**The Foundation degree experience: Expressions of transformation and multiple identities.**

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**Abstract**

Economic and democratic agendas underlie the introduction of the Foundation degree (Fd); an economic drive to up - skill the workforce amidst global market place competition, whilst simultaneously widening participation in Higher Education and stimulating lifelong learning. Critically positioned within and spanning these two competing agendas is the Fd. This research aims to capture the views and experiences of a cohort of students undertaking the Fd in Health and Social Care at the University of Southampton. The study comprises a flexible design, using face to face interviews to generate qualitative, primary data, collated in conjunction with secondary data in the form of government papers and official reports. Thematic and documental analysis is applied in order to draw out key findings for discussion. Initial observations suggest that many students undergo a transformational experience during their journey into, through and beyond the Fd programme, developing as confident and critical thinkers. In addition, striving to balance two learning environments (work-based and academic), in addition to maintaining a home/family environment, the employee/learner's changing sense of self can reflect conflicting elements of multiple identities, whilst highlighting the value of communication and partnership equality in effective, collaborative working. For future Higher Education programmes to fully capitalise on integrating academic, work-based learning and employer engagement, the key voice of the Fd student experience needs to be heard.

**Introduction**

Fds were introduced in 2001 by David Blunkett whilst Secretary of State for Education (DfES, 2000) with the objective of addressing skills shortages at the associate practitioner and higher technician level, to contribute to the widening participation agenda and to promote collaboration between employers, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and Higher Education (HE) providers. Global economic competitiveness and the need for increased skills were cited as key drivers (HEFCE, 2000; HEFCE, 2001). Fds were expected to meet these needs by blending academic knowledge with technical and transferable skills required by employers, whilst facilitating lifelong learning for the workforce. According to the Quality Assurance Agency, the distinctiveness of Fds depends upon the integration of the following characteristics: employer involvement; accessibility; articulation and progression; flexibility; and partnership (QAA, 2004).

**Existing literature**

As a relatively recent HE qualification, a limited number of evidence- based research or evaluations have been fully developed in relation to its success either in meeting the skills shortages or in widening access (Rowley, 2005). In its 2005 review, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2005), the body responsible for introducing the first benchmarks against which Fd programmes were to be measured, concluded that Fds were generally succeeding in recruiting, developing and educating students very successfully (over 4,500 students on the 68 programmes reviewed). However, the review (QAA, 2005) also indicated that a significant minority of providers struggled with issues such as engagement with employers, providing suitable work placements and making explicit progression opportunities and constraints. A study focusing on engaging with employers in work-based learning (Benefer, 2007) revealed that making partnerships work is dependent on a number of critical success factors, including programme delivery in part on the employer's premises, mentoring as a key factor and a firm partnership between employer, FE College and the University. Illustrating a model of good practice in employer engagement, case studies of this nature can be extremely informative in terms of sharing key success factors, yet there remains a need to cross reference such findings with the experience of the learners themselves.

Other research examines issues from a more institutional viewpoint, focusing on feedback from Fd programme developers and providers. The study of curriculum innovation in the context of cross-sector partnerships in post-compulsory education (Foskett, 2003) revealed that successful needs-led curriculum development with employers relies on complementary aims, good personal relationships, and strong interpersonal skills of partnership members. Similarly, a discussion of the risks and challenges associated with the 'lived experience' of delivering a Fd in Health and Social Care (Thurgate, MacGregor & Brett, 2007) concluded that the workplace facilitator is a vital link in the success of the Fd programme. Such studies provide important evidence of both barriers and innovations pertaining to effective curriculum change within partnership contexts, implementing a variety of methodologies to include interviews, participant observation, focus groups and documental evidence. Their findings offer valuable insight into the complexities of employer and needs-led curriculum planning in HE with specific emphasis on Fd development. In this instance, the main focus is on those elements crucial to the development of successful collaborative partnerships, essentially between two major stakeholders i.e. the University and the employer organisation, yet it is equally vital that the views and experiences of the third member of the partnership are not overlooked, i.e those of the employee/learner.

Having said that, a number of qualitative studies do indeed focus on specific aspects of the Fd student experience, such as the progression of learners from a FE College to the final year of a University honours programme (Winter & Dismore, 2008); likewise, students' perspectives of the nature and extent of employer involvement in Fds (CHERI, 2008). Studies of this nature offer rich insight into the implications for students, and in doing so contribute significantly to the growing volume of experiential research supporting the notion that collective influences - including socio-economic, academic and cultural – have a significant impact on the student experience. Building on existing qualitative research, this particular paper will focus on the educational and professional development of Fd students, specifically in terms of transformation and identity, thus offering an original contribution to knowledge in this field.

**Methodology**

The research comprised a flexible, qualitative design providing a framework within which to conduct a series of face to face, semi-structured interviews. This approach was considered to be the most appropriate means of collecting primary data, as it would allow participants the freedom to talk as naturally as possible, to express views and opinions in their own time, whilst also affording the opportunity to explore in more depth the most poignant themes as they arose (Robson, 2002). In addition, secondary data in the form of official documents, government initiatives and relevant papers were consulted and analysed. With the student's informed written consent, all interviews were digitally recorded, allowing the researcher to remain consistently engaged with and actively listening to a participant throughout the entire interview and creating an ambience in which the participant's views were valued. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim, affording interviewees the opportunity to read through individual transcripts should they wish to verify, retract or alter comments. The CAQDAS software package NVivo was used to assist with organising, coding and retrieving data in preparation for ensuing thematic analysis.

This paper draws on two research studies, which, whilst sharing a number of similar thematic links, are distinguished by their individual aims, objectives and life spans. The initial study comprised of qualitative interviews with twenty two alumni participants who had graduated with a Fd in Health Care/Health and Social Care between 2002 (inception year) and 2008. Graduates participated in a single, face to face interview which aimed to capture their reflections on the value of the Fd experience in terms of their working lives/career pathways, and more specifically how they regarded their subsequent employability.

The second, ongoing study is longitudinal in design and consists of a series of up to three interviews over a 3-4 year period with students who are currently undertaking the Fd in Health & Social Care. This first part of the study aims to capture the student's educational and professional journey in terms of exploring initial hopes and perceptions of what the Fd experience would be like, the value students place on the Fd programme, together with their thoughts and feelings with regard to the work-based learning element of the programme. It is anticipated that the final interview will take place once the student has graduated, whether employed in an original post, in new employment or not in employment. The second strand of

this study involves collecting and collating individual entry qualifications of students, again with informed consent, together with their subsequent assignment/project achievements throughout the Fd programme. An examination of these quantitative data alongside qualitative interview feedback will afford unique insight into the extent to which students' personal perceptions of their individual progress are fair reflections of their actual achievements.

It is anticipated that the sample will reflect the voices of approximately fifty Fd students, who will volunteer to participate in the study on a self-selecting basis.

## Background

The Fd in Health Care at the University of Southampton was validated in 2002 and recruited its initial cohort of full-time and part-time students in September of that year. The degree was developed in conjunction with partners in the NHS, partners in the Social Care and independent sectors, who were involved in curriculum design and the provision of practice-based placements for students. This new qualification signified commitment to the government's widening participation and lifelong learning agenda (DfES, 2003), whilst providing an ideal vehicle for developing closer working relationships with employers, public services and other educational establishments. To help realise this overall vision, regional Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) received funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Locally, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Lifelong Learning Network (HI-LLN) supported a number of initiatives to order to 'maximise progression opportunities for work-based, non-traditional vocational learners by offering enhanced, flexible, work-related educational opportunities, with benefits for learners, employers and the regional and national economy' (HI-LLN, 2006). One of these initiatives took the form of a project to capture the Fd student experience whilst informing future curriculum development.

## Findings

Findings from the initial, graduate-focused study indicated that participants used personal change as their reference point and gateway to future employment (unlikely now to revolve around one employer or skill set). Although confident in the workplace, many participants experienced initial self-doubt in relation to their perceived academic ability. However, determination to succeed began to nurture a thirst for knowledge which led in turn to academic achievement, positive feedback and further progress. As a result, levels of confidence and self-belief rose at crucial stages throughout the duration of the programme. This symbiotic increase in knowledge, confidence and self-worth was described by participants as transformative.

The notion of transformation also appears as a significant theme in the early findings emerging from the ongoing longitudinal study. During interviews, many participants recalled a negative compulsory school experience which had left them with low levels of academic confidence and limited expectations. A notable number of participants still harboured some of the self-doubts implanted from school days yet were determined to overcome them and succeed within a learning environment, despite often being the first family member to ever study at HE level. Rowley (2005) paints a similar profile when he suggested that the majority of Fd students had not previously considered HE nor had they come from families or communities where HE was an expectation.

Re-entry into a formal educational environment, therefore, often engendered feelings of anxiety, fear of failure and a sense of 'trespassing' in a territory perceived to be out of bounds. Overcoming these fears through determination and a desire to succeed on the part of the student, coupled with growing insight and understanding of the particular needs of work-based learners on the part of HE staff and employers, led to a gradual transformation into a more confident, critical- and independent-thinking learner. As students developed their personal and professional autonomy as learners, embracing and being nourished by knowledge, a transition from a didactic to a more self-directed, inquiry-based approach to learning became apparent. This sense of 'taking responsibility' has encouraged the questioning of established practices,

leading to reciprocal learning through work relationships indicative of 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Participants referred to a growing awareness of the bigger picture; the historical evolution of Health and Social Care organisational cultures, structures and roles which allowed them to formulate more informed and individual viewpoints in a broader socio-economic and political context. In turn, an increasingly confident and critical thinking employee may initially appear as threatening to an employer organisation, but it could be argued that by opening up and maintaining good communication routes between employee and employer, and indeed the HEI, then a more balanced and trusting relationship can evolve within this collaborative partnership. The critical voice of the employee/learner needs to be listened to.

Moreover, findings suggested that the student voice carries an important message not only into the working and learning environments but also within the personal/home environment. Many participants had made the decision to begin an Fd programme in Health and Social Care because it was 'the right time' for them. Further questioning with regard to this notion revealed that the decision often reflected a crucial moment in time when a participant's circumstances changed, sometimes subtly, often drastically, but always poignantly. This could be, for example, when children had reached an age when they were less dependent on parental time and physical presence; when there was a relationship breakdown with a spouse/partner or when there had been a change in management at work resulting in a new focus and direction for employees concerned. However, within all these scenarios, where there were children in the household, the decision made by a mother or father to embark on a programme of study at HE level sent out an extremely powerful message to those children/teenagers in terms of providing an influential role model and raising the aspirations of the next generation of learners. Transformation can have a knock on effect beyond the individual student.

Findings to date also highlighted, as a significant emerging theme, a need to balance the dual-identities experienced by participants. Given the nature of the Fd programme, which requires the employee/learner to spend a significant portion of their time in a work-based learning environment, participants frequently voiced feelings of tension and conflict in relation to the 'dual-identity' experienced when moving between different organisational cultures and environments (work and academic). This was found to be particularly true for employer-sponsored participants, who had generally already developed a distinct and confident work identity over a considerable period of time. These employees were not only familiar with the particular organisational culture, language and established norms/values in which they operated on a daily basis often over many years, but employers were also accustomed to a relationship with employees which was clearly defined and mutually understood. This notion of how learning, identity and practice both connect and conflict is supported by Holland *et al* (1998: 4) in the suggestion that identity is not fixed, but rather a response to cultural circumstances.

The potential for tension and conflict can be intensified further by a potential lack of clarity of role and expectation when an employee presents as a student fulfilling their work-based learning placement, both on the part of the employee/learner and the employer. Some participants reported frustration at the perceived lack of understanding and respect for their learner identity in the workplace, often describing a feeling of being seen as regular staff members, especially when short staffed. On the other hand, employers may not be fully informed of the specific role and focus of their sponsored employees whilst they are on Fd work placements, reflecting the need for employers to develop a deeper understanding of and insight into the purpose of the work-based learning element. It could be argued that the role of the work-based mentor is ideally positioned to assist in bringing about greater clarity and a shared understanding of this element of the programme. Developing good practice with regard to the mentoring process would not only enhance the quality and effectiveness of the Fd programme but would also allow the employee/learner to fully embrace the role of work-based learner.

Finding a voice that speaks for and represents the different roles and identities experienced by employees/learners is a crucial aspect of attaining the partnership equity necessary for effective collaborative working between employers, HEIs and learners (Foskett, 2003). Partnership equity is

achieved through the build up of trust, communication and shared aims of all members of a consortium. Researching employer and needs-led curriculum planning in HE, Foskett (2003) goes on to emphasise the need for recognition from all partners that collaborative working of this nature presents a learning situation that subsequently has a meaningful impact on curriculum development. The potential benefits of creating a close and transparent working partnership between students, HEI staff and employers can be manifold in terms of developing shared trust and values, building up respect for the unique expertise of all concerned, gaining insight into the world of work and feeding all these valuable benefits back into the curriculum development process. The student's own perception and lived experience offers a highly valuable contribution to the development of a mutual understanding within a partnership.

Feelings of dual identity are extended further to encompass 'multiple- identities' for many of the participants interviewed. By the very nature of Health and Social Care related employment, the majority of individuals engaged in this programme are female (although the number of males is increasing year on year), many of whom are also juggling home/family commitments (partners, spouses, children) alongside the demands associated with work and study. For those students working long hours in a physically challenging job, their family time at the end of the working day/weekends is equally important and demanding of their time, energy and attention, often leaving only late evenings to dedicate to studies and assignments. Some participants reflected on the concerns expressed by those partners/spouses who experienced study time as encroaching on shared time together, which only goes to further highlight the complex and conflicting demands incurred by multiple identity roles.

## Conclusion

The transformative experience illuminated by the findings of this study to date, based on a symbiotic increase in knowledge, confidence and self-worth, suggest emerging links between lifelong learning and social and organisational change. Participants in this study expressed a growing feeling of empowerment resulting from their experience on the Fd programme, enabling them to develop and voice opinions as well as question established practices within the workplace. Where a workforce is increasingly empowered and intellectually engaged in the very structure of their organisation, there exists the potential to bring about meaningful organisational change and innovation. Specific to those students for whom work-based learning plays a significant role in their HE experience, it is vital that issues pertaining to dual learner/employee identity are appreciated and further explored. For effective work-based learning collaborations to be successfully established and sustained between employers and education, the employee/learner voice is of crucial value.

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