The Foundation Degree Experience:
An Undergraduate Perspective
Combining academic study with work based learning; Foundation Degrees are distinctive higher education qualifications that integrate the application of classroom learning to the context of the workplace.

The work based learning elements of Foundation Degrees can occur through many different approaches delivered through the structure of the programme and the design of the curricula. As an outcome, institutions across the sector have designed and implemented a range of varied approaches through innovative work based activities or in some instances, work related teaching, learning and assessment. However, regardless of approach taken, what is essential is the active engagement of employers combined with strategies aimed at enhancing learning for employability.

A key feature of Foundation Degrees is their focus upon equipping graduates with the higher level knowledge and skills that employers are looking for. The promotion of generic, transferable skills relating to effective communication, team work, problem solving, logical thinking, independent working and meeting deadlines are common examples. For a student, the impact of a Foundation Degree can be significant in terms of personal and professional skills development. However there are many factors that can impact upon the way in which a Foundation Degree is experienced. This can include a student's academic ability, attitude to work and study, the quality of work based or work related learning, employer engagement and other organisational factors. There is little doubt that as the higher education sector continues to focus upon the quality of learning opportunities provided to students, organisations such as the Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education must continue to do more to understand the varying needs and expectations of its Foundation Degree students.

This booklet is the Institute’s second publication following its joint activities with undergraduate student reviewers and I am delighted with the work they have undertaken. The themes, conclusions and recommendations have provided valuable insight and have already begun to have an impact upon the way in which the Institute plans to design and enhance its Foundation Degrees for the future. My thanks are extended to all who have been engaged with the project.

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Following a meeting with the Institute’s Higher Education Quality Department, 8 undergraduate student reviewers were initially appointed with all 8 seeing the project through to its completion. The reviewers were either self-nominated or recommended by the Institute’s Higher Education Schools and represented a wide range of curricula including:

- Business Management
- Applied Computing and Multimedia Technologies
- Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Engineering
- Rehabilitation
- Hospital and Health Care
- Counselling Studies

Student reviewers were briefed on the purpose of the project; the specific aim being to ascertain the undergraduate perception of the Foundation Degree experience through a series of student led focus groups; and the broader aim linked to building the student voice through more innovative approaches. It was explained that the focus of the project was particularly important in light of the Institute’s application for Foundation Degree Awarding Powers.

A series of briefing and training sessions were delivered and student reviewers were also provided with written information relating to the defining features of Foundation Degrees and the QAA Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark Statements. Additional training was also given relating to how to deliver effective focus groups and the design of appropriate questions and prompts. Opportunities for reviewers to share their initial ideas and to work together to agree standardised research questions were facilitated. Following initial discussions and preparatory whole group work, student reviewers subsequently met in pairs to better prepare for a shared, professional approach to holding their respective focus groups.

Student reviewers were additionally briefed regarding the nature of the focus groups to be held and understood that:

- They would need to capture student perceptions of their Foundation Degree experiences.
- No focus group should take longer than 40 minutes.
- Group sizes would likely fall between 8 and 15 students.
- All groups would be comprised of students studying on Foundation Degrees only.
- Tutor anonymity was to be encouraged at all times.
- Questions should not be leading or provoke disharmony.
- Examples of good practice and recommendations for enhancement needed to be captured.

Administrative support was provided to each pair of student reviewers via a transcriber. The transcriber attended each focus group and recorded feedback given to the reviewers within each session. In the event of reviewer difficulty, the transcriber was briefed to step in and provide support to ensure student groups were not unsettled. No student reviewers were permitted to review a programme on which they were enrolled.

As a form of convenience sampling, 8 focus groups were scheduled across a range of Foundation Degrees including:

- FdSc Hospital and Health Care
- FdA Social Care
- FdEd Early Childhood Studies
- FdA Educational Administration
- FdA Housing Studies
- FdA Crime and Disorder
- FdSc Electrical and Electronic Engineering
- FdSc Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Engineering
Student reviewers reported that the top six reasons why students within their focus groups had chosen to study locally included factors relating to:

- Not having the confidence to go to University
- Convenience and accessibility
- The cost of tuition fees
- Being able to work and study at the same time
- Employers supporting their study on a Foundation Degree

It was reported that the perceived benefits of studying on a Foundation Degree were wide-ranging but largely common across all focus groups. For example;

- A significant number of students expressed that the Foundation Degree had a marked impact on the student’s levels of confidence and the development of skills transferable to the work place (such as improved time management, verbal, presentation and written communication skills including more effective report writing).

“My Foundation Degree has developed my skills in being able to adopt a more rational approach to dealing with challenging situations within the work place” (Student on FdA Crime and Disorder)

- Several students felt that the types of assessments on their Foundation Degrees were appropriately contextualised and because they were relevant to the work place, this had facilitated greater ease of engagement with the learning process.

- Many students commented that their Foundation Degree had raised their aspirations with the majority considering progression within their career or into further study. Some had already been recognised by their employers and had been promoted as a result.

Students on the FdSc Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Engineering had all been previously employed in the refrigeration sector and had found that there were no opportunities for progression. However since undertaking the Foundation Degree they found that they were now able to work at a management level within their chosen industry and outside of the sector.

Other students reported that:

“To date, the Foundation Degree has already opened up new doors…it’s made me realise my capability” and “It’s made me want to climb the ladder” (Students on FdA Housing Studies)

- Some students commented that their Foundation Degree had significantly developed their professional skills and as a result identified that they were far more reflective in the work place than previously.

- Many students commented that they had gained improved knowledge particularly of the legislative and policy context and which was highly relevant to the sector they were working in.

- Many commented upon the relevance of learning wider theoretical perspectives and their application within the workplace. It was generally felt that gaining an underpinning knowledge had helped students understand why they needed to do particular things whilst at work.

“I feel I no longer have tunnel vision” (Student on FdA Educational Administration)

- Only one group identified that the benefit of studying on their Foundation Degree was that their previous experience and employment had been formally accredited against some modules.
> Other more general, but frequent comments related to the benefits of higher level study; reviewers reported that students discussed that they had benefited socially through the development of new friendships and contacts; and that they had experienced a real sense of achievement which had also raised their self esteem.

In establishing what students knew about Foundation Degrees prior to enrolment and the quality of their early discussions with the Institute about work based learning, reviewers reported that:

> Many students identified that they did not know what a Foundation Degree was prior to studying on their programme.

> Some students said that they had tried researching information on the internet and found information to be lacking. Of note students also identified that the Institute’s own web site and prospectus contained no information relating to work based learning.

> Of those students who had to find their own work based learning providers, the majority felt they did not have the contacts or confidence to source their own and that this has caused some initial anxiety.

Whilst studying on their Foundation Degree reviewers found that whilst the majority of students had managed to successfully balance the demands of work based learning and study, many discussed the challenges of coping with both. Issues relating to family responsibilities and childcare were frequently raised as compounding issues by more mature students.

One student commented that she chose to study part time so that it was much more manageable with work and family commitments but pointed out that whilst all students have the option of part time routes, funding is a significant issue.

Many year 2 students reported that due to their deeper understanding of the underpinning theory and its relevance to the work place, the gap in the knowledge and skills of other employees in the workplace had been apparent. Many students reported “surprise” upon the unexpected recognition that their own knowledge, understanding and skills has surpassed that of their peers or managers within the work place, who in some instances were recognised as being out of date particularly in relation to policy and practice.

Students across the focus groups identified that when initially carrying out work based learning some employers did not appear to be fully briefed about why students were there even though appropriate work based learning packs and information had been sent. A common theme across all focus groups also related to the student’s perception that to some extent employers seemed unsure about the key features and significance of Foundation Degrees.

The majority of students across all Foundation Degrees agreed that more information regarding careers at open events and enrolment would be beneficial in the future. Several students also identified that increased careers guidance whilst studying on the Foundation Degree should also be enhanced. However some students reported that having completed several modules of study, upon reflection they had recognised new opportunities for pursuing different career and progression routes that had not previously been considered.
In completing the focus groups student reviewers captured meaningful and valuable feedback from a cross section of students studying on Foundation Degrees. Collating both the feedback and drawing upon their own experiences the following recommendations are made:

> Improved career guidance at open events, interview and enrolment.
> Ensure all employers understand the distinctive features and benefits of Foundation Degrees in general.
> Provide more support in assisting students 'not' in relevant work to find work based opportunities.
> Provide opportunities for students to discuss work based learning experiences with other students or provide access to relevant student feedback.
> Improve marketing on the Institute’s web site and prospectus about what Foundation Degrees are and the requirements of the work based learning elements.
> Promote opportunities available for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning.
> Develop the information provided prior to enrolment to better prepare students for the demands of balancing academic study with work based learning and the impact upon personal and family commitments.
> Offer more Foundation Degrees to expand choice.
With special thanks to our Student Reviewers

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