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**The Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education**

## **Overview report on Foundation degree reviews**

**Conducted in 2003**

## Summary

1 This report presents the findings from the reviews of Foundation degrees (FD) in England, conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) during 2003. The overview is based on the confidential reports resulting from these reviews. The reviews were commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to:

- investigate the distinctive features of the FD as set out in the HEFCE's *Foundation degree Prospectus 00/27 (the Prospectus)*;
- to establish the quality of the students' learning experience;
- to investigate whether each programme is likely to meet the standards of a FD award as defined in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*; and the *Foundation degree: qualification benchmark (final draft) (FDBQ)*.

The reviews will contribute to the separate evaluation of the FD also commissioned by the HEFCE. The programmes reviewed are set out in Appendix 1 and the *FDBQ* is attached as Appendix 2.

2 Around 3,100 students were enrolled on the 33 FDs sampled. This represents about one-third of the total number of students enrolled at the time of the review. The reviews were carried out at a time when FDs were still very new and few students had completed. The method was designed to take account of this. As well as evaluating the quality of the students' learning opportunities, the reviewers were asked to evaluate the evidence available to judge the extent to which the students were likely to be able to achieve the required standard. The method was based on a series of key questions. These are set out in Appendix 3.

3 At this early stage in the development of the FDs, the majority of providers were successfully offering programmes of the required standard and quality. The reviewers reported that they had:

- confidence in the emerging standards and emerging achievement of 30 programmes: and
- confidence in the quality of the students' learning opportunities together with the monitoring and enhancement of standards and quality of 30 programmes.

Four reviews resulted in judgements of no confidence. Two of these applied to both emerging standards and achievement, and the quality of learning opportunities, one to emerging standards only and one to the quality of learning opportunities only. In the case of the latter, this judgement has been reversed during a follow-up visit by the Agency to check improvement action.

4 Commonly occurring strengths include clearly articulated aims, well-designed curricula and a variety of teaching, learning and assessment methods. The flexibility of the FDs is reflected in a variety of ways, such as in the patterns and times of attendance, workload planning, real and simulated work-based learning and credit for the achievements of students who need to defer completion of their studies. Most providers have effective systems in place for monitoring and enhancing quality and standards.

5 The reviewers found a number of areas of innovation and good practice worthy of wider dissemination. These include the involvement of employers and employer-related organisations in curriculum design; on-line systems for the delivery of learning, study skills and support material; the use of logbooks and progress files to encourage students' reflection and independent learning; and high levels of collaboration between academic consortium partners in programme design and assessment.

6 The FD contributes to increasing access and widening participation in higher education by increasing the range of awards available at Intermediate - level of the *FHEQ*. In some cases, the FD is targeted on a niche market for which there is no other vocational award at this level. The reviewers found FDs most effective in increasing access when they have been designed to meet the occupational standards set for employment, for example, at assistant or associate professional level.

7 There is scope for the development of FDs in a range of modes of attendance and at a range of locations to increase accessibility and flexibility. For example, only two-thirds of the sample were offered by consortia of institutions of higher and further education, just over one-half were offered on one site only, just over one-third were offered as full-time programmes only and only one was offered by distance learning. Providers also need to ensure that student support and guidance is available for all students. The reviewers were concerned that many part-time students had few opportunities to access programme information,

advice from tutors or support and mentoring in the workplace and that this was limiting their opportunities to benefit fully from their studies. Further development of support and guidance would also make a valuable contribution to reducing the premature withdrawal of students from the programmes.

8 Most FDs have arrangements for students' progression to an honours degree either in place or under development, but the reviewers only found good practice in the clear articulation of progression routes in around one-third of the sample. Within this good practice they found examples where students could take bridging units to enable them to progress to an honours degree after level 1 and curricula that allowed students to achieve both a FD and a qualification of a professional, statutory or regulatory body.

9 There is scope for further development and assessment of students' knowledge, understanding and skills. The most significant areas for improvement are those which occur in over one-half of the FDs. These include the need to clarify and strengthen intended learning outcomes in line with *the Prospectus* and the draft *FDBQ* across the range of key, generic, specialist and work-related skills. The reviewers found that many students were achieving practical and vocational skills at the expense of higher-level, intellectual, analytical and reflective outcomes. The reviewers also identified a number of problems associated with student assessment such as unclear marking criteria, the lack of assessment of some learning outcomes, poor internal moderation and missed opportunities for external examination of level 1 work which contributes to the award.

10 Most providers have involved employers effectively in the development and the delivery of the FDs but there were few cases where employers were full members of consortia. This limits the potential for sustained employer involvement in all aspects of the delivery and assessment of the programme, its review and evaluation. Employer membership of a consortium usually occurred where one main employer contributed to an FD.

11 In around one-half of the FDs, the reviewers found a need for significant development of work-based learning, in particular to address the variability of experiences of students across employment locations within a consortium. They identified the need for more formal monitoring and mentoring of work-based learning, the creation of incentives for employers to become more involved in its delivery and assessment and the need for

improved handbooks and other forms of information to raise understanding and awareness of FDs among employers and work-based providers.

12 Finally, the reviewers identified a number of concerns relating to the resourcing of FDs. These include the need to ensure that there are sufficient staff with appropriate skills in teaching teams and the recruitment, training and support for work-based mentors and assessors. The reviewers also commented that providers will need to ensure that growth in FD enrolments is matched by an increase in both staff and physical resources.

## Introduction

13 This overview report summarises the outcomes of the Foundation degree (FD) reviews undertaken by the Agency in England during 2003. The programme of FD reviews was commissioned by the HEFCE to:

- i investigate the distinctive features of the programme reviewed, focusing both on the core features of the award as set out in the HEFCE's *Foundation degree Prospectus 00/27 (the Prospectus)* and on whether the programme is likely to meet the standards of a FD award as defined in:
  - *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*;
  - *The Foundation degree: qualification benchmark (final draft) (FDQB) (Appendix 2)*.
- ii establish the quality of the students' learning experience;
- iii contribute to the evaluation of the FD award.

14 This overview report has been written to identify strengths, innovative aspects and good practice for wider dissemination and to make recommendations for further development and improvement of FDs. The report pays close attention to the involvement of employers and employer-related organisations in FDs, as work-based learning is central to the award. The report will also contribute to the evaluation of the FD award commissioned by the HEFCE.

15 The findings from the reviewers' lines of enquiry in each FD review resulted in a report containing two threshold judgements on the confidence, or otherwise, in:

- the emerging academic standards and the emerging achievements of students; and
- the quality of the students' learning opportunities, including their monitoring and enhancement.

These two areas of judgement will be referred to as emerging standards and quality in the remainder of this report.

Full details of the method for FD review are set out in the *Handbook for the review of foundation degrees in England 2002-03*.

16 The review process was normally completed within a period of five weeks, from the initial meeting between the reviewers and the providers,

to the meeting at which the reviewers reached their judgements. The review process was structured around the following activities:

- preparation of a self-evaluation report by the provider(s);
- a preliminary meeting carried out by the review coordinator;
- regular liaison between the reviewers and the review facilitator
- a visit, normally for two days, including visits to the provider(s) and to at least two sites of work-based learning;
- off-site scrutiny of evidence by the reviewers;
- sharing of evidence by the reviewers;
- a meeting at which the reviewers considered their judgements;
- a letter sent to the provider(s) containing the judgements;
- an unpublished report sent to the provider(s), including the opportunity to comment on a draft for factual accuracy.

17 As a supplementary activity, the reviewers considered areas of innovation and good practice that may be worthy of wider dissemination. This activity was intended to enable the provider to build on strengths and enhance delivery, and to assist in the further development of the FD award. The identification of innovation and good practice did not contribute to the two threshold judgements.

18 The review process took account of the newness of the FD award and that, at the time of the review, only a small number of students had completed their programmes. This is reflected in the reviewers' judgement of emerging standards.

19 The sample of 33 programmes reviewed included 17 providers who had received development funding from the HEFCE, and 16 who had either received additional student numbers from the HEFCE or had provided the student numbers from within existing targets. This accounted for around one-third of the FDs which had started in England at the time of the review. Overall, 3,089 students were enrolled on the programmes reviewed, 1,483 on the HEFCE-funded programmes and 1,606 on those without additional funding. There were 1,661 full-time students and 1,428 studying part-time. The sample included programmes consisting of a

range of modes of attendance, subjects, size of consortia and geographical distribution. Eight programmes had only full-time students attending, 11 had only part-time students, while the remaining 14 programmes offered both modes of attendance. Appendix 1 contains a list of the programmes reviewed.

20 The review process was based on a self-evaluation by the providers which answered 10 key questions, with an optional extra question on examples of good practice and innovation. In all but two of the programmes reviewed, no students had completed a FD programme, and so it was not possible for the reviewers to judge whether the academic standards appropriate for the final award had been achieved. Questions 1 to 5, therefore, looked at emerging standards and emerging student achievement, and questions 6-10 dealt with the quality of student learning opportunities, together with the monitoring and enhancement of standards and quality. These key questions are set out in Appendix 3.

## Emerging standards and emerging achievements of students

### Strengths

21 Across the range of FDs reviewed, there is overall confidence in emerging standards and emerging achievement of students in 30 of the 33 programmes reviewed.

22 A main feature of the sample of FDs is the diversity of deliverers and subject areas. This results from the selection of a sample for review. Reports indicate that this is invariably reflected in the aims, which are tailored to the vocational area for which they have been designed. In the majority of cases the aims are clearly articulated and are consistent with the core features for FDs and the *FHEQ*. Eighteen reports highlight a proactive approach to the development of the FD and the clear link between the provision's aims and the needs of the local labour market. Ten reports strongly indicate the distinctive character and nature of the FD, for example, in responding to a niche market or recognition and delineation of specific markets.

23 Review reports show that the vast majority of FDs have effectively involved employers and employer-related organisations to identify employment needs and to assist in the design and content of the programme. The reviewers found that

the FD suffered from a lack of adequate employer involvement in only one case. In some cases the partnership with employers is considered an area of good practice or innovation. However, in others the reviewers considered that this needs strengthening.

24 The partnership generated with employers has been continued through the use of advisory groups or with industry contacts serving on programme committees. Two providers have created a very strong link with local employers, involving such aspects as the sponsorship of students, purchase of text books, assistance with fees, visits to sites and negotiated shift patterns to allow attendance at classes.

25 In the majority of cases, providers maintain the involvement of employers through their assistance with student case studies. In four cases, for example, students are integrated into employers' project teams. Other providers enhance the currency of the programme through the contribution of industry professionals to the delivery. Examples include guest lectures and seminars, and a few providers recruit industry professionals on part-time or fractional appointments.

26 Further strengths include instances where there is a requirement for students to have regular subject-related employment. This impacts positively on students' work practice, since learning can be immediately applied in the workplace, and this also influences other staff in the work settings with whom the student comes into contact. A small number of programmes are influenced by the particular conditions of the relevant industry. For example, in civil engineering, the small size and specific nature of the construction sites does not allow comprehensive work-based learning opportunities. This limits the students' experience of work placements and so they participate in college-based or work-based simulations, or live projects, instead of work-based learning. In some cases the reviewers regard such alternative arrangements as strengths of the programme as they replicate workplace practice while allowing students to be appropriately assessed. The reviewers found instances of strengths in individual programmes. These include good tutorial and mentor arrangements, work-based learning handbooks, workplace supervisor arrangements, and an example where the latest industry standards are used to continually update the curriculum.

27 Work-based learning arrangements are broadly in line with the precepts in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in*



*higher education (Code of practice): Section 9: Placement learning.* Providers understand their responsibilities; students know their rights and learning outcomes contribute properly to the overall aims of the programme.

28 Eleven programmes have clear links between aims and learning outcomes, and these are met. In a number of cases, aims and outcomes are well mapped against documented requirements of the industry. The reviewers commended half the programmes for learning outcomes that reflect accepted occupational standards for the subject. Some professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) accredit FDs to add professional status. For example, the European Institute of Transport Management has given the Award of Excellence to a FD in Aircraft Engineering.

29 In the majority of programmes, arrangements for students' progression to an honours degree are either in place or still under development, but only 12 reports highlight clear articulation between the FD and honours degrees as a positive feature. The reviewers considered the bridging modules offered by two providers are likely to ensure a smooth transition to honours level. Further examples of good practice include a consortium which offers fast-track transfer to several honours programmes after level 1 and another which provides an integrated curriculum that allows students to acquire two qualifications, one academic and one professional, at FD level.

30 The reviewers commend the design of the curriculum of 11 FDs. In these cases the curriculum gives a sequential development of planned learning outcomes and an underpinning of contextual awareness and skills. The majority of programmes also have a flexible framework, a feature commended in 13 reports. This offers students flexibility in such areas as mode and time of attendance, deadlines, workload planning, attendance at multiple sites and intermediate certificated exit points. Despite the complexity of delivering the FD programmes on a number of different sites, the reviewers identified two providers who had taken particular care to ensure that all students received identical information on outcomes.

31 The vast majority of reports (30) indicate that a variety of assessment methods is used, with 12 programmes noted for particular features. Examples include: presentations using work experiences and simulated scenarios or live projects. These were most effective where they provided students with

the opportunity to draw on a range of work-based activities, and to compare the different practices of different firms. In addition, the reviewers found individual programmes which systematically measure the students' achievement, for example, through the progressive assessment of key and/or transferable skills.

32 Overall, reports indicate that students receive formative feedback on assessed work, albeit of varying quality. Often class sizes are small and this allows the staff to provide comments orally with additional advice and group critiques to enable students to concentrate on improving their levels of achievement. However, this approach may need to become more formalised, with emphasis placed on comprehensive written feedback, when class sizes become larger. Written feedback is normally given in the existing larger classes. Two FDs include the opportunity for students to gain interim awards. This allows students to leave after year one with a recognisable qualification which records assessed knowledge and skills and potentially to return, after a break in their studies, directly to year two.

33 The samples of assessed work scrutinised by the reviewers showed that the majority of students are broadly achieving the expected standard at level 1 on the *FHEQ* and are covering an appropriate range of employment-relevant skills. In 10 programmes the achievement of students is appropriate, with a small number of cases identifying the production of work of a high standard at module level. In one case employers note high added-value for students, showing that the integration of work-based and theoretical studies and the application of skills benefits both students and employers.

## **The quality of student learning opportunities together with the monitoring and enhancement of standards and quality.**

### **Strengths**

34 The reviewers had overall confidence in the quality of 30 FDs. Since the programme of reviews was completed, one of these judgements was reversed at a follow-up visit by the Agency to check improvement action.

35 All reports indicate that a range of learning and teaching methods are used to support students to achieve a mix of employment skills

and applied theoretical studies. Over one-half of the reports identify special features of particular benefit, such as action learning sets, study materials specifically designed for the workplace, simulated workplace learning, high-quality learning material, distance learning, experiential learning, self-evaluation and reflection, learning contracts, progress files, and online material to support consistent learning experiences.

36 Five reports note the high quality of face-to-face teaching delivered by tutors who are both knowledgeable and suitably experienced. The invaluable contribution of employers and visiting professionals to the teaching process is highlighted in nine of the programmes. This involvement ensures the relevance and currency of the curriculum, and encourages the inclusion of realistic projects and the acceptance of the programme by employers. The promotion of independent learning is commended in six reports. One programme encourages students to take control of their own learning from the outset, and provides them with electronic learning material before the topic is taught. In other cases, virtual-learning environments (VLEs) have been designed to promote independent learning and interaction between students. The reviewers noted as a strength the uniformity of the student learning experience across the multiple sites of a consortium, coupled with appropriate customised local input.

37 All programmes offer various forms of academic support information, albeit of varying quality, with three providing online facilities where students can communicate with staff and each other. Opportunities for students' personal and professional development are provided by 12 FDs. These include cases where students write action plans for all aspects of their work and monitor and evaluate these at regular intervals. In 13 cases the reviewers highlighted accessible and approachable staff and good support facilities, such as the availability of drop-in study skills centres. Students on six FDs receive effective study skills support as required. In 10 cases, the reviewers noted as a strength the use of personal development plans or the proposed development of personal learning plans. In one case, formal progress files are used to encourage students to reflect on their acquisition of professional and transferable skills.

38 The reviewers drew attention to the teaching staff of five FDs and the high quality of their qualifications, research records, industrial experience and commitment. One provider has appointed staff

specifically for the FD programme and four others have provided specific staff development.

39 Students have access to general physical learning resources that are of a high standard. These are appropriately organised and managed to support students' achievement of programme outcomes of 21 FDs. All students have access to information and communications technology (ICT) facilities.

40 Excellent specialist learning resources are highlighted in 16 reports. The nature of such facilities varies due to the wide range of subjects covered by the programmes under review. Examples include the availability of operational aircraft and associated systems, industry-leading fashion technologies and materials collections, specialist crime-scene houses and forensic facilities, advanced chemistry and engineering laboratories, health care and digital media equipment. In a number of cases, these are available in the HEI as part of the provision for other programmes or through employer facilities or donations. In a small minority of cases, the reviewers identified some problems with specialist facilities, including a lack of maintenance or the need for students to share them with commercial activities.

41 Eleven reports identify effective approaches for programme approval or validation. The involvement of employers in this process ensures that a clear employment need is met. The procedures reflect consideration of the *Code of practice: Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review*. One provider has commissioned an independent interim evaluation of the award after the first year of operation to assist with the monitoring and enhancement of these procedures.

42 One-half of the programmes have robust mechanisms for monitoring and review. In one case, an improvement grid analysis and action plan makes an important contribution to ensuring the continued development and enhancement of the programme. Generally, providers have identified and addressed issues of concern and one third are monitoring the FD through a self-critical awareness and through reviews.

### **Areas of innovation and good practice for wider dissemination**

43 The reviewers identified innovation and good practice worthy of dissemination in 30 FDs. Generally, the reviewers found it difficult to distinguish between innovation and good practice and so no distinction is made here.



44 There is a range of innovative features and good practice relating to emerging standards. The involvement of employers and employer-related organisations is of fundamental importance in the design of the FDs. The reviewers cited this as good practice in 11 reviews. In these examples, employers had been fully involved from an early stage in FD design. Although employers are not generally involved in the summative assessment process, they typically contribute by assisting with the design of assessment questions. They also make a contribution to the curriculum by supplying data for case-studies and assisting in their delivery. The continued involvement of employers in a monitoring and management role, through their membership of course committees, is an important and widespread feature of FDs.

45 A second area is the high level of collaboration between HEIs and FECs in the design of the curriculum of five FDs. In these examples, the mechanisms and arrangements at consortium and partnership level for programme development, design and approval have resulted in strong curricula. In addition, there are some cases of innovation and/or good practice in the arrangements for the assessment of students. Examples include the opportunity for students to negotiate aspects of assessment to ensure relevance to their employment, strategies adopted for group assessment and the moderation of assessments.

46 The most prominent area of innovation and/or good practice, noted in relation to the quality of students' learning opportunities, is the use of online delivery, support and study skills packages found in nine FDs. Some providers have developed study skills guides with the potential to offer learning materials on site or at a distance. Such approaches clearly accord with the overall intention of FDs and the requirements of their students and are used extensively. The reviewers comment on user-friendly and comprehensive learning materials and the value placed on them by students. Most providers acknowledge the consequent demands for the availability of appropriate ICT resources at home as well as in the work place. One provider has been able to accommodate this through the loan of laptop computers to students for the duration of the course.

47 The providers of five FDs promote the development of students' independence, self-reflection and personal development through the innovative use of logbooks and progress files. These reflective documents assist in the development of high-order skills with related

reference to students' work experience. In others, students contribute to the development of individual learning contracts in preparation for work-based learning. These enable greater ownership, reflection on progress and add value to their experience. Some providers also have effective handbooks, informal student mentoring systems and paired placements. Paired placements allow students to swap roles with a student in another work setting which is geographically close but different in character. This gives greater breadth and insight into their eventual working role.

48 There are several further examples of innovation and/or good practice noted in individual reports that reflect many of the defining characteristics of FDs. For example, one provider offers good opportunities, and substantial support, for students with modest entry qualifications to enable them to benefit from their programme of study.

### **Recommendations for further development and improvement: emerging standards and emerging achievements of students**

49 Intended learning outcomes are the element of the FDs in greatest need of further development. For the majority (22) there is a need to clarify or strengthen the structure of intended learning outcomes to match *the Prospectus*. This is a concern not only for students' theoretical studies but also for their work-based learning. The reviewers recommend a systematic mapping of how learning outcomes will be assessed and demonstrated, paying close attention to the appropriate balance between key skills, generic skills and specialist knowledge, including work-based learning.

50 In 10 programmes, the intended learning outcomes of FD programmes are not well matched to the *FDQB* or *the Prospectus*. The majority of these programmes were developed prior to the publication of the *FDQB*. In some of these cases providers have not yet highlighted the distinctive features of the FD as set out in *the Prospectus*, either to students or to employers. In particular, providers need to ensure that students, staff and employers are fully aware of the centrality of work-based learning in the FD programme.

51 Around one-quarter of reviews identify the importance of providers continuing to explore the links between FD learning outcomes and those in

other relevant competence-based or work-based qualifications, such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and PSRB qualifications. If these links are to be formally developed, providers need to give careful consideration to the full range of professional body requirements, not only knowledge and skill requirements but also marking criteria and grading schemes.

52 Twelve reports point to the need for the providers to clarify progression routes to honours degree programmes and for the curriculum to reflect this. Although this is a requirement of the FD award, students and employers are not always clear about which progression routes are available. There is also a lack of clarity about bridging course requirements within some FD programmes and the reviewers have concerns about the appropriateness of these routes including concerns about their sufficiency and relevance.

53 Within the FD structure, the whole of the programme contributes to the award and all the work is eligible for moderation by an external examiner. In a number of programmes, the same external examiners are being used across a range of awards including FD, HND and honours degrees. While this could assist standardisation, it is important to ensure that external examiners understand the requirements and distinctive features of FDs.

54 The reviewers were concerned about the quality of the systems used to moderate assessment in 13 programmes. The reviewers' main concerns are internal moderation and verification which at times lack critical evaluation and the lack of application double-marking policies.

55 Employers do not generally take part in the summative assessment of students. Some providers do not involve employers in assessment as they believe that the control of assessment by academic staff is the guarantor of standards. The reviewers understand and support the general caution providers are showing in this early stage of development of this new award. However, the reviewers encourage providers to involve employers in assessment of work-based skills as identified as an option in both *the Prospectus* and in the *FDQB*.

56 Students of about one-half of the programmes experience some variation in the quality of written formative feedback. It is not always clear to students how their assessed work could be improved. In five cases, the reviewers highlight this as a serious problem.

57 Sixteen reports raise concerns about the marking criteria used in assessment. These include: a lack of clarity in informing the students about the marking criteria; the failure to use and award the full range of marks; a lack of distinction between marking criteria and learning outcomes; an assessment strategy which does not ensure that all learning outcomes are being tested; and examples where students were not clear which assignments were testing which outcomes. These concerns relate both to theoretical studies and work-based learning.

58 In a significant minority of reports, the reviewers recommend that more attention should be given in assessment to the development of appropriate academic and study skills, including the use of evidence, analysis and reflection and the avoidance of plagiarism. In addition, the reviewers found that assignments in 10 programmes are not always sufficiently taxing or matched to the appropriate level. Some encourage students to be descriptive rather than analytical in their answers. Although the students' achievement of all key learning outcomes should be tested, some assessment strategies do not fully achieve this. In a small minority of cases, the reviewers noted the lack of assessment of key skills. In addition, where FD students shared modules with students on other programmes, the reviewers identified a lower achievement by students on the FD.

59 Arrangements for the accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (AP(E)L) and entry with advanced standing raise concerns in seven reviews. Although AP(E)L systems are generally in place, there is only limited evidence of their use. In some cases, this is because they are not clear and students find them difficult to use, for example, in demonstrating that all outcomes for a particular module have been achieved. In other cases, students are not enthusiastic about AP(E)L and do not apply for it, preferring to experience all taught aspects of the programme. Generally, students' prior skills and knowledge developed in the workplace, were not accredited at entry and industrial partners were not involved in the AP(E)L procedures.

60 In 16 cases the reviewers found that the strength in students' achievement in the early stages of the programme centres on descriptive, vocational and practical outcomes rather than on intellectual and cognitive skills. Providers need to develop increased opportunities for students to achieve higher-level skills of analysis, and reflection in level 1 and in the early part of level 2. In some cases, work-based mentors are effective in helping to address this problem by facilitating the integration of work-based learning and theoretical studies as students move from the first to the second level of the FD.

### **Recommendations for further development and improvement: the quality of student learning opportunities, including the monitoring and enhancement of standards and quality**

61 In eight reports, the reviewers noted the use of a limited number of teaching and learning methods and the overreliance on a didactic teaching style, particularly in the second year. This is of particular concern where programmes include few contributions by employers. The problem is amplified in consortia, where it is difficult to ensure a consistently high quality of delivery across a range of providers. There is evidence from other FD reviews that input from industry experts, through seminars, guest lectures and master classes goes some way to address this issue. In one case, the reviewers suggest the implementation of a peer observation scheme including hourly-paid staff as a mechanism to enhance teaching and learning.

62 The vast majority of programmes are experiencing problems in effectively linking work-based and theoretical learning. In addition, in nine cases the reviewers express concerns about various aspects of the delivery of work-based learning. They found that the aim of integrating work experience into the programme learning outcomes is generally achieved, however, there is variation in the quality and quantity of mentorship and support each student receives. This creates a particular tension as the development of some work-based learning outcomes relies extensively on the student's place of employment.

63 Causes of this level of variability in work-based learning are partly due to employers' lack of understanding of the nature and requirements of FDs. Evidence from about one-half of the reports

suggests that employers feel that they require more information to comprehend fully FD requirements and the potential for their own role. Some providers produce guidance on work-based learning for students, but less frequently for employers. In five cases, the reviewers report only a limited level of employer involvement in the programmes.

64 Students of six FD programmes are taught with students from a range of other awards. In these cases the needs of FD students are difficult to meet in option modules taken by diverse groups of students. Overall, these concerns centre on maintaining the integrity of the FD award, meeting the diverse needs of groups of students and timetabling, which limits the options for FD students.

65 The reviewers found problems associated with recruitment and/or retention in 13 programmes. Some of these have significant attrition rates in year one. They also found evidence of emerging problems with future recruitment and marketing, and noted in a number of reports that competition from other awards could be a factor.

66 Nineteen programmes reviewed are experiencing difficulties with student support, especially the support of part-time students. Problems include the availability of, and students' access to, tutors, the availability of appropriate course information, and the support of students in the workplace. Several reports indicate the lack of industry mentors who can support students and facilitate work-based learning. The majority of programmes have experienced some difficulties relating to the induction and training of work-based mentors and, in 15 per cent, this is noted as a significant issue.

67 Around one-quarter of the reports note that progress files are not yet fully utilised to provide student support, for example, to encourage reflection, development and application of knowledge. An emerging theme in a number of reviews is that employers and employer organisations within consortia have not yet identified criteria for demonstrating competence and supporting students' achievement of core skills in the workplace.

68 In around one-quarter of reports, the reviewers consider that there has been insufficient staff development to ensure that teaching teams have appropriate skills to deliver the FD. This applies to both the support and development of subject

specialists, as well as to general scholarly activity. Areas for development include the introduction of more formal staff development arrangements and sessions focused on the specialised teaching approaches used in the programme. FECs often have their own staff development activities but there is little evidence that they are able to benefit from the staff development opportunities of the HEI. Sometimes this is because FEC staff do not have the time to take up the opportunities offered by their partner. In some 13 cases, there is an overreliance on a small number of staff to deliver the programme.

69 Problems with the availability of physical resources available to support the FD students are identified in 10 reports. These problems include the limited opening hours and accessibility of learning support centres for part-time students and the availability of appropriate VLEs and cross-consortia intranets. In 11 cases, there are potentially useful links developing between HEIs and FECs for the provision of extra library resources. However, the effectiveness of these is sometimes compromised by difficulties of travel or access through online or intranet links.

70 Eleven reviews highlight the lack of a formal mechanism for students to evaluate their programmes. In addition, the reviewers note the need for the development of a clear system for generating feedback from all major stakeholders, including students in around one-quarter of the programmes.

71 The reviewers identified consortia-related quality concerns in 13 reports. The reviewers are concerned that the programme approval arrangements for some FDs have not been wholly effective, for example, in cases where the reviewers did not have confidence in emerging standards and/or quality or where they found the need to improve assessment strategies, particularly to include the assessment of work-based learning. There is evidence that monitoring and review mechanisms are not yet fully developed to cover all sites and consortium members, including work-based learning providers. The reviewers particularly note the need for providers to ensure consistency of the quality of the curriculum and of its delivery across all sites. The concerns also include the lack of shared programme material and information, aspects of work-based learning, the engagement of the consortia with quality assurance procedures, and the incorporation of FD regulations into college regulatory frameworks.

72 The reviewers confirm that students' work-based learning could be improved by the revision of academic monitoring arrangements, suggestions include the strengthening of the links between academic staff and students' workplaces so as to regularise academic support for students and ensuring an equivalent entitlement of access to staff.

## Conclusions

73. The reviewers have confidence in the emerging academic standards and quality of learning opportunities including the monitoring and enhancement of standards and quality in 29 of the 33 FDs reviewed. Since the completion of this programme of reviews, one judgement of no confidence in the quality of learning opportunities has been reversed during a follow-up visit by the Agency to check improvement action.

## Strengths

74 The following strengths are present in large numbers of the programmes reviewed. However, all programmes do not exhibit all strengths:

- programme aims are clearly articulated and are consistent with the core features of FDs and the *FHEQ*. The diversity of subject areas is reflected in aims, which indicate the distinctive character and nature of the programme and are usually linked comprehensively to the local market (paragraph 22);
- the effective involvement of employers and employment-related organisations to identify employment needs and to assist in the design and content of the FD (paragraphs 23 to 26)
- a wide range of teaching, learning and assessment approaches is used to support students' achievement of a mix of employment skills and academic learning (paragraphs 25 to 26; 31; 35 to 36);
- students are offered flexibility in their studies, for example, in attendance, location, workload planning, work-based learning and intermediate certificated exit points (paragraphs 29 to 30);
- curricula are well designed to support the sequential development of planned learning outcomes and an underpinning of contextual awareness and skills (paragraph 30);
- appropriate and well-managed specialist facilities are available to FD students either through the educational institutions or through employers (paragraph 40);

- effective approaches are in place for initial validation and approval of programmes (paragraph 41).

### Areas of innovation and good practice

75 The following areas of innovation and good practice are identified in significant numbers of reports:

- the effective involvement of employers and related organisations to identify employment needs and assist in the design and content of the programme (paragraphs 23; 44);
- the involvement of employers in programme delivery (paragraph 44);
- high levels of collaboration between HEIs and FECs in academic consortia on programme design and assessment (paragraph 45);
- the use of online learning materials, including VLEs, for the delivery of subject and study skills and learning support (paragraph 46);
- the promotion and support of students' independence, self-reflection and personal development through the use of logbooks and progress files (paragraph 47);
- the balance of student achievement of practical and vocational skills with the acquisition of higher-level intellectual, cognitive, analytical and reflective outcomes. (paragraphs 60; 62);
- the variability of students' experience at work-based learning (paragraphs 62 to 63; 67);
- support and guidance, particularly for part-time students (paragraphs 66 to 67);
- staff development and the physical resourcing of programmes, especially if student numbers increase in future years (paragraphs 68 to 69);
- arrangements for programme approval, monitoring and review, with particular emphasis on assuring equivalence of experience across all sites of learning in a consortia (paragraphs 70 to 72).

### Recommendations for further development and improvement

The following areas need further development and improvement. Not all recommendations relate to all programmes. There is a need to address:

- intended learning outcomes which should be clarified or strengthened in line with *the Prospectus* and the *FDQB* (paragraph 49);
- the involvement of employers in the summative assessment of students' work-related skills (paragraph 50);
- links between learning outcomes and those in other relevant competence-based or work-based qualifications (paragraph 51);
- student assessment, so as to ensure the consistent implementation of rigorous assessment practices (paragraphs 53 to 54; 56 to 57; 58);
- the need for more information for employers to help them to contribute effectively to FDs (paragraph 55);
- the appropriateness and effective operation of systems for the accreditation of prior experience and learning, particularly to accommodate previous work experience (paragraph 59);



## Appendix 1 - The Foundation degree programmes reviewed

Awarding institution	Consortium institution(s) delivering FD in 2002-03	Subject
Anglia Polytechnic University	Anglia Polytechnic University	Ophthalmic Dispensing
Birkbeck College	Birkbeck College	Information Technology
Bournemouth University	Bournemouth and Poole College Kingston Maurward College Weymouth College	Tourism
City University	City and Islington College	Public Service Management
Coventry University	North Warwickshire and Hinkley College	Logistics Management
Kingston University	Kingston University KLM UK Engineering LTD	Aircraft Engineering
Leeds Metropolitan University	Leeds Metropolitan University	Early Years Practice
Liverpool John Moores University	St Helens College	Construction
Middlesex University	College of North East London	Housing Studies
Open University*	Croydon College	Digital Media Production
Open University	Croydon College Northbrook College North East Surrey College of Technology	e-commerce Technologies
Thames Valley University	Thames Valley University Stratford upon Avon College	Hospitality Management
The London Institute	London College of Fashion	Fashion Design Technology
The London Institute	London College of Printing	Travel and Tourism
The Manchester Metropolitan University	The Manchester Metropolitan University	Health and Social Care
The Manchester Metropolitan University	City College Manchester Hopwood Hall College Tameside College	New Media Design
The Nottingham Trent University	The Nottingham Trent University	Chemistry
The Nottingham Trent University	The Nottingham Trent University	Civil Engineering Construction
University College Northampton	University College Northampton	Learning and Teaching (Schools)
University of Bradford	Bradford College Thomas Danby College	Health and Social Care
University of Central England in Birmingham	Josiah Mason College South Birmingham College Sutton Coldfield College	Management
University of Central Lancashire	Preston College Wigan and Leigh College	Forensic Science
University of East Anglia	Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture	Land Based Studies
University of Essex	Writtle College	



Awarding institution	Consortium institution(s) delivering FD in 2002-03	Subject
University of Hull	University of Hull East Riding College Grimsby College Hull College North Lindsey College	Education in pre-16 Learning and Teaching Support
University of Kent at Canterbury	University of Kent at Canterbury	Electronic and Computer Systems
University of Lancaster	Blackburn College Edge Hill College of Higher Education, Ormskirk St Martin's College	Teaching and Learning Support
University of Plymouth	Plymouth College of Art and Design Somerset College of Arts and Technology	Creative Digital Arts
University of Salford	Nelson and Colne College North Trafford College Priestley College Salford College Wigan and Leigh College	Community Governance
University of Sunderland	Bishop Auckland College City of Sunderland College East Durham and Houghall Community College Gateshead College New College, Durham North Tyneside College	Early Childhood Studies and Practice
University of Sunderland	City of Sunderland College North Tyneside College	e-Business
University of Sussex	Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication	Computer Visualisation and Animation
University of Teesside	University of Teesside Middlesbrough College	Chemical Technology
University of Warwick	North Warwickshire and Hinckley College	Community Enterprise and Development

\* During the review, in April 2003, the validating institution changed to London Metropolitan University.

## Appendix 2

### The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

#### Foundation degree: qualification benchmark (final draft)

##### Preface

*The framework for higher education qualifications* (the *FHEQ*) includes qualification descriptors that list the generic characteristics of a qualification at each of the following levels: certificate, intermediate, honours, master's and doctoral. A qualification descriptor exemplifies the outcomes of the main qualifications at each level, and demonstrates the difference between levels. It provides clear points of reference at each level, and describes outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications.

The *Subject benchmark statements* describe the general characteristics, attributes and capabilities associated with a particular subject area. Thus they provide a means by which the academic community may describe the nature and characteristics of a programme in a specific subject. They also represent general expectations about standards for the awards of qualifications at a given level and specify the attributes and capabilities that those possessing such a qualification should be able to demonstrate.

A qualification benchmark describes the distinctive character 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. A qualification benchmark does not include subject level detail or attempt to define general expectations about threshold standards.

During the review of foundation degrees, which is being undertaken by QAA in 2002-03, the qualification benchmark will remain in final draft form. The reasons for this are as follows:

- institutions may not have had enough time to consider fully the contents of the document prior to the review;
- the final draft status reflects the developmental aspect of the review process;
- the outcomes of the review will help to shape the final version of the document by identifying existing good practice and any gaps in the document.

For more information on the *FHEQ* and Subject benchmark statements see  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/index.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/index.htm)

##### Introduction

1 This document describes the distinctive characteristics of a foundation degree in terms of its purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes. In doing so it seeks to answer the question: what is a foundation degree?

2 The foundation degree provides a new model of vocational higher education based on close collaboration between employers and providers of higher education. It aims to widen and increase participation in higher education by delivering knowledge and skills needed for employment by the application of work-based and flexible modes of learning.

3 The *Foundation degree qualification benchmark* will act as an external reference point<sup>1</sup>. Reference points differ fundamentally from rules or prescribed definitions. They provide the co-ordinates with which to map academic practice, not regulate it. By virtue of their nature and definition they can neither be applied in a mechanistic way, nor lead to compliance. The *Foundation degree qualification benchmark* provides a valid and authoritative reference point. For more information on the use of reference points see:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/public/newmethod/fod.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/newmethod/fod.htm)

4 The qualification benchmark document will:

- assist those directly involved to design and validate foundation degree programmes;
- provide general guidance for describing the generic learning outcomes associated with the foundation degree;
- support internal quality assurance;
- assist reviewers to make judgements about foundation degree provision;
- help other interested parties to understand the purpose, generic content and outcomes of foundation degree programmes.

5 In *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* the foundation degree is located at the Intermediate level. For further information on the *FHEQ* see:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/ewni2001/contents.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/ewni2001/contents.htm)

6 Under the terms of the Bologna Declaration the foundation degree does not fulfil the requirements of an award to terminate the first cycle. Such an award should last a minimum of 3 years full-time and may provide entry to master's or doctoral degrees. In the UK the bachelor's degree with honours normally indicates completion of the first cycle.

For more information on the Bologna Declaration see the QAA website:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/bmb/contents.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/bmb/contents.htm)

7 This qualification benchmark has been developed collaboratively by a wide range of practitioners involved in setting up foundation degree programmes. The document's evolution has benefited from wide discussion with higher education providers, employer representative bodies and from the comments of numerous other stakeholders.

<sup>1</sup> Other external reference points include: *The frameworks for higher education qualifications*, *Subject benchmark statements*, *QAA Code of practice*; National occupational standards.

<sup>2</sup> There is a separate framework document for Scotland. For more information see:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/scotfw2001/contents.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/scotfw2001/contents.htm)

## What is a foundation degree?

8 The foundation degree integrates academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and programme providers. It builds upon a long history of design and delivery of vocational qualifications in higher education. Foundation degrees are vocationally focused and equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment and the needs of employers. They also provide a pathway for life-long learning and the opportunity to progress to other qualifications.

9 Work-based learning is central to the foundation degree. Learning at work takes many forms and serves a variety of purposes. When designing a foundation degree it is important that the work-based learning is appropriate to the sector or type of employer.

10 In a foundation degree programme academic knowledge and understanding will reinforce and support the development of vocational skills with appropriate academic rigour. External reference points such as the *FHEQ*, Subject benchmark statements and national occupational standards will inform the design of foundation degrees.

11 The coherence and integrity of a foundation degree programme comes from the planned integration of work-based skills and academic learning. Understanding and defining the balance of purposes within a foundation degree is important in order to design a curriculum and to provide the related experiences that will enable the learning outcomes to be achieved.

12 The distinctive features of a foundation degree are highlighted in the awarding institution's normal approval and review procedures for programmes. Employer representatives are involved in the design and regular review of foundation degree programmes. Subsequent review procedures, eg periodic review, will want to ensure that evaluation of the work-based learning provision is undertaken as part of the review, and involves feedback from the work-based learning providers. Students should have opportunities to comment on their work-based learning experiences, and their comments will be considered in annual monitoring processes. For more guidance on the approval, monitoring and review of foundation degree programmes see the sections of the *QAA Code of practice* on *Programme approval, monitoring and review* and *Placement learning*.

## Defining characteristics

13 The distinctiveness of the foundation degree can be found in the integration of the following characteristics: accessibility; articulation and progression; employer involvement; flexibility; and partnership. While none of these attributes are unique to foundation degrees, their clear and planned integration within a single award underpinned by work-based learning makes the award highly distinctive.

## Accessibility

14 The foundation degree sets out to increase access and widen participation in higher education. Access and participation can be improved where opportunities for learners are provided at colleges close to their work and home, and where the programmes deliver the knowledge and skills needed in local and sectorial employment markets.

15 Further education colleges play a crucial role in the recruitment onto, and the delivery of, foundation degree programmes. Working in partnership with the awarding institution and employers, further education colleges are well placed within the community to increase access to higher education by attracting 'new' students with a range of academic and/or vocational entry qualifications and experience.

16 The provision of foundation degree programmes within easy reach of students maximises flexibility in terms of learning opportunities. Often this enables students to spend minimum time out of the work place and remain in employment - in order to 'earn and learn'.

17 Although many foundation degree programmes are designed to meet the needs of the local employment market, some foundation degree programmes will be targeted at national and international employment needs.

### Articulation and Progression

18 For many learners the achievement of a foundation degree programme fulfils their vocational and educational needs. The qualification is valued by employers and learners alike as a means of developing the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary in preparing for work, enhancing existing employment, or in preparation for a career change.

19 The foundation degree also provides a progression route by offering opportunities for learners to advance, where appropriate, towards other qualifications. Consequently, it is important that a clearly articulated progression route exists between the foundation degree and other qualifications, both those validated by higher education institutions as well as by professional and other educational bodies. In the case of the bachelor's degree with honours all institutions awarding the foundation degree guarantee articulation between it and at least one bachelor's degree with honours.

20 Progression from the foundation degree to the bachelor's degree with honours may involve a bridging programme which will ensure that those students progressing onto the bachelor's degree with honours are adequately prepared. In other cases, where the foundation degree has been closely designed with a particular honours progression route, it may be possible to provide

progression directly to the final year of the bachelor's degree with honours.

21 The arrangements for progression will be determined by the awarding bodies' admissions policies and procedures and should be implemented consistently and fairly. All progression arrangements should be made explicit to students on the foundation degree programme.

22 In cases where a student could gain vocational or professional qualifications and/or accreditation through the foundation degree, programme designers would normally seek such accreditation as would benefit students. As part of the validation process for foundation degrees, institutions should include, where appropriate, the requirements of individual vocational or professional accreditation bodies.

### Employer involvement

23 The foundation degree is also intended to provide students with the knowledge, understanding and skills that employers need. In order to achieve this it is important that employers are involved in the design and regular review of foundation degree programmes. Employer involvement will be further enhanced by the inclusion of employer bodies and Sector Skills Councils in the development, design and review of foundation degree programmes.

### Flexibility

24 Flexibility is central to many aspects of the foundation degree because it facilitates responsiveness to, for example, the needs of learners from a variety of backgrounds and to the rapidly shifting demands of employment. It is important that institutions delivering foundation degrees consider the range of requirements of learners likely to enter the programme. These requirements may include:

- **flexible delivery modes and study patterns:** including full time, part-time, distance learning; 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:** which may provide links with a number of honours degree programmes in different specialisms within the subject as well as to other educational and professional awards;

- **flexible admissions requirements:** applicants will come from a wide diversity of backgrounds and be able to demonstrate their suitability for entry onto a foundation degree in a variety of ways. The promotion of life-long learning means it is important that institutions recognise and accredit different forms of prior learning.

## Partnership

25 The ideas of partnership and collaboration are central to the concept of the foundation degree. An effective partnership will help deliver broad acceptance of the foundation degree, reinforce ownership of the qualification among all stakeholders and establish the currency of the foundation degree in its own right.

26 The contribution of a range of partners in foundation degree programmes should keep programmes relevant, valid and responsive to the needs of employers and learners. The responsibility for assuring the quality and standards of foundation degrees rests with the awarding body. However, the successful delivery of the programmes will depend on a range of partnerships, some of which are identified below:

- **Employers:** the direct involvement of employers in the continuing development, monitoring, and delivery of foundation degree programmes is an important aspect of meeting the needs of employers and learners. Employer involvement may include input to: the design and approval of programmes; work-based modules; delivery of course materials; assessment of learning outcomes; and provision of a supportive learning environment.
- **Further education colleges:** a partnership between higher education and further education involves close collaboration on the design, approval and delivery of programmes and the assessment of learning outcomes. Colleges play a critical role in the support and guidance of students.

Note that foundation degree programmes will need to be validated by a degree awarding institution, and the relationship with the further education college covered by the QAA *Code of practice on Collaborative provision*. Institutions may also want to refer, where appropriate, to the HEFCE document *Indirectly funded partnerships: Codes of practice for franchise and consortia arrangements*.

- Professional bodies: professional bodies play an important role in helping to promote the foundation degree with employers by reinforcing the value of the qualification, and may also be actively involved in the design and review of programmes.
- Sector Skills Councils: the successor body to the national training organisations will help support the promotion and development of the foundation degree among potential students, employers and employees. The Sector Skills Councils may also be actively involved in the design and review of programmes, promoting the use of national occupational standards where they exist.
- Students: students play an important part in negotiating, with guidance and agreement from the institution and employer, their own learning needs in both the work and academic learning environments through learning contracts.

## Knowledge, understanding and skills

27 The generic outcomes identified below are drawn from the intermediate qualification descriptors in the *FHEQ*. Typically, holders of a foundation degree will 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;
- 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 the foundation degree will 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 will have:
- qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment and progression to other qualifications requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

28 Foundation degree programmes best meet the needs of employers and students where knowledge, understanding and skills are clearly integrated. Students should benefit from being able to interpret ideas and situations in the wider context of both their employment field and academic understanding. By focusing on contextualised learning underpinned by both vocational and academic understanding, recipients of the foundation degree demonstrate learning outcomes explicitly relevant to both professional and employer needs. Furthermore, the knowledge, understanding and skills achieved will assist student progression to honours level and above. Such integrated and contextualised learning depends on both employers and academic departments being actively involved in the design, delivery and assessment of learning outcomes both formative and summative.

## Learning, teaching and assessment

### Learning and teaching

29 At the forefront on any learning and teaching strategy are the means through which learners are enabled to achieve the intended learning outcomes. In the case of the foundation degree the relevance of skills and their application in a work-based environment, underpinned by academic knowledge and understanding is critical. It is important that consideration is given to how the skills-learning element of a foundation degree programme can be integrated into the programme of study from its beginning.

30 A foundation degree can be delivered in many ways: a learning and teaching strategy may include a range of diverse and innovative learning and teaching methods including the use of web-based

and distance learning methods; self-directed studies; project work; and problem-based learning. The institution's learning and teaching strategy will identify appropriate learning styles for foundation degree students.

31 A foundation degree programme is designed to provide sufficient time for self-directed learning and reflection to encourage life long learning by supporting students develop action plans, demonstrate active learning and facilitate the student's ownership of the learning process.

### Assessment

32 The assessment of each element of study, including work-based assessment, will be specified at the time of validation. This may include a variety of formal and informal, summative and formative techniques provided that they are all capable of rigorous testing and independent verification. Through the combination of work-based learning and other more traditional means of evaluation the foundation degree offers the opportunity to develop not only integrated means of delivery, but also integrated means of assessment between providers and employers.

33 Work-based assessment should where appropriate include employers. Arrangements between employers and higher education institutions/further education institutions should be fully articulated, including any training of employers in assessment procedures (eg mentoring etc), in formal agreements at the commencement of the partnership. They will be regularly reviewed as part of the on-going monitoring of the programme.

34 The awarding institution and the provider are responsible for ensuring that their assessment is consistent and appropriate to the level of the award and the nature of any work-based assessment. Appeals procedures and mechanisms to resolve disputes should be explicit and available to all, including students.

35 For more information and guidance see the sections of the *QAA Code of practice on Assessment of students and Placement learning*.



## **Acknowledgement**

The QAA would like to thank all those who provided comment on this qualification benchmark. With the help of so many constructive and thoughtful contributions it was possible to make significant improvements prior to publication.

## Appendix 3

### 10 key questions of Foundation degree (FD) review

#### Key questions for the review of FDs

##### Key question 1

**To what extent are the aims and intended programme outcomes clear and appropriate for the HEFCE core features for Foundation degrees, and the *FHEQ*?**

Areas for consideration:

- the existence of clear and appropriate links between the aims and the learning outcomes for the programme and the extent to which these provide a distinctive and readily identifiable character for the FD;
- programme aims and learning outcomes as a sound basis for achieving the core features for FDs;
- programme aims and learning outcomes as a reflection of the occupational standards of the relevant sector skills council and, where appropriate, the national occupational standards;
- the relationship between the learning outcomes for modules, units or courses and those for the programme as a whole;
- the clear and effective communication of the aims and intended programme outcomes to all participants.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the SER and the programme specification;
- definitive curricular documents;
- the relevant student/programme handbook(s).

Review activities might include the following:

- analysis of the programme specification and other curricular documents in relation to the external reference points;
- discussions with members of the teaching staff and students.

##### Key question 2

**To what extent do the design and content of curricula reflect the core features for Foundation degrees and what is the likelihood that they will enable students to achieve the programme outcomes?**

Areas for consideration:

- the credit-rating of the programme (which should be a minimum of 240 credits);
- guaranteed articulation arrangements with at least one honours degree;
- where appropriate, clearly articulated arrangements for progression to honours degrees and to professional qualifications or higher-level NVQs;
- the design of the curriculum to ensure that students are able to attain the programme outcomes;
- the provision of an appropriate balance of employment-relevant skills (technical, work-specific, key, generic) and broad-based academic content within the curriculum;
- the design and organisation of the programme to support appropriate modes of delivery/study;
- where the programme is available in different locations or different delivery modes, the extent to which all versions of the curriculum provide an equivalent programme of learning for students, appropriate to the award of a foundation degree;
- the links between the design of the curriculum and the framework of occupational standards of the relevant sector skills council.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the SER and the programme specification;
- definitive curricular documents and institutional regulatory information;
- module or unit descriptions/guides;
- internal and external monitoring reports;
- formal articulation and contractual agreements;
- records/minutes/reports of external consultations;

- the relevant student/programme handbook(s);
- communications from employers, professional and statutory bodies and/or the relevant sector skills council.

Review activities might include the following:

- analysis of the programme specification and other curricular documents in relation to the external reference points;
- scrutiny of other relevant documentation, including the items listed above;
- discussions with members of the teaching staff and students.

### Key question 3

**To what extent are the arrangements for assessment clear, robust and capable of systematic testing of the students' achievement of programme outcomes?**

Areas for consideration:

- the existence of assessment arrangements that are clear and understood by all participants;
- methods of assessment and assessment criteria that are appropriate for the programme outcomes;
- security of the assessment arrangements to ensure consistent measurement of student achievement, whatever the location or delivery mode;
- the existence of assessment arrangements that enable the students to demonstrate achievement of the programme outcomes and the relevant core features;
- ways in which assessment addresses the range of employment-relevant skills (technical, work-specific, key, generic) and broad-based academic content;
- arrangements to provide students with a transcript, validated by the awarding HEI, to record their assessed skills and knowledge;
- the consideration given to arrangements to underpin the transcript with a personal development/learning plan for each learner;
- robust and transparent arrangements to award credits in recognition of APL and APEL.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the programme specification and the relevant student/programme handbook(s);

- assessment regulations;
- sample of student work with mark lists and feedback comments;
- relevant institutional and programme-specific policies, including those relating to APL/APEL;
- staff feedback on the assessment process.

Review activities might include the following:

- scrutiny of relevant documents and student work, including the items listed above.

### Key question 4

**To what extent do the emerging student achievements, including the results of assessments where available, indicate that programme outcomes are likely to be achieved and meet the expectations of the core features?**

Areas for consideration:

- indications, from the available evidence, that the standards being achieved by learners, at this stage, will meet the minimum requirements of the award, as measured against the *FHEQ*, the *FDQB*, and the core features;
- the extent to which the assessment procedures and the sample of student work confirm that module outcomes can be achieved and that programme outcomes are likely to be achieved;
- whether the work produced by students is at an appropriate level and shows that all students are covering an appropriate range of employment-relevant skills (technical, work-specific, key, generic), that there is an integration of work and academic activities and skills, and that students are benefiting from a broad range of study;
- whether the work produced by students shows that consistent standards are being achieved, particularly at the threshold pass level, whatever the location or delivery mode.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the programme specification and relevant student/programme handbooks;
- sample of student work with mark lists and feedback comments;
- internal and external monitoring reports including, as available, programme monitoring reports and reports of external assessors/examiners;

- learning contracts and personal development/learning plans.

Review activities might include the following:

- scrutiny of relevant documents and student work, including the items listed above.

### Key question 5

**How are employers/employer-related organisations involved in the design of the curricula, and the assessment and achievement of the students?**

Areas for consideration:

- the relationship between the learning outcomes for the modules and work-based learning requirements in the programme outcomes;
- the effective involvement of employers and employer-related organisations in identifying employment sector needs and in the design and content of the programme;
- the effective incorporation of work-based learning within the programme and its sufficiency in enabling students to develop an understanding of the world of work;
- the achievement or plans for achievement of recognition of the programme from employers;
- if appropriate, how employers participate in or contribute to the assessment of work-related skills;
- the effectiveness of arrangements for assessing and recording the achievements of students in work-based learning;
- where work-based learning attracts credit, the robustness and transparency of the arrangements to demonstrate the recognition of that learning, and the extent to which those arrangements have been agreed between all members of the consortium, the demonstration by students of an appropriate range of skills, relevant to the area of study, in work-based learning.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- sector-specific statements from employer organisations;
- validation document; relevant institutional policies;
- student/programme handbook(s);
- minutes of meeting with employers and employer-related organisations.

Review activities might include the following:

- discussions with employers and training organisations.

The quality of students' learning opportunities, including their monitoring and enhancement

The questions below are designed to enable the reviewers to evaluate whether the quality of the students' learning opportunities, including their monitoring and enhancement, is appropriate for a foundation degree programme. This section comprises five key questions, supported by areas for consideration arising from each question.

### Key question 6

**To what extent is the approach to learning and teaching delivery, including the range of learning and teaching methods, effective for achieving the learning outcomes, responsive to the distinctive character of the foundation degree award and its students, and designed to reflect the core features?**

Areas for consideration:

- the range of learning and teaching methods and their appropriateness for achieving the programme learning outcomes and the particular mix of employment skills and broad-based academic learning;
- learning and teaching activities to ensure the integration of work and academic activities;
- whether the delivery of the curriculum is supported by appropriate learning materials, including those for flexible or distance learning where relevant;
- the effectiveness of learning and teaching in promoting independent and lifelong learning;
- the maintenance of an acceptable threshold quality of curriculum delivery in respect of schemes, methods and materials, whatever the location or delivery mode.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the programme specification and relevant student/programme handbook(s);
- relevant institutional and programme-specific policies, particularly those relating to learning and teaching;
- module or unit descriptions/guides, and teaching schemes;
- internal and external monitoring reports;

- schemes for institutional and/or peer observation of teaching, and any available outcomes of those schemes.

Review activities might include the following:

- scrutiny of relevant documents, including those items listed above;
- scrutiny of student work;
- discussions with members of the teaching staff and students.

### Key question 7

**To what extent are the arrangements for providing academic support for students effective and to what extent do they meet the distinctive needs of Foundation degree students, whatever their location and mode of study?**

Areas for consideration:

- whether the information given to prospective students and those joining the programme reflects the core features for a FD and students are given clear and accurate information on the character, content and delivery of the programme;
- whether the available evidence, including early retention data, suggests that student expectations are realistic and are being met;
- the arrangements for the recruitment, admission and induction of students to ensure the fair and consistent treatment of applicants, whatever the location, consortium partner and delivery mode;
- the consideration given to personal development plans and, where they exist, their effectiveness in supporting student learning and progression;
- the arrangements for academic and pastoral support appropriate to the needs of the different categories of students;
- the arrangements for academic support to allow the identification of study skills needs and support for their development;
- the arrangements for academic support allow students to obtain additional advice and information on the requirements of employment, self-employment and entrepreneurial activity.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the programme specification and relevant student/programme handbook(s);
- relevant institutional and programme-specific policies.

Review activities might include the following:

- scrutiny of documents, including those items listed above;
- scrutiny of student work;
- discussions with members of the teaching staff and students.

### Key question 8

**Is the provision of human and physical resources adequate, and to what extent is it appropriately organised and managed to achieve the Foundation degree programme outcomes and meet the expectations of the core features?**

Areas for consideration:

- the number and relevant expertise of teaching staff delivering the programme across all locations and modes;
- the deployment of teaching staff to ensure that all students receive a satisfactory learning experience, whatever the location or delivery mode;
- the extent to which the range and quantity of learning resources is adequate for the needs of the programme and FD students;
- the strategy for the provision of sufficient specialist facilities, between the institutions and the confirmed workplace settings, for achieving the programme outcomes;
- access by students to appropriate and convenient facilities, particularly for the broad-based academic studies;
- access to sufficient and convenient ICT facilities, with appropriate technical assistance, to support the delivery mode.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the programme specification and relevant student/programme handbook(s);
- relevant institutional and programme-specific policies, such as the resourcing strategy for foundation degree provision;

- staff development strategies and records of the participation of FD staff in staff development events.

Review activities might include the following:

- scrutiny of documents, including those items listed above;
- scrutiny of staff lists and CVs;
- direct scrutiny of relevant facilities;
- discussions with members of the teaching staff and students.

### Key question 9

**To what extent do the employers/work-based learning providers contribute to the delivery of the programme and does this reflect the core features?**

Areas for consideration:

- the effective use of workplace knowledge and experience of students in curriculum delivery;
- the effectiveness of workplace learning and the extent to which it is designed to reflect the relevant learning outcomes and core features;
- where employers contribute to the delivery of the programme, how those contributions are effectively designed and integrated;
- the policy, and implementation of arrangements, for recognising prior and work-based learning by the provider and all partners;
- the appropriateness of arrangements for academic and pastoral support for the needs of the students in work;
- an appropriate involvement of employers with the expertise and experience to ensure that the work-related experience and skills of students is relevant, up-to-date and matched to programme outcomes;
- the provision, between the provider and the confirmed work-based learning settings, of sufficient specialist facilities for achieving the programme outcomes, with appropriate agreement as to their use by students;
- the briefing of employers as to the purpose of work placement and their role within it;
- the extent of the briefing, monitoring and support of students before and during their placement;

- the extent to which relevant staff receive appropriate induction to their role in monitoring the students on work placement;
- the extent to which the work placement is effective in enabling students to demonstrate work-based skills.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the programme specification and relevant student/programme handbook(s);
- relevant institutional policies, including those relating to APL/APEL;
- work placement handbooks/guidance;
- learning agreements;
- resources strategy.

Review activities might include the following:

- scrutiny of documents, including those items listed above;
- scrutiny of student work;
- discussions with employers, members of the teaching staff and students;
- discussions with staff.

### Key question 10

**To what extent is there a robust and understood framework in place for the effective monitoring and enhancement of quality (and standards) across all parts of the Foundation degree provision? To what extent does it address the core features, and the need for ensuring equivalence of the student learning opportunities between the delivery partners?**

Areas for consideration:

- whether mechanisms for the approval/validation of new FD programmes are robust, ensuring that such programmes meet a clear employment need and meet the core features;
- the relationship of these mechanisms to the actual approval process used for the programme under review;
- the existence of a clear statement as to where, within the provider or consortium, responsibility for monitoring and enhancement lies;
- whether clear mechanisms are in place for ensuring that the programme is monitored systematically against its learning outcomes, with action plans drawn up to promote improvement;



- regular review of the monitoring arrangements to ensure that the programme is meeting and is responsive to the core features and appropriate employment sector organisations;
- whether the provider has identified and addressed issues of concern relating to the programme;
- the extent to which the arrangements for monitoring and enhancement are effectively designed to include work-based learning activities;
- arrangements to ensure consistency in the monitoring of academic standards and the quality of the student experience, across all locations and delivery modes.

Sources of documentary evidence might include the following:

- the programme specification and relevant student/programme handbook(s);
- relevant institutional policies, including those relating to APL/APEL;
- diagram of quality assurance procedures/quality assurance manuals;
- internal monitoring reports.

Review activities might include the following:

- scrutiny of documents, including those items listed above;
- scrutiny of student work.

## Appendix 4

### Review Coordinators who took part in Foundation degree reviews

Dr Christopher Amodio  
Professor Allan Ashworth  
Mrs Kate Atherton  
Dr Lawrence Auchterlonie  
Ms Penelope Blackie  
Eur Ing Alan Chantler  
Dr Gordon Edwards  
Dr Barry Garnham  
Mr Nigel Hall  
Professor John Hilbourne  
Mr Martin Hill  
Mr A Grant Horsburgh  
Dr John Hurley  
Dr Susan Kay  
Dr Daniel Lamont  
Mrs Joan Lawrence  
Mr David Lewis  
Mr Philip Markey  
Professor James McAuley  
Mr Maurice Mealing  
Professor Geoffrey Robinson  
Dr Peter Steer

## Specialist reviewers who took part in Foundation degree review

Mr Frank R Adams  
 Dr Christopher Amodio  
 Mr Tim Appelbee  
 Mr Duncan Backhouse  
 Professor Rob Baggott  
 Ms Lina Basu  
 Dr Michael Beckett  
 Mr Michael C Bennett  
 Professor W Derek Birrell  
 Professor A Michael Bourn  
 Dr Graham Bowpitt,  
 Dr Elizabeth Briggs  
 Mr Frank Brogan  
 Dr Paul Brunt  
 Dr Michael P Carter  
 Dr Bernadette Casey  
 Dr Valerie Chapman  
 Mr Tony Clancy  
 Dr Keith R Cliffe  
 Dr Philip D Coleman  
 Mrs Carol A M Comer  
 Mr Charles Cowap  
 Professor John A Dawson  
 Mrs Deirdre M Edey  
 Mr Dave Edgar  
 Mr Jim England  
 Dr Daniel Fairbairn,  
 Mr S Lyn Fawcett  
 Mr A Iain Fleming  
 Mr Alastair H Forbes  
 Ms Ann Jackson Fowler  
 Mr John A Fulton  
 Dr Phil Garnsworthy  
 Ms Ruth Goatly  
 Mr Peter B Gordon  
 Mr Kevin Grant  
 Mr Brian Griffiths  
 Professor Richard L Grimsdale  
 Ms Romla Hadrill  
 Dr Joan Halfpenny  
 Dr David Hall  
 Dr Josephine K Hamilton-Jones  
 Mrs Jacqueline Hare  
 Professor Mike Healey  
 Dr Helen E Higson  
 Dr J Alan Hill

Ms Gillian Hilton  
 Dr Simon James  
 Professor Keith Johnson  
 Professor Robert C Johnson  
 Professor Peter Jones  
 Ms Anna Kyprianou  
 Mrs Sandra Lacey  
 Dr Mary Langan  
 Mrs Tina Laukkanen  
 Professor Larry Lind  
 Mr David Ling  
 Professor Derek Longhurst  
 Dr Ann Macaskill  
 Dr Catherine Macdonald  
 Mr Eric Macintyre  
 Mr Graham A Martin  
 Dr David Maudsley  
 Dr Robert J Mears  
 Mr Bob Millington  
 Miss Patricia M Mullins  
 Dr David Mundy  
 Mr Ian Patrick  
 Professor Frank Poole  
 Mr Gerard Rice  
 Ms Gillian Sandford  
 Dr Stephen Scott  
 Ms Suzie Scott  
 Ms Maureen Sears  
 Mr Alan Smith  
 Dr Brian L Smith  
 Mr Graham Stevens  
 Mrs Roshani Swift  
 Ms Christine Taylor  
 Dr Jayne Taylor  
 Ms Barbara E Thomas  
 Dr John Tinker  
 Professor Doug Walton  
 Mr Brandon Williams  
 Professor Barry Winn  
 Mr John R Worsfold  
 Mr James D Younger