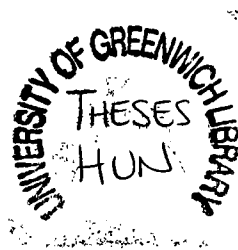


Student Perspectives on Foundation Degrees: Employment Skills and Work-based Learning

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines students' perspectives of Foundation Degrees, employment skills and work-based learning. It questions whether the primary remit of higher education should be the development of vocational skills for the workplace. It investigates: firstly, the perceived benefits to individuals undertaking a Foundation Degree in terms of developing appropriate employment related skills; secondly, whether the compulsory work based/related learning element, seen as the cornerstone of Foundation Degrees, provides students with the relevant skills for the workplace; thirdly, the assumption that the government's multiple-agendas of widening participation in education, as a means to improve social inclusion; upskilling the workforce; working collaboratively with employers and further education colleges, can be met through provision of shortened higher education degree programmes.

Results from three research studies, indicate that students felt that undertaking a Foundation Degree would improve employment prospects; improve employment promotion prospects and develop employment skills. Students also felt the Foundation Degree prepared them for the third year of an honours degree programme. However, findings relating to whether the compulsory work-based learning element of the Foundation Degree provided students with the relevant skills for the workplace were inconclusive. The studies also found that, despite its compulsory nature, not all of the Foundation Degrees from which respondents were surveyed had a work-based learning element as part of the programme. The implications of this are that the work-based learning element is not being used to promote employer engagement in the manner that the government intended. The research also revealed that employers were not engaging in formal assessment of the Foundation Degree programme, neither were they providing mentoring for employees undertaking this form of study. This represented a missed opportunity for true engagement with employers in a manner that could help to bridge the divide between academic qualification and vocational relevance. A number of recommendations are made.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Title Page | i |
| Declaration | ii |
| Acknowledgements | iii |
| Abstract | iv |
| Contents | v |
| List of Tables | vi |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Research Question | 2 |
| Personal & Professional Context | 3 |
| CHAPTER 1 | |
| Foundation Degree – its place and purpose within Higher Education | 5 |
| European Perspective | 8 |
| International Perspective | 11 |
| Historical Context | 15 |
| Further Education | 18 |
| Higher Education | 21 |
| FE/HE Divide | 22 |
| FE/HE Collaboration through Franchise | 26 |
| Post Dearing | 32 |
| CHAPTER 2 | |
| Foundation Degrees | 36 |
| Introduction | 36 |
| Partnership | 36 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Foundation Degree Support | 41 |
| Work-based Learning (WBL) and Employer Engagement | 42 |
| Current Sub-Degree Provision | 50 |
| Funding in Further and Higher Education | 56 |
| Funding the Widening Participation Agenda | 58 |
| Future Partnerships | 60 |
| Research Questions | 63 |
| CHAPTER 3 | |
| Methodology | 65 |
| The Social Reality of Research | 66 |
| Selected Research Design | 67 |
| Ethical Considerations of Research | 69 |
| CHAPTER 4 | |
| Research Study 1 | 70 |
| Introduction | 70 |
| Research Question for Study 1 | 70 |
| Methodology for Study 1 | 70 |
| Context | 70 |
| Methodology | 71 |
| Sample | 71 |
| Data Collection Method | 72 |
| Results | 73 |
| Findings and Discussion | 74 |

| | |
|---|----|
| CHAPTER 5 | |
| Research Study 2 | 80 |
| Introduction | 80 |
| Research Question for Study 2 | 80 |
| Methodology for Study 2 | 80 |
| Context | 80 |
| Methodology | 81 |
| Sample | 81 |
| Data Collection Method | 82 |
| Results, Analysis and Discussion (a) | 82 |
| Results, Analysis and Discussion (b) | 90 |
| Results, Analysis and Discussion (c) | 91 |
| Other Relevant Studies | 92 |
| Outcome of Research Studies 1 & 2 and Summary | 93 |
| CHAPTER 6 | |
| Research Study 3 | 95 |
| Introduction | 95 |
| Research Question for Study 3 | 95 |
| Methodology for Study 3 | 96 |
| Context | 96 |
| Methodology | 96 |
| Sample | 96 |
| Data Collection Method | 97 |
| Results, Findings and Discussion | 98 |
| Former Student Experiential Perspective | 98 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Summary of Former Student Findings | 107 |
| Programme Leader Perspective | 108 |
| Summary of Findings from Programme Leader Interview | 113 |
| CHAPTER 7 | |
| Findings from the Three Research Studies | 114 |
| Further Discussion | 115 |
| Recommendations | 127 |
| CHAPTER 8 | |
| Conclusion | 129 |
| Context in which the Research took place | 129 |
| Implications for Professional Practice | 131 |
| New Knowledge and Further Research | 132 |
| References | 133 |
| Appendices | 148 |
| Appendix 1 | |
| Research Study 1 - Questionnaire | |
| Appendix 2 | |
| Research Study 2 - Questionnaire | |
| Appendix 3 | |
| Research Study 1 –Chi-Square Analysis Data | |
| Appendix 4 | |
| Letter to Participating Colleges | |
| Student Information Sheet | |

LIST OF TABLES

Research Study 1

Table 1

Chi Square analysis of Questionnaire 74

Research Study 2

Table 2

Responses to Employer Engagement 83

Table 3

Comparison of Positive Student Responses by Age 88

Table 4

Comparison of Percentage Response to Usefulness of Work Experience
and Foundation Degree Study in Skill Development 90

Table 5

Student Response to Foundation Degree Expectations 92

Research Study 3

Table 6

Interview Questions 97

INTRODUCTION

Foundation Degrees were introduced in February 2000 as a new two-year higher education qualification. In his foreword to the government consultation document (Department for Education and Employment 2000) the then Secretary of State David Blunkett stated that;

'We now live in a knowledge driven economy. Our future prosperity depends upon our ability to foster growth in sectors such as IT, finance, electrical and electronic engineering and creative industries. The Foundation Degree will be key in developing skills and abilities in these areas and meeting the continuing demand for higher level technicians elsewhere....' (DfEE 2000, Section 1. para.1.12.)

The consultation document was critical of existing sub-degree provision claiming amongst other things that student numbers were falling, and that both employers and students were confused by the various types and range of qualification available. Furthermore, the document expressed *'concerns about existing provision at this level....and only a minority of employers were satisfied with the adequacy of technical skills and the preparation of students for employment.'* (ibid. para.1.6)

The government claimed that in order to be economically competitive in the global market, employees needed to be upskilled. Its strategy to address this situation was to increase the numbers of young adults entering higher education and it set challenging targets for participation in higher education. In offering a vocational 'Foundation Degree' the government was taking direct responsibility for ensuring higher education developed the skills, attitudes and abilities that employers had identified were required.

This new qualification served a dual purpose: to meet the skills needs perceived as essential to ensuring that Britain remained economically competitive in the global market and to support the government's commitment to expanding access to higher education experience for 50% of 18-30 year olds by 2010. In addressing this dual agenda, the government aimed to draw together vocational and academic routes to higher level qualifications and so bridge the perennial divide in the British education system.

The development of Foundation Degrees was based upon political and social ideologies that shaped the agenda for reform of higher education. This thesis challenges the underlying assumptions regarding the skills agenda, the social inclusion agenda and the role of higher education in supporting political policy. A central tenet of the government's skills policy was the projected role of employers as key stakeholders in the collaborative design and delivery of the Foundation Degree. This thesis will reflect upon how successful this strategy has been and whether the prime focus upon employer engagement has provided a way to meet projected skill shortages as set out in the government's consultation document (DfEE 2000) and later the Skills Strategy document – *21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential* (DfES, 2003c)

Following a historical review of further and higher education policy and collaboration between further and higher education institutes, this thesis questions whether the primary remit of higher education should be the development of vocational skills for the workplace and whether widening participation in higher education can contribute to promoting social cohesion?

Research Question

The research question investigates firstly, the perceived benefits to individuals undertaking a Foundation Degree in terms of developing appropriate employment related skills. Secondly, it investigates whether the compulsory work-based/related learning element, seen as the cornerstone of Foundation Degrees, provides the participant with the relevant skills for the workplace. Thirdly, it investigates whether it is realistic to assume that the government's multiple-agendas of widening participation in education, as a means to improve social inclusion; upskilling the workforce; working collaboratively with employers and further education colleges, can be met through provision of shortened higher education degree programmes.

Personal and Professional Context

The researcher is currently a Head of School at a further education college in Kent. The rationale behind this thesis relates to his involvement and experience gained as a practitioner in the development, design and delivery of curriculum provision from Level 1 through to Level 3 for 16 – 19 year old students and level 4 for 19+ year olds in full-time post compulsory education. The college works in partnership with a local university and has a history of developing HE programmes at sub-degree level. The school currently delivers Level 4 Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Foundation Degrees. The development and design of the HND programmes were in response to market demands within the sport, recreation and leisure industry. However, the Foundation Degree was primarily developed in response to pressure from the university to meet government targets dictated by funding allocations (DfEE, 2000).

The two-year Higher National Diploma programmes have served a two-fold purpose. Firstly, they attract those students, through UCAS, who do not meet the minimum qualification requirement for a traditional honours degree entry. These are, more commonly, students who have been undertaking 'A' level studies in subjects not necessarily related to the Higher National Diploma programme. This approach attracts a diverse range of students in terms of age, previous experience and ethnicity. Secondly, they serve as a natural progression for the further education Level 3 students who have completed a two-year National Diploma programme in a related subject, who feel that the leap from further education to undergraduate status is too great and therefore use the Higher National Diploma route as a stepping stone to undergraduate level. In both cases completion of the two-year Higher National Diploma programme offers a progression route to the second year of a three year undergraduate honours degree programme. The Higher National Diploma programme was developed with a work-based learning unit in order that students are able to experience first-hand the workplace environment.

In the researcher's experience the two cohorts have different support needs in order to achieve their qualification. Those entering the programme from the 'A' level route are less likely to complete the programme than those from the further education route. This is possibly because the 'A' level students have become de-motivated by their

failure to enter university in the first instance and so are less committed to the Higher National Diploma programme, whereas, the further education students have a more positive attitude towards their studies. One of the major concerns noted by the researcher is one of difficulty experienced by students undertaking higher education programmes in a further education environment, in their ability to undertake independent research and moreover to critically interpret their findings.

A Foundation Degree in '*Sports Studies*' was developed in response to requests from the university for new degree level higher education programmes in line with the government's agenda. It was designed with the intention of providing practitioners within the sport, recreation and leisure industry a 'degree' qualification to support their vocational experience and opportunity to progress to the final year of an honours degree after two years. To this end, only those students who are in relevant employment are targeted for recruitment. This ensures that students have an opportunity to combine both academic and work related studies.

In my experience, employers have been supportive of their employees undertaking the Foundation Degree in principle but have not been fully conversant with the government rationale behind this initiative and in many cases have failed to provide practical or financial support. It is to this end that this thesis was undertaken in order to gain a students' perspective as to the perceived benefits of undertaking a Foundation Degree and whether the work-based or work related learning element provides relevant vocational skills for the workplace.

CHAPTER 1

The Foundation Degree – its place and purpose within Higher Education

'The purpose of education is life-enhancing: it contributes to the whole quality of life. This recognition of the purpose of higher education in the development of our people, our society, and our economy is central to our vision. In the next century, the economically successful nations will be those which become learning societies: where all are committed, through effective education and training, to lifelong learning. So, to be a successful nation in a competitive world, and to maintain a cohesive society and a rich culture, we must invest in education to develop our greatest resource, our people.' (NCIHE 1997, p.6.)

This statement taken from the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) demonstrates the central principle that lifelong learning is essential to the economic, social, moral, educational and political wellbeing of the nation. It is a view that has underpinned the development of central policy over the past 30 years and its influence can be seen in the development of a range of strategy documents including the Skills Strategy White paper (DfES, 2003).

However Coffield (1999) argues that this utopian view of lifelong learning as the panacea for all ills is *'naïve, limited and apparent as well as being deficient, dangerous and diversionary'* (Coffield 1999, p.479) He suggests that this orthodoxy is based upon a number of assumptions, the most relevant of which are: globalisation and the development of new technology dictate a need to upskill the workforce in order to be competitive; educational providers must be more responsive to the needs of employers; individuals must take responsibility for keeping their skills updated. Coffield contends that the link between education and economic development is a *'simplified version of the theory of human capital'* (p.481) citing both Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961) whose publications provided the basis upon which the policy for upskilling the workforce for economic development was first derived.

It should be questioned however, as to whether the assumption that the UK has to invest in skilled employment in order to remain economically competitive is true. Government policy decision makers and educationalists vehemently argue the importance of skills as a mechanism for improving personal job prospects, company productivity and economic viability in a global market. On this basis the 'high skills'

model has dominated the debate in which the significance of technical skills particularly the use of ICT has been promoted as a critical pathway to high skills, higher incomes and increased job satisfaction for employees. In adopting this model the government strategy is interventionist to promote supply of specific skills for the labour market and increase the number of young people gaining qualifications. Keep and Mayhew (1999) maintain that:

'boosting the supply of skilled and educated employees will, of itself, act as a catalyst for economic change and enhance productivity and competitiveness.'
(Keep and Mayhew, 1999, p.9)

The problem is, from an employer's point of view, one of defining exactly which types of skill are required from their employees. For example, it may be easier to define the skills needed to become an expert in the field of plumbing than it is to define the skills needed to work in the personal service industries where personality traits are as important, if not more important, than personal knowledge. There is greater confusion still, since much is made of the importance of these 'softer' skills and their transferable nature, yet the precise nature of these generic skills remains ill defined. As Grugulis, Warhurst and Keep (2004) comment:

'Generic skills, it is argued, form a universal foundation for success in the labour market, transcend the individual subjects being studied, and are applicable across a wide range of situations' (Grugulis et al 2004, p. 8)

From a government perspective (Blunkett 2000), the most significant generic skills are: Information Technology (IT), Numeracy, Communications, Problem Solving, Improving Own Learning and Performance and Working with Others. By definition IT and Numeracy skills can be seen as 'hard' and technical whereas others such as Working with Others could be conceived of as personal traits rather than specific skills since they involve attributes such as personal judgement, motivation and leadership. In placing the emphasis upon the possession of these personal traits and defining them within the realm of skills which can be taught, employers are shifting responsibility for the development of these traits from their managerial role onto training establishments.

There remains however, a divided view between what the employers and the government require in developing a skills base. Whereas employers' interests are focused on their immediate concerns, recruitment, development or control of staff; government concerns are focused on accountability in the form of accreditation. This leads to a dichotomy for employers, as investing in accreditation could be perceived as, a threat to the skills base within the company whereby individuals gaining certificated evidence of skills could utilise them as a means to further career progression with another employer.

The Foundation Degree prospectus (HEFCE 2000) stated that:

'The Foundation Degree is intended to help education providers supply the labour market with the high-quality graduates needed to address the shortage of intermediate level skills, as well as making higher education (HE) more affordable, accessible and appealing to a wider range of students – thereby widening participation in HE and stimulating lifelong learning' (p. 3)

In introducing the Foundation Degree as a degree level form of accreditation, the government is following the 'high skills' model for economic competitiveness. However, it should be noted that the 'high skills' model is not the only viable model for development of economic competitiveness. Many employers opt for a 'low skill'/simple product strategy where competitive advantage is based on bulk purchases and low prices and investment in staff skills does not confer additional advantage. As Keep & Mayhew (1998) contend:

'many employers are pursuing perfectly rational training policies because their competitive strategies do not necessarily require them to upskill their entire workforce' (Keep & Mayhew 1998, p.8)

The cornerstone of the Foundation Degree is dependent upon employer partnership to drive the agenda forward in a vocationally relevant context. However, although this is the vision of the government, employers may have a different view and employer engagement may not be the simple solution promulgated to bring about change in higher vocational training.

European Perspective

In considering the development of the Foundation Degree in Britain, it is useful to review the developments in sub-degree level qualifications in comparable European countries, both in terms of relevance to and acceptance in the workplace and in terms of promoting progression to a full degree programme. In this respect this study found the international assessment of intermediate-level qualification in higher education conducted by Robertson (HEFCE 2002) particularly useful.

In establishing what 'counts' as an intermediate-level qualification in higher education Robertson (HEFCE 2002) defined two key criteria: namely that the qualification should be recognised for progression within higher education and secondly that it should be independently recognised by employers in the labour market. He points out that whilst many countries offer intermediate vocational qualifications, in the main, they do not confer progression in HE institutions. Similarly, several countries offer credit at an intermediate level that support progression within the higher education system but have limited value beyond this and may not count as independently recognised qualifications in a vocational or professional capacity. These criteria are useful as they underpin the political intention of the introduction of the Foundation Degree in the UK and could be applied to the existing HND programmes. Robertson identifies two countries where intermediate qualifications that meet these criteria are well established; France and the United States of America. These will be looked at in greater detail later: however, it is useful to summarise the position in other countries for comparison.

Prior to this it is worth commenting that there are broadly speaking, similar patterns of higher education across much of Europe and members of the Commonwealth in that a graduate qualification takes three to four years; a masters degree a further two years of study and a doctorate an additional three years. This is sometimes referred to as the '3-5-8' model and the Bologna declaration in 1999 opted to adopt this model in a move towards harmonisation of the higher education system across countries. This commitment was originally agreed by France, Germany, Italy and the UK in the Sorbonne declaration of 1998. The intention of the 'Bologna process' was to move

towards common procedures around quality assurance and credit transfer arrangements (Robertson, 2002)

With the development of an introductory degree at foundation or associate level in some European member states an additional element has emerged as an entry + two year intermediate level qualification. In Belgium for example, higher education courses are offered on two levels. The first is taught over two years leading to the '*candidat/kandidaat*' qualification which is assessed by examination. All students must pass this initial qualification before progressing on to the '*licence/licencie*' which takes a further two years of study. The '*candidat/kandidaat*' qualification is similar to part one of a British degree rather than a qualification in its own right and is used as an academic filter to identify students deemed capable of progressing to the full '*licence/licencie*' award. In this respect, it is different from the UK Foundation Degree.

Italy appears to have a poor record in terms of degree completion rates up to 2002; according to Robertson (HEFCE 2002) '*only 30% of students registering for the Laurea (degree) complete it and only 11% within the expected 5 years.*' p.17. Some vocations have an alternative qualification: the '*diploma universitario*'. mainly aimed at skilled technicians which, whilst supporting the development of vocational skills, do not support progression into a degree programme. Since 2002, a new three year '*Laurea breve*' has been introduced as a three year degree programme.

Since the 1960s Germany has developed intermediate qualifications focused upon developing vocational skills that are well regarded by employers because they are closely linked to the labour market. They are offered in the '*fachhochschulen*', as an alternative to university education and tend to be popular with more mature students from lower socio-economic groups. The programmes are intensively taught over two to three years and are subject to strict examination. Gellart and Rau (1992) identified that approximately 75% of engineers and 50% of computer sciences and business studies students qualify via this route. However, they are not designed to offer progression into higher education. Moreover, because they are held in high regard by employers there is little incentive to seek higher education progression via this route as it appears to add little additional benefit in terms of career progression.

France has an interesting history of developing intermediate-level higher qualifications managed under state regulation, working towards well defined common standards. From the mid 1960s, in a response to the need to improve graduation rates for students, France introduced a number of intermediate qualifications. Firstly, the *Diplôme d'Etudes Universitaires Générales (DEUG)* was introduced as an exit qualification for students unable to complete the full 'Licence'. It was the equivalent of the first two years of the 'Licence' and was awarded as a general diploma. This was followed by the *Diplôme d'Etudes Universitaires Scientifiques et Techniques (DEUST)* which had a science bias. These were quickly adopted by the universities and enrolments on these programmes rose in line with enrolments for the main 'Licence'. Alongside these qualifications an alternative intermediate qualification was offered in the institutes of technology, the *Diplome Universitaire de Technologie (DUT)*. The *DUT* stressed technological competence and was more vocationally orientated than the *DEUG* or the *DEUST*, but was aimed at a smaller market. Finally, a fourth qualification at intermediate level was introduced the *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur (BTS)*. This saw a five fold increase in enrolments from 1982 to 2001 and was specifically designed to support the development of vocational skills for the less academically orientated. Unlike the *DUT*, the *BTS* was not designed to support progression to the 'Licence'.

These varying routes to intermediate qualifications have specific purposes. Like Britain, France was concerned to improve qualification rates for school leavers and set challenging targets. In 1985, it set a target of an 80% pass rate for the *baccalauréat*. Working towards this target has had the effect of increasing participation in higher education since this qualification acts as a regulator for initial entry. However, increased enrolments in higher education have been directed by the government into the less academically demanding *BTS* with its vocational focus. Interestingly, although most educational initiatives are steered centrally, the *BTS* does have some leeway to encourage local employers to be involved in the design and delivery of the programme: indeed, up to 30% of a *BTS* can be delivered by employment based teachers.

The *DEUG* and *DEUST* were designed to improve completion rates both at the two year stage and in progression to the 'Licence'. However figures published in 2000

suggest this has not been effective, with a slightly worse rate of completion after two years and reports of students taking longer to complete the '*Licence*'. Worse still, Robertson (HEFCE 2002) reports that the *DEUG*:

'..... enjoys minimal credibility with students, whilst employers disregard it universally'.(p.26)

This is borne out by the relatively high levels of unemployment amongst students qualified to the *DEUG/DEUST* stage. However the *DUT* is held in regard by employers and has a successful rate of completion in time – 73% in 2001. It could be argued that this is successful because it is delivered in specific institutions of vocational higher education. Competition for places on this type of intermediate programme is fierce and unlike the other intermediate programmes includes a compulsory work placement for a minimum of 10 weeks. It is also tuition intensive typically consisting of twice the number of annual taught hours compared with the *DEUG*.

International Perspective

From an international perspective, the USA has a long history of offering intermediate higher education qualifications. Unlike France, there are few formal, national frameworks for higher education, no qualifications framework as such and no national standard for quality assurance in higher education. However American universities and colleges are very successful at attracting adults into higher education including mature students who study on a part-time basis whilst in employment. It would seem to be an accepted part of American culture that college attendance improves economic well being. This implicit assumption underpins the notion of lifelong learning. However, whilst American community colleges may be good at enrolling students onto programmes, they do not necessarily have a particularly good retention or success rate. Robertson (HEFCE 2002). The main qualification offered is the two year Associate degree, which is widely available through the community colleges and is the main route to transfer to degree level programmes. That said, there has been a shift in focus for the Associate degrees over time from an emphasis on academic progression to one of increasing relevance to meeting the needs of the local economy.

Community colleges (formerly called Junior colleges) first developed over a century ago to provide Associate's degrees on a two year basis for students unable to join a Bachelor's degree programme in the first instance. Upon completion, it was possible for students to progress to the partner university to complete the full degree. There was a steady growth in junior colleges offering the Associate's degree up to the 1930s when the economic depression enabled colleges to explore new markets for the unemployed. This saw the development of curricula focused on occupational training and work related skills.

Robertson (HEFCE 2002) highlights the importance of two pieces of legislation. The first, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act 1944 (The GI Bill), gave returning servicemen paid access to retrain at college. This was successful in both developing skills for the workplace and creating space for the employment market to readjust to absorb an increased workforce without causing mass unemployment. The second, the Presidential Commission on Higher Education in 1947-8, spelt out the role of the renamed community colleges, to provide Associate degrees as a means of transfer to universities and to provide programmes offering occupational training and workforce development. The universities were given prime responsibility for the 4 year degree programmes.

The 1960s saw the biggest increase in the number of new community colleges opening across America. This was partly due to increased demand based on demographic growth following the 'baby boomer' years and partly due to changing social and political factors such as the Civil Rights movement and the 'War on Poverty' campaign increasing demand for educational opportunities and social inclusion. Strategies to widen participation were supported by targeted funding arrangements in the form of student loans and a well established financial support programme called the TRIO programme aimed at supporting low income, low achieving and educationally marginalised adults to take up a variety of educational opportunities. This programme has now operated for over 40 years.

Growth in community college enrolments continued into the 1970s but with a shifting agenda to one of greater support for work preparation and vocational training programmes, resulting in a subsequent decline in enrolments for liberal education

programmes into the 1980s. This shift affected numbers enrolling on Associate Degree programmes and therefore subsequent transfer to the full degree programme in universities. By 2001, vocational Associate Degrees accounted for 70% of the total Associate Degree enrolments in community colleges. This can be partly explained by the government backing for Associate degrees under the 'new vocationalism' which stresses the need for qualifications to have a direct bearing on employability.

A major difference between the American system of Associate degrees and the British Foundation Degree development is one of ownership of the programme. In Britain nearly all Foundation Degrees have to be validated by a university but are delivered in partnership with further education (FE) colleges. In America, all Associate degrees are developed and awarded by the community colleges themselves, although some may have articulation arrangements with local universities to facilitate transfer to the four year programme.

Whilst the UK is trying to promote progression into higher education and to meet the needs of employers with the same qualification format, other countries have diversified between the two [employers' needs and university demands], allowing the possibility of transfer between the two options. In the UK, it would appear that the skills need of industry and of universities' academic rigour are not necessarily harmonious and this could create tension in attempting to design a 'one size fits all' higher education (HE) Foundation Degree qualification.

Equally, within the Australian Qualifications framework a number of universities offered a two year 'Advanced Diploma' or one year 'Diploma' programme at intermediate level. These qualifications have a strong vocational bias based on the needs of the local economy. The enrolments up to 1999 were declining whilst the registrations for Bachelor's degrees flourished. Robertson (HEFCE 2002) asserts that this change was not brought about by a straight transfer from Associate degree to Bachelor's degree but rather more of the intermediate level work was taken up by the further education sector. If this is so, it is similar to the pattern that is emerging for the delivery of Foundation Degrees in the UK which are primarily delivered by further education colleges in partnership with local universities.

Since 2004 Associate degrees have been developed as two year programmes positioned alongside the Advanced diplomas. These have greater focus upon the foundations of research based knowledge for an academic discipline than the Advanced diplomas and have less emphasis on industry specific workplace competency. The Australian Department for Education, Science and Training (DEST) suggests that these qualifications are oriented to the newer knowledge based occupations. That said, they are intended to offer an exit point at sub-degree level or progression onto a Bachelor's degree or into an advanced diploma for more specific industry competencies dependent on the career aspirations of the individual. They are delivered in universities and self-accredited or not self-accredited providers such as Technical and Further Education Colleges (TAFEs) and private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). Employment experience is not a requirement of entry to these programmes. It would appear that although there is a government drive to simplify transfer and progression between programmes the framework is being built with specific and differing objectives for each pathway.

This differs from the British Foundation Degree which is aiming to provide academic progression and employment relevance with the same qualification. Why does the UK government feel the need to link these two areas with a sub-degree qualification? In launching Foundation Degrees in 2000, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett acknowledged that as well as fostering economic competitiveness, higher education had a role to play in promoting social justice by expanding access and improving life chances for individual participants. In January 2003 a White Paper entitled *'The future of higher education'* (DfES 2003) set out the government's long term strategy for investment and reform in higher education policy. Central to this document was the expansion of higher education to meet future economic needs. In this respect the government stated that they will *'Continue to increase participation towards 50 per cent of those aged 18-30, mainly through two-year work-focussed Foundation Degrees'*

In order to better understand why successive government policies have insisted upon the development of a single qualification to meet the needs for both vocational and academic preparation it is perhaps worth reflecting upon the historical context of educational policy in the UK

UK Historical Context

UK Educational policy, from an historical context, has been one that has been largely dictated by what Bailey (1997, p. 19.) describes as *'the principles and practice of hierarchy, differentiation and therefore, selection.'* Following the conventional division into upper, middle and working classes, the term 'tripartite' is used to differentiate between *'social classes, fractions of social classes, types of children and in types of institution established to provide for them'*. (ibid) Tripartism has manifested itself in many different guises throughout the history of education. From the classical connotation of societal divisions (first, second and third class structural divide) through to present day policy, tripartism has reflected a general representation of society. However, Hendrick (1997) argues that educational policy is not necessarily a class issue, claiming that in the late nineteenth century a two-tier system of elementary and secondary education was not restricted to the divides of the working and upper classes:

'Elementary education in general was intended to serve what were deemed to be the limited needs of working-class children and was not seen as the first stage in a two-tier system with secondary education to follow.' (Hendrick 1997, p. 66)

Far from not being a class related issue Hendrick suggests that an individuals' educational need is dictated by class in that working class children are not expected to access secondary education unless they were exceptionally clever. Secondary education within the grammar schools was primarily for the needs of the fee-paying middle class, although opportunities existed, through a scholarship system, for working class children to gain entrance to grammar schools. However, by the late nineteenth century *'many of the elementary schools had begun to develop 'higher grade' classes for clever working-class children whose progress had gone beyond the normal curriculum.'* (ibid).

Fears that broadening of the curriculum at elementary level might blur the well defined divide between social classes, led to changes in educational policy. The 1902 Education Act legislation was designed to stop the development of curricula in elementary schools whilst at the same time oversee the setting up of a separate

secondary education system funded by the public purse and from charging fees. Here then was an early example of using educational policy to influence social cohesion by ensuring that the class system was largely upheld. The system was in the main aimed at the middle and lower class children although yet again procedures were in place to allow exceptionally gifted working class children to gain entry through scholarships. However the divide between elementary and secondary education, in reality, became even more obscured in two areas. Firstly, in 1911 central schools, found mainly in London, began offering a vocational and scientific curriculum set just below the standard of secondary schools. Secondly, in 1913 junior technical schools began offering pupils, at the ages of thirteen and fourteen, skills training in order to meet the needs of local industries borne out of the industrial revolution. A similar situation exists today with the expansion of the service industries and associated needs for training in this field.

The 1902 Act also saw the demise of locally elected school boards with a transfer of authority given to county borough councils as local education authorities (LEAs). This transfer of authority provided LEAs with the powers to create new grammar schools from local taxation. Hendrick (1997) states that::

'The crucial figure in the establishment of the new system was Robert Morant, Permanent Secretary at the Board of Education, and an elitist representative of the upper-class who wished to propagate the public school ethos through provincial grammar schools.' (Hendrick 1997, p. 67)

In many respects this 'do-gooder' attitude could be compared with the philanthropic view held towards the introduction of adult education programmes. It could also be argued here, as indeed Hendrick does, that Morant was genuine in his desire to see grammar schools as a real opportunity for working class pupils to progress to university education whilst at the same time endeavouring to maintain, within a state funded education system, *'an hierarchic structure of schooling corresponding to social class divisions.'* (ibid)

It was 1945 before secondary education became freely available to all, although between 1918 and 1945 there was, according to Limond (1999)

'an ever-growing erosion of the expectation that secondary schooling would generally be purchased and that its limitations to a select minority was both necessary and desirable.' (Limond 1999, p. 35)

The Spens Report, published in 1938, related tripartism to three types of school namely grammar, technical and secondary modern. The Education Act of 1944 first introduced the idea of “three progressive stages” in the education system, namely primary, secondary, and higher education. Depending upon individual ability, pupils were assigned to a grammar, secondary modern, or technical school. However it has to be questioned as to how ability was measured and whether this favoured the middle classes thus ensuring that greater numbers of middle class children were assigned to grammar schools.

Thus under the post-war Labour administration of 1945-51, the British class system remained largely intact (Ainley, 1993, 1999). The tripartite secondary system (grammar, central/technical, secondary modern) that was proposed effectively mirrored the three traditional divisions of the male labour workforce, namely white collar, blue collar and manual. In reality, state secondary schooling became bipartite as most of the planned central/technical schools did not come into being.

However, tripartism was produced through a combination of the private and public schools; namely private (so called 'public' or independent) schools for the gentry, grammar schools for the middle classes and secondary moderns for working class children. Separation in this way was controversial as the private schools remained independent following the 1944 Act, which did nothing to support the Government's promotion of social equality. In addition, the introduction of the '11-plus' examination process in the 1950s and 1960s made division, supposedly on the basis of merit, even more controversial. Such inequalities in the social distribution of educational opportunity were highlighted by both Glass (1954) and Halsey (1957). In this respect the Labour government of the early 1960s eventually acknowledged that grammar schools were seen to be attracting a disproportionately high number of children from middle class homes thereby disadvantaging working class children. As an alternative, comprehensive schools, which catered for pupils of all abilities, were viewed as a more effective model of educational equality.

However by the end of the 1970s questions arose as to the extent to which policies aimed at increased equality might be at conflict with those aimed at economic growth and individual aspiration. The increasing concern for value-for-money within education was further highlighted when the Tories came into power in 1979. Policies introduced in the 1960s and 1970s were challenged by the Thatcher government whose priorities placed the needs of industry and the economy at the centre of the education process above those of the child (The Plowden Report 1967). Education reform from 1988 to 1994 sought to restore the tripartite system of educational class privilege. It saw an attempt at return to centralization thereby undermining the authority of local education authorities (LEAs). Reforms included diversification through the creation of semi-private forms of schooling, the introduction of market forces in terms of competition between schools for pupils, and deregulation through expansion and the restructuring of further and higher education.

Further Education

Further education has a broad remit which according to Bailey (2002):

'.....stands as a distinctive sector of post-compulsory education, separate from the universities, but its work ranges from courses forming part of the official definition of higher education to courses over-lapping with the work of secondary schools.' (Bailey 2002, p. 54)

The term 'further education' was first used in the Regulations for Further Education published in 1926 (Bailey 2002). Traditionally its main purpose has been to offer vocational programmes for students employed in or aiming to work in local industry and commerce. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, school boards began providing evening classes for school leavers and adults. Although initially the curriculum was elementary an extension of what was then being provided in elementary schools - it later offered advanced, post elementary subjects. These comprised of science, art and technical subjects belonging to two examining bodies of that era. Classes were held between September and May and students attended on a voluntary basis. An end of year examination was held and those successful students received a certificate depicting their awarded grade. Much of what was learnt was taught from a theoretical aspect and any link to their occupation had to be made by the students themselves. It has to be questioned as to how much employer involvement

and skills analysis assessment was undertaken in the workplace, furthermore whether there was employer consultation in curriculum design.

The Technical Instruction Act of 1889 (Bailey 2002) gave councils the power to raise funding, through local taxation, to establish technical education delivered mainly through evening classes at recently established technical colleges. These included polytechnics in London and university colleges in cities such as Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield. Bailey (2002) comments that whilst development and initiative in this sector remained voluntary, evidence showed that::

'foreign countries were building systems of general and technical education and that these were an important factor in their economic development and increasing competitiveness in world markets.....' (Bailey 2002 p. 56)

The absence of a national plan for further education meant that provision of technical or other evening classes for workers remained at the sole discretion of school boards or local councils. Such was the concern over the lack of educational development resulting from the differing responsibilities of various central and local bodies, that in 1900 the Board of Education was set up as the first single central education authority in England and Wales. It took on the roles previously held by the Education Department, the Department of Science and Art, and the educational functions of the Charity Commissioners.

With the abolition of the school boards and the establishment of new local authorities as a result of the 1902 Education Act, it was expected that the new Board of Education and the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) would oversee expansion and development in post-school education over the next few decades. However, this was not to be the case: there followed a period of reorganization where the focus fell mainly on the establishment of voluntary and maintained elementary schools and the growth of secondary schools based on the grammar school model. Although proposals for post-school education were developed these were not implemented.

The principal means by which the Board of Education sought educational restructure and growth was through its policy of issuing Regulations to implement changes. Draft Regulations in 1917 (Bailey 2002) called for compulsory attendance at day

continuation schools and although these were to be incorporated within the 1918 Education Act, they were in fact aborted owing to a combination of employer opposition and post-war financial constraints. However, one of the Board's more notable achievements was the development in 1920 of national and higher national certificates and diplomas which were awarded jointly by the Board and professional bodies. These were delivered in the technical colleges by full-time specialist teachers who were also involved in both design and assessment procedures.

The post-war depression years of the twenties and thirties saw little in the way of development in further education. However, in the run up to the 1935 general election limited funding was provided to develop, alongside other educational areas, technical education. To this end the Board conducted a general survey of technical education in England and Wales: The findings of the survey exposed a general North/South divide in terms of provision and accommodation in favour of the latter. As a consequence, some 320 schemes for new colleges and alterations to existing establishments were identified, at a cost of over £11 million. (Bailey 2002, p.61). However, by the outbreak of the Second World War, only 20 of these projects had been undertaken. Despite encouragement from the Board of Education, the LEAs were reluctant to commit themselves to such undertakings, given the fact that they had to meet 50 percent of the costs of providing technical education, which was not mandatory.

The situation at this time could be regarded as one of wasted opportunity and short-sightedness on the part of government willingness to embrace technical education as an important factor to economic development. An analogy can be drawn with the position today, in that employers are currently reluctant to financially commit to investment in training beyond their immediate concerns and in line with the wider government agenda. It is an issue that is still being addressed, only the skills themselves have changed from those of industrial skills such as shipbuilding, motor and engineering to information communication technology.

Changes were forthcoming with the advent of the 1944 Education Act, which saw statutory provision made for further education facilities to be provided by the LEAs. However, schemes for such provision were not implemented until the mid-fifties when the focus of post- school education finally turned to one of producing specific

qualified manpower to benefit the economy. The 'Technical Education' White Paper of 1956 stated that the needs of the economy transcended all other ideals in post-compulsory education, a view similarly espoused by Blunkett in 2000 (DfEE, 2000, Section 1, para.1.12.). In this respect, the incumbent Labour Government committed itself financially to the setting up of a system of national, regional, area and local colleges. Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) fulfilled the role of national provider in advanced technology courses. Regional technical colleges offered differing levels of higher education provision including university degree standard courses. Area technical colleges offered advanced courses for part-time students, whereas local colleges provided non-advanced courses, again, for part-time students.

Higher Education

Higher education, according to Lowe (2002):

'is generally understood to be that education which takes place either in , or under the auspices of, universities or colleges of higher education and which involves the students concerned, of whatever age, in doing work beyond GCE Advanced Level.' (Lowe 2002, p. 75)

In England, in the late nineteenth century, the main universities comprised Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and London. These were supported by the university colleges which had been established in major cities during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The early twentieth century saw many of these university colleges being upgraded to university status in order to cope with expansion in higher education. These included Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Bristol. Collectively known as the 'Redbricks', these universities saw increases in the number of full-time students as they began to offer three-year undergraduate courses at degree level. However as each university saw growth within its Arts faculty there tended to be a drift away from their original college status and purpose of meeting the demands of the local employment market, towards becoming centres of teacher education to meet growth in the number of secondary schools. Focus shifted to the technical colleges set up by the new Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to meet the demand for technical training at local level and to provide vocational degree courses, the

demand for which universities could not or would not meet. Lowe (2002) comments that:

'this particular facet of the expansion of the system enabled academic hierarchies to be built in from the start and sustained for much of the twentieth century. Those involved in the planning of the system became well aware of these hierarchies and were not averse to sustaining them' (Lowe 2002, p. 80)

There remains a dichotomy within higher education, whereby on the one hand certain subjects and curricular routes are seen as ways into the more influential professional positions, thereby maintaining perceptions of a hierarchy of knowledge, whilst on the other hand there is now an expectation that higher education should be of a vocational nature offering skills training to meet the needs of the economy. This juxtaposition may well be a contributory factor in the manner by which the current Labour government are promoting a new two-year Foundation Degree.

FE/HE divide

In the early 1960s pressure was growing for change in the provision of higher education in the UK. In this respect the Committee on Higher Education was established which in 1963 presented its report (Robbins 1963) on the future of higher education. It identified four aims and objectives of higher education summarized as follows:

- Instruction in skills for employment
- Promoting the general powers of the mind
- Advancing learning
- Transmitting a common culture and common standards of citizenship

The Robbins report put forward plans for expansion within higher education from 216,000 full-time students in 1962/3 to 558,000 by 1980/81 (Williams, 1992). Its recommendations were to form the basis for the development of the university sector for years to come. Indeed these four aims were to be the starting point for the Dearing Report into higher education some thirty-four years later. The Robbins report anticipated that by 1980 most higher education would be provided by universities or

university-controlled teacher training institutions with universities enrolling 62% of full-time students, colleges of education 26% and other providers 12%. It recommended the transfer of Colleges of Advanced Technologies from LEA jurisdiction away to the university sector as technological universities. However, it became clear that the growing need for vocational, professional and industrially-based courses could not be fully met by the universities.

This led to the publication in 1966 of a government White Paper entitled '*A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges*' which saw the establishment of a dual or binary system in higher education comprising universities and polytechnic colleges. Between 1969 and 1971, 30 institutions became polytechnics. However, whilst the new polytechnics were in the forefront of 'advanced further education' within the new binary system of higher education, the 700 or more further education colleges providing so called 'non advanced further education' were cast adrift to develop their own agenda under the control of the local education authorities. Many of these local colleges were re-designated as 'tertiary' colleges by the local education authorities to whom all secondary school students on post-16 courses were transferred.

Advanced further education (AFE) in this instance comprised: degrees validated by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA); higher national diplomas validated by the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) together with other awards validated by professional bodies. Non advanced further education (NAFE) comprised national diplomas validated by BTEC; advanced level general certificate of education (GCE A-Level) and other technical and craft qualifications. This provision of post-school education was viewed by local education authorities as a '*seamless robe*' of educational opportunities (Parry and Thompson, 2002, p. 3). Funding provision and course validation came courtesy of the government through the Department of Education and Science (DES). It was fronted by the National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education (NAB) which approved the courses and allocated resources for higher education programmes in local education authority colleges. There were, at this time, 405 Further Education/Higher Education institutions in England, other than universities, that provided higher education and by the mid 1980s accounted for approximately half of the higher education students in England.

At the same time as the UK was developing the binary system in Britain, Australia was developing a similar system following the publication of the Martin report in 1964. (Williams, 1992, Gamage,1993), The Martin Committee was established in 1961 to inquire into the need to strengthen arrangements for sub-degree higher education since its removal from Australian universities following the Murray report of 1957. By 1965 the Commonwealth Government had agreed to provide financial support for Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) with a clear focus on the development of vocational and sub-degree work, excluding teacher education, although this was later included. The binary system was fully functional in Australia by 1973 when responsibility for finance and planning for all non-university higher education sat with the Commission on Advanced Education. Colleges of Advanced Education were under the control of local State boards and funded to provide approved sub-degree and degree programmes. Universities were funded through a block grant system from the Commonwealth Government to provide education for their first and higher degree students and to conduct staff research; they thus retained legal autonomy. However Williams (1992) points out that the division of responsibilities did not remain clear cut as some degree studies were conducted in Colleges of Advanced Education accredited by the State boards for Advanced or Higher education (Williams, 1992, p286). Moreover, according to Billett:

'... there is little evidence to suggest that, after a decade and a half of leadership by business, the vocational education system have improved in terms of: (1) participation and sponsorship by business; (2) the quality of learning experiences: or (3) its inclusiveness.' (Billett, 2004, p14)

The establishment of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC) in 1975 served to weaken the structure of the binary system whilst retaining two councils to recommend funding the two sectors. By 1985, these councils' powers were further reduced to an advisory capacity. The distinction between the universities and the Colleges of Advanced Education in terms of academic provision was further blurred by the development of postgraduate programmes within Colleges of Advanced Education so that by 1987 the main distinction between the two types of provider was that universities received funding for research.

Changes in higher education policy in the UK came about as a result of the 1987 Government White Paper entitled; *Higher education: meeting the challenge (DES 1987)*. Having gained a strong foothold in higher education provision, both polytechnics and larger further education institutions were taken from local education control and set up as separate corporations within a new higher education sector, effectively imposing greater central control of Higher Education. This was achieved through the abolition of the National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education (NAB) in favour of a new funding and planning body entitled the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC). The PCFC took on the responsibility of all higher education funding even for those colleges that remained under local education authority control; only those colleges providing 'non advanced further education (NAFE) courses remained under LEA control.

The Education Reform Act (ERA) (1988) defined higher education courses as those categorised (a) to (h) in section 120 schedule 6 of the Act. Under this Act and the subsequent *Education (Prescribed Courses of Higher Education) (England) Regulations (1989)*, both 'advanced further education' (AFE) and 'non advanced further education' (NAFE) were re-designated as 'prescribed' and 'non-prescribed' courses in higher education (NPHE). Prescribed courses of higher education included all:

- first degree and postgraduate courses leading to a recognized academic award;
- full-time and sandwich courses for the diploma of higher education or the BTEC higher national diploma;
- other full-time and sandwich courses of more than 1 year's duration providing education at a higher level that prepare for an examination for an award of the CNAAs;
- full-time courses of at least 1 year's duration and all sandwich courses and part-time courses (including block release and day release courses) of at least 2 year's duration providing education at a high level:
 - for the initial or further training of youth and community workers, or
 - for the further training of teachers.

Non-prescribed courses of higher education were those courses not included within the schedule of the 1988 Act; these included:

- part-time BTEC higher national certificate
- certificate in management studies
- awards validated by professional bodies

There remained some grey areas in terms of funding provisions. For example, full-time higher national diploma 'prescribed' courses continued to receive funding through the local education authorities under a new rate-support grant credit scheme. In general, the newly restructured Universities Funding Council (UFC) and the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) were the two funding providers either side of the binary line in higher education.

FE/HE collaboration through franchise

Franchise in this instance refers to the outsourcing of programme delivery by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to Further Education Colleges (FECs). It came about as a result of an overall increase in student recruitment brought about by the enrolment of fees-only students and saw a number of higher education institutions make collaborative overtures to further education colleges. Through franchise arrangements, higher education institutions, mainly the polytechnics, funded one or more further education colleges to deliver some of their full-time and part-time undergraduate courses. These courses were seen as preparatory or foundation courses for degree or diploma programmes. This collaborative role which included 'associate college' schemes (later to become 'partner college' schemes) saw a pronounced growth in further and higher education student numbers. These courses included Higher National Certificates/Diplomas (HNC/D), National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 4 and now Foundation Degrees.

This collaborative role was to be further extended with the introduction of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. This Act had been preceded by a Government White Paper in 1991 entitled; *Higher education: a new framework* (DES 1991a) which had proposed the abolition of the binary line in higher education, claiming it

was a barrier that prevented greater competition for funding and students. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 allowed polytechnics to adopt university titles and granted them degree-awarding powers. A new body, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was set up to administer funding in this area. The new legislation also saw changes in further education that would have a bearing upon higher education provision. Further education colleges were liberated from local authority control and established as independent corporations. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) was created to take over funding responsibility from LEAs and included the funding for 'non prescribed higher education (NPHE) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) which were being delivered in the further education sector. According to FEFC (1996), when the new funding bodies were set up, HEFCE funded prescribed higher education at over 70 further education colleges whereas the FEFC funded 'non-prescribed higher education' in over 400 colleges. Both the FEFC and the HEFCE also took over the responsibility of quality assurance for the education each provided. In this respect prescribed and franchised courses were assessed by the Quality Assessment Division of the HEFCE whereas 'non prescribed higher education' courses were assessed by the FEFC Inspectorate.

The 1991 government White Paper entitled *Education and training for the 21st century* (DES, Department of Employment and Welsh Office 1991) expected that autonomy from local authority control would give further education establishments the success and kudos experienced by the polytechnics and other higher education institutions. However the success enjoyed within the higher education sector was being achieved at a faster than expected growth rate and, more importantly, spiralling costs. This resulted in a 'capping' of full-time undergraduate places being imposed on the higher education sector. This so called 'consolidation' (Clark 2002) was in complete contrast to the growth that took place within the further education sector. Innovative funding schemes intended to encourage growth and remunerate colleges for additional student enrolment did much to fulfil the 1991 White Paper expectations.

A report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 1995 identified the relationship that had developed between further education institutions and higher education institutions and their respective funding councils. In addition, a diversity of links, partnerships and collaborative arrangements had come about as a

result of educational and market forces, although this relationship was subject to the vagaries of market changes such as ‘consolidation’ in the higher education sector. Funding arrangements for higher and further education continued to prove difficult in areas where overlapping academic boundaries were constantly changing. However, this relationship is to prove crucial for the effective delivery of the Foundation Degree.

Whilst the nature of higher education in further education colleges may have differed, some common ground is seen in the following areas:

- Vocational work - FECs deliver a significant number of all sub-degree vocational HE provisions related to the world of work, in areas that include Business and Management, Science, Maths and IT, and Health related subjects.
- Access and location – the number and location of further education colleges make them ideally placed to serve ‘*geographically dispersed and educationally marginalized populations*’ that include local, part-time and mature students.
- Progression routes – students on HE courses within further education colleges are enabled a smooth transition with a ‘*degree of continuity*’ in terms of teaching and learning strategies. (HEFCE 1995, p. 4)

The HEFCE (1995) report claimed that the delivery of higher education through further education colleges had become a ‘*significant feature of HE provision*’. The similarity in the interests of both higher education institutions and further education colleges were grounds for continued collaboration and based upon interpretation of present trends in higher education that were increasingly characterised by:

- A vocational emphasis – applying HE provision to meet the requirements of employers within industry;
- Flexibility and student choice – recognizing the need to offer new and varied means of delivery to an ever changing student population;
- Lifelong learning – meeting the diverse and differing abilities of those wishing to undertake education at any time throughout adulthood;

- A regional and local emphasis – acknowledging differentiation and development of local and regional markets for higher education. (ibid p. 4)

The report also recognized that the nature and extent of collaboration between the further education colleges and higher education institutions was an institutional matter whereby higher education institutions would decide where and how their higher education provision would be delivered. However, whilst the impact of ‘consolidation’ has seen some reappraisal of collaboration between the two providers it has not been to the detriment of the links between the institutions. Indeed, given the similarity between the unique characteristics of higher education in further education and the modern trends in the development of higher education, further education colleges are well placed to respond to future demands. It would appear from this that a new binary system has now emerged.

From a personal and professional context this collaboration between higher education institutions and further education colleges has proved beneficial for both students and staff. Students are provided with an opportunity to gain a degree qualification with the first two years delivered at a further education college as a preparatory pathway at sub-degree level, progressing to a third or final year of a degree at a higher education institution. However, collaboration between the two providers can be frustrated by the differing ethos of Schools within the same university. For example, I have personally experienced close cooperation with two Schools within the local university whose ‘widening participation’ strategy has resulted in the development of two Foundation Degrees, whereas the reluctance of a third School within the same organisation to adopt a similar strategy has so far proved unproductive in Foundation Degree development. As Doyle ((2001) comments:

‘It would appear that management in the sense of control is a more straightforward issue in the FE sector than in HE. Issues of size, organisation and culture pose challenges for inter-sectoral partnership for the implementation of policy. The University’s ‘multiple cultural configurations’ in particular raise questions about its ability to respond strategically as a single member of a partnership attempting to interpret and then deliver widening participation. Its ‘collaborative capability’ as an organisation would appear to be limited.’ (Doyle, M. 2001 p.12)

Whilst the HEFCE maintained a high profile in its policy discussion and consultation for higher education, the same could not be said of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). In respect of consultation with further education colleges, there was a dearth of publications. However, in 1996 the FEFC published a report entitled 'Vocational Higher Education in the Further Education Sector.' (1996a) In the summary of this 'National Survey Report' it stated that: '*Vocational higher education is an integral part of the provision offered in many further education colleges*' and that:

'The widespread availability of these vocational higher education programmes in further education colleges, and the flexible way in which they are taught, are essential features of the drive to achieve the national targets for lifelong learning'. (FEFC1996a, summary)

Whilst both of the aforementioned HEFCE and FEFC documents published in 1996 sounded like bureaucratic wishful thinking, what was stated has in my opinion been successfully brought into practice. And notwithstanding previous comments regarding the School ethos in universities, further education colleges and higher education institutions are working collaboratively in the manner that the HEFCE predicted. To this end it has laid the foundation for the collaborative agenda between further education and higher education and the future development of sub-degree qualifications.

The question of funding within both the further education and higher education sectors ultimately provided the setting for a national committee of inquiry into higher education. It was known widely thereafter as the Dearing Report, and its review of funding and policy dealt primarily with higher education. In respect of further education review, the FEFC set up an internal committee headed by Helena Kennedy QC. Its three year review entitled '*Learning works. Widening participation in further education*' was published in 1997 and was central in determining the future role of the further education college sector. (FEFC,1997). Through the findings and recommendations of both these committees, particularly Dearing, together with the visions of a new Labour government in that same year, future policy in higher education was to be steered to its present standing.

In its introduction, the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997), claimed that *'There are now more HE students in further education than there were university students at the time of the Robbins report in 1963'* (p.1.) It used as its starting point the aims and objectives set out in the Robbins Report some thirty-four years earlier stating that:

'The aim of higher education is to enable society to make progress through an understanding of itself and its world: in short, to sustain a learning society.' (NCIHE 1997, p. 1.)

It set out four main purposes of higher education as:

'to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment;
to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society;
to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels;
to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.' (ibid chapter 5, p. 3)

These 'purposes' serve to romanticise Higher Education as a means of generating a 'perfect society' in which all are inspired to, and are able to, fulfil their potential. However, they do not take into consideration the reality of those individuals aspiring to Higher Education who have failed to develop the basic skills necessary for progression from compulsory education. Among the recommendations of the Dearing Report was that *'more sub-degree provision should take place in further education colleges'* (ibid, Annex 'A', p. 7.) The growth in sub-degree provision at FE colleges was seen as a way to increase participation in higher education through the reduction of barriers such as the availability of local provision and travelling distances.

This widening of participation in higher education through further education colleges was deemed to be a strategy of one of cost effectiveness at a time of public expenditure limitations inherited voluntarily by New Labour from the Tories. Indeed, the whole issue of affordability appeared as a hidden agenda within the Dearing inquiry. Widening participation in higher education through further education institutions was presented as a cheap alternative, however little consideration was

given to the additional academic support needs of the intended students. Neither was any consideration given to the investment required in technical, vocational or professional application that such courses demanded, particularly in the light of economic demand for a more highly skilled workforce. This was despite the fact that the Inquiry focused upon widening participation, urging the FEFC and the HEFCE to collaborate in order to tackle problems of low expectation and achievement. Unfortunately, that collaboration did not transpire as discussed later and to date the HEFCE have done little to tackle the aforementioned problems. In fact it has been left to the further education institutions to resolve which are far better placed to address issues such as low levels of numeracy, literacy and IT skills.

The timing of the Dearing Report proved crucial in terms of a government response, inasmuch that the newly elected Labour government in 1997 seized the initiative in announcing, prior to its full response, additional funding for higher education to initiate the resumption of growth at sub-degree level, chiefly at further education colleges. As a result of the Dearing recommendations and government acceptance, all funding for higher education provision, including provision within further education colleges, became the responsibility of the HEFCE.

Post Dearing

The ramifications of the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) were to be felt long after its recommendations were given government backing. However, although its recommendations were intended to unite both further and higher education for the benefit of widening participation, in reality further education was still seen as subservient to higher education. Notwithstanding the Dearing Report recommendations for effective collaboration between the two sectors there remained a parallel divide in terms of development and implementation of policy, including planning, funding and quality assurance arrangements. In effect both collaboration and widening participation were features within the Dearing Report that would dictate higher education policy and funding in the years that followed.

In its response to both the Dearing and Kennedy inquiries, the new Labour Government saw widening participation and lifelong learning at the centre of its

policies for post-compulsory education. In its response to the Kennedy report, the government stated its commitment:

'...to the establishment of a learning society in which all people have opportunities to succeed. Increasing access to learning and providing opportunities for success and progression are fundamental to the Government's strategy. These are keys to social cohesion and economic success.' (DfEE 1998b, p. 7.)

This would involve collaboration and effective cooperation between the Further Education Funding Council, further education colleges, higher education institutions and Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in developing strategies for lifelong learning.

Similarly the government's response to the Dearing report emphasised the need for future collaboration in stating:

'This Government has stressed a partnership approach in planning education and training provision. That is central to the Investing in Young People strategy. We look to the FEFC's regional committees to be effective partners with local government and other providers in improving cooperation in meeting the needs of 16-19 year olds, developing local skill strategies and setting regional targets.' (DfEE 1998a, chapter 3, p.1.)

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) response to the Dearing recommendation of allocating funds to those institutions demonstrating a commitment to widening participation was one of mainstream and special funding proposals. The role of the HEFCE in terms of promoting widening participation was not to be underestimated, for although the recommendations of the Dearing Report were directed mainly at the further education sector, it was the HEFCE who was charged with the task of implementation. Having assumed responsibility for all higher education funding including that previously funded by the FEFC for sub-degree provision, the remit of the HEFCE was one that now encompassed not only funding and planning but in addition that of participation, progression and both quality and standards. In effect, higher education policy was calling for collaboration between all the relevant parties. This was further reinforced by proposals to give priority in the growth of sub-degree provision to further education colleges thereby strengthening the links of collaborative working.

However, in its response to the Dearing report, the HEFCE was not entirely convinced as to the evidence for demand in sub-degree provision:

'A return to growth in HE is to be welcomed, as are the Government's recent statements about future growth. Evidence of demand for sub-degree level study in England needs to be tested...Expansion in sub-degree provision, viewed as a priority by the Committee, may provide increased numbers at the advanced technician level, but evidence suggests that many students with diploma level qualifications progress to degree courses. In the light of the uncertain evidence of demand for sub-degree provision, additional numbers should be aimed more generally at increasing advanced skills in the workforce and widening access to HE rather than being focussed exclusively on sub-degree courses.' (HEFCE 1997, p. 3.)

The HEFCE actually raise a valid point here although this rather cynical view prompts the question as to who benefits from the latter proposal. The HEFCE do not suggest how advanced skills in the workforce are to be promoted generally, and yet a general widening of access to higher education would surely be of benefit to higher education providers. There is a sense that the HEFCE may feel threatened by the idea that sub-degree provision could become of value in its own right, especially if it becomes a pathway that is favoured by employers who are expected to pay for the provision. Notwithstanding this, the HEFCE acknowledged the important role carried out by the further education colleges as higher education providers:

'We recognize and value the distinctive role of FE colleges as HE providers, particularly in securing progression to HE for many non-traditional entrants and delivering courses that respond to local and vocational needs.' (ibid, p. 6.)

However, it also raised concerns that sub-degree provision should not be restricted solely to further education colleges:

'Although FECs provide a significant proportion of sub-degree courses – and should continue to do so – limiting growth of sub-degree programmes to FECs as the Committee recommends may damage or restrict opportunities for relevant sub-degree activity in HE institutions. If the objective is to expand the provision of advanced level skills at sub-degree level and to widen access, then we would wish to see expansion by the most appropriate providers in both the HE and FE sectors.' (ibid, p. 6.)

The HEFCE were effectively challenging the Dearing recommendation claiming that:

'There may be an assumption underlying the recommendation that limiting sub-degree provision to FECs is a cheaper option. We shall reserve judgement about this until research which assesses the comparative costs of HE in the two sectors, recently commissioned by the HEFCE and FEFC, has been completed.' (ibid, p. 6.)

This appears to be further evidence of the perceived threat to higher education from sub-degree provision and effectively leaves the door open for higher education institutions to develop their own sub-degree programmes. However, from professional experience I would contend that higher education institutions do not have the expertise to deliver programmes at sub-degree level in isolation particularly those that involve a work-based learning unit.

Overall the primary concern of the HEFCE was to ensure that student experience of higher education provision was of a high quality across all funded programmes, notwithstanding provider or location:

'Colleges will be able to choose the funding option which best suits their circumstances. But in making their choices, we look to colleges to consider carefully whether some form of collaboration or partnership with an HEI or other FECs would help them secure high quality and standards. We also expect that existing franchising relationships will continue unless there is good reason to change them.' (HEFCE 1999, p. 2.)

Furthermore, it was acknowledged that there are differences between further education colleges and higher education institutions in terms of the content, method and delivery of higher education programmes however; there should be no variation between them in terms of quality.

'Our expectation is that colleges will deliver the same quality and standards of higher education as HEIs' (ibid, p. 3.)

Along with widening participation, collaboration on both funding and quality issues was now seen as central to the HEFCE policy.

CHAPTER 2

Foundation Degrees

Introduction

The main requirements of Foundation Degrees were set out in the 'Foundation Degree prospectus' (HEFCE 2000) and detailed the following essential features:

- *Employment involvement*
- *The development of skills and knowledge*
- *Application of skills in the workplace*
- *Credit accumulation and transfer*
- *Progression – within work and/or to an honours degree* (HEFCE 2000, p. 7)

Expectations and outcomes of these requirements are discussed in this chapter.

Partnership

In this vision, central to the success of the Foundation Degree, would be the collaboration between further education colleges and higher education institutions. The latter would validate the award and ensure both quality and standards whereas the former would have the responsibility of programme delivery. Although from personal experience, design, quality and standards of Foundation Degrees has been a joint responsibility of both providers. This has proved advantageous in promoting close collaboration between educational establishments.

The Dearing recommendation (NCIHE 1997) that future growth in sub-degree provision be delivered by further education colleges was seen by the government as an ideal platform for the delivery of Foundation Degrees. Firstly, a collaborative arrangement involving a consortium of further education colleges, higher education institutions and employer representatives would ensure that the new qualification was accessible and widely available to all at a local level to meet local skills and employment requirements. Secondly, in addition to it being a stand alone qualification, it would also provide a progression route to honours degree, with an

additional 1.3 years of full-time study or part-time equivalent. Priority was given to funding those bids where a firm partnership between higher and further education institutions had been established.

‘While universities and higher education colleges with degree-awarding powers will award Foundation Degrees, the successful delivery of these programmes depends on the active involvement of several other partners. For this reason we have put a consortia-based approach at the heart of our initial prototype phase. Besides the degree-awarding body, employer representatives and the institutions delivering the Foundation Degree will be an integral part of any consortium.’ (HEFCE 2000, p. 10.)

A total of 21 consortia were given approval to deliver Foundation Degrees from 2001-2002 together with appropriate funding for development. In all, 40 prototype programmes were developed by these consortia which included 13 pre-1992 universities, 15 post-1992 universities and 68 further education colleges. In terms of qualification award, the Foundation Degree would be entitled ‘Fd’ with the final award dependent upon the strand taken. For example, a Foundation Degree in science would be designated ‘FdSc’, an Fd in engineering ‘FdEng’ and one in arts designated ‘FdA’.

The Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) recommendation that further education colleges should be given priority in sub-degree provision was accepted by the government. However, whilst supporting the Dearing recommendations on growth, the new Labour Government was of the opinion that current sub-degree provision would not provide the necessary expansion required to meet its target of a 50% participation rate for 18 to 30 year olds in higher education by the year 2010. The consultation paper (2000) highlighted that the numbers registering for higher national awards were falling. Concerns had also been raised that the current range of higher education sub-degree provision, whilst providing specialist knowledge, was not meeting employers’ requirements in terms of technical skills and preparation for employment. Despite the earlier fact by the HEFCE that *‘many students with diploma level qualifications progress to degree courses’* (HEFCE 1997, p.3.), many of those students progressing to honours degree were failing to complete their programme of studies at degree level. Therefore, it could be argued that the current range of higher education sub-degree

provision was not meeting the UK population's academic requirements in terms of preparation for honours degrees.

'For all these reasons – to meet the shortage of people with technical level qualifications, to develop in students the right blend of skills which employers need, and to lay the basis for widening participation and progression – we need a new qualification: the Foundation Degree' (DfEE 2000, p. 6.)

The development of the Foundation Degree is seen as part of the government's agenda for widening participation and lifelong learning and its strategy to cement a closer relationship between education and employment. Foundation Degrees are designed to:

'.....attract people from a broad range of backgrounds. They will appeal to employees wishing to increase their career opportunities; to people whom the education system has failed in the past but who are seeking a second opportunity; and to young people who want a more applied course'. (DfEE 2000) section 3. para. 3.5

Furthermore, in its consultation document the government stated that the Foundation Degree would form:

'part of a lifelong learning ladder to improve qualifications and careers, helping people to step into higher education and to move in and out at appropriate milestones in their education and employment.' (Blunkett 2000, p. 2.)

However, a response to the consultation document by the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE 2000) reported on the need for higher levels of learning. It argued that there had been no demand from employers for a two-year Foundation Degree. Although they did acknowledge that whilst current sub-degrees serve as useful preparation for honours degree courses, they felt that they:

- *'Lack sufficient intellectual depth or rigour*
- *Are not viewed by individuals as either an end in themselves... or are particularly valued....*
- *Do not always evaluate work experience and do not produce students with sufficient key skills*

- *Are not an adequate progression route for those with NVQ3 awards...*
- *Are not tapping the potential that exists from those in non-traditional groups (especially those in lower social groups)*
- *Have relatively high drop-out rates from those in such groups partly because of the commitments (not just financial) required for such lengthy periods of study*
- *Attract (in some instances) those with poor capabilities or produce poor graduates who devalue the honours degree graduate currency....*
- *Are not always producing graduates with sufficiently developed high-level skills or sufficient knowledge of business.’ (CIHE 2000, p.1, 2)*

In considering these criticisms of existing provision it is worth stating that Higher National Certificate/Diplomas are, in the main, validated by universities or national awarding bodies with progression routes to the second or third year of an honours degree established with a university. To suggest that they ‘lack sufficient intellectual depth or rigour’ is to criticise the integrity of the validation process. From a personal and professional context, the Higher National Certificate/Diplomas were highly valued by students as both a stand alone qualification and a progression route to honours degree programmes.

The CIHE comment regarding progression for a National Vocational Qualification at Level 3 is worthy of further analysis. This is a good example of how successive governments have tried to link vocational qualification pathways to academic qualification routes. The NVQ vocational qualification pathway adopts a practical approach to workplace training and accreditation ‘by doing’, thereby placing an emphasis upon practical application of skills which are assessed through evidence collection and collation. This differs significantly from the academic approach to qualifications which focus upon critical analysis of theoretical knowledge. These are two distinct pathways; each with their own merits, but trying to formulate a seamless progression between them has been and will always prove to be problematic whilst incompatible assessment procedures are utilised. This incompatibility stems from the different ethos that exists between academic and vocational programmes.

The government proposes to offer Foundation Degrees as the bridge between the vocational and the academic routes. However, it has not addressed the issue of how the assessment procedures should converge. Therefore, the Foundation Degree, whilst

having merit in an academic context, could, in my opinion, be seen as a 'reward' to the vocational practitioner who would not normally attain 'degree status'. This could be seen as a way of addressing the criticism that existing sub-degree provision is not 'tapping the potential that exists from those in non-traditional groups' by opening up an additional vocational route to higher education and at the same time addressing the 'relatively high drop-out rates' through offering a two year programme with progression to the third year of an honours degree qualification and thus shortening the overall length of study time. This government provision of awarding 'degrees' to non-traditional higher education participants, is a dichotomy in that it potentially serves to devalue the traditional honours degree but at the same time serves to meet the Government target for increased participation in higher education.

The DfES claimed that '*jobs at the associate, professional and technical level would increase by around 790,000 between 1999 and 2010.*' (DfES 2003b, p. 2.) The Foundation Degree aimed to:

'...increase the number of people qualified at higher technician and associate professional level (eg legal executives, engineering technicians, personnel officers and laboratory technicians)' (DfES 2003a, p. 3.)

However, although it was the government intention that Foundation Degrees be aimed at developing technical and engineering skills in collaboration with major employers, this aim has not been fully realised, inasmuch that the main growth in Foundation Degrees offered in further education colleges appears to have focussed upon the development of softer skills associated with Personal and Service Industries. For example, I have personally been involved with the development and delivery of programmes in Sports Studies, Community Sport, Public Services, Learning Support and Educational Administration, none of which are developing technical or engineering skills. The reasons for this are in my opinion twofold: firstly the Higher National Certificate/Diplomas are simply being 'adapted' or 're-badged' as Foundation Degrees (HEFCE 2000), with minimum change to content or delivery method. (This is further discussed below). Secondly, for financial expediency for providers, in that funding was made available to support the development of Foundation Degrees *per se* rather than specifically targeting the aforementioned

technical and engineering based subjects. This has been exacerbated with the development of the softer skills based Foundation Degrees in that these did not necessarily involve employer engagement in the design and development process to the extent that Blunkett (2000) had intended. As a consequence, students are not necessarily undertaking learning in the workplace as stipulated in the Foundation Degree prospectus.

Foundation Degree Support

A framework for support and development was overseen by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) who, in March 2001, commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to set up a 'Foundation Degree Support Team' (FDG). An end of first year report to the HEFCE by the Foundation Degree Support Team identified the following emerging taxonomy of Foundation Degree provision based upon market demand and programme design and content:

1. Meeting a niche employment need identified by employers or by Sectors Skills councilor by former National Training Organizations, where a shortage of skilled workers exist.
2. Meeting an essential employee need – employees identified who previously had no or limited development or progression routes into HE
3. Delivering sustainable regional collaboration – Foundation Degrees offered by established consortia with a particular culture of co-operative working. Totally committed to the Foundation Degree and to adopting a common approach to their implementation across a consortium through tight central co-ordination.
4. Adapters – Foundation Degrees are developed from existing Higher National Certificate/Diplomas but incorporating the essential vocational dimension required of a Foundation Degree.
5. Re-badgers – Foundation Degrees are simply revamped or re-badged Higher National Certificate/Diplomas with little or no employer involvement

(PricewaterhouseCoopers 2002, p. 13.)

The Foundation Degree Support Team found that in general the number of examples of Foundation Degrees tended to increase, moving down through the above taxonomy. In this respect, there are far more examples of Foundation Degrees from

‘Adapters’ and ‘Re-badgers’ than from ‘Meeting a niche employment need’. They concluded that the reason for this was the decrease in the level of direct employer involvement in both the development and delivery of the Foundation Degree. In both the ‘Adapters’ and ‘Re-badgers’ categories, difficulties arise from employers who may not be clear as to their role or level of input when entering into a higher education partnership. It may also indicate that current provision was already fit for purpose and there was no need to introduce a replacement qualification. Providers of Foundation Degrees from these two categories of the taxonomy may find it financially advantageous to utilize existing resources rather than incur costs from creating new materials. However, this is also likely to see little or no market research into the viability or validity of setting up new Foundation Degrees. Moreover there was an assumption that success from an existing Higher National Certificate/Diploma would lead to a more successful Foundation Degree. This misguided approach tended to ignore one of the main tenets of a Foundation Degree, namely close working partnership with employers in industry. This has been borne out by my own professional experience.

Work-based Learning (WBL) and Employer Engagement

The major tenet of a Foundation Degree is its partnership with employers within industry. The government consultation paper on Foundation Degrees (DfEE 2000) commented that it is essential that students be exposed to the world of work prior to entering the labour market. It argued that:

‘far too many students leave higher education without any first hand experience of work and less than half have had any work experience related to their course of study.’ (DfEE 2000, section 2, para. 2.14, p.7.)

However, although this may be the case with regards to honours degree students, it does not necessarily apply to sub-degree provision, Indeed the Higher National qualifications incorporated a non-compulsory component of work experience/placement to prepare students for employment. The new Foundation Degree makes work-based learning (WBL) a compulsory component thereby endeavouring to ensure that the emphasis falls upon the workplace. Indeed one of the

'benchmarks' set by the QAA (2002) is the '*direct involvement of employers in the continuing development, monitoring and delivery of Foundation Degree programmes*' p.6. Therefore, it was proposed that a new Foundation Degree be developed in collaboration with employers, that learning outcomes should relate to the workplace and progression routes be guaranteed. It offers:

'A two year route to a degree with high market value which because of its focus on employability will offer a new option for people, both young and mature, who do not feel that a traditional, three year honours degree is right for them'. (DfEE 2000, p.2.)

The consultation document (DfEE, 2000) further commented that students would be able to gain work experience through either work placements, or existing full or part-time employment for full or part-time mature students.

'In future, all students should have a sound understanding of how enterprises operate before they enter the labour market. We envisage there being a cross over between the Foundation Degree and the vocational modules being undertaken by those on three or four year degrees' (DfEE 2000, section 2. para. 2.16, p. 9.)

As with the Higher National Certificate/Diploma provision, the Foundation Degree can be delivered either on a full-time or part-time basis. However, the key aspect of the Foundation Degree that gives justification for this new qualification is the compulsory work-based or work-related learning element. The current Higher National Certificate/Diploma provision may offer opportunities for work-based or work-related learning. However, this is at the discretion of the provider and is not necessarily compulsory.

The focus on learning in the workplace has grown within higher education over the past decade with what Boud and Garrick (1999) describe as:

'...a shift away from viewing educational institutions as the principal places of 'valid' learning toward the recognition of the power and importance of work places as sites of learning.' (Boud & Garrick 1999, p.3)

Work-based learning is identified in the '*Start up guide for Foundation Degrees*' as:

'that learning which rises from reflection on experiences based on activities in the workplace. It will, in general, have negotiated outcomes relevant to the nature and purposes of the workplace and the personal and professional development of the individual. The learning achieved will include underpinning knowledge, understanding and practice and will be tailored to meet the needs of students and the workplace.' (DfES 2003a, p. 20. draft)

However, definitions of what constitutes work-based learning vary from academic programmes focused upon providing learning for work, to work-based learning through experience of undertaking work. Foundation Degree Forward (FDF) (2005) argues that:

'It is very difficult to say what WBL is as it is approached and delivered in so many different ways. It isn't possible, therefore, to reduce it to a single essential 'thing'. WBL can't be simply defined, for example, by the fact that it takes place in the workplace (since some forms of work don't strictly speaking have a workplace) nor can it be defined in more general terms as learning which is 'related to' or 'based in' work since it is the nature of the particular relationship between work and learning which is important.' (Foundation Degree Forward, 2005.p.1)

The workplace has become an increasingly important environment for learning, influenced by developmental learning theorists. Lave and Wenger (1991), in developing their Situated Learning Theory, suggested that individuals create knowledge about their surroundings based upon interpreting the interaction between existing knowledge and their new experiences .In this way learning is acquired in situ relating to its context. Kerka (1997) suggests that the theory of constructivism examines ways to make the learning environment more conducive to the transfer of knowledge and skills to alternative settings. She argues that there is:

'an innate human drive to make sense of the world, instead of absorbing or passively receiving objective knowledge that is 'out there', learners actively construct knowledge by integrating new information and experiences into what they have previously come to understand.' (Kerka, 1997,p2)

There appear to be two emerging models for the delivery of Foundation Degrees which only partly comply with government expectations and as such, the work-based learning intent. Model one sees the total delivery of a Foundation Degree in the workplace with the support of a college (mainly employer led). This model incorporates the ethos of work-based learning in its totality and provides practitioners

and apprentices with in-house vocational education and embedded vocational skills. Brown, Harte & Warnes (2007) sub-divide this model into two further models, the Affirmative and Transformative models, both currently used to develop the health care workforce. The Affirmative model could be seen to support staff working on confined tasks to defined levels of competence and as such mirrors the NVQ mode of qualification. The Transformative model is more closely aligned to traditional higher education programmes in that it encourages participants to develop critical thinking skills in order to be effective change agents. Whilst the assessment method differs between these models, the emphasis for both is on local delivery within the workplace and *'requires the support of their managers, colleagues, academics and practice educators'*, p. 196. In this respect this fulfills the so called work 'partnership' ethos the government intended for Foundation Degrees.

Model two is a separate entity delivered within a college or university with a work-based learning or work-related module incorporated within the programme (mainly college-led). A college-led Foundation Degree is more likely to retain the ethos that has an emphasis on academic rigour rather than vocational outcome and as such is more likely to focus on ensuring progression to the third year of a conventional honours degree. This model is more likely to predominate where Foundation Degrees have been developed independently of major companies and so are more likely to be taken up by employees working for small or medium size employers (SMEs)

The two models are likely to have a different focus for assessment, for example, model one will have assessment entirely within the workplace whereas model two is more likely to have an academic bias in its assessment methodology although it has to include an assessment of workplace learning. Costley & Armsby (2007) identify two different foci for assessment of work-based learning in higher education, dependent upon whether work-based learning is presented as a mode of study or as a field of practice in its own right. They draw the distinction by suggesting that where WBL is a field of study it is more likely to focus on assessing generic skills in the workplace whereas, as a mode of study, subject specific skills will form the focus for assessment. (Costley & Armsby 2007. p21).

Work-based learning as a mode of study lends itself to delivery as a module of a programme or as a work experience type placement and is the format most likely to be adopted by 'adaptors' or 're-badgers' of current sub-degree provision to Foundation Degree programmes. By contrast, work-based learning as a field of study is more likely to underpin the development of Foundation Degree programmes tailored for specific industries and delivered in the workplace.

In theory the Foundation Degree route is a vehicle for meeting the government target for participation in higher education for the 18-30 age range. In practice, and from personal experience, many recruits to Foundation Degrees are from a wider age range and are already experienced practitioners within their industry seeking an academic qualification to validate their experience and improve employment prospects. This has advantages for further education colleges offering the model two Foundation Degree delivery for the work-based learning element of the degree programme in that they do not have to arrange work placements for their students. This places the onus on the student to ensure that their employer understands and supports the assessment requirements for the work-based learning module. This can be problematic in that although employers may be willing to release their staff to attend college, they may not be fully aware of their expected responsibilities. This issue is explored as part of the research question in Research Study One.

As with any 'apprenticeship' the prospective 'employee' must be able to spend time in the work place to acquire skills of the job. This close co-operation/partnership with industry is a valid and important aspect that gives the Foundation Degree an air of credibility. However in reality this expectation is only implicit to model one. For those students undertaking a model two Foundation Degree, the role of the employer is less clear cut. Although there is an expectation of employer engagement in the design, delivery and assessment of a Foundation Degree, again in reality both large and small employers are frequently unaware of these requirements and if they have not been involved in the design of the programmes may be ill-equipped to participate in the delivery or indeed the assessment of the programme.

The Foundation Degree benefits the large conglomerate employers where the government has vested interest and regulatory control such as the public sector.

Indeed, Edmond, Hillier & Price (2007) comment that the *'public sector is important as a role model for employer engagement'* p.172., in particular the desire, as part of the government's agenda for modernisation within the workforce, to upskill workers in low skilled employment, particularly health and education, that previously required basic or no qualification status. This undermining of the divide between professional workers and support staff is crucial to understanding the government's rationale behind the introduction of Foundation Degree, its role in higher education and the ongoing development of 'degree' status qualification in the workforce.

The Foundation Degree has been introduced to 'qualify' the vocational practitioner in an attempt to demonstrate and accredit the skills of the employee across the age spectrum. However whilst the government may be applauded for doing so, how different is this type of Foundation Degree from the current Higher National Certificate/Diploma provision? Moreover is the compulsory work based or work related element going to improve employee skills for the workplace any better than that provided by Higher National Certificate/Diploma provision? The Foundation Degree may take many years to achieve the same kudos as the Higher National Certificate/Diploma qualification which has, over the past decades, established itself as a recognised qualification for entry into industry and to higher education. Both qualifications offer an alternative route into Honours degree qualifications and so can be said to be widening participation. It remains to be seen whether the Foundation Degree will eventually replace the Higher National Certificate/Diploma qualifications or whether industry will accept both as a credible vocational qualification.

One of the main factors that favour Foundation Degree provision is the proviso that validation of said programmes must include employer engagement in providing prospective students with 'work-based learning' experience within the workplace. *'Employer engagement is at the heart of what makes Foundation Degree distinctive'* (DfES, 2004 p. 28). Employers' participation in Foundation Degrees is intended to be both a central and distinctive feature of this qualification. Whereas other higher education programmes that incorporate a work related element rely on work placements to give students work-related skills, Foundation Degrees are intended to fully engage the employer in all aspects of the programme, from inception to final assessment.

However this is proving to be problematic: traditionally there has been a tension between meeting the skill requirements of industry and matching the academic rigour of traditional qualifications. Hollerton (2005) states that:

'The awards of professional bodies are not easily transferable into the academic environment despite their very real vigour in assessment and professional rigour. The government now appears to be in the process of rectifying this in its consultation document, Recognising Achievement in the Twenty-First Century. (Hollerton, I. 2005 p.49)

This endeavour appears to be long overdue; as far back as 1990, Barnett pointed out *'the growing clamour by industry for the graduates it employs to have more work related skills'* (Barnett 2000, p.19). Furthermore, Morgan et al (2004, p.355) cite the Skills Task Force (2000) in pointing out that *'skills tend to be a neglected issue when employers are formulating their business strategies'*. This raises the question as to whether employers have clearly identified the skills they require and moreover whether they have robust plans in place to develop employees' skills. In undertaking the development of a Foundation Degree, consideration needs to be given as to how to accredit the work-based learning element of the programme so that there is commonality across programmes of learning.

Another difficulty for Foundation Degrees arising from employer engagement relates to the diverse background of the government targeted student intake. The makeup of this cohort ranges from 18 year old students with 'A' level experience but with little or no work-related experience to mature students with minimal academic qualifications but in-depth experience of the workplace. Connor (2005) supports this in claiming that at least three different markets have emerged:

- School leavers who may not feel fully qualified or confident enough to start an honours degree
- Successful young advanced apprentices or other work-based learners who are seeking progression to higher levels
- More mature learners, to help them advance their learning and upgrade their knowledge and skills

She also suggested that the more mature market was likely to see the greatest uptake. Whilst addressing the government's wish for wider participation in higher education, this also means a broader range of students in terms of previous academic history, work history, socio-economic status and potential support requirements.

These issues require careful planning to meet the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) needs of all participants and stakeholders. A recent Foundation Degree Forward (2006) case study highlighted the need to provide work placements for students with limited work history, whilst those currently in relevant employment need to be able to reflect on their current work practice. This highlights the difficulties of endeavouring to meet the needs of all under a single framework.

Part of the problem stems historically from the free market philosophy of the 1980s that encouraged competition in the provision of CPD between academic institutions and private organisations with an emphasis on 'professional updating'. This resulted in a narrowing of focus to provide specific skills to the detriment of the holistic development of employees. There is then a dichotomy between what the universities see as important to personal development and the development of reflective practice and the short term benefits of meeting the immediate needs of employers in industry.

The focus on competition between providers discouraged collaboration and led to a culture of mistrust. This cultural barrier needs to be overcome if employer engagement as part of the government's Foundation Degree initiative is to be successful. Equally the universities need to pay closer attention to industry requirements. As Watson and Howarth (2006) point out:

'The development must be based on a sound understanding of the application of CPD in the workplace. They should aim to assist organisations and individuals to discover what they need, not simply deliver what they seem to want or have ready to deliver.' (Watson and Howarth, 2006, p.8)

They go on to argue that:

'Industry does not want traditional academic qualifications at all, and the problem for universities is to re-focus on valid professional competencies.' (ibid p.8)

A crucial element leading to the success of Foundation Degrees will depend upon the ability to bridge this academic/vocational divide. This will be achieved through matching the needs of industry for flexibility of delivery and clearly identified practical benefits of participation whilst concurrently ensuring academic rigour and quality.

Current Sub-Degree Provision

This brings into question the current status of higher education sub-degree provision much of which also offers valuable work experience/placement. The consultation document on Foundation Degrees (DfEE, 2000) claims that both employers and prospective students are *'often confused by the vast range and number of sub-degree qualifications'* presently on offer. Whilst the government is in favour of *'value in diversity and a need for qualifications which meet particular requirements'*, the confusion that they claim exists is bred from *'bewilderment'* that means such qualifications are *'under-valued and difficult to promote'*. In this respect, the government expects the Foundation Degree to *'subsume many of the other qualifications and bring greater coherence to the current jungle of qualifications at this level.'*

This belief was still being upheld in the government's White Paper in January 2003 entitled *'The future of higher education'*. In his Foreword, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke, sought to *'seek a partnership between students, government, business and the universities to renew and expand our higher education system for the next generation'*. The government reiterated its pledge to increase participation in higher education towards 50 percent of 18-30 year olds by 2010.

Once again it was expected that much of higher education expansion would come as a result of the government's new two-year Foundation Degree initiative. As before, these would be delivered in further education colleges, thereby strengthening the collaborative links between further and higher education establishments. The White Paper commented upon the *'good start'* made by Foundation Degrees *'as a reputable and truly employer-focussed higher education qualification.'* It also reiterated its proposal to integrate both Higher National Certificate/Diploma qualifications into the

Foundation Degree framework as part of its short term (2003-2005) higher education strategy. However by October 2003 'Guardian Education' reported that:

'Ministers have had to accept that BTEC Higher National Diplomas and Higher National Certificates, which the higher education white paper in January suggested would be swallowed by the new Foundation Degrees, remain as popular as ever. Indeed, the public appetite for them is growing. The latest figures show that last year 12,400 people were taking Foundation Degrees....In 2002/03, the numbers taking HNCs... and the follow-on HND.....rose for the fifth consecutive year to 79,589.' (Kingston, P. 2003 p. 41.)

However, the Guardians' article also included comments from a DfES spokesman which appear to contradict the aforementioned figures:

'HNDs have served employers well in the past but the numbers studying them in England have been gradually declining in recent years... Foundation Degrees ...are already demonstrating success in meeting changing skills needs in the private and public sector.' (ibid, p. 41)

Although no evidence was provided, the same newspaper article also commented upon a House of Commons Select Committee report which urged the Government to 'take no action to encourage phasing out of HNCs and HNDs' and that 'they should remain as distinct options until there is no public demand for them' (ibid)

In this respect, Higher National Certificates/Diplomas are an established qualification, well known to employers and like 'A' levels have provided the 'gold' standard. Furthermore, the availability and marketing of Foundation Degrees remains in its infancy, therefore, only time will tell whether they achieve the same status as Higher National Certificate/Diploma qualification. 'The Times Higher' highlighted concerns raised by The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) as to the validity of the government's Foundation Degree policy in addressing skills shortages. The CIHE was concerned that:

'neither higher or further education institutions nor funding agencies had taken "ownership" of vocational training at sub-degree level.' There was no coordinated planning, leading to a clash of agendas between skills and higher education..' (Tysome, T. 2003, p.6.)

In the same article, Richard Brown, CIHE chief executive, claimed that:

'At the moment, we have a situation in England where no one owns the FE/HE interface. Meanwhile HE institutions want to expand their own Foundation Degrees to capture people in FE colleges and pull them through on to first-degree courses. This produces a divergence of interests between employers, who value people with advanced vocational qualifications and enter the workplace to address the skills gap, and the HE agenda, which is to get bums on seats on degree courses.' (ibid, p. 6.)

In this respect there remains a conflict of interest in meeting the government's aim of 50 percent of 18 to 30 year olds to have some experience of higher education by the year 2010. Patrick Ainley, Professor of Education & Training at the University of Greenwich, identified two contentious issues, one of which appears to contradict the government's aim, whilst the other looks to move the goalposts in order to meet its aims. With regard to the latter, competence based qualifications such as Foundation Degrees will, in the main, be delivered in further education colleges. According to Ainley:

'The "degree" title re-designates these students as HE students and higher education institutions will accredit their courses. So it can be claimed those on this "work based route" will have "some experience of HE" (Ainley, 2004 p. 8.)

However, it should be noted that students undertaking Higher National Certificates/Diplomas under university validation were also higher education students.

Having higher education in further education will no doubt provide the government with a wider base from which to draw its statistics. On the downside, and in the former, the question of student fees and in particular raising them to meet the full costs may prove a disincentive to either embarking upon or completing a Foundation Degree programme. These are genuine issues that continue to dominate the current political education agenda.

What is clear is this current government's overwhelming desire to increase the supply of higher education at levels below honours degree. According to Gibbs (2001, p. 21.) some 20 percent of graduates are employed in jobs for which they are 'overeducated' and not receiving the remuneration currently afforded to those employed in 'graduate' jobs. In meeting a skills shortage, the Foundation Degree may be seen as an attempt at fusing both the academic and vocational paths to higher level qualifications. In her

foreword to the 'Foundation Degree Prospectus.' the then minister for higher education, Tessa Blackstone, drew an analogy between academia and industry;

'In higher education as in manufacturing, maintaining that competitive edge requires us not just to develop and improve existing products but to diversify into new ones.' (HEFCE 2000, p.2)

However, whilst acknowledging the role of British higher education: *'Our honours and masters degrees attract students from every corner of the world. We are rightly proud of what our universities and colleges achieve'*, she somewhat undermined this role by adding *'The Foundation Degree has the potential to raise the skill level of our workforce, particularly in the new industries.'* (ibid, p. 2.) In effect, the Foundation Degree can be seen as answering an 'employer resource issue' for which purpose the current honours degree is seen as somewhat ineffective, in meeting the diverse skill requirements of industry.

There is, however, the possibility that the pendulum may swing too far towards vocational training as a panacea for meeting a market niche. Gibbs (2001) adds that;

'....to move too far into the realms of vocational training may create a disembodied notion of educational quality and thus instigate the conversion of institutions of culture into manufacturers of credentialised potential employees.' (Gibbs 2001, p. 22.)

However, it should be noted that National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were designed specifically to meet vocational training needs that Harvey & Slaughter (2007) regard as a 'license to practice' because:

'.....it involves elements of face-to-face observation and assessment. NVQs are nationally recognised qualifications in the UK, that assess an individual's skills, knowledge and understanding required for a particular job.' (Harvey & Slaughter, 2007 p.36)

The Foundation Degree could be construed as a product of market forces dictating educational policy with the notion of education for economic progression. In meeting industry demands for a skilled workforce, the government, which controls the purse strings of funding for higher education, insists upon employer involvement in its design. However, although employer involvement is promoted, the nature of that

involvement remains ill-defined. The Foundation Degree may lead to a bipartite system whereby the established honours degree system will in future vie with a vocational degree system. This has echoes of the CNAA degree system awarded by polytechnics. In introducing the Foundation Degree, the government has redefined higher education where curriculum, in which control has shifted from what Gibbs describes as;

'the domain of academic authority to occupational standards. This creates a divide which, at its core, distinguishes academic from vocational by the purpose of learning; for itself or for others. It structurally changes higher education far beyond the inclusion of a portfolio of employability skills in every degree programme.' (Gibbs 2002, p. 200.)

The government, however, in its case for expansion in higher education, claims there is no such divide and that it is merely endeavouring to meet economic changes in society:

'Society is changing. Our economy is becoming ever more knowledge-based – we are increasingly making our living through selling high-value services, rather than physical goods.... But we know that this is not the whole picture. The economy also needs people with modern skills at all levels. We are not choosing between more plumbers and more graduates. We need both, and we need to help individuals to make sensible and appropriate choices.' (DfES 2003, p. 58.)

The government priority in expanding higher education is to ensure that expansion is of both a quality and type to fulfill employer demands and the needs of both the economy and students alike. The government does not see all the needs of the future economy coming from the traditional three year honours degree route. It believes that the economy will benefit from more work-focused degrees such as the new shorter Foundation Degrees that offer specific, job-related skills;

'We want to see expansion in two-year, work-focused Foundation Degrees; and in mature students in the workforce developing their skills. As we do this, we will maintain the quality standards required for access to university, both safeguarding the standards of traditional honours degrees and promoting a step-change in the quality and reputation of work-focused courses.' (ibid, p. 60.)

The Foundation Degree is the flagship of the government's policy of expansion in higher education. It is intended to play a major role in, firstly, achieving its target of increased participation in higher education of 50 percent of those aged 18 to 30 by 2010 and, secondly, in meeting its overall aim of preparing 90 percent of this age group for either higher education or skilled employment. It will, however, necessitate a change in the pattern of provision. The government claims in the White Paper that there is evidence to suggest that the;

'.....skills gap is most acute at a level that is served well by what has traditionally been termed 'sub-degree' provision. – two year provision that is work focused.....but work-focused higher education courses focused on this skill level have suffered from social and cultural prejudice against vocational education. (ibid p. 61.)

Adding to this dilemma;

'Employers claim they want graduates whose skills are better fitted for work; but the labour market premium they pay still favours traditional three-year honours degrees. Graduates with honours degrees earn 64 percent more than those without degrees, but including two-year work-focused courses, the figure drops to 50 percent.' (ibid p. 61.)

Given the above it is not surprising that students prefer to opt for three-year honours programmes. However from 2004, the government will offer additional funded places for Foundation Degrees. This preferential funding is designed to ensure growth in the new qualification whilst at the same time ensuring that growth in traditional honours degree courses is maintained at a steady rate. This could be seen as a form of social coercion to ensure the Foundation Degree succeeds, however the difference in kudos once in employment also needs to be addressed and this may be beyond government control.

The '*Employers Skill Survey*' (DfES 2002b) provided valuable input for the government white paper on the future of higher education. At the time of the survey it estimated that there were some 550,000 job vacancies, equivalent to around three percent of people employed:

'Of these vacancies, the survey suggests that around 45 percent were hard-to-fill, ie around 245,000 in all, of which 46 percent were caused by skill-related

difficulties, ie there just over 110,000 skill-shortage vacancies.' (DfES 2002b, p. 9.)

The survey also showed that these skill-shortage vacancies were most likely to occur '*...among professional staff (most commonly in education), associate professionals (in health and social care) and skilled trades (in construction).*' (ibid, p. 52.)

Many of the employers surveyed were of the opinion that skills needs were likely to change over the coming years to meet new technology and new working practices.

Following on from the publication of 2003 White Paper, the government published in the same year their Skills Strategy entitled '*21st Century Skills – Realising Our Potential*'. In endeavouring to meet the challenge of improving skills within the workforce, the government identified five key areas in which they needed to act:

To place employers' needs for skills at centre stage;

To raise ambition in skills demand;

To motivate and provide support for more learners to 're-engage' in learning;

To make both colleges and training providers more responsive to both employers and learners needs;

To provide better collaboration across government and public services.

Once again the government reiterated its commitment to expansion in higher education through changes in the pattern of provision '*We will reform the qualifications framework, so that it is more flexible and responsive to the needs of employers and individual learners.*' (DfES 2003c p..25.) and '*We will work with colleges and training providers to help respond more effectively in providing skills, training and qualifications to meet employer and learner needs...*'. (ibid, p. 26.)

Funding in Further and Higher Education

The issue of funding higher education provision through further education establishments is central to the success of government educational policy. Following the publication of the 1995 consultation report, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) set up a working group to assess the response to its report and

to consider future approaches to funding higher education in further education colleges. A further consultation report from the HEFCE in 1996 recommended that *'the Council should for the immediate future continue with its existing approach to funding HE in FECs.'* (HEFCE 1996a, p. 4.)

The report argued that retaining the current approach to funding would maintain diversity and would recognise the strengths of higher education in further education colleges. In this respect, further education colleges would continue to develop a variety of higher education provision in line with and appropriate to the needs of both student and regional requirements. The variability of mission statements and strategic plans of individual colleges and higher education institutions would dictate the manner in which partnerships developed and the manner by which colleges would pursue their own validation of higher education provision.

The HEFCE considered the wider policy context to be *'characterized by change, uncertainty and financial constraint'* and that the present arrangements have enabled further education colleges to *'develop a successful and diverse range of provision'* HEFCE (1996a). In short, the Council considered that the diversity and complexity of current funding of higher education in further education colleges could in effect prove difficult to change.

However, the HEFCE commented on the disadvantages of a market-led approach that could further widen an incongruent and uncoordinated higher education system. Moreover they warned that the intricacies of the current funding system might become chaotic at a time of rapid change which should demand greater management. This concern coincided with many of the responses to the previous consultation report which expressed a desire for a more coordinated and ordered system of higher education, in which further education colleges have a clearly defined role. It could also be interpreted that the HEFCE were keen to retain control of the coordination of higher education, which was threatened by the success of further education colleges in responding to local needs.

However, questions had arisen as a result of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education as to, firstly, the need for two separate funding bodies and secondly

how the responsibility for funding should be split. The Inquiry found that whilst there should be close cooperation between the two, the formulation of just one funding body would prove too unwieldy to represent vested interests adequately. In this respect the committee of inquiry considered two main options as to the responsibility of funding between both the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and the HEFCE. Firstly, that all sub-degree funding should be the remit of the Further Education Funding Council and degree level provision that of the HEFCE. Secondly, all higher education provision irrespective of where it is delivered should be the responsibility of the HEFCE. Whilst the higher education funding policy for Scotland and Northern Ireland opted for the former option, the committee of inquiry opted for the latter for England and Wales in that all funding for higher education in further education colleges should be the remit of the HEFCE, thus seeing the demise of the FEFC.

In order to cater for these new developments, the government looked to reform the then current system of funding the post-16 learning provided by the FEFC. To this end, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was set up in 2001 as a single body to take responsibility for the management, development, planning, funding and quality assurance for post-16 learning. This responsibility did not stretch to higher education provision.

Funding the Widening Participation Agenda

The government is providing increased funding for the sector '*rising to almost £10 Billion in 2005-06*' (DfES 2003 p. 80.), claiming that this settlement makes a significant contribution towards rectifying under funding in previous years. The Skill Strategy paper (DfES 2003c) highlights the government's commitment in providing a better socially balanced student population if it is to meet its 2010 target. Specifically, five main measures are proposed to increase access to higher education:

- Restoring grants for students from low-income families and abolishing up front fees;
- The drawing up of Access Agreements to improve access for those disadvantaged students;

- Expansion of the Aim Higher programme to provide stronger links between schools, colleges and universities;
- Changing the provision of funding to enable universities and colleges to be properly reimbursed for extra costs involved in attracting and retaining students from non-traditional backgrounds;
- Doubling the amount of additional money to assist vulnerable students and the introduction of grant support for part-time students.

It was the government's intention that many of the aforementioned students would enter higher education through the new Foundation Degree qualification.

Whilst these proposals were welcome, doubts were cast as to whether these incentives were viable in the face of top-up fees to the tune of £3000 per student. In this respect there remains ambiguity in the government's aim of social inclusion. Brown (2003) also raised doubts as to whether the Foundation Degree would ensure the expansion of student numbers and social participation:

'So far at least, these [Foundation Degrees] mainly cover niche areas where the honours degree is not the main education requirement for professional status. There is no sign that the Government has yet grasped what would be needed to attract suitably qualified students – especially those with vocational Level 3 qualifications on what are almost certain to be part-time, employer supported courses.' (Brown 2003, p. 12.)

In his conclusion, Brown contended that the government was faced *'with a number of difficult choices'* over the future of higher education in England. On the one hand, the government was looking to create a university system comparable to those top class universities in the USA: make them more socially responsive; fulfil a skills gap in the economy through the creation of a new vocational Foundation Degree qualification at sub-degree level; offer a package of financial incentives to increase wider participation. Whilst on the other hand, put constraints on the costs of tuition; constraints on the number of honours degree student numbers; enhance the standards of both teaching and learning. The government, in its attempt to make higher education more readily available to all those who wish to participate, was faced with a number of contradictions leading to dilemmas in policy proposals. Tuition fees,

bureaucracy, social inclusion, widening participation, institutional autonomy and meeting the needs of the economy are but a few of the problems the government had to contend with in its attempt to create *'a brave new world'* in higher education.

Future partnership

Success in the development of Foundation Degrees was dependent upon a close working tripartite relationship between employers, universities and higher and further education colleges, and those representing local and regional interests. In this respect the government had established two key bodies that would endeavour to monitor and guide the development of Foundation Degrees. Firstly, a Task Force had been set up to advise Ministers and the Department for Education and Skills on future strategy to put into practice the government's plans for Foundation Degrees. The Task Force was expected to report to Ministers in summer 2004 as to progress made in establishing Foundation Degrees and moreover, future steps required in 2005 and beyond. Secondly, Foundation Degree Forward (FDF) was formed as a result of the government's White Paper (DfES 2003) commitment to set up new national body to support and promote the development and validation of Foundation Degrees. The FDF and the Task Force would work closely to implement policy objectives in practice.

The two-year Foundation Degree is now a vocational degree reality, competing against established academic honours degrees. However it must be remembered that there is a progression route from the two-year Foundation Degree into the final year of an honours degree. So, is this true competition or has it widened participation for students who would otherwise not be in the higher education arena?

The future of Higher National Certificate/Diploma provision remains uncertain. In terms of validity, quality assurance, input and delivery there is no genuine reason to suppose that conversion to a Foundation Degree would improve student status. Higher National Certificate/Diploma programmes remain as popular as ever, although the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in their 2003 bulletin state that; *'overall, HNC/HND numbers have been declining for much of the last decade'* (LSDA 2003 p. 2.) However in their 2004 research report they show that the number of students enrolled upon these programmes in 2001/02 was 37,309 compared with

just 2791 students enrolled upon Foundation Degree programmes (LSDA 2004, p. 7.) (Refer appendix 2). However, by 2003 for Foundation Degrees, this figure had increased to 12000 students (DfES 2003b, p. 10.)

The 2003 bulletin also found that whilst several sector-wide bodies are seeking to take forward the development of the Foundation Degree, it also found that there was some confusion amongst employers as to the intention and purpose of this new qualification at sub-degree level. In particular, the term 'foundation' caused consternation as this was already being used in several areas within higher education. It further claimed that:

'the term 'foundation' implied a general base of knowledge and skills on which an individual might build more specialized learning at a later stage' (LSDA 2003 p. 12.)

Furthermore, it was generally felt in areas where Higher National Certificate/Diploma are already fulfilling an intended role and were being delivered to a national standard, then employers could see no reason as to why new awards should be introduced.

There are, however, two areas where Foundation Degrees may, in the future prove more beneficial to both institution and student. These are funding incentives and honours degree progression respectively. In respect of funding incentives, the government in its White Paper on the future of higher education (DfES 2003), announced that £32 million would be made available to support the development of Foundation Degrees until 2006 when it is expected that student numbers would increase to 50,000. (ibid, p. 18.) In this respect the HEFCE (2003) invited bids for an additional 10,000 student places for 2004/05. They attained 11,497 full-time equivalent (FTE) places in total, of which 9,302 were to start in 2004-05 and 2,195 in 2005-06 HEFCE (2004)

It is becoming apparent that the government is determined to phase out current sub-degree provision in favour of Foundation Degrees:

With regards to honours degree progression, it is clear that the government intends to phase out Higher National Certificates/Diplomas and Edexcel expects that 20,000 Higher National Diploma places will be replaced by Foundation Degrees by 2006. (DfES 2003b, p 19.)

Higher education institutions and further education colleges will need to decide if they are to keep pace with future sub-degree development:

'HEIs and FECs currently offering HND programmes will make their own decisions about whether their current provision best meets their learner needs, or whether they wish to replace it with Foundation Degrees. (HEFCE 2003, p. 9.)

In reality, this is likely to be dictated by funding opportunities and the employment status of potential recruits. In my professional capacity, the College where I am currently employed offers both HND and Foundation Degree programmes. The current Higher National Diploma provision where there is no compulsory work placement unit fulfils a progression route from Further Education Level 3 programmes for students with minimal industry experience. The current Foundation Degree provision best serves the experienced practitioner in full-time employment looking to underpin their existing experience with an academic qualification.

With financial incentives in the form of bursaries to attract students on to Foundation Degrees and additional funding provided for colleges, the government is looking to a more vocational pathway in order to meet its skills strategy and higher education policy. Clearly the government is aiming to shape the future of higher education and skills training by using these financial incentives to attract a broader audience into higher education. At the same time higher education establishments are under pressure to maintain quality in provision, defined broadly in line with industry standards and to provide value for money in justifying the finance provided.

It has to be asked why the government is bent upon promoting the upskilling of the labour force through the higher education route. It is promoting changes that are seeing a shift in the general expectation of higher education experience from one focusing on individual development to one where employment competencies are now seen as the new indicator of individual success. This tension between government expectations of widening participation, mass higher education and the focus on development of employment skills within higher education is in my opinion a clash of ideologies.

Research Questions

This thesis has so far reviewed the underlying assumptions regarding the skills agenda, the social inclusion agenda and the role of higher education in supporting political policy, from a government, provider and employer perspective. It has also begun to question whether the prime focus upon employer engagement has provided a way to meet projected skill shortages as set out in the government's consultation document (DfEE 2000) and later the Skills Strategy document – *21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential* (DfES, 2003c). Following a historical review of further and higher education policy and collaboration between further and higher education institutes, this thesis has also questioned whether the primary remit of higher education should be the development of vocational skills for the workplace and whether widening participation in higher education can contribute to promoting social cohesion?

Having examined the government intention in developing Foundation Degrees to match employers stated needs, this thesis examines whether these intentions are being realized from a participants' perspective. In challenging the assumption that employer engagement with Foundation Degrees will help meet projected skills shortages, this thesis will question individual participants' experience of Foundation Degrees. Will the current design, with a compulsory work-based learning element, improve individuals' life chances and prove successful in meeting employers' needs where previous government initiatives have failed? This study seeks to examine the following:

1. To investigate the perceived benefits to individuals in undertaking a Work Based/Related Learning placement as part of a Foundation Degree.
2. To investigate whether the compulsory Work Based/Related Learning element, seen as the cornerstone of Foundation Degrees, provides the participant with the relevant skills for the workplace?
3. To investigate whether the provision of shortened higher education degree programmes can realistically meet the government's multiple-agendas of

widening participation in education as a means to improve social inclusion; upskilling the workforce; working collaboratively with employers and further education colleges, can be met through provision of shortened higher education degree programmes?

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Selecting a research paradigm

Prior to undertaking research, careful consideration should be given to selecting an appropriate research paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) define a research paradigm as:

'a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts....' (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p.200)

These *'basic beliefs'*, as described above, are those of positivism, post-positivism, constructivism and critical theory paradigms. Within the positivist or normative paradigm, the scientific method is recognized as the main procedure in attempting to find a causal relationship between variables with an emphasis upon empirical, quantifiable observations. Mouly (1978) describes this approach as:

'...the essence of the modern scientific method and marks the last stage of man's progress towards empirical science, a path that took him through folklore and mysticism, dogma and tradition, casual observation, and finally to systematic observation.' Mouly, (1978) p.10

Post-positivism, constructivism and critical theory paradigms embrace many variants and designs of naturalistic approaches, which include phenomenology, ethnography, biography, grounded theory and historical study. (Cresswell 1998).

Prior to deciding upon an appropriate research paradigm and methods of data collection for this study, it was important to understand the social reality of research. It was essential because the chosen research design will involve interaction by the researcher with research participants and as such will require justification as to its appropriateness to this study.

The Social Reality of Research

In examining social reality of research, '*explicit and implicit assumptions*' underpinning inquiry paradigms were identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979), (cited in Cohen et al 2001) as ontology, epistemology and methodology. Hitchcock & Hughes (1995) suggests that:

'Ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions; these in turn, give rise to methodological assumptions and these, in turn, give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection.' (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995, p.21)

Denzin & Lincoln (1998) view these assumptions as three interconnected fundamental questions whose responses define the '*basic beliefs*' of inquiry paradigms. Ontology questions the nature of reality and therefore, what can be derived from it, for example if inquiry is viewed from a positivist stance and '*matters of "real" existence*' then matters concerning '*aesthetic or moral significance fall outside the realm of legitimate scientific enquiry*'. (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p.201). Epistemological assumptions question '*the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known*' and this assumption is determined by the answer to the ontological question. Taking the above example of '*real existence*' then the inquiry position of the knower is one of '*objective detachment*' (ibid p.201.)

Methodological assumptions question the manner in which the knower sets about determining that what can be known based upon the ontological and epistemological assumptions. From the ontological and epistemological examples described above, '*real" reality pursued by "objective" detachment*, dictate the methodology undertaken by the inquirer. In this instance the '*control of possible confounding factors*' be they qualitative or quantitative in nature. (ibid p.201)

These assumptions underpin the paradigm inquiry and define the manner in which research is undertaken and consequently the nature of data collected. An awareness of the relationship between these assumptions is important as both the researcher and the respondents bring to this study their own interpretations of reality and within the interaction create further versions of reality. Undertaking research without respecting

these assumptions undermines the basic principle that each and every one of us is unique and if the research is to be valid, individual viewpoints should not be misrepresented. I am also aware that there is the potential for bias in my interpretation of the students' perspective and just as the students have their own experiences and interpretations of the reality of their experience, I too, as the researcher, bring my own realities and interpretations to their narrative.

Selected Research Design

Post Positivism

The government is presenting Foundation Degrees as being unquestionably beneficial to the individual in providing additional skills for the workplace and progression into higher education. The need to upskill the workforce and the use of Foundation Degrees as a means of achieving this, are presented as an 'undisputable truth'. This study investigates this 'undisputable truth' from a student perspective and asks whether student experience of Foundation Degrees mirrors government rhetoric. In considering the research questions on pages 66/67, a post-positivist research paradigm was deemed appropriate for Research Studies 1 and 2 and an interpretive research paradigm deemed appropriate for Research Study 3.

The ontology of a post-positivist research paradigm is one of '*critical realism*' and would appear appropriate from its suggestion that:

'reality is assumed to exist but to be only imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms and the fundamentally intractable nature of phenomena' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998 p.205)

I am aiming to explore the reality of student's experience of work-based learning in Foundation Degrees and as such each participant will have their own unique view and interpretation of their experience. In addition, by examining a variety of Foundation Degrees, I will also need to be aware of the differences and multiple realities of their experiences. The epistemology of a post-positivist paradigm suggests that objectivity, although not abandoned, '*remains a "regulatory ideal"*'; *special emphasis is placed on external 'guardians' such as critical tradition (do the findings fit with pre-existing*

knowledge?.....Replicated findings are probably true. (ibid p.205). The methodology of post-positivist paradigm suggests *'doing inquiry in more natural settings'* Two small surveys were undertaken using questionnaires as a data collection tool. Questionnaires are used to elicit quantitative data to evaluate areas of commonality and difference in the students' experience of Foundation Degrees in terms of perceived benefits and relevant skills for the workplace.

Adding a Professional Perspective

In this research, in order to go beyond the post-positivist paradigm, and in particular to bring my years of professional experience to further refine the analysis, I will be making comments about the data from my personal and professional experience. This adds an element of interpretivism into an otherwise post-positivist research paradigm.

The ontology and epistemology of interpretivism often seem indistinguishable inasmuch that the ontological reality may fluctuate during the research study and result in a subjective epistemology whereby the *'investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the "findings" are literally created as the investigation proceeds.'* (ibid p.205) Schwandt (1998) describes the related approaches to research of constructivism and interpretivism as views that guide researchers towards a particular outlook, *'Proponents of these persuasions share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it.'* p.221. They reject the positivist's notions associated with the 'scientific' approach to research, in favour of a paradigm that takes on a different view of knowledge acquisition. Guba & Lincoln (1998) comment that *'Knowledge consists of those constructions about which there is a relative consensus.....Multiple 'knowledges' can coexist when equally competent (or trusted) interpreters disagree.'* p. 212

The methodology of the interpretive paradigm suggests that *'individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents.'* (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p. 205) Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to provide individual perspectives on Foundation Degrees to further qualify and interpret the results of the quantitative data obtained from the

questionnaires. This provided an in-depth understanding of the ontological reality of students' experience, probing personal reflections of an epistemological nature.

Ethical Considerations of Research

All three research studies require participants to impart information of a personal nature and to explore their attitudes to and experiences of Foundation Degrees. Therefore it is important to consider the ethics of undertaking such research in ensuring that all are willing, informed and consenting participants, whose confidentiality is not breached. Two methods of data collection were employed in these research studies, Research Studies 1 and 2 employed self-report questionnaires whilst Research Study 3 used individual one to one interviews.

Whilst Cohen *et al* (2007) state that '*The questionnaire will always be an intrusion into the life of the respondent*'..., p.317, due consideration was given to minimizing the intrusion of the questionnaire at all stages from inception to administration. Initial requests for participating colleges were made by email through the *JISC* college email system and questionnaires were then forwarded to those colleges who agreed to participate. A student information sheet was attached to the questionnaire outlining the purpose of the study and informing participating students that any information provided would be treated in confidence. (*Appendix 4*)

Informed consent was gained prior to undertaking one to one interviews for Research Study 3 and permission was sought from participants to tape record the interviews. However, Silverman (2004) points out that:

'.....initial consent may not be enough, particularly where you are making a recording. In such cases, it often is proper to obtain further consent to how the data may be used.' (Silverman, 2004, p.258)

Therefore, following the taped interviews participants consent was sought to analyse the recording and to use the data for this thesis. Ethical approval for this thesis was received from the University Research Degrees committee.

CHAPTER 4

Research Study 1

Introduction

The purpose of Research Study 1 was to examine the perceived benefits to individuals of undertaking a work-based learning element of a Foundation Degree. Work-based learning is an essential component of a Foundation Degree and a government pre-requisite in their construction.

Research Question for Study 1

The research question investigates the perceived benefits to individuals in undertaking a work-based learning element of a Foundation Degree in terms of:

- improving employment prospects
- improving employment promotion prospects
- improving industry experience
- improving employment skills

Additionally, whether the Foundation Degree was useful generally in terms of:

- better preparation for employment
- better preparation for a degree programme at university

Methodology for Research Study 1

Context

In this study these perceived benefits were examined in relation to students' personal demographics to analyse whether students' perceptions differed according to the following:

- gender,
- age,
- employment/education status

- reasons for taking a Foundation Degree
- weeks at Work-based learning (WBL) Placement
- days per week at WBL Placement

Methodology

A small scale survey was undertaken for this research study; as Cohen & Manion *et al* (2007) comment ‘.....surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention ofdetermining the relationships that exist between specific events. (p.205). In this instance, the views of participants were sought to establish whether specific relationships existed between their personal background and expectations of Foundation Degree outcome.

Sample

The population sample was recruited from Foundation Degree students in six further education colleges currently delivering Foundation Degrees, who had responded to an on-line request for volunteers to support this study. From the 120 questionnaires distributed, 33 were completed and returned. This was a 28% response rate and somewhat lower than the expected response rate of 33%. The cohorts returning the questionnaire were made up as follows:

| | |
|---------|----------|
| Males | 21 (64%) |
| Females | 12 (36%) |

The age range of the respondents was as follows:

| | |
|-------------|----------|
| 19-24 | 15 (46%) |
| 25-29 | 7 (21%) |
| 30-34 | 4 (12%) |
| 35-39 | 5 (15%) |
| 40-44 | 2 (6%) |
| 45 and over | 0 (0%) |

Whilst the largest cohort within this grouping has been drawn from the 19-24 age range (46%), it can be seen from the above data, that the Foundation Degree appears to recruit more mature students overall (54%). This could be interpreted as making a positive contribution towards the government's target of widening participation in higher education up to the age of 30 (67% of the sample meet this criteria) . However, I am of the opinion that the Foundation Degree is attracting more mature students over the age of 25 with vocational experience primarily because of the vocational focus of the academic programme. Learners who have been out of the educational arena for some time may feel more comfortable returning to study if they feel that their experience will be valued.

Data Collection Method

A self report questionnaire (*Appendix 1*) was devised and composed of three sections using multiple choice and Likert scale type questions. Questions 1-7 sought to gain personal background information, questions 8-22 related to the work-based learning placement incorporating perceived benefits as indicated above and questions 23-25 focused on the benefits of the Foundation Degree programme in preparing participants for employment or further study. Questions selected were considered to be non-threatening and specifically relevant to the research subject, intended population and sample. The questionnaire was initially piloted to a cohort of second year Higher National Diploma students who had undertaken a work-based learning

element as part of their programme. As an ethical consideration, students were informed as to the purpose of the pilot and that they were under no obligation to complete the questionnaire, however, all responded positively to the questions and as such the questionnaire was deemed to be fit for purpose. As a result of this pilot, amendments were made to four of the questions in order to reduce the number of options for responses to better facilitate Chi-Square analysis. All participants were able to complete the questionnaire without difficulty and, as a result of trialing, questions were considered to be both valid and reliable

Results

Although a relatively small sample, quantitative data analysis was undertaken using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). A Chi-square statistical test was applied to measure the difference between a statistically produced expected and an actual result to determine whether there is a significant difference between them. (*Appendix 3*) A contingency table was constructed to compare selected variables against participant's perceptions of the usefulness of a Work-based learning placement and a Foundation Degree programme indicated in questions 19 – 24 of the questionnaire. The selected variables were deemed to be relevant in relation to the research question of this particular study.

These are:

Q.2 'gender'

Q.3 'age'

Q.5 'employment/education'

Q.6 'reasons for undertaking Foundation Degree '

Q.11 'weeks at WBL placement'

Q.12 'days per week'

Table 1 summarises the results of the Chi Square tests.

| Table1. Chi Square analysis of Questionnaire | | | | | | |
|---|---------------|------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| | Q.2 Gender | Q.3 Age | Q.5 Employment/ Education status | Q.6 Reason for undertaking Foundation Degree | Q.11 Weeks at WBL Placement | Q.12 Days per week at Placement |
| Q.19 ...improving your employment prospects | NS | S | NS | NS | NS | NS |
| Q.20 ...improving your employment promotion prospects | T | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS |
| Q.21 ...improving your industry experience | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS |
| Q.22 ...improving your employment skills | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS |
| Q.23...better preparing you for employment | NS | NS | T | NS | NS | S |
| Q 24 ...better preparing you for a degree programme at university | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS |

n = 33, S = Significant, NS = Not Significant; T = Trend

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 identifies two trends and two areas of significance difference for analysis and discussion in addition to those areas of commonality. Initially the study set out to demonstrate the similarities in experiences between the cohorts. To this end a series of Chi-square tests were applied to demonstrate whether any significant differences existed within the group.

Table 1 shows that within the sample no significant differences were found in relation to the following variables ‘*reasons for undertaking the Foundation Degree*’ (Q.6) ‘*number of weeks on a work-based learning placement*’ (Q.11) and responses to questions regarding the perceived benefits of undertaking a Foundation Degree (Q.19-24).

Reasons for undertaking the Foundation Degree

Further analysis of the '*reasons for undertaking a Foundation Degree*' (Q.6) showed that 55% of respondents selected the Foundation Degree on the basis of improving their employment prospects, 27% for a change of career, 24% as a progression route to higher education, 15% selected on the basis of locality, 9% considered the specialist subject and 6% took into account the college reputation. Only one participant did not respond to this question. In relating this to the research question, it can be seen that the most frequent reason given for undertaking a Foundation Degree is to improve employment prospects. This could mean that those practitioners already employed in their chosen field are seeking to gain an academic qualification to improve employment prospects. This does not necessarily mean that the participants are undertaking the Foundation Degree as part of upskilling as the government intends. However, it does suggest that the message that Foundation Degrees improve employment prospects is getting across and that this is seen as a qualification in its own right rather than simply a progression route to higher qualifications.

Number of weeks on a Work-based Learning placement

Further analysis of the '*number of weeks on a work-based learning placement*' (Q.11) showed that 45% of the sample were undertaking a work based placement for longer than 20 weeks, 21% were on placement for between 16-20 weeks, 24% on placement for between 11-15 weeks and only 9% were on a placement for less than 10 weeks. This would indicate that the government's intention of promoting work-based placement as a key element of a Foundation Degree appears to be being addressed. However, the question arises as to whether the placement is meeting the full intention of employer engagement in the workplace. This needs to be further examined in light of the responses to question 12 relating to the number of days spent on placement.

Gender

With respect to '*gender*' there were in the main no significant differences between the responses of males and females, although it should be noted that almost two thirds of

the sample were males. Compared with the national average enrolment figures for Foundation Degrees in 2005/2006 of 43% male and 57% female students, this sample contains a higher proportion of male students (HEFCE 2008 p. 27). Overall, 58% of the sample thought that the work-based learning placement would help them in gaining employment, 61% thought that it would improve their employment skills and 73% of the cohort thought that it would better prepare them for employment.

However, a trend was noted ($\chi^2=4.959$, $df=2$ $p=0.84$) in that males were more likely to respond that they thought the work-based learning placement would help them to gain promotion in employment. There are several possible explanations for this. It could be that the male participants have undertaken the Foundation Degree specifically because they are more interested in gaining promotion at work rather than gaining alternative employment. It could be that the male participants are more inclined to feel that their employment prospects have been thwarted by their previous educational background and that employers have overlooked experience in favour of qualified applicants. Whereas females may be more likely to attribute career progression difficulties to other factors such as taking a career break for caring responsibilities which impact on their work experience history. This is an area for further investigation in Research Study 2.

Age

No significant differences were found based on 'age' of respondent in respect of improving industry experience, employment skills or gaining promotion. However, there was a significant difference ($\chi^2=6.359$, $df=2$ $p=0.042$) in respondents' perception of the benefits of work-based learning experience in relation to improving employment prospects. Those aged 25 and over were significantly more inclined to report that work-based learning experience would improve their employment prospects compared with those aged 19-24.

There may be several reasons for this significance. It could be that:

- Mature students are more likely to have greater work history to draw upon in making their judgements

- Mature students may be more adept at reflecting on their own practice
- Mature students may have a clearer view of their career path and so can see the benefits more clearly.

Whereas:

- Younger students may be using a work placement as a first step into employment rather than building on existing employment experience
- The work placement provided for those who require one may be indirectly rather than directly linked to their career aspirations

These aspects will also be explored further in Research Study 2.

Employment/educational status

In relation to the participant's immediate '*employment/educational status*' prior to undertaking the Foundation Degree there were no significant differences with regard to improving employment prospects, promotion prospects industry experience or employment skills. However, and perhaps not surprisingly, there was a trend ($\chi^2=9.289$: $df =2$; $p=0.054$) for those who were unemployed at the start of the Foundation Degree to expect that the work-based learning experience would better prepare them for employment than those who were already employed at the start of their studies.

Days per week at placement

With regards to the number of '*days per week at placement*' there were no significant differences in respondent views on improving employment prospects, improving promotion prospects, improving industry experience or improving employment skills. However there was a significant difference ($\chi^2=11.330$: $df =2$; $p=0.003$) as to how useful respondents thought the Foundation Degree was in preparing them for employment. Overall 73% of the cohort believed that the work-based learning placement would better prepare them for employment however, this varied significantly dependent on the number of days per week spent on placement. Of the 66% of respondents who undertook a work placement for one day per week, 86% of them found this to be beneficial. Whereas, of the 34% of the sample who undertook a

placement for more than one day per week only 45% of them thought this to be beneficial.

On the face of it this appears to be contradictory to the purpose of a Foundation Degree particularly its compulsory aspect of work-based learning. In this respect placement for one day per week for those in employment in an alternative setting, could be seen to enhance the employees experience in the field. However, placement for longer than this could be seen to detract from the participant's primary job role and therefore be detrimental. Students who are on a placement for more than one day a week were more likely to have been unemployed or in full time education prior to the start of their Foundation Degree programme. This cohort was less likely to see the benefits of the work placement in improving their work prospects for the future. The work-based learning unit of the Foundation Degree was designed primarily to facilitate those practitioners who are already in vocationally related employment rather than a route to employment for the unemployed.

However, as previously stated there appears to be two emerging models for the delivery of Foundation Degrees. Model one being delivered in the workplace with the support of a college whilst model two is delivered within a college or university with a work-based learning or work-related module incorporated within the programme (mainly college led). The model of delivery for Research study 1 was not explored, so it may be that the difference can be explained by the model employed.

A DfES (2006) research report that evaluated students' views and experiences of a Foundation Degree in Early Years *commented* that students viewed WBL as a valuable component of their Foundation Degree programme (EYSEFD). It was perceived to be *'beneficial for the development of their overall knowledge and skills and noted the complementary nature of having both CBL (College Based Learning) and WBL elements to the EYSEFD.'* (DfES 2006 p.42.) Generally students felt that *'working with children on a day-to-day basis kept them grounded and gave them a more realistic, practical understanding of EY, to accompany the theoretical knowledge the taught aspects of the course had given them.'* (ibid p.42). The report goes on to comment upon one student, who had progressed from the EYSEFD to an honours degree in that she felt she had gained an advantage over those honours degree

students who had not undertaken the EYSEFD and were not employed within the Early Years environment as they *'had a very naïve outlook on what schools are and what children are like.'* (ibid p.42).

These comments are interesting insomuch that the work placement for the Foundation Degree in Early Years is providing vocational experience as the government intended. This is seen by the individual as conferring an advantage over honours degree students following a traditional academic route. In this instance although the Foundation Degree is supposedly enabling a progression route to an honours degree, it would appear that the honours degree students are disadvantaged by not having this work based experience.

Overall, Research Study 1 has identified significant differences in two areas. Firstly there is a different perspective between age groups and their views on the Foundation Degree's ability to improve employment prospects. Students aged 25 and over being more inclined to believe that the work-based learning experience improved their employment prospects compared with those in the younger age bracket. Secondly there is a difference dependent on the time spent at work experience placement and student perspective of their preparation for employment. Students spending one day per week on a work placement were more likely to consider this to be beneficial in terms of preparing them for work than those who spent more time on a work placement.

These issues are explored further in Research Study 2 which will also explore whether the work-based learning element is providing the skills that the employers require and whether the Foundation Degree adequately prepares them for the third year of an honours degree.

CHAPTER 5

Research Study 2

Introduction

Research Study 1 focussed upon differences in students' perception of the Foundation Degree experience based upon their personal demographics. Two significant differences were found; students' perception of the Foundation Degree's potential to improve employment prospects differed between age groups and students' perception of the Foundation Degree potential to prepare them for employment differed according to the time spent on work experience placement.

Research Question for Study 2

Research Study 2 explores further the two significant differences found in Research Study 1 namely, whether the Foundation Degree improves employment prospects and whether the student experience demonstrates employer engagement in Foundation Degrees in the manner in which the government intended. It also investigates whether the Foundation Degree is useful in developing the skills that employers require and whether the Foundation Degree prepares students for the third year of an Honours degree programme.

Methodology for Research Study 2

Context

With regards to employee skills, several publications have identified employee skills shortfalls. The DfES (2002) identified the main areas of deficiency in technical and practical skills and go on to list the main transferable skills as: Communications Skills, Customer handling, Team-working and Problem Solving (p.73); whilst Costley and Armsby (2007) identified reflective practice and vocational skills as areas of concern.

Based upon the aforementioned, I have selected the following five skill areas as most relevant to the development of individuals undertaking a Foundation Degree:

Technical Skills: These relate to an understanding of the theoretical criteria that underpin the practical undertaking.

Academic Skills: These relate to the more generic skills required for academic study such as research skills and critical reading skills.

Transferable Skills: These relate to the development of skills that can be used in a broader work related context and include communication, inter-personal and team building or working with others

Vocational Skills: These relate directly to the practical skills required for the day to day execution of individual student job role

Reflective Skills: These relate to the students' ability to question and evaluate ongoing practice in the workplace and college for problem solving.

Methodology

As with Research Study 1 a small scale survey was undertaken for this research study to determine student response to employer engagement and student response to usefulness of work experience and Foundation Degree study in developing a range of skills.

Sample

Students across a range of Foundation Degrees delivered at three further education colleges in partnership with the University of Greenwich participated in this study. These students were undertaking Foundation Degree programmes in the following disciplines:

- Foundation Degree in Sports Studies
- Foundation Degree in Early Years
- Foundation Degree in Educational Administration
- Foundation Degree in Learning Support

Unlike Research Study 1, where the model of delivery was not made explicit, these Foundation Degrees all follow the model two mode of delivery in that they are college based Foundation Degrees. This model is assumed to have greater academic rigour in preparation for the third year of the honours degree, (Browne, Harte & Warnes, 2007) however, for Research Study 2, I wished to examine the rigour of the work-based learning element given the contradictory results obtained from Research Study 1.

Data Collection Method

As in Research Study 1 a questionnaire (*Appendix 2*) was compiled for this study. It was based upon a questionnaire used by the DfES in their Evaluation of Foundation Degrees undertaken by York Consulting (DfES 2004) and provides both validity and reliability to this study. The questionnaire consisted of closed questions, thereby eliciting specific responses.

Questionnaires were distributed to seventy-five (75) students of which thirty-four (34) completed questionnaires were returned for analysis and evaluation. This provided a 45.3% return which compared more favourably with the first Research Study 1 of 28% and showed an acceptable rate of return for a postal questionnaire.

Results, Findings and Discussion (a)

Employer Engagement

The first section looks at employer engagement and *Table 2* demonstrates the percentage of students' response to a variety of questions relating to employer engagement.

Table 2 Responses to Employer Engagement

| Item | Positive | Negative |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| Q. 9 <i>How relevant to your employment is your current Foundation Degree programme?</i> | 88 | 12 |
| Q. 10 <i>How supportive is your employer of you undertaking a Foundation Degree?</i> | 91 | 9 |
| Q. 11 <i>In undertaking your Foundation Degree, how useful has your current employment been in providing opportunities to put into practice what you have learnt.</i> | 82 | 18 |
| Q. 12 <i>Please indicate whether you have received mentoring from your Employer?</i> | 58 | 42 |
| Q. 13 <i>If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be useful.</i> | 100 | 0 |
| Q. 14 <i>Please indicate whether your Employer has undertaken any formal assessment of you as part of your Foundation Degree accreditation?</i> | 26 | 74 |
| Q. 15 <i>If yes, please indicate whether you found this to be useful</i> | 100 | 0 |
| Q. 16 <i>Are you undertaking a work experience placement as part of your Foundation Degree?</i> | 35 | 65 |
| Q. 17 <i>If yes, how useful has your work experience placement been in providing opportunities to put into practice what you have learnt?</i> | 100 | 0 |
| Q. 18 <i>Please indicate whether you have received mentoring from your Work Placement Provider?</i> | 92 | 8 |
| Q. 19 <i>If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be useful.</i> | 100 | 0 |
| Q.20 <i>Please indicate whether your Work Placement Provider has undertaken any formal assessment of you as part of your Foundation Degree accreditation?</i> | 26 | 74 |
| Q. 21 <i>If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be useful.</i> | 100 | 0 |

n = 34 (scores in percentages)

Relevance to Employment and Employer Support and Opportunities to put into Practice Skills Learnt

Questions 9, 10 and 11 show a positive response in terms of questions relating to: relevance (88%), employer support (91%) and usefulness (82%) of the Foundation Degree to students' employment. The percentage of students reporting that their employers are supportive shows an increase over the percentage (80%) found in the results of an earlier study by the HEFCE (2007) which stated that *'four out of five qualifiers from part-time study had some support from their employer'* (HEFCE 2007 p. 58) This report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England provides key statistics of the main characteristics of Foundation Degree programmes and students from 2001-2007. Findings from this report are used for comparison with this study.

Mentoring

Whilst students report that employers are supportive, question 12 indicates that only 58% of students are receiving mentoring by their employer in the workplace, although of those who are receiving mentoring, all (100%) thought this was useful (Question 13). This is comparable with the findings from the DfES (2004) Final report '*Evaluation of Foundation Degrees*', in which less than 50% of the case study Foundation Degree courses had a work-place mentoring scheme in operation. This may be cause for concern, as it highlights the fact that although employers are in theory supportive of their employees undertaking a Foundation Degree, they are not readily mentoring their employees.

There could be three reasons for this: firstly, time constraints; employers do not have the time to undertake this role. Secondly, skills constraints; they do not have the skills or training to undertake this role. Thirdly, they may not be aware that this is an expectation of them. Conversely, of those who undertook a work placement with an employer (Question 18), 92% of them received mentoring from their placement provider. Again, all who received mentoring in this manner found it to be useful (100%, Question 19). It could be that the support requirements are made more explicit by the Foundation Degree provider when arranging a placement.

Formal assessment

Lack of employer involvement is further highlighted in question 14 which show that very few students (26%) received formal assessment undertaken by their employer in the workplace. However, those students that did, found this to be useful (100%, Question 15). Furthermore, question 20 demonstrates that only 26% of students on work placement received formal assessment from their workplace provider. Again, those that did receive formal assessment found this to be useful (100%, Question 21). As previously stated, the basic tenet of a Foundation Degree is the purported close cooperation between the provider and the employer. However, it is clear that in terms of assessment procedures employers are not actively engaged in the assessment of Foundation Degrees following a mode two delivery pattern.

The question of how best to assess the work-based learning element of the Foundation Degree is worthy of further debate. Brodie and Irving (2007) identify a pedagogical triangle for work-based learning, demonstrating the interdependence between learning, critical reflection and capabilities. They identify that the assessment of capability is problematic, not least because the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications emphasizes the academic components which they suggest can serve to devalue capability. If the responsibility for assessment of Foundation Degrees is based purely with the academic institution rather than involving the employers, the focus for assessment is more likely to be on academic standards together with the students' abilities to reflect upon and describe their competences in the workplace. However, there is a danger that this misses out on assessment of learners' application of skills 'in situ' in order to establish their vocational competencies, which is where the employers' contribution could be most valuable. Brodie and Irving (ibid) point out that this raises questions about equity and standardization across employers and therefore questions regarding quality assurance of assessment undertaken by work place assessors operating outside of the quality assurance procedures of the educational institution. The results of this study suggest that these problems are largely side stepped by avoidance of work place assessment undertaken by employers, at least with regard to model two delivery of Foundation Degrees. The question is whether employers are unwilling or unable to undertake such assessments or whether the education system is unable or unwilling to adapt to this assessment methodology.

Work experience placement

A revealing aspect of this study relates to question 16 whereby just 35% of the respondents undertook a work placement as part of their Foundation Degree. Those that undertook a work placement clearly benefited from the experience (100% saying it was useful). However, it was noted that students of two of the five Foundation Degrees surveyed did not have a work placement, as they were already actively employed in the area to which the Foundation Degree was related. This suggests that these students will have direct experience of the workplace from which to draw upon in order to complete their studies. This is supported by the fact that 88% of the study participants reported that their current employment was directly relevant to their Foundation Degree programme (Question 9).

These results reflect the findings of the Final Report DfES (2004) which suggested that the way work-based learning is incorporated into Foundation Degree programmes depended on a variety of factors. In particular, they noted difficulties in organising work placements, especially if students were already in employment and juggling time constraints. In their analysis of 15 case study institutions, they found that only 20% of institutions had adopted a fully integrated approach to work-based learning.

Overall the study findings partly answer the stated research question as to the appropriateness of the Work Based/Related Learning element of the Foundation Degree, in that, if students were undertaking a work placement, they found it relevant and useful. However, it does question whether all Foundation Degrees have incorporated the work-based learning element as the government intended. The findings also suggest that, whilst employers are not fully engaging in Foundation Degrees, participants in this study appear to be able to relate the Foundation Degree to their experience in the workplace. This is supported by the fact that students participating in this study have predominately enrolled on programmes that are relevant to their current occupation. Thurgate, *et al* (2007) note that

'...during academic discourse a student is encouraged to develop critical thinking skills which can ultimately result in them analyzing and questioning the organisation in which they work, The impact of this can be that employees will begin to challenge the organization's culture, which may subsequently cause a change in the relationship between employer and employee,...
(Thurgate *et al*, 2007, p.221)

The potential challenge to the organisation's culture could be a reason for employers not to fully engage with Foundation Degrees.

The extent of employer involvement and commitment is worthy of further discussion. The government intention of upskilling the nations' workforce to improve national competitiveness when first devising the Foundation Degree focused mainly upon the large organisations in both the private and public sectors. One of these institutions is a major aircraft engineering corporation, KLM, based in the UK. Here students, after spending 14 weeks with an educational provider (Kingston University), spend 28 weeks in the workplace environment to ensure that *'standards and requirements are met at all times and so at the end of the course, students achieve an industry*

recognised qualification.' (DfES, 2004, p.31). Another example is that of JCB, a major private sector engineering organisation and its collaboration with Staffordshire University. Benefer (2007) describes the main focus of this collaboration venture as one of *'raising the skill levels in the local manufacturing and construction industries which employ approximately 36 percent of the workforce in East Staffordshire'* (Benefer 2007 p. 213). The work-based learning within the JCB organisation is carried out on the employer's premises with both content and assessment related to employer's needs. The work-based project affords the student an opportunity to develop technology skills and knowledge within a real work-based scenario. As Benefer (2007) is keen to point out:

'It [the Fd] is delivered in a college with a strong reputation for its engagement with employers and which is committed to work-based learning and to meeting the skills needs of local industry. The employer contributes to the design of the programme, particularly in the provision of "real" projects and assignments to support the assessment of learning. Delivery on site helps to ensure that work-based learning and academic learning are integrated.' (Benefer 2007, p. 216)

However, whilst the above examples clearly meet government agenda of employer engagement with large organisations, the same cannot be said for small and medium size employers (SMEs). Therefore, the answer to the research question as to whether work-based learning provides participants with the relevant skills for the workplace really depends on the workplace. This is a key issue and will be discussed later in this thesis.

Age group differences

In Research Study 1 a significant difference was found between age groups as to students' perception of the Foundation Degree's potential to improve employment prospects. Therefore, the age differences were explored further in this study related to students' perceptions of employer engagement. *Table 3* provides further analysis of these results by comparing the differences between student responses according to age groups.

Table 3 Comparison of Positive Student Responses by Age

| Item | Age Group | |
|---|-----------|-----|
| | 18-29 | 30+ |
| Q. 9 How relevant to your employment is your current Foundation Degree programme? | 92 | 90 |
| Q. 10 How supportive is your employer of you undertaking a Foundation Degree? | 100 | 90 |
| Q. 11 In undertaking your Foundation Degree, how useful has your current employment been in providing opportunities to put into practice what you have learnt. | 92 | 85 |
| Q. 12 Please indicate whether you have received mentoring from your Employer? | 58 | 65 |
| Q. 13 If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be useful . | 100 | 77 |
| Q. 14 Please indicate whether your Employer has undertaken any formal assessment of you as part of your Foundation Degree accreditation? | 42 | 20 |
| Q. 15 If yes, please indicate whether you found this to be useful | 100 | 25 |
| Q. 16 Are you undertaking a work experience placement as part of your Foundation Degree? | 66 | 20 |
| Q. 17 If yes, how useful has your work experience placement been in providing opportunities to put into practice what you have learnt? | 100 | 100 |
| Q. 18 Please indicate whether you have received mentoring from your Work Placement Provider? | 66 | 50 |
| Q. 19 If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be useful . | 100 | 75 |
| Q.20 Please indicate whether your Work Placement Provider has undertaken any formal assessment of you as part of your Foundation Degree accreditation? | 22 | 14 |
| Q. 21 If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be useful . | 100 | 100 |

n=33, (scores in percentages)

Relevance to Employment and Employer Support and Opportunities to put into Practice Skills Learnt

Questions 9, 10 and 11 indicate that there was little difference between age groups in terms of relevance, support and usefulness to students' employment.

Mentoring

Question 12 shows a small difference between age groups with regards to receiving mentoring from their employer, with the age 30+ group (65%) slightly more likely to receive mentoring than the 18 – 29 year olds (58%). However, when students were asked to rate the usefulness of mentoring from their employer all (100%) of the 18 – 29 year olds found this to be useful whereas only 77% of the 30+ cohort found this to be useful (question 13). Again as in *Table 2*, student mentoring appears to be a cause

for concern. Conversely, there is slightly more chance of students receiving mentoring from a work placement provider if they are in the 18 – 29 age bracket rather than aged 30+.(Question 18). Yet again all (100%) students in the 18 -29 year old group found this to be useful whereas only 75% of the 30+ students felt they benefited from work placement mentoring (Question 19).

Formal assessment

Question 14 reveals that just 42% of the 18 – 29 year old group and just 20% of the 30+ group receive formal assessment from their employer as part of their Foundation Degree accreditation. However, whereas all (100%) of the 18 – 29 year old group who received assessment in the workplace found this to be useful, only 25% of the 30+ group felt that the assessment was beneficial (Question 15).

Furthermore question 20 again reveals that of the 18 – 29 age group, only 22% received formal assessment from a work placement provider and for the 30+ age group this figure drops to 14%. However in both age groups all (100%) found the assessment to be useful (Question 21).

Further analysis of question 16 relating to whether students are undertaking a work placement reveals there is a marked difference between the age groups, with 66% of the 18-29 cohorts undertaking a placement compared with only 20% of the 30+ students.

The issue of formal assessment has already been discussed at length however, central to the development of Foundation Degrees is the need to enhance students' capability in the workplace. This would seem to be an obvious area for employers to contribute to formal assessment. However, as the research outcome above shows, this is an aspect that does not appear to be well supported by employers. Brodie & Irvine (2007) highlight debates surrounding:

..... 'issues of equity, employer perception of what and how they are assessing , standardization between employers and across WBL opportunities, and, naturally, quality assurance of assessment undertaken by those outside of the higher education institution' (Brodie & Irvine 2007, p.17)

This raises the question as to whether this is a problem that inhibits employers from being involved in the assessment process or is it a problem for the Foundation Degree provider concerned about quality assurance and inspection? Moreover, higher educational institutions would seem to be taking primary responsibility for assessing work based capability. However, although they may be better placed to adhere to quality assurance procedures for assessment, are they better placed than employers to assess individual capabilities in the work place?

Results, Findings and Discussion (b)

Employment Skills

The second section of this study looks at developing skills within the work place and *Table 4* demonstrates the percentage of students who rated the usefulness of their work experience and Foundation Degree studies in developing a range of skills.

| Table 4. A comparison of percentage response to Usefulness of Work Experience and Foundation Degree Study in terms of developing the following skills: | | |
|--|----------------------------------|--|
| Skills | Q. 22 Work Experience (%) | Q. 23 Foundation Degree Study (%) |
| Technical Skills | 71 | 79 |
| Academic Skills | 60 | 97 |
| Transferable Skills | 73 | 88 |
| Vocational Skills | 93 | 97 |
| Reflective Skills | 100 | 97 |

n =34 (scores in percentages)

Technical Skills

From the data in *Table 4* it can be seen that students found the Foundation Degree study slightly more beneficial in developing *technical skills* compared with work experience. This outcome indicates that a Foundation Degree programme can be seen as providing the underpinning knowledge to students existing vocational skills and is meeting those shortfalls as indicated by the government (DfES, 2002).

Academic Skills

The acquisition of *academic skills* is an important feature of a higher education programme so it is not surprising, therefore, to note from these results that the Foundation Degree study is seen as a major contributor in this area. One of the problems I have encountered with new cohorts to higher education is their inability to use research skills autonomously. In order to ameliorate this, I have ensured that a 'Research Skills' module has been included within the Foundation Degrees validated with the partner university. It is beyond the remit of this study to say whether the development of academic skills is a key feature of model 2 Foundation Degree delivery or whether this extends to programmes delivered in the work place.

Transferable, Vocational and Reflective Skills

Both *transferable skills* and *vocational skills* in *Table 4* are seen as being beneficial to students undertaking a Foundation Degree in developing skills such as communication, inter-personal and team building skills, shortfalls of which were highlighted by the government (DfES 2002). *Table 4* also indicates that work experience and Foundation Degree study are effective in providing both *vocational and reflective skills*, the shortfall of which were identified by Costley and Armsby (2007). Reflective skills are particularly important as a tool for assessing learning derived from the workplace, and as Brodie & Irvine (2007) conclude, critical reflection develops students' ability to '*apply and critique knowledge, not only in the workplace, but as a skill for higher level academic work*' (p.15). The development of critically reflective skills is essential for those students progressing to the third year of an honours degree programme.

Results, Findings and Discussion (c)

Future Employment Prospects and Promotion

Finally this section looks at student response as to expectations of and *Table 5* demonstrates the percentage of student response to questions relating to their expectations of the Foundation Degree and progression to Honours degree.

| Table 5 Student response to Foundation Degree expectations | | |
|--|--------|------------|
| Q. 24 Please indicate whether you expect the Foundation Degree to be useful in terms of: | | |
| | Useful | Not Useful |
| a) Improving future employment prospects | 85 | 15 |
| b) Improving future employment promotion prospects | 82 | 18 |
| Q. 25 Please indicate whether, upon completion, you believe your Foundation Degree will be useful in preparing you for the third year of an honours degree programme? | | |
| | Useful | Not Useful |
| | 100 | 0 |

n=34 (scores in percentages)

Question 24 shows a positive consensus from all respondents with regard to the Foundation Degree a) improving future employment prospects and b) improving future promotion prospects.

Question 25 shows 100% of respondents believe the Foundation Degree will provide useful preparation for progression to the third year of an honours degree programme. Student expectation to both of these questions is extremely high and it would be useful to extend this research further to ascertain whether, after a period of one year, student expectations have been fulfilled.

Other Relevant Research Studies

A case study undertaken at City University by Hillier & Rawnsley (2006) surveyed both student cohorts and employers as to how well the outcomes and expectations of a Foundation Degree programme in Public Service Management had been met. Two self report postal questionnaires were distributed: one to employers (57) and one to students (60). Employer respondents (19, representing a 35% response rate) came from a variety of public services, including the NHS, Local Government, Civil Service and Education. 87% of the employers claimed that they had sponsored their employees (students) to undertake the course and whilst financial costs to the respective organisation did not appear to be an item of concern many of the employers '*...expressed concern at students taking time off work to attend the College*' (p.9.) The survey had a disappointing response rate from students (15, representing a 25% response rate), who were drawn from an inner-London population working in public

service organisations. 70% were from ethnic minority groups with an average of 91% being mature students. Although less than 20% of the students had any 'A' level qualification considered to be the '*customary qualification route to higher education in England*'. (p.9.)

Of the outcomes and expectations of the Foundation Degree programme within the survey, employers claimed that employee achievement had been seen in areas such as: improving skills, improving confidence and ability to manage and communication skills. Employees' (students') achievements were seen in areas such as, Numeracy, communication skills, problem solving and analytical skills. Employers also noted an improvement in writing and budgetary skills; an improvement in an awareness of policies, particularly those pertaining to equality and diversity. Out of curiosity as to whether these desirable employer 'soft skills' could be taught within the Foundation Degree programme, the researchers relate the response of one public service employer as follows:

The Fd 'can give you an understanding of how you can go about thing, different ways of doing things.....but a lot of what you learn is from observing people....You need the balance of both: teach the theory in the classroom but I don't think anything can take away from actually having to do it OK (NHS) (Hillier & Rawnsey 2006 p. 11)

Hillier & Rawnsey's interest in 'soft skill' echoes the analysis of Keep (2004) as to how '*the importance of qualifications as signifiers of skill has declined over time given the current discourses about a knowledge driven economy*' p. 11. They cite Keep (2004) in stating that there is:

..a gradual but profound shift in the nature of the skill sets that many employers are seeking...from manual skills (dexterity and tool usage) and hard technical knowledge, towards a growing prioritization of 'softer' social skills and personal attributes. (Keep 2004 cited in Hillier & Rawnsey 2006 p. 11)

Outcomes of Research Studies 1 & 2 and Summary

The outcome of Research Studies 1 and 2 reveal the following; in Research Study 1, a significant difference was found in two areas. Firstly, in the students' perspective of

their views on the Foundation Degree's ability to improve employment prospects related to age differences. Secondly, in the time spent at work experience placements and student perspectives of their preparation for employment. In Research Study 2, Findings (a) reveal that in the main students are positive about employer engagement being of benefit, although this is not necessarily being implemented in the way the government intended. In particular, a predominantly negative response was given to questions regarding formal assessment being undertaken by the employers or on a work placement. This raises the questions as to the commitment of employers in their understanding of the concept of Foundation Degrees being carried out in the workplace. There could be several reasons for this, including a lack of understanding of the processes involved in formal assessment procedures, time constraints or financial constraints. Findings (b) reveal that students value both the Foundation Degree study and the work experience as valuable in developing a range of skills. Findings (c) show that students gave a positive response to questions relating to the perceived benefits of the Foundation Degree in improving employments prospects and employment promotion prospects and useful in preparing them for the third year of an honours degree.

In summary, Research Studies 1 & 2 show that there are shortcomings with regards to employer engagement in Foundation Degrees and this is an issue that is discussed at length later in this thesis. However, from a student perspective, the Foundation Degree appears to be meeting its intention of developing a range of employment skills as well improving employment prospects and employment promotion prospects.

In Studies 1 and 2, the student perspective of Foundation Degrees was examined through a quantitative approach. However, in order to provide a student experiential perspective to the aforementioned research studies' findings, Research Study 3 was undertaken that sought the views, through semi-structured interviews, of some of the individual participants undertaking Foundation Degrees who had contributed to Research Study 2. In addition, an interview was also undertaken with a Programme Leader to obtain a personal insight on effective delivery of a Foundation Degree. In undertaking these interviews, a qualitative perspective was sought to further qualify quantitative data so far obtained.

CHAPTER 6

Research Study 3

Introduction

Research Study 3 was undertaken in order to provide student experiential perspective to the aforementioned findings of Research Studies 1 & 2. In addition, the views of a Programme Manager were sought to obtain a personal insight on effective delivery of a Foundation Degree.

Research Question for Study 3

The research question for this study elaborates upon the research questions examined in Studies 1 and 2 regarding employer engagement. In particular, the study investigates students' personal reflections on their employer's support and involvement in various aspects of the Foundation Degree they were undertaking. This interpretive analysis underpins the findings of the survey data obtained in Studies 1 and 2.

In contrast, an interview with a Programme Manager of a Foundation Degree was undertaken to provide a broader perspective on the government agenda for Foundation Degrees. Specifically, this interview focused on questions relating to the reality of implementation of a Foundation Degree. It begins to address some of the issues relating to Research Question 3 (p. 2 and 66) which asks whether it is realistic to assume that the government's multiple-agendas of widening participation in education as a means to improve social inclusion; upskilling the workforce; working collaboratively with employers and further education colleges, can be met through provision of shortened higher education degree programmes?

Methodology for Research Study 3

Context

To corroborate and extend the findings from Research studies 1 and 2, individual students' experiential perspectives were sought to explore the reality of participation in Foundation Degree study, in comparison with government intention.

Methodology

As a specific research tool, interviews can be seen as part of the interpretive research paradigm. The interview seeks to elicit from individuals their perspective and interpretation of issues specific to their own situation and surroundings.

Sample

Five former female students, who had recently completed Foundation Degrees in '*Educational Administration (FdA)*' and '*Learning Support (FdA)*', volunteered and were subsequently interviewed. Of the five female respondents, (Respondent A) was in the 18 – 29 age range and four (Respondents B, C, D & E) were in the 30+ category as 'mature students'.

- Respondent A is currently employed as an Administrator within Registry Department of an F.E. College in London
- Respondents B & C are currently employed as Administrators within Student Services Division of an F.E. College in Kent
- Respondent D is currently employed as a Manager of Learning Support Assistants within an F.E College in Kent
- Respondent E is currently employed as Classroom Assistant within a School for pupils with learning difficulties in Kent

Data Collection Method

Taped interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed environment that was relaxed, friendly and conducive to both interviewee and interviewer, thus allowing data to be collected in an organised, controlled and unobtrusive manner. Following the taped interviews, participants' consent was sought to analyse the recording and to use the data for this thesis. A transcript of each interview was made and extracts appropriate to this thesis have been used in this chapter. Informed consent was gained prior to participation and permission was sought from participants to tape record the interviews.

Table 5 summarises nine key questions that formed the thrust of each interview and sought to elicit participant's personal reflections of their Foundation Degree programme of study. Discrete questions were compiled so as to enable the interviewee to reflect upon their experiences from the beginning to the end of their studies. Particular emphasis was placed upon employer engagement. The interviews were semi-structured and participants were afforded the opportunity to discuss issues that extended from these questions.

| | |
|---|--|
| 1 | <i>Why did you undertake an Fd programme?</i> |
| 2 | <i>How prepared were you to undertake a Foundation Degree?</i> |
| 3 | <i>You are currently in employment, have you had the opportunity to put into practice what you have learnt on the Fd programme. Please expand?</i> |
| 4 | <i>How do you think the Fd programme has helped you to enhance your employment skills?</i> |
| 5 | <i>Has your employer been supportive – explain how?</i> |
| 6 | <i>In what ways do you think the experience of working within an educational establishment made your Foundation Degree easier to undertake?</i> |
| 7 | <i>Which aspects of the degree programme have been assessed in the workplace?</i> |
| 8 | <i>Did you receive mentoring from your Employer?</i> |
| 9 | <i>Are you progressing to the third year of a BA (Hons) degree?</i> |

Results, Findings and Discussion

Former Student Experiential Perspective

In response to *question 1, why did you undertake an Fd programme?* it emerged that there was a general consensus that the Foundation Degree was being undertaken to provide an academic qualification to complement years of experience gained as a practitioner in their respective workplace environment. Respondents B & C and E felt that they had been overlooked in terms of promotion but more importantly they felt that they had very little credibility and this had negatively affected their self esteem. Respondent C, in particular, commented that:

.....I have been doing this job for quite a number of years and felt that I had accumulated sufficient hands on experience to enable me to move up the promotion ladder. However, when the supervisor's post became available I was overlooked in favour of somebody younger with less experience that had a NVQ level 5. I subsequently found out that I was not promoted because I did not have a 'qualification' to support my experience

Similar examples were given by Respondents B and E. In undertaking the Foundation Degree they felt that this would provide the kudos that would hopefully improve their status within their employ and the employment market. This view is upheld in a study by O'Keefe & Tait (2007) of students undertaking a Foundation Degree in Early Years. They found that;

Many [students] were using the qualification as a passport to career development. They wanted a recognised award, updating their knowledge and practice. (O'Keefe & Tait 2007.p.32)

A series of interviews carried out by Tierney & Slack (2005) with individuals undertaking a Foundation Degree revealed similar experiences. They found that:

'A desire for professional development was a common factor that pushed interviewees towards undertaking their course' (Tierney & Slack 2005 p. 378)

They cite an example of support worker team leader in a further education college; *'I wanted to do something related to my job but at a degree standard to show a level of*

learning and achievement' (ibid p.378). Similarly, a nursery nurse of ten years standing commented that;

'.....people thought that there was not a lot of skill in working with young children and [she] hoped she would be regarded as more professional on gaining a Foundation Degree' (ibid p. 378)

A mature student in her late 40s felt that *'because of her age....she needed a degree to provide her with some job security'* (ibid p.378)

Quite clearly the aforementioned respondents viewed the Foundation Degree as an opportunity to further their respective careers. In this respect, the Foundation Degree appears to be performing as intended and can be seen as offering opportunities for practitioners in industry to gain a vocational qualification to support their industry experience. In doing so, individual confidence in both employment prospects and employment promotion prospects appear to be improved by gaining the award. In addition, the Foundation Degree can be seen to be widening participation in Higher Education to a wider community of learners.

In response to **question 2**, *'how prepared were they to undertake a Foundation Degree?'*, all respondents stated that they were not sure what to expect prior to starting the degree and had therefore, found some aspects of the programme challenging in ways they had not expected, as a result of not being prepared. For example, Respondents B, C, and D had not undertaken a programme of study since leaving school and found academic rigour difficult to adapt to at the outset. Respondent B commented that:

.....Not having done anything like this since leaving school it came as a bit of a shock in the first lesson on 'Investigating Research', I did not have a clue what the lecturer was talking about and, as for the first assignment, well...beam me up Scotty. However, the lecturer concerned was very patient and took the time to explain and help me understand and with my own research initiative I was able to get to grips with the course. When I look back now and see how far I've travelled along the road from where I started I feel really pleased and proud of myself.....With hindsight I think I would have been better able to cope with the programme in the beginning if I had undertaken a summer school to help me with things like research skills, how to reference stuff and writing academically.

Whereas Respondent A commented that:

....Although I had no problem in meeting the academic side of the Fd I found the discipline of research and time management an issue in that the programme took up more of my time than I had anticipated.

In a similar vein Respondent C commented:

....I had no idea of how to write an essay or how to find relevant articles..... I didn't know how to do the Harvard referencing method or even what a bibliography was – but I do now!

Respondent E however, highlighted this to be a weakness within the Fd programme, commenting that:

....there wasn't any prep for people who hadn't done an academic essay before. I was fortunate that I have always been interested in academia and did a degree a couple of years ago for a year and a half but some people were on that course that hadn't studied for thirty years away from Schools...it was very daunting for them: perhaps some study skills classes would have been beneficial.... and I also wonder about their Literacy and Numeracy levels for, some of the people who are coming on to it, because if you are an adult student you do not have to have any prior certification of your achievements and I know when we were doing your statistics some people were really struggling because their Numeracy weren't up to the point where they could cope with that and same applies to writing an essay. If your English isn't very good, you are never going to produce an academic essay.

Similar responses were obtained by Tierney & Slack (2005) in their research with one respondent commenting that she:

'would have liked more information about referencing and structuring an essay, and felt that tutors expected students to know more than they did in terms of assignment construction (Tierney & Slack 2005, p.380)

Similarly another respondent commented that:

'...it had been 14 years since she had been required to produce something to be marked. (Tierney & Slack 2005, p.380)

In response to **question 3** which related to question 11 in tables 3 and 3a (Research Study 2), all Respondents claimed that they had had the opportunity to put into practice what they had learnt within their employment. Respondent A commented that:

....Since I started my Foundation Degree I've had to write reports on student attendance at work and I find it easier to do them now. I know how to set them out. I can do them in a structured way which looks more professional.

Respondent C commented:

..... Before I started my degree I wouldn't have had the confidence to stand up in front of a group and speak let alone give a presentation but we had to give presentations as part of the course so I got used to it and learnt how to stop feeling self-conscious.

Whilst Respondent D found a newly gained skill to undertake presentations useful as part of her employment remit:

.....Presentations are something I have never done and I must admit it has given me more confidence when I am holding staff meetings. 70 staff standing up in front of those is pretty daunting but since I've done the presentations I do feel more comfortable with that and I have gone on to do a presentation that I am going to roll out on staff development on how to use support staff effectively so I think I have gained confidence in that area

When asked whether course content had been related to daily work practice Respondent E commented that:

.....Policy side yes, we wrote a behavioural policy on the back of the Fd 'Action Research' project because it made you look around more and felt hey! I could change things here....the library we changed because it was just an under resourced area erm....so I put in a proposal and the Head teacher said 'Oh this is good' so we changed a few bits but is an ongoing thing as you know what education is like it takes a millennium to work some thing(s) out.

Two respondents interviewed by Tierney & Slack (2005) claimed that they had 'found it hard to relate what was covered on this course to their own workplace although it had been useful to learn about what was happening at different stages in the education system' (Tierney & Slack 2005 p. 382 & 383). This leads me to question as to whether employers were involved at the design stage of that particular Foundation Degree. Alternatively were the students recruited to an inappropriate Foundation Degree programme?

However, it seems clear that in both research studies the course had made students more reflective in their understanding of the theoretical underpinning to practical application.

Question 4 related to question 24 in table 3 (Research Study 2) asks about enhanced employment skills. All five students commented that gaining a Foundation Degree would make them more employable and improve promotion prospects which concurred with the findings from the main questionnaire. There were no differences between the age groups in their response.

Respondent A commented:

.....I think I would be more likely to apply for other jobs once I've got my degree. I will feel better qualified to go for other posts. I think I will be more confident and have a better chance of getting a better job.

Respondent B commented:

....I don't know if I will get promoted at work or not but if other jobs come up I would be more confident to apply for them now than I would have been. I think that's true even though I haven't finished the programme yet.

Respondent C commented:

...I'd definitely try going for other jobs once I'm qualified. I'm not doing this for nothing

The same views are held by those respondents interviewed by Tierney and Slack (2005) with one respondent claiming that: his Foundation Degree *'had given him a broader view of the job opportunities open to him'* (Tierney & Slack 2005 p. 383).

However, some respondents:

'.....called for more career guidance as part of their course, to ensure they were aware of all avenues available to them on completing their Foundation Degree' (ibid p.383)

Similarly, Thurgate and MacGregor (2008), commenting on their experience of providing Foundation Degrees, state that:

'The impetus for the individual health care worker (HCW) to undertake an FD is to up-skill, increase their knowledge base and progress in their career.' (Thurgate & MacGregor, 2008, p.28)

In response to **question 5** which related to question 10 in tables 3 and 3a, (Research Study 2) *'How supportive was your Employer in undertaking a Foundation Degree'* four Respondents A, B, C and D reported that their employers were very supportive, for example they had been given time off to attend the course and part of their fees were paid by their employer as part of a Staff Development programme. This bore out the response to the main questionnaire. However, this may reflect the type of degree they were undertaking or the nature of the establishment where they were employed, as Respondent E commented:

....I know it was very difficult to juggle the hours around....I went to a training course in Kensington and met people who had just finished Fds at Southbank and the London Institute and they said that their Schools had allowed them the time off to go, whereas my School didn't...they said I had to make the hours or lose the money so it seems to be a bit of a lottery as to how Schools approach it as well.....I think it is mainly a misunderstanding on my School's part....you know when I explained to them what it was all about they said that this is a benefit to you and long term you are just going to go off and leave us so why should we be supporting you in this...I know two people doing their MAs being supported by their School and soon as they get their MA they will be out the door so they can't really say that. It is a little bit of class culture...oh you're just a teaching assistant, part of the mother's army and got a bit of a qualification now but you're still not as good as us you still feel that a lot about the teaching fraternity....not all of them but you still feel that.

Interviews carried out by Tierney & Slack (2005) produced similar responses: for example, one respondent whose fees were paid by her employer commented that:

'..... (she) was unsure whether this would continue and admitted that she would pull out of her course if they stopped making this contribution' (Tierney & Slack 2005, p.379)

Other respondents interviewed claimed that they would have been unable to undertake the course if their employers had not agreed to pay the fees, whilst another respondent commented that they:

'...taken on two jobs to see her through her Foundation Degree, which curtailed the time she had available to study' (Tierney & Slack 2005, p.379)

The problem of finding the right balance of the demands placed upon respondents in undertaking the course appears to be a common trend in both research studies although personal experience suggests that this is not unique to Foundation Degree programmes.

None of the students interviewed in this study had undertaken a work placement, as they were already working in the environment to which the Foundation Degree related; namely educational administration, management and learning support. Therefore, **question 6** refers specifically to their experience of working in an educational establishment and indirectly links with question 16 in tables 3 and 3a. All students commented that their work experience was essential in underpinning their academic study. Respondent B commented:

...It has really helped me to reflect on what happens at work in terms of being able to understand the theory. I think the course would have been much harder if I wasn't in work as I wouldn't be able to relate to what we have been talking about.

However Respondent E did not consider WBL to be an essential part of the Fd, commenting that:

....I don't think I could have completed the course if I wasn't working in an educational setting....but that being said I don't think you needed an intense input...you know you could have just gone into a School worked once or twice a week and been....you know mother's help with the reading etc.....no not the Fd that that we undertook erm... we have in the past had NVQs which are to do with Learning Support and they are far more work based and you needed to be work based as they are very practical sort of.... how would you display this in the corridor....children's work....very practical hands on content whereas the Fd was more...although I said it needs to be more theoretical....it was more theory based and you went and did your own research...you read up on other people's opinions of things so you didn't need to be....it wasn't practical...I am finding it difficult to express myselfermin reality I would go into the classroom I would do a lot of direct teaching myself but from a Learning Support side of things I prepare resources...I file away resources, I attend to student's one to one learning on a particular lesson...that was catered for in my NVQ course because it would say 'what resources do you prepare' and I would pop in my folder the resource that I had prepared. Whereas on the Fd it would say 'why would these resources be more beneficial than these ones and you would have to look at the theoretical side of things. What I am trying to say it's more....it's more erm...metaphysical.

In response to *question 7* which related to question 14 in tables 3 and 3a, (Research Study 2) none of the students had been assessed in the workplace. This reflects the overall trend of this study which showed that just 26% of respondents received any formal assessment in the workplace. Quite clearly this is an area that has been underdeveloped and employers need to consider how workplace assessment at Foundation Degree level can be undertaken. This issue is discussed more fully in *'Further Discussion'*

In response to *question 8* which related to question 12 in tables 3 and 3a, (Research Study 2) *'Did you receive mentoring from your employer?'* Respondents B, C and D all claimed that their employer had provided a mentor to which they could discuss issues relating to their course. Respondent B in particular commented that:

....I was fortunate in that I had a mentor who understood the problems and issues I was encountering on my course and whilst he could not resolve all issues it was the ability to talk and air the problem that helped me mostly

Respondent E however, commented that:

...yes....I did have a mentor...the problem was she did not understand what a Foundation Degree was all about...so while we were able to talk about local issues it was difficult to relate this to the bigger picture

Respondents interviewed by Tierney & Slack (2005) also gave mixed responses. One respondent commented that she was *'frustrated at the lack of interest shown by her head teacher at her school'* (Tierney & Slack 2005 p. 381). However, in contrast to this another respondent commented that: *'anything I've been struggling with he's given me advice or he's pointed me in the right direction. He's been excellent like that.'* (ibid p.381)

Benefer (2007) claim that:

'The role of the mentor is crucial to the success of a work-based learning programme. It is an expectation that mentors will familiarize themselves with the programme of learning and agrees to facilitate learning in the workplace to the best of their ability.' (Benefer 2007, p.215)

Wilson et al (2005) comment likewise:

'A mentor in the workplace.....helps the student to identify their individual learning needs, apply knowledge to practice and act as a resource for the student's development.' (Wilson et al 2005, p. 119)

It is clear from the above student response that mentoring in the workplace is an issue that employers need to focus upon more intensely in order to provide the student with a sense of employee involvement.

Finally in response to **question 9**, only one Respondent (E) has opted to progress onto the final year of a related BA (Hons)degree at University. When asked who in society do you think would benefit from undertaking a Fd? She commented:

.....Those that want to go on to degree level.....what is the point of an Fd if you didn't take it on to the third year? It is a vocational qualification to support the years that practitioners have undertaken within the industry to help promote promotion within that company.....but how does that differ from a HLTA because Canterbury are offering a HLTA with a Fd aren't they..... A HLTA is a High Level Teaching Assistants Award which has to meet certain standards which are comparable to the PGCE standards.... almost identical but you have to provide evidence, you have to show an understanding and write up an essay and then you have to produce evidence...erm....to my way of thinking the HLTA is very similar to the NVQ merged with the Fd which is why Canterbury are offering it as a combined, so I can really understand the ambiguity that surrounds all these different qualifications and perhaps the confusion there is in senior management because I wouldn't know...if someone presented me with a c.v. and said I have a Fd and somebody else presented me with a c.v. that said I had HLTA status, I wouldn't know which was the better one. If you are not watching it in the press and you don't know, who are you going to go for?....

However other Respondents have chosen alternative pathways to the degree programme. B and C have opted to undertake a teacher training programme and B commented that:

.....It took time to decide because yes, I did want to go on to the BA but when we researched in to it, it proved that what we were going to be doing wouldn't have carried on what we had been doing for the Education Administration side of the Foundation Degree, it was more for support people. It didn't [have a progression into a BA in Education Administration] we

thought that we could go into a BA in perhaps the business side of it but there is no such animal....teacher training... ..as I say I am going to be on for retirement age and what I am thinking is if I can get a qualified teachers status which is what PTTLS, CTTLs and DTTLs leads you to then I can perhaps go into the basic skills teaching or something like that and semi-retire. Added to that we have been told that all people doing training sessions even if they are trainers for a training company will have to have this teaching qualification by 2010 so by doing that I am covering all aspects. So I can continue doing the work at college if I want to but also I can take my skills elsewhere if I wanted to move away.

Respondent D stated that she was going to take a break before progressing to a Level 5 ILAM course commenting that after which:

... ..perhaps come back to the cert ed and then progress to the BA eventually....[although].... I'm looking at a 55 retirement so we'll see.

Summary of Former Student Interview Findings

The main findings from these interviews indicate that undertaking a Foundation Degree has given students, particularly those practitioners with vocational-industrial experience, a renewed confidence to perform and extend their current job role. Students also commented on enhancement of their self-esteem with regards to improved employment prospects and promotion prospects.

On the whole students felt ill-prepared for the rigour of undertaking a Foundation Degree in terms of time-commitment and dealing with academic expectations. This finding concurs with findings from other stated research and suggests that generally information, advice and guidance regarding Foundation Degrees needs to be adapted to take account of the previous academic background of potential participants. There is far greater need for academic study support for participants who have industrial experience but who have been out of education for some time.

This may also account for the reason why the majority of students interviewed opted not to progress to the third year of an undergraduate degree programme, choosing in some instances to pursue other more vocationally related study programmes; for example, a teaching certificate or a management qualification.

This study found employer support for employees undertaking a Foundation Degree was variable. Some employees commented that they had been given time off to study by their employer, whilst others found difficulty in managing time to meet study requirements. Similarly, some interviewees stated that their fees had been paid for by the employer, whilst others had to take on two jobs to finance their studies.

With regards to the work-based learning element of the programme, all interviewees claimed that this was essential in underpinning their academic study. This is, perhaps, a reflection on the government's insistence that work-based learning be a compulsory part of the Foundation Degree. Although it will be recalled that data analysed from Research Study 1 found that not all Foundation Degrees had a work-based learning component. This aspect will be commented upon in '*Further Discussion*'.

With regard to employer engagement, this study clearly shows that not all employers are engaged in Foundation Degrees in the manner in which the government intended. In particular there is a serious shortfall in the involvement of employers in mentoring employees and in engagement in the formal assessment procedures associated with the degree.

Programme Leader Perception

To gain further insight into the practical mechanics of Foundation Degree operational delivery, an interview with a Foundation Degree Programme Leader (Respondent F) was undertaken to compare the realities with government theoretical intent. The following is a transcript of selected extracts of the interview carried out on 11th June 2007. Respondent F is a Programme Leader for a Foundation Degree in Sports Studies at a leading further education college and is approaching the end of the first year of delivery.

One of the key themes of a Foundation Degree as promulgated by the government is its employer engagement together with an appropriate marketing strategy; did he think that these criteria had been met?

..... very little because I don't think the employer in our particular sector were aware of what the Foundation Degree was, and the implications of it in terms of the development of the staff in their employment..... but I think if you are looking to allocate blame in this particular instance you have to look at the Government's policy with Foundation Degrees. It seems more akin to just to getting people into higher education than it is concerned with the quality of that education.

I think that [employment engagement] was important at the outset for the Government however in practical terms I think it has become very, very difficult to engage employers and take their employees out of the workplace for a day and then manage or help manage their higher education programme.

Did he feel that this is a time or a financial constraint?

.....I think that is only part of it. Taking the viewpoint of the employers, I think if they wish to develop their employees in the field of higher education they will look to find an outlet for that... rather than the employees themselves looking for some form of higher education and then ask their employers to take that on. Within our sector, the sports sector, what we have found is that the big employers have actually formulated their own Foundation Degree in-house[they] select the employees they consider would benefit from this training and ensure that they undertake the Fd accordingly. So in effect the impetus has come from the employer whereas from our position we are looking at the impetus from the potential student looking then for the employer to support them.

This contrasts with the experiences articulated by Thurgate and MacGregor (2008) commenting on their experience of employer involvement in the design and delivery of a Foundation Degree in Health and Social care:

'.... In establishing collaborations that bring benefits for both employer and HE/further education (FE) institutions, working together needs commitment and belief in the success of the venture. The employer has to be involved in all stages of the programme design and operation in order to ensure focus to the development of the organization's provision and demonstrate commitment to and value for their workforce' Thurgate & MacGregor (2008, p28)

This highlights the varying commitment of employers to Foundation Degrees and in particular the challenges facing small and medium size employers in engaging in provision of vocational training for their employees compared with the commitment available from larger organisations.

Of the cohort you have had this year how many of them are currently employed within the sport and recreation industry and have they been able to find a placement for the work based modules with their employer or have they had to look elsewhere?

....Within the current cohort, all but one are actually employed in the sport and education industry their prime employer is education but their field of education is sport....The majority have had to look elsewhere but I think the major reason for that is finding a suitable environment in which to conduct their studies and research to reflect what is needed for their degree. Their place of work isn't adequate to fulfil the needs of the Fd.

This comment merely underlines the gap between the employers and government expectations in terms of employer engagement. Did he feel that this inadequacy stems from the lack of mentoring by the employer for the students?

.....I think that's part of it and that brings me back to my earlier point and that I'm not sure that the employers are totally onboard with our particular cohort. Looking at things from a purely economic viewpoint, if an employer wanted to develop their staff they would look for a suitable outlet to develop their staff in conjunction with the employee's wishes.

I had the opportunity to interview some students undertaking a different Foundation Degree and they felt that, whilst they were experienced and professional practitioners in their field, they needed to undertake a Foundation Degree to give them an academic qualification, to boost self esteem and to boost confidence and to make them more available in the employment market. Had he experienced this with his current cohort?

.....I think the majority of the current cohort that I look after they arepretty young, you know, sort of early mid 20s so they are not far off going through compulsory education. So from that point of view I guess they are looking more to bumping up their academic credibility rather than gaining the skills that perhaps the Foundation Degree gives them. That said, I can understand why the Fd students on the education programme look at it for both angles because they are obviously more mature and they've had longer time in their professional workplace so they understand both the implications of the academic credibility but also the skills that HE study actually gives you in the workplace.

The Foundation Degree has a progression route to the third year of an honours degree, did he feel that the current cohort were likely to cope with stepping up to an honours degree?

....Well, first of all I think they find the transition to HE very difficult and the problem I can see happening is after two years once they've actually got used to erm.. the requirements of a Fd and hopefully completed it they will then move onto the third year of an undergraduate programme which is a step up again. And my concern is will they have the necessary skills to then complete that third year of an undergraduate programme, because they are basically making two giant steps in the space of two years and I just wonder if they are actually going to cope with that... ..I guess the one advantage of the HND was you went onto the third year of a degree programme, if you completed your HND successfully and by successfully I mean at least merit or distinction level, whereas now you could go through two years of a Fd with merely a pass criteria and still go into the third year and that I think is going to cause problems.

Have any of the employers of those who are currently on the first cohort requested any support from the college and, conversely, has the College provided any support for the employers?

....No, employers haven't been in touch with us, and we've supplied support for employers through the students. Basically in a description of what it is the students are going to take and what they will be required to do over the course of the year and how it will impact upon their job. The problem here is that I think the whole ethos of the Fd is back to front. It should be, in my view, employer driven whereas at present we are just marketing ourselves to take in students and hopefully give them an education that will help them in their place of work rather than the employers requesting of us what these students need to do and I think there's a big difference there.

If students have had difficulty in obtaining WBL placements with their employer, where have they been placed? Did you have to arrange any work placements for the first cohort?

.....A number of students have undertaken placements in local sports clubs because that's where they can apply the knowledge that they've gained from the course in terms of coaching and development. One or two have undertaken roles in their place of work. How well that has gone we have yet to find out... ..No they've actually done that themselves. They've identified work placements for themselves, be it at their place of work or outside coaching children or whatever.

A Work-based Learning (WBL) module is characteristic of Foundation Degree design, did he feel that one semester is sufficient time for a work based placement or did he think it should be ongoing throughout the two years?

.....Well considering it is a vocational work-based programme I would like to see this work-based learning go on for the entire year, the problem there is how you monitor this and how you record it and allocate results accordingly, and find out exactly what the student is getting out of applying what they know in a work-based setting, For that amount of time its very difficult. It's difficult anyway because you have to rely on the students' own views and experiences and how they put that across to you as part of their assessment. One thing we are lacking at the moment I think is enough employer comment on how the student is doing in work-based learning capacity.

The government's rationale behind a Foundation Degree is that it provides students with the necessary skills required for their employment - technical skills, communication skills etc, has he found this to be the case?

.....I think, I think it doesn't give them much more in the way of skills than what an HND would. That's my honest opinion.....I think there is a degree of inevitability about that the HNDs will eventually metamorphose into Fds

Finally, did he feel that the Foundation Degree is really just a reconstituted Higher National Diploma that makes it easier for the government to meet its targets by encouraging students to go to undergraduate level sooner rather than later?.

.....Yes I do and I think this is in danger of devaluing undergraduate programmes for the reasons you've just outlined there An HND was 2 plus 2 whereas an Fd is 2 plus 1. 3 years regardless of how well you do you can come out with a BA or a BSc honours which begs the question why don't they just go straight for an undergraduate programme? Well if they couldn't get on an undergraduate programme from year one are not Fd programmes and those who are working on it essentially working harder to get these students up to a required level at the end of year 2 to complete an undergraduate programme?

The government has an agenda of 50% of students in higher education by the year 2009 did he feel that this agenda is going to benefit both employees and employers?

....I certainly don't think it's the employers that are benefiting but the people that are benefiting are the universities because they are taking the lion's share of the fees. As to whether 50 % of the population by 2010 can be educated at HE level that's all very well in principle but does that not devalue the credibility of HE qualifications. If everybody has got one; what the point of doing it?

Summary of Findings from Programme Leader Interview

The findings from the Programme Leader perspective indicate that employer engagement is also an issue for Foundation Degree providers in a Further Education College setting. In particular, he highlights the problems of engagement for small and medium size employers, who can ill-afford to release staff to attend a Foundation Degree programme, let alone provide the additional support that is expected. He also comments on how unaware employers were of the additional expectations within the Foundation Degree ethos. Thus he discusses shortfalls in provision of mentoring in the workplace and collaboration with employers. However, as previously discussed this view differs from those of Thurgate & MacGregor (2008) with regard to collaboration with employers and this highlights the difficulties in implementing a recommended strategy across all sectors of industry.

On the subject of widening participation and the government's intention to recruit 50% of students aged 18 – 30 in higher education by 2009, the respondent did not feel that this particularly benefited employers and that the universities were the main benefactors in terms of financial incentives. In relation to the research question, the programme manager's comments suggest higher education sub-degree programmes may be beneficial in upskilling the workforce and therefore provide a means of widening participation in higher education. However, collaboration with employers, certainly in the development of Foundation Degrees in the sports industry, is currently problematic.

CHAPTER 7

Findings from the Three Research Studies

This chapter summarises the main findings and further discusses broader issues resulting from the three research studies.

Research study 1 identified that there is a different perspective between age groups and their views on the Foundation Degree's ability to improve employment prospects. Students aged 25 and over being more inclined to believe that the work-based learning experience improved their employment prospects compared with those in the younger age bracket. Secondly there is a difference dependent on the time spent at work experience placement and student perspective of their preparation for employment. Students spending one day per week on a work placement were more likely to consider this to be beneficial in terms of preparing them for work than those who spent more time on a work placement.

Research study 2 identified, firstly: that, in the main, students are positive about employer engagement being of benefit even though this is not necessarily being implemented in the way the government intended. In particular, employers seem reluctant to undertake formal assessment or mentoring in the work environment. Secondly, students value both the Foundation Degree study and the work experience as valuable in developing a range of skills. Thirdly, students considered that the Foundation Degree improved employments prospects and employment promotion prospects and was useful in preparing them for the third year of an honours degree.

In Research study 3, student interviews indicate that undertaking a Foundation Degree enhances students' confidence and self-esteem in regard to their current work role and their views on future employment and promotion prospects. However, most participants felt ill-prepared for the rigour of undertaking a Foundation Degree in terms of time-commitment and dealing with academic expectations and would benefit from additional study support, particularly if it is the intention to progress these students to the third year of an honours degree. The study also uncovered discrepancies in employer support for employees undertaking Foundation Degrees

even though participants felt that the work-based learning element of the Foundation Degree was an essential part of their learning programme.

The Programme Leader interview demonstrates that employer engagement is also an issue for Foundation Degree providers in a Further Education Colleges. In particular, he highlights the problems of engagement for small and medium size employers, both in terms of releasing staff to attend a Foundation Degree programme, and in providing the additional support that is expected, even if they are aware of these expectations. He also highlights shortfalls in mentoring provision and collaboration with employers.

In relation to the research question, the programme manager's comments suggest higher education sub-degree programmes may be beneficial in upskilling the workforce and therefore provide a means of widening participation in higher education. However, collaboration with employers, certainly in the development of Foundation Degrees in the sports industry, is currently problematic.

Further Discussion

The third part of the research question asks: Is it realistic to assume that the government's multiple agendas of widening participation in education as a means to improve social inclusion; upskilling the workforce; working collaboratively with employers and further education colleges, can be met through provision of shortened higher education degree programmes?

It would seem that in promoting Foundation Degrees the government, from the outset, clearly had in mind the major multi-national companies who in conjunction with both universities and further education colleges would establish Foundation Degrees to facilitate the vocational as well as the academic development of their own employees and the sector overall.

What appears to be happening in this case is that the partnership between universities, colleges and major employers has not functioned in the way intended. Although there is some evidence of multi-national companies' collaboration in Foundation Degrees, others companies have concentrated on developing training for their own employees

whilst colleges and universities have concentrated on developing academic programmes for those generally working in the sector, who do not have access to the same employer training. For small and medium size employers (SMEs) the college based Foundation Degree validated through the universities provide access for their employees to an academic and vocational qualification that would not be available to them otherwise. The problem here is that SMEs in most cases cannot afford financially to sponsor or release their employees to undertake the qualification. As a result, students tend to study in their own time and at their own expense. This in effect does not appear to differentiate from the current Higher National Certificate/Diploma qualification set up.

The programme manager makes a valid point in stating that:

.....the whole ethos of the Foundation Degree is back to front. It should be, in my view, employer driven whereas at present we are just marketing ourselves to take in students and hopefully give them an education that will help them in their place of work rather than the employers requesting of us what these students need to do and I think there is a big difference there.

If the employer is not actively engaged in designing the Foundation Degrees offered by educational institutions, how can the universities and colleges be sure that the product they design will be valued in the workplace? Similarly how can the universities and colleges be sure that the student is able to benefit effectively from the work-based placement? Costley & Armsby (2007) comment that:

'flexibility in the way WBL is interpreted means that different models are being offered to meet the needs of many people who work and are ready to study at a higher education level' (Costley & Armsby 2007. p. 23).

However whilst Costley & Armsby (2007), suggest that this flexibility serves to meet needs, a study undertaken by Burke, Marks-Maran, Ooms, Webb & Cooper (2009) into student perceptions of work-based learning in Foundation Degrees, see this flexibility as problematic. In their study, a total of 152 students completed a questionnaire (a 34.1% response rate) from which findings related to three key areas; perceptions, meaningfulness and understanding of the term work-based learning. They found that *'students had diverse understandings and interpretations of WBL'*

and as *'being about placement experience rather than about how these placements generate learning'* (p.16). Students' perceptions varied from one Foundation Degree to another particularly with regard to time and activities undertaken on work-based learning placement. In terms of meaningfulness, students reported *'good links between their assignments and their workplace experiences'* (p.26). In regard to understanding, students who participated in this study commented that they saw work-based learning as a placement rather than a learning experience. As a consequence, it would seem that work-based placements are not consistently providing the developmental experience intended.

In order to explore the reasons for this, it is necessary to understand the whole concept of Vocational Educational Training (VET) policy and the relationship between employers, employees, education providers and government(s). The Department for Education and Skills (2003c) paper entitled *21st Century Skills, Realising Our Potential* comments as follows:

'The aim of this National Skills Strategy is to ensure that employers have the right skills to support success in their businesses and individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled' (DfES, 2003c, p.11)

In order to do this, the Strategy set out its agenda for change in colleges and training providers to make them:

..... 'more responsive to employers' and learners' needs, reaching out to more businesses and more people, and providing training in ways that suit them. Creating a truly demand-led approach means reforming qualifications, reforming the way we fund colleges, and reforming the way we deliver training.' (DfES, 2003c, Forward to the Skills Strategy).

The issue of vocational educational training, who delivers and who pays, is not new and is seen as contentious (Hayward 2004). The promotion of partnerships between employers, education providers and governments (past and present) causes tensions as to the main purpose of post-16 education; is it to provide state funded training for the workforce or is it to prepare young adults for higher education and can those aims be satisfied simultaneously? The question has to be asked as to whom in this relationship exerts the most influence on the higher education system. There is a need to examine

this relationship in greater depth to understand the political position behind the government agenda and the push towards greater vocationalism of education to meet the highly publicized skills gap and apparent demise of the British economy. The strategy for future skills development promotes partnership working between employers and education providers. However, the reality is that this partnership will remain unequal. Education providers are charged with meeting the needs of employers and face serious consequences if this charge is not met, in terms of funding restraints and inspection grades.

Employers are 'consulted' on the skills required in the workplace and frequent reports, particularly from the government, are made on how education is failing to provide those skills (DfES, 2002b, DfES, 2003b, DfES, 2003c). However, this consultation with employers is not straightforward and raises questions as to who is consulted and whether their views are representative of the employers as a whole. The issue is further compounded by the logistical makeup of businesses within the UK. According to the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership (2000) there were, in 2000, 2.5 million single owner businesses accounting for 69.6% of all UK businesses, although turnover was just 7.4%. Conversely, less than 1% of all businesses (33,000 companies) employed over 50 people, yet these accounted for 62.8% of UK business turnover. Of these 33,000 businesses only 7,000 were designated as large companies employing more than 250 people. This figure represents 0.2% of all UK businesses.

This clearly causes a difficulty in engaging with employers, as the government would not be able to engage with every employer. Instead they rely on businesses representatives through the Sector Skills Councils and local Learning Skills Council (LSC) arrangements as well as representatives from the largest employers. Thus, it is likely to be difficult to gain a truly representative view from a diverse group of employers represented by a few who are unlikely to have consulted with others in a democratic manner. Gleeson and Keep (2004) cite a DfES 2002 internal document that acknowledges consultation with employers is problematic, inasmuch that:

' our evidence demonstrates that relying on representative bodies is not enough – employers have told us that such bodies: don't represent the views of

all their members; only represent themselves; are remote from the reality of business; have a political agenda not directly related to business needs' (DfES, 2002, p.19 cited in Gleeson and Keep, 2004 p.42)

The government, whilst keen to develop a strategy to meet the projected skills gaps in the economy, seems powerless to ensure that the employers, whilst demanding that these skills are needed, actually make the contribution that is needed from employers in terms of financial support for training and support in the workplace to develop those skills 'in situ'. Thus it is left to the education providers to fill the gap, hence the comment from the *programme leader* that the '*Foundation Degree is back to front*'.

In reality, employers want employees who already have all the skills required prior to starting employment, as their main goal is to run their business and not to provide training. In reality, it is impossible to gain those skills without having experience in the workplace and some of those skills can only be gained in the workplace. Thus the government is faced with devising a strategy to develop those skills identified as necessary by employers but with little support from the employers to do so. It is education providers that are charged with addressing this need, in reality, something they are ill-equipped to do. At the same time, education providers are also charged with promoting academic rigour to support the needs of higher education establishments who also complain of falling standards and students ill-equipped for academic study.

There is of course a third perspective pertaining to this partnership and that is the motivation of the individual in undertaking training in the first place. From their viewpoint, they look firstly to acquire skills in the shortest possible time and at minimal costs. Secondly, they aim to gain maximum advantage in the workplace once they have attained the relevant qualification. This advantage can of course only be maintained if qualified staff are in short supply. From an employer's perspective, the opposite is advantageous inasmuch as a plentiful supply of qualified individuals minimizes skills shortages. This provides the employer with a choice of employee and also enables the employer to control wages. This also minimizes the investment that the employer makes in providing training, shifting the responsibility to the individual or state-funded provision. As Gleeson and Keep (2004) comment:

.....'in terms of apportioning the cost of training, employers will, if unconstrained by other influences, want to transfer as much of the cost of skill acquisition onto the individual or the state (or both)' (Gleeson and Keep, 2004, p.39)

This clearly has implications for all training programmes that involve work-based learning and the Foundation Degree is no exception. However, the DfES (2003c) Skills strategy emphasized that the Sector Skills Councils were expected to develop occupational standards defining the skills needed in their sector that would inform the development of national qualifications such as those offered in Modern Apprenticeships and later Apprenticeships. Thus they were developing a national benchmark. In designing Foundation Degrees rather than working to national standards, the awards are accredited by the universities, supposedly designed in conjunction with local employers. This has the potential to tailor qualifications more specifically to the needs of local employers; however, it raises issues about the amount of time local employers are willing and able to contribute to consultation and design of these qualifications but moreover commit to taking responsibility for their employees in undertaking Foundation Degrees.

This responsibility entails financial and time constraints as well as monitoring and assessment in the workplace. It raises questions about the ability of employers to conduct assessments in the workplace and may raise other training issues. However, the time commitment required to address these issues detracts from the core business of employers, namely running their business. This 'Catch- 22' situation is reflected in the results of Research Study 2 where it transpired that only 26% of questionnaire respondents were assessed in the workplace. Furthermore none of the Respondents subsequently interviewed were assessed in the workplace (*question 7*). From analysis of the results of this research into employer engagement within Foundation Degrees it is apparent that there is a continuing shift between employers', students' and governments' perspectives. This reluctance for employers to become fully engaged in vocational educational training has been highlighted by Gleeson & Keep (2004) who comment that since 1981:

..... 'massive amounts of effort and money have been sunk by government into the research for a 'permanent bridge between school and work'. A long list of initiatives in search of policy solution has resulted - the one-year Youth

Training Scheme (YTS), two-year YTS, Youth Training (YT), the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), National Traineeships, General/National Vocational Qualifications (G/NVQ) and now Foundation and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships. The end result must, in the main, be judged disappointing.....despite successes with a limited number of employers in a limited number of sectors, overall outcomes have been poor – and largely underwritten by the private governance of public taxation.’ (Gleeson & Keep 2004 p. 53)

Contrast this with apprenticeships that are undertaken in European countries: employers there are fully committed in both management and training. Whereas in apprenticeships undertaken in this country, the majority of which are operated by private training organisations, just 5% of these are *‘directly sponsored by individual employers’* (Ryan & Unwin 2001) with the remainder of employers only offering work placements. As a consequence of the failure to develop a UK wide, employer supported, work-based apprenticeship pathway into industry, the burden of upskilling those entering the labour market has fallen upon the education system and in particular upon the ever expanding further and higher education system. Dearing’s recommendation (1997) that future funding of higher education be the responsibility of all three parties (government, employer and student) has not come to fruition especially on the part of the employer. They have doggedly remained unenthusiastic and in spite of the present government’s initiative to retain this ‘partnership’, there remains minimal input from employers in terms of financial contribution and work placements. Thurgate *et al* (2007) point out that:

‘.....despite QAA (2005) and Foundation Degree Forward (FDF) demanding the involvement of employers from conception to delivery of an FD.....the willingness of employers to take equal partnership cannot be assumed’ (Thurgate et al 2007, p. 216.)

It is an issue that the government appears reluctant to address. This in turn has placed a financial burden upon the government and of course the student. (CIHE 2003). The current government initiative to coerce employers to be involved is ‘Train to Gain’ which features prominently in the Leitch Report (2006) and states that the government will increase funding to £1 billion by 2010. It remains to be seen how this will differ from other previous attempts to engage employers.

Discussion has already centred upon both employer and student perspectives; however, it is the perspective of the government that determines the direction for all three key stakeholders. The growth of higher education during the 1980s and 1990s, together with the government's aim of 50% participation of students under the age of 30 by the year 2010, has highlighted concerns relating to the value of higher education in society but moreover to its role in future economic prosperity. Through its support for the ongoing expansion of the higher education Sector, the government has made explicit expectations of economic development, increased wealth and greater social benefits.

However, I would suggest that the link between Higher Education and government policy is driven by a political rather than an economic agenda. The question posed is: what evidence does the government have that links successful outcome in the higher education sector with economic success? Morgan et. al. (2004) cite Ashton and Green (1996) in stating that *'there is no published research evidence that establishes a clear causal link between post-16 education and a nation's economic competitiveness.'* (Morgan et. al. (2004 p.354) As previously suggested in this thesis, the government could be accused of borrowing this assumption from American economists and incorporating it within their own educational policy, to the extent that Barber (1998) claimed that *'the success of any economy will depend on the level of education of its workforce.....'* (ibid p.354)

The government has since taken this a step further by calling for 'education for all' and 'lifelong learning', both of which have struggled to survive through inadequate funding. The same can be said for a number of recent government financed training and education schemes, many of which, as previously discussed, have been short-lived; these include: National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ), Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education (AVCE), National Traineeships, Modern Apprenticeships, Foundation and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, Graduate Apprenticeships. Will the Foundation Degree follow likewise?

In this respect we come back to the discussion as to the extent of employer involvement and commitment. In developing a work-based learning curriculum, the

establishment of a relationship between all stakeholders is imperative despite the different agendas and idiosyncrasies of the main partners. Benefer cites Foskett (2003) in concurring that:

... 'it is important that all partners have complementary aims, compatible missions, good personal relationships, clear responsibilities, trust each other, and are prepared to sign up to a common agreement on respective roles and commitments, (Benefer 2007, p. 211)

However, notwithstanding the rhetoric of both employer engagement and work-based learning, Rowley (2005) considers Foundation Degrees to be a 'risky business' and that:

'...working in partnership is not easy, and the partnership working required for the delivery of Foundation Degrees has a number of dimensions' (Rowley 2005, p. 8)

What is not clear from this partnership is the level of skills being met by students; neither does it state how much of a financial contribution, if any, the employer is making towards this partnership. The emphasis here appears to be one of establishing a work-based 'relationship' that is possibly benefiting the employer skill-wise at the expense of the provider and employee.

The government and its policy makers take the stance that the main function of the government/employer relationship is its focus on upskilling the workforce. The problem arising here is that in adopting this rather narrow focus the government is failing to recognise that organisations do not exist purely for the purpose of skill utilization or creation. Whilst the demand for both may form part of an employer's agenda, the main reason for their existence is to make a profit within the private sector or the effective delivery of a service within the public sector. That is not to say that skills are not important, but they remain incidental to the goals of an organisation and what the government fails to recognise is that, according to Gleeson & Keep (2004):

'Many employers are able to generate the profits they desire with a relatively lowly-skilled workforce which they treat as a more or less disposable commodity' (Gleeson & Keep 2004 p. 46)

In developing a Foundation Degree in Sports Studies, I received feedback from local small and medium employers (SMEs) in the sport and leisure industry showing that some of these companies have set up their own in-house training programme specific to the skills they require in order to successfully operate their businesses. As such they are not interested in locking in to an academic award at Level 4 (Foundation Degree) and are reluctant to support individual employees in terms of finance and time allowance to undertake them. However, practitioners from other SMEs that do not have their own in-house training schemes have enrolled on Foundation Degree courses although employer involvement is patchy in terms of employee support.

The desire to use the educational system to promote vocationalism alongside academic excellence is always going to cause friction in terms of expectations of all three parties. Education has traditional ideas of academic rigour to uphold, including examinations, external assessments and prescriptive methods leading to achievement outcome. Whereas, by contrast, employers do not consider these attributes to be relevant to vocationalism. The employee is therefore, straddling the divide between the two expectations.

Foundation Degrees could be perceived by some as yet another government initiative attempting to span the academic-vocational divides. In my opinion, the government is ingratiating itself upon its Labour roots in providing a 'degree' albeit a vocational award for the working class whose educational background has not provided them with the opportunity to progress to university to undertake a traditional honours degree. Social inclusion and widening participation are at the root of a vocationally orientated educational agenda. However, government policy does not understand both sides of the coin, in that there will always be sections of the workforce population who do not value education and do not see the benefits of participation for them.

The social inclusion agenda for education assumes individuals have an equal desire to learn but unequal access to education and attempts to address this inequality. Personal experience suggests that many students embarking upon both further and higher education programmes do not possess the basic skills from their secondary education and struggle to cope with the demands of academia whereas those from Grammar school backgrounds progress to 6th form and then onto university with the basic skills

necessary to succeed. The whole point of inclusion is not to state that you do not fit with the system but to ask how the system can adapt to fit with you so that you are included. However, personal experience again dictates that this can only be achieved by altering the programmes of study to the extent where they become so prescriptive that little is left for the student to think for themselves – thus undermining the very intention of Higher Education in the first place.

The current government commitment to Foundation Degrees is clear, although its ultimate success is uncertain. It lies at the crossroads of the divide between academic and vocational progression; a stand alone qualification after two years, an honours degree after three years if the student so wishes to progress to a third year. However, left to its own devices, it is in danger of doing neither particularly well and it requires a stronger identity if it is going to establish itself as a worthwhile qualification for mature students in higher education. Perhaps a natural reduction in competitive qualifications (Access/Higher National Certificates/Diplomas) may strengthen its cause in future years, but, in the meantime, the government and the employers need to rethink their skills strategy to find consensus or common ground from which both provider and learners (employees) may benefit.

Hillier and Rawnsley (2006) argue that; *'the relationship between employers and education....is an 'elusive objective'* p.15 and notwithstanding government funding to the Learning Skills Council (LSC) and *'the increasing attention being paid to employers by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) through knowledge transfer and its third stream of funding, employers are not fully engaged with education.'* P.15. As stated previously, profit from both the private and public sectors, - despite the government's assertion that the public sector *'is an important role model for employer engagement'* - take precedence in business over the development of a workforce.

The Leitch Review of Skills (2006) looks to address this situation and sets out in its Executive Summary principles to *'underpin delivery of a raised ambition'* p. 3. These include:

- *'shared responsibility. Employers, individuals and the government must increase action and investment. Employers and individuals should contribute most where they derive the greatest private returns;*
- *focus on economically valuable skills. Skills development must provide real returns for individuals, employers and society. Wherever possible, skills should be portable to deliver mobility in the labour market form individuals and employers;*
- *demand-led skills. The skills system must meet the needs of individuals and employers. Vocational skills must be demand-led rather than centrally planned;*' (Leitch Review of Skills 2006, p.3)

However, whilst the report promises *'to increase employer engagement and investment in skills'*; *'increase employer investment in Level 3 and 4 qualifications in the workplace;*' and *'employers will have more influence over skills strategy within a simplified system'* (ibid p.5) there yet again appears to be no statement as to the level of financial commitment to be made by the employer. To date this remains the situation. A recent report on Foundation Degrees from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) claims that;

'nearly 72,000 students were registered, or were expected to register, on Foundation Degree programmes in 2007-08.....and expect total student numbers to rise to about 97,000 before 2010' (HEFCE 2008, p.2.)

However, the report goes on to state that:

.....'evidence suggests that students, even part-time students, do not get their tuition fees paid by their employer, or receive any other financial support. This underlines the challenge of the employer engagement programme, to develop provision to which employers will be willing to make a contribution significantly greater than the fee' (ibid. p.56.)

The nature and form of the relationship between the State, employers and education has changed over the past twenty years so that *'education is now a less separate and discrete entity; its relative autonomy has been curtailed'* and is now one of *'individualism and consumerism.'* (Gleeson & Keep 2004, p.38). It has to be recognised and acknowledged that employers are only one beneficiary of the

education system and that the same education system does not exist solely to meet the needs of the economy. Improvement in this important relationship is essential if learners are to achieve and the requisites of both the state and employer are to be successfully achieved.

Recommendations

As a result of the findings of Research Studies 1, 2 and 3 the following recommendations are made:

1. There needs to be a greater emphasis on formal assessment in the workplace undertaken by the employer or trained assessors from the Foundation Degree provider. This could be along the lines of assessment currently being carried out in Apprenticeship and Train to Gain schemes. Training needs to be provided to support employers undertaking formal assessment in the workplace. This should be subject to quality assurance procedures.
2. Foundation Degree providers should ensure that adequate support is in place for students undertaking the Foundation Degree programme, prior to and during the period of study. Taster sessions or pre-course study skills programmes should be provided as part of the information, advice and guidance support framework for Foundation Degree programmes. Ongoing support should be readily available for individuals, including opportunities to develop and gain accreditation for literacy and numeracy skills.
3. There needs to be stronger marketing of the benefits of Foundation Degrees to engage small and medium size employers (SMEs), and financial incentives paid to employers to support the costs of releasing staff to attend Foundation Degree programmes.
4. Training opportunities need to be made available to employers in mentoring to support employees undertaking Foundation Degree programmes or student placements in their organisation

5. Foundation Degrees should make explicit the links with local or national employers prior to validation. Moreover, this provision should be registered with and monitored by QAA to ensure employer involvement is embedded in the Foundation Degree at the time of validation.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Context in which the Research took place

Foundation Degrees were introduced in February 2000 as a new two-year degree qualification. The government consultation document (DfEE 2000) was critical of existing sub-degree provision, claiming amongst other things that student numbers were falling, and that both employers and students were confused by the various types and range of qualification available. The government claimed that in order to be economically competitive in the global market, employees needed to be upskilled. This new qualification served a dual purpose; to meet the skills needs perceived as essential to ensuring that Britain remained economically competitive in the global market and to support the government's commitment to expanding access to Higher Education experience for 50% of 18-30 year olds by 2010.

In this context, the research questions of this thesis asked:

1. What are the perceived benefits to individuals in undertaking a work-based learning placement as part of a Foundation Degree in terms of:

- improving employment prospects
- improving employment promotion prospects
- improving industry experience
- improving employment skills
- better preparation for employment
- better preparation for a degree programme at university

2. Does the compulsory Work-based/related Learning element, which is seen as the cornerstone of Foundation Degrees, provide the participant with the relevant skills for the workplace?

3. Is it realistic to assume that the government's multiple-agendas of widening participation in education as a means to improve social inclusion; upskilling the workforce; working collaboratively with employers and Further education colleges, can be met through provision of shortened higher education degree programmes?

Within this thesis I set out to establish whether this new government initiative entitled 'Foundation Degree' would succeed, firstly, in its intention of embedding the ethos of vocationalism within higher education: secondly, whether the government edict of a compulsory work-based learning element in Foundation Degrees would match the demand for skills development required by employers: thirdly, whether the programmes emphasis on employer engagement would ensure employers' compliance with the skills agenda.

In order to achieve this, I conducted a series of research studies that sought firsthand the views and perspectives of students undertaking Foundation Degrees and former Foundation Degree students. The methodology used included surveys using self-report questionnaires to obtain quantitative data and interpretive methodology employing one to one interviews to elicit qualitative data.

Findings from results concluded that for the first part of the research question respondents were of the opinion that undertaking a Foundation Degree would improve employment prospects; improve employment promotion prospects and develop employment skills. Respondents also felt that the Foundation Degree prepared them for the third year of an honours degree programme. However, findings relating to whether the compulsory work-based learning element of the Foundation Degree provided relevant skills for the workplace were inconclusive. This was attributed to the fact that, despite its compulsory nature, not all of the Foundation Degrees from which respondents were surveyed had a work-based learning element as part of the programme. The implications of this were discussed at length, as it seems that the work-based learning element is not being used to promote employer engagement in the manner that was intended. In particular, it was postulated that, rather than insisting on a work placement as an essential part of the Foundation Degree programme, opportunities to reflect on current practice in the workplace should be utilized where students were undertaking a Foundation Degree related to their current employment.

A second weakness highlighted from the research revealed that employers are not engaging in formal assessment of the Foundation Degree programme, neither are they providing mentoring for employees undertaking this form of study. This represents a missed opportunity for true engagement with employers in a manner that could help to bridge the divide between academic qualification and vocational relevance.

From a programme management point of view, employer engagement with small and medium size employers is problematic due to the diverse nature of the employers and time and business constraints. Many small and medium size employers find it difficult to release staff to attend training and are unfamiliar with the support expectations of Foundation Degree programmes and the extent of involvement expected from employers.

In addition, it was recognised that if the Foundation Degree is to be used as a vehicle to promote social inclusion by widening participation in higher education, more needs to be done to support students making the transition into higher education studies through additional learning support mechanisms and study skills training. Many students felt ill-prepared for studying at this level.

Implications for Professional Practice

Clearly there are several implications in terms of professional practice arising from this study; firstly, the positive outcomes of this research study, namely, improvement of employment prospects, improvement of employment promotion prospects and development of employment skills, are deemed the basis upon which the development and validation of further Foundation Degrees can be justified.

Secondly, where work-based learning was included as part of the Foundation Degree programme, this proved beneficial in terms of developing employment skills. Unfortunately, it was evident that this was not being provided as an essential component of all Foundation Degrees. Therefore, policy should ensure that the requirement for a work-based learning component to the Foundation Degree has been established prior to validation, and that this is rigorously tested via employer representation on the validation panel. Employer engagement could be demonstrated

in several ways; by providing work placements, by providing opportunities to reflect on current practice in the workplace and by providing assessment and mentoring opportunities. In order to achieve this, employers will need support in the form of training in conducting assessment procedures that meet academic standards and in developing appropriate mentoring skills. This is likely to be difficult for small and medium size employers to implement and so it may be that partnerships have to be forged between employers in the same sector to promote assessment and mentoring schemes.

Students embarking on Foundation Degree programmes need additional information, advice and guidance before starting their studies to ensure that they are able to utilize their time and study techniques effectively. It would seem to be prudent to provide pre-enrolment study days that include assessment of students' literacy and numeracy support needs, study skills, critical reading and writing techniques.

New Knowledge and Further Research

This study has considered how Foundation Degrees are developing in practice and particularly has highlighted the difficulties around utilizing employer engagement as a means to ensure higher education can meet the demands of employers for higher level skills development in the workplace whilst retaining academic rigour to ensure participants can progress to the third year of an honours degree programme. This research study has also shown that, contrary to government intentions, the compulsory work-based learning module, seen by the government as an essential component of Foundation Degrees, is not a consistent feature in all Foundation Degrees.

Two key findings from this research warrant further investigation. Firstly, the benefits of a work-based learning component have been established. However, this could be explored further to ascertain models of good practice in delivering work-based learning in order to embed further the ethos of work-based learning in the Foundation Degree programme. Secondly, formal assessment in the work place seems to be problematic, with few employers willing to take on this role. Further research should be undertaken to identify barriers to work-based assessment at this level in order to address these issues.

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APPENDIX 1

Research Study 1 - Questionnaire

Foundation Degree (Fd) Programme

Student Questionnaire 2005

As part of an ongoing research programme, your co-operation in completing this questionnaire would be gratefully appreciated.

All information will be kept in strictest confidence.

There is a section at the end for you to give any additional comments you feel are beneficial to your programme.

Foundation Degree (Fd) Programme

Student Questionnaire 2005

ABOUT YOU:

Q1 Name - *You may remain anonymous if you wish*

Q2 Gender
Male Female

Q3 Please indicate your age at the start of your Foundation Degree programme:

19-24
25-29
30-34
35-39
40-44
45 and over

Q4 Please indicate qualifications held prior to the start of your Foundation Degree programme:

GCSE
A Level
AVCE/GNVQ Advanced
NVQ Level 1
NVQ Level 2
NVQ Level 3
NVQ Level 4
BTEC National Diploma/Certificate
Degree
Other (please specify)

Q5 Please indicate what you were doing prior to the start of your Foundation Degree programme:

In education (6th form/FE College)
Part-time employment
Full-time employment
Self-employed
Unemployed
Other (please specify)

Q6 Please indicate the reason(s) why you undertook the Foundation Degree programme:

Locality
Progression route to Hons. Degree
Change of Career
Specialist subject
Improve employment prospects
College reputation
Other (please specify)

Q7 Please indicate what you intend to do once you have completed your Foundation Degree programme:

Work full-time - already have a job
Work part-time - already have a job
Work full-time - look for job
Work part-time - look for job
Another HE programme at College
Year off / gap year
Progress to a degree programme
Other (please specify)

ABOUT YOUR FOUNDATION DEGREE WBL MODULE AND PLACEMENT

Q8 Please indicate whether your Foundation Degree programme included a Work Based Learning module:

Yes No

Q9 If yes, please indicate which year(s) this module was undertaken:

Year 1
Year 2
Years 1 and 2

Q10 Please indicate whether the Work Based Learning module included a Work Based Learning Industry placement:

Yes No

- Q11 Please indicate how many weeks were you at your Work Based Learning placement?
- 1 - 5.....
- 6 - 10.....
- 11 - 15.....
- 16 - 20.....
- More than 20.....

- Q14 Please indicate whether during your two-year Foundation Degree programme you were also in employment:
- Yes..... No.....

- Q12 Please indicate how many days per week were you at your Work Based Learning placement?
- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3 or more.....

- Q15 Please indicate whether your Work Based Learning placement was undertaken at your place of employment:
- Yes..... No.....

- Q13 Please indicate whether your Work Based Learning placement was related to your Foundation Degree programme:
- Yes..... No.....

- Q16 Please indicate whether your job was either:
- Part-time..... Full-time.....

- Q17 If part-time, please indicate how many hours per week this entailed:
- Less than 5.....
- 6-10.....
- 11-15.....

- Q18 Please indicate whether your job was related to your Foundation Degree programme?
- Yes..... No.....

Please rate the extent to which you found the Work Based Learning placement useful in terms of:

- | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Q19 ...improving your employment prospects? | Not at all Useful 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Very Useful 5 |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Q20 ...improving your employment promotion prospects? | Not at all Useful 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Very Useful 5 |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Q21 ...improving your industry experience? | Not at all Useful 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Very Useful 5 |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Q22 ...improving your employment skills? | Not at all Useful 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Very Useful 5 |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

ABOUT YOUR FD PROGRAMME IN GENERAL

Please rate the extent to which you found the Fd programme useful in terms of:

- | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Q23 ...better preparing you for employment? | Not at all Useful 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Very Useful 5 |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Q24 ...better preparing you for a degree programme at university? | Not at all Useful 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Very Useful 5 |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- Q25 Please give any other comments relating to your WBL placement or your Foundation Degree in general:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. If you are interested in participating in any further research please complete the following:

| | |
|--|--|
| Name | Telephone Number |
| <input style="width: 400px; height: 20px;" type="text"/> | <input style="width: 400px; height: 20px;" type="text"/> |

APPENDIX 2

Research Study 2 - Questionnaire

Foundation Degree (Fd) Programme

Year 2

Student Questionnaire 2006

As part of an ongoing research programme, your cooperation in completing this questionnaire would be gratefully appreciated.

All information will be kept in strictest confidence.

ABOUT YOU

1. Gender

| | |
|------|--------|
| Male | Female |
| (1) | (2) |

2. Age at the start of your Foundation degree programme

| | |
|-------|-----|
| 18-29 | 30+ |
| (1) | (2) |

3. Please indicate which of the following qualifications you currently hold.

| | |
|--|-----|
| HND/HNC or 'A' Levels, NVQ 3, Nat Diploma | (1) |
| NVQ 2, First Diploma, GCSE 5+ grade A-C | (2) |
| NVQ 1, GCSE/'O' below grade C or No Qualifications | (3) |

* Other qualifications: (Please state).....

4. What is the title of the Foundation degree programme that you are currently undertaking?
.....

5. Is your Foundation degree programme full or part-time?

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| Full-time | Part-time |
| (1) | (2) |

6. What was your main employment status, including voluntary and paid work, in the year prior to starting your Foundation degree? (please tick one box)

| | | | |
|----------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| Full-time employment | (1) | Registered unemployed | (3) |
| Part-time employment | (2) | Not employed | (4) |
| Other please specify | | | (5) |

7. Were you a full-time student in the year prior to starting your Foundation degree?

| | |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | No |
| (1) | (2) |

8. What is your current employment status, including voluntary and paid work? (please tick one box)

| | | | |
|--|-----|---|-----|
| Full-time employment (please go to question 9) | (1) | Registered unemployed (please go to question 16) | (3) |
| Part-time employment (please go to question 9) | (2) | Not employed (Please go to question 16) | (4) |
| Other (please specify) (please go to question 16) | | | (5) |

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

9. How **relevant** to your employment is your current Foundation degree programme?

| Relevant | Not Relevant |
|----------|--------------|
| (1) | (2) |

10. How **supportive** is your employer of you undertaking a Foundation degree?

| Supportive | Not Supportive |
|------------|----------------|
| (1) | (2) |

11. In undertaking your Foundation degree, how **useful** has your current employment been in providing opportunities to put into practice what you have learnt.

| Useful | Not Useful |
|--------|------------|
| (1) | (2) |

12. Please indicate whether you have received mentoring from your Employer?

| Yes | No |
|-----|-----|
| (1) | (2) |

13. If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be **useful**.

| Useful | Not Useful |
|--------|------------|
| (1) | (2) |

14. Please indicate whether your Employer has undertaken any formal assessment of you as part of your Foundation degree accreditation?

| Yes | No |
|-----|-----|
| (1) | (2) |

15. If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be **useful**.

| Useful | Not Useful |
|--------|------------|
| (1) | (2) |

16. Are you undertaking a work experience placement as part of your Foundation degree?

| Yes | No | (If No, go to question 23) |
|-----|-----|----------------------------|
| (1) | (2) | |

17. If yes, how **useful** has your work experience placement been in providing opportunities to put into practice what you have learnt?

| Useful | Not Useful |
|--------|------------|
| (1) | (2) |

18. Please indicate whether you have received mentoring from your Work Placement Provider?

| | |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | No |
| (1) | (2) |

19. If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be **useful**.

| | |
|--------|------------|
| Useful | Not Useful |
| (1) | (2) |

20. Please indicate whether your Work Placement Provider has undertaken any formal assessment of you as part of your Foundation degree accreditation?

| | |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | No |
| (1) | (2) |

21. If yes, please indicate whether you have found this to be **useful**.

| | |
|--------|------------|
| Useful | Not Useful |
| (1) | (2) |

22. Please indicate whether you found your work experience placement **useful** in terms of helping you to develop the following skills:

| | Useful | Not Useful |
|------------------------|--------|------------|
| a) Technical skills | (1) | (2) |
| b) Academic skills | (1) | (2) |
| c) Transferable skills | (1) | (2) |
| d) Vocational skills | (1) | (2) |
| e) Reflective skills | (1) | (2) |

23. Please indicate whether you found the Foundation degree **useful** in terms of helping you to develop the following skills:

| | Useful | Not Useful |
|------------------------|--------|------------|
| a) Technical skills | (1) | (2) |
| b) Academic skills | (1) | (2) |
| c) Transferable skills | (1) | (2) |
| d) Vocational skills | (1) | (2) |
| e) Reflective skills | (1) | (2) |

24. Please indicate whether you expect the Foundation degree to be **useful** in terms of:

| | Useful | Not Useful |
|--|--------|------------|
| a) Improving future employment prospects | (1) | (2) |
| b) Improving future employment promotion prospects | (1) | (2) |

25. Please indicate whether, upon completion, you believe your Foundation degree will be **useful** in preparing you for the third year of an honours degree programme?

| | |
|--------|------------|
| Useful | Not Useful |
| (1) | (2) |

Thank you for your time in completing this questionnaire

APPENDIX 3

Research Study 1 – Chi-Square Analysis Data

Appendix 3

Research Study 1 - Chi Square Test Results

Q.2 'gender' v Q.19 'improving your employment prospects'

The data for question 19 shows that the majority of respondents (19 of 33 – 58%) thought Work Based Learning (WBL) placement would help them in gaining employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between men and women in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment prospects.

$$\chi^2 = 1.749; df = 2; p = .417$$

Q.2 'gender' v Q.20 'improving your employment promotion prospects'

The data for question 20 shows that (15 of 33 – 45%) thought WBL placement would help them in gaining promotion within their employment. Following a Chi square Test there was no statistically significant difference overall however, the male cohort indicates that there is a trend towards improving employment prospects with;

$$\chi^2 = 4.959; df = 2; p = .084$$

Q.2 'gender' v Q.21 'improving your industry experience'

The data for question 21 shows that (24 of 33 – 73%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving industry experience. However following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between men and women in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve industry experience.

$$\chi^2 = 0.445; df = 2; p = .800$$

Q.2 'gender' v Q.22 'improving your employment skills'

The data for question 22 shows that (20 of 33 – 61%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving their employment skills. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between men and women in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment skills.

$$\chi^2 = 3.446; df = 2; p = .179$$

Q.2 'gender' v Q. 23 'better preparing you for employment'

The data for question 23 shows that (24 of 33 – 73%) thought WBL placement would better prepare them for employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between men and women in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for employment.

$$\chi^2 = 1.927; df = 2; p = .382$$

Q.2 'gender' v Q.24 'better preparing you for a degree programme at university'

The data for question 24 shows that (25 of 33 – 76%) thought WBL placement would help them in better preparing them for a degree programme at university. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between men and women in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for a degree programme at university.

$$\chi^2 = 0.733; df = 2; p = .693$$

Analysis of question 2 against questions 19-24 show no statistical significance between male and female respondents however what is clear is both male and female respondents found that their WBL placement experience very useful in questions 19 to 24.

Q.3 'age' v Q.19 'improving your employment prospects'

The data for question 19 shows that the majority of respondents (19 of 33 – 58%) thought Work Based Learning (WBL) placement would help them in gaining employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was a statistically significant difference between those aged 19-24 and those over 25 in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment prospects. In this respect those aged over 25 found the Foundation degree significant in improving their employment prospects

$$\chi^2 = 6.359; df = 2; p = 0.042$$

Q.3 'age' v Q.20 'improving your employment promotion prospects'

The data for question 20 shows that (15 of 33 – 45%) thought WBL placement would help them in gaining promotion within their employment. Following a Chi square

Test there was no statistically significant difference between age groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience improving employment prospects.

$$\chi^2 = 3.546; df = 2; p = 0.170$$

Q.3 'age' v Q.21 'improving your industry experience'

The data for question 21 shows that (23 of 33 – 62%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving industry experience. However following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between age groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve industry experience.

$$\chi^2 = 1.449; df = 2; p = .484$$

Q.3 'age' v Q.22 'improving your employment skills'

The data for question 22 shows that (22 of 33 – 67%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving their employment skills. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between age groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment skills.

$$\chi^2 = 2.587; df = 2; p = .274$$

Q.3 'age' v Q. 23 'better preparing you for employment'

The data for question 23 shows that (26 of 33 – 79%) thought WBL placement would better prepare them for employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between age groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for employment.

$$\chi^2 = 3.339; df = 2; p = .188$$

Q.3 'age' v Q.24 'better preparing you for a degree programme at university'

The data for question 24 shows that (26 of 33 – 79%) thought WBL placement would help them in better preparing them for a degree programme at university. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between age groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for a degree programme at university.

$$\chi^2 = 1.354; df = 2; p = .508$$

Q.5 'employment/education' v Q.19 'improving your employment prospects'

The data for question 19 shows that the majority of respondents (18 of 33 – 55%) thought Work Based Learning (WBL) placement would help them in gaining employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groupings in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment prospects.

$$\chi^2 = 1.882; df = 2; p = 0.757$$

Q.5 'employment/education' v Q.20 'improving your employment promotion prospects'

The data for question 20 shows that (18 of 33 – 55%) thought WBL placement would help them in gaining promotion within their employment. Following a Chi square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groupings in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment prospects

$$\chi^2 = 2.575; df = 2; p = .631$$

Q.5 'employment/education' v Q.21 'improving your industry experience'

The data for question 21 shows that (18 of 33 – 55%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving industry experience. However following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve industry experience.

$$\chi^2 = 5.753; df = 2; p = .218$$

Q.5 'employment/education' v Q.22 'improving your employment skills'

The data for question 22 shows that (18 of 33 – 55%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving their employment skills. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment skills.

$$\chi^2 = 5.358; df = 2; p = .253$$

Q.5 'employment/education' v Q. 23 'better preparing you for employment'

The data for question 23 shows that (18 of 33 – 55%) thought WBL placement would better prepare them for employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for employment. However the test did show a trend towards 'better preparing you for employment' by those who were unemployed at the start of their Fd programme

$$\chi^2 = 9.289; df = 2; p = .054$$

Q.5 'employment/education' v Q.24 'better preparing you for a degree programme at university'

The data for question 24 shows that (18 of 33 – 55%) thought WBL placement would help them in better preparing them for a degree programme at university. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for a degree programme at university.

$$\chi^2 = 3.935; df = 2; p = .140$$

Q.6 'reasons for undertaking Fd' v Q.19 'improving your employment prospects'

The data for question 19 shows that the majority of respondents (19 of 33 – 58%) thought Work Based Learning (WBL) placement would help them in gaining employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment prospects.

$$\chi^2 = 1.198; df = 2; p = .878$$

Q.6 'reasons for undertaking Fd v Q.20 'improving your employment promotion prospects'

The data for question 20 shows that (19 of 33 – 58%) thought WBL placement would help them in gaining promotion within their employment. Following a Chi square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience improving employment prospects with;

$$\chi^2 = 0.566; df = 2; p = .967$$

Q.6 'reasons for undertaking Fd' v Q.21 'improving your industry experience'

The data for question 21 shows that (23 of 33 – 70%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving industry experience. However following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve industry experience.

$$\chi^2 = 0.777; df = 2; p = .941$$

Q.6 'gender' v Q.22 'improving your employment skills'

The data for question 22 shows that (24 of 33 – 72%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving their employment skills. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment skills.

$$\chi^2 = 1.026; df = 2; p = .906$$

Q.6 'gender' v Q. 23 'better preparing you for employment'

The data for question 23 shows that (23 of 33 – 70%) thought WBL placement would better prepare them for employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for employment.

$$\chi^2 = 3.240; df = 2; p = .519$$

Q.6 'reasons for undertaking Fd' v Q.24 'better preparing you for a degree programme at university'

The data for question 24 shows that (28 of 33 – 85%) thought WBL placement would help them in better preparing them for a degree programme at university. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for a degree programme at university.

$$\chi^2 = 2.907; df = 2; p = .573$$

Q.11 'weeks at WBL placement' v Q.19 'improving your employment prospects'

The data for question 19 shows that the majority of respondents (21 of 33 – 64%) thought Work Based Learning (WBL) placement would help them in gaining employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the numbers of week's students spent at WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment prospects.

$$\chi^2 = 4.072: df = 2; p = .131$$

Q.11 'weeks at WBL placement' v Q.20 'improving your employment promotion prospects'

The data for question 20 shows that (16 of 33 – 49%) thought WBL placement would help them in gaining promotion within their employment. Following a Chi square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the numbers of week's students spent at WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience

$$\chi^2 = 0.593: df = 2; p = .743$$

Q.11 'weeks at WBL placement' v Q.21 'improving your industry experience'

The data for question 21 shows that (24 of 33 – 73%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving industry experience. However following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the numbers of week's students spent at WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve industry experience.

$$\chi^2 = 0.170: df = 2; p = .919$$

Q.11 'weeks at WBL placement' v Q.22 'improving your employment skills'

The data for question 22 shows that (21 of 33 – 64%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving their employment skills. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the numbers of week's students spent at WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment skills.

$$\chi^2 = 3.446: df = 2; p = .179$$

Q.11 'weeks at WBL placement' v Q. 23 'better preparing you for employment'

The data for question 23 shows that (24 of 33 – 73%) thought WBL placement would better prepare them for employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the numbers of week's students spent at WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for employment.

$$\chi^2 = 1.886; df = 2; p = .390$$

Q.11 'weeks at WBL placement' v Q.24 'better preparing you for a degree programme at university'

The data for question 24 shows that (25 of 33 – 76%) thought WBL placement would help them in better preparing them for a degree programme at university. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the numbers of week's students spent at WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience in better preparing them for a degree programme at university.

$$\chi^2 = 0.972; df = 2; p = .615$$

Q.12 'days per week at WBL placement' v Q.19 'improving your employment prospects'

The data for question 19 shows that some of the respondents (15 of 33 – 45%) thought Work Based Learning (WBL) placement would help them in gaining employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the number of days spent at their WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement experience to improve employment prospects.

$$\chi^2 = 2.905; df = 2; p = .234$$

Q.12 'days per week at WBL placement' v Q.20 'improving your employment promotion prospects'

The data for question 20 shows that (15 of 33 – 45%) thought WBL placement would help them in gaining promotion within their employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the number of days spent

at their WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement to improve employment promotion prospects.

$$\chi^2 = 3.200: df = 2; p = .202$$

Q.12 'days per week at WBL placement' v Q.21 'improving your industry experience'

The data for question 21 shows that (24 of 33 – 73%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving industry experience. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the number of days spent at their WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement to improve industry experience.

$$\chi^2 = 3.713: df = 2; p = .156$$

Q.12 'days per week at WBL placement' v Q.22 'improving your employment skills'

The data for question 22 shows that (22 of 33 – 67%) thought WBL placement would help them in improving their employment skills. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the number of days spent at their WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement to improve employment skills.

$$\chi^2 = 3.364: df = 2; p = .186$$

Q.12 'days per week at WBL placement' v Q. 23 'better preparing you for employment'

The data for question 23 shows that (24 of 33 – 73%) thought WBL placement would better prepare them for employment. Following a Chi Square Test there was a statistically significant difference between the number of days spent at their WBL placement and their views of WBL placement in better preparing them for employment.

$$\chi^2 = 11.330: df = 2; p = .003$$

Q.12 'days per week at WBL placement' v Q.24 'better preparing you for a degree programme at university'

The data for question 24 shows that (27 of 33 – 82%) thought WBL placement would help them in better preparing them for a degree programme at university. Following a Chi Square Test there was no statistically significant difference between the number of days spent at their WBL placement and their views as to the benefit of WBL placement in better preparing them for a degree programme at university.

$$\chi^2 = 0.600; df = 2; p = .741$$

APPENDIX 4

Letter to Participating Colleges

Student Information Sheet

Dear Sir/Madam

Further to our recent e-mail communication, please find enclosed copies of a Foundation Degree student questionnaire. It relates to students' perception of work based learning (WBL) and is part of a research study I am currently undertaking as part of an Ed(D) Doctorate in Education.

It would be very much appreciated if you could return them as and when they have been completed. A stamped addressed envelope is enclosed for this purpose. Once again many thanks for allowing me the opportunity of data collection for research purposes. If we can be of any assistance to you or your colleagues in terms of reciprocation in this area of research, then please contact me accordingly.

Yours faithfully

James Huntington

Enc

Dear Student,

I am currently conducting ongoing research into Foundation degrees and in particular the relevance of the workplace and work based learning within this degree framework. The attached questionnaire asks you to provide information regarding employer participation and your own experiences of work based learning related to your Foundation Degree.

Your personal contribution would provide valuable data towards this research although you are under no obligation to complete this questionnaire. However, any information you choose to disclose will remain confidential and individual responses will not be shared with third parties from any participating institution.

Many thanks for your cooperation

Yours sincerely

James Huntington