relevant to both employers', and perhaps also professional, needs. Consideration of sustainability in the application of the knowledge, understanding and skills achieved enables successful progression both within employment and to honours level or to other qualifications.

3.2 Teaching and learning

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 learning and teaching strategy for the programme will 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.

Foundation degree programmes 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.

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

Where learning contracts are agreed between the learner and the provider, they include the criteria for knowledge, skills and understanding.

3.3 Assessment

The assessment of each element of study within foundation degree programmes, including the assessment of work-based learning, is specified at the time the programme is approved. An assessment strategy reflects 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 the outcomes are 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 higher education providers and employers.

Employers, where possible, are involved in the assessment of work-based learning. Arrangements between higher education providers and employers should be specified fully at the outset of any programme which involves working with another organisation, 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. For further information see *Chapters B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* and *B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others* of the Quality Code.

4 Characteristics of foundation degree graduates

Foundation degree graduates:

- will have a sound understanding of the principles in their field of study
- will have learned to apply those principles more widely
- will have learned to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems
- are able to perform effectively in their chosen field.

Foundation degree graduates will have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Apprenticeship frameworks

www.apprenticeships.org.uk/partners/frameworks.aspx

HEFCE website, foundation degrees

www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/kes/ee/foundationdegrees

HEFCW website

www.hefcw.ac.uk

National Occupational Standards

www.ukstandards.co.uk/Pages/index.aspx

Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines

www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-higher-education/ni-apel-guidelines.htm

Northern Ireland Foundation degree Validation Framework Guidelines and Template

www.delni.gov.uk/es/foundation-degrees-ni-validation-framework

The frameworks for foundation degrees developed by some Sector Skills Councils
(see individual Sector Skills Council websites)

Appendix: Members of the review groups for Foundation Degree Characteristics

Membership of the review group for Foundation Degree Characteristics benchmark (2014):

Alex Bols	Guild HE
Lesley Bryden	New College Durham
Mick Cottam	Myerscough College
John Cowan	Dept for Business, Innovation and Skills
Kate Crabtree	Welsh Assembly Government
Nick Davy	Association of Colleges
Heather Fry	HEFCE
Pat Morrison	DELNI - HE Policy Branch
Mr Mark Stone	Plymouth University
Dr Alyson Thomas	HEFCW
Liz Turner	Oxford Brookes University
Greg Wade	Universities UK

Employer representatives

Chris Keane	Rolls Royce
Dave Smith	Murco
Janet Bohrer	QAA
Cathy Kerfoot	QAA
Dan Murch	QAA

Membership of the review group for the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* (2010):

Details below appear as published in the second edition of the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* (2010)

Mary Blauciak	Head of Design and Visual Arts City College Manchester Nominated by City College Manchester
Helen Bowles	Policy Advisor SCOP
Keith Brumfitt	Principal Advisor Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
Paul Burdon	Deputy Director, School of Science and Technology University of Teesside
John Dickinson	Secretary to the Office for the Associated Institutions University of Lancaster
Pauline Gibson	Foundation Degree Advisor Sector Skills Development Agency
Alan Hunt	Head of Academic Development and Quality Bournemouth University
Celia Hunt	Observer HEFCW

Professor Derek Longhurst	Director of FDF
Jane Mardell	Foundation Degree Policy Team Leader Department for Education and Skills
Dr Alan Maybury	Academic Development University of Bradford
Vivian McIver	Assistant Chief Inspector Education and Training Inspectorate, Northern Ireland
Lynn Parker	Director of Educational Partnerships University of Teesside
Professor Nigel Reeves	Pro-Vice Chancellor and Professor of OBE German Aston University Representing the QAA Steering Group for Benchmarking
Professor Simon Roodhouse	Chief Executive University Vocational Awards Council
Elizabeth Rouse	Dean of Academic Development and Quality Assurance London College of Fashion, University of the Arts
Chris Taylor	Policy Officer HEFCE
Ian Tunbridge Dean	University of Plymouth Colleges
Professor Mary Watts	Pro Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning City University
Professor Nick Harris	Director of Development and Enhancement QAA
Dr David Gale	Assistant Director QAA
Dr Penny McCracken	Assistant Director QAA
Wendy Stubbs	Assistant Director QAA

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