

Foundation Degrees

What are they? Who are they for? Where can I find out more?

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What are they?

The foundation degree is a new higher education qualification which has been created and designed with input and co-operation from employers to meet the demand for highly skilled people who know their subject and can apply it in the workplace. The National Skills Task Force reports that by 2006 there will be some 9.2 million jobs for higher technicians and associate professionals – 700,000 more than today. To meet this need a new qualification was required to allow an extension to the vocational ladder created through National Vocational Qualifications and Advanced Vocational Certificates in Education.

Foundation degrees are the equivalent of an NVQ level 4 and are one level below honours degrees. They will attract a minimum of 240 credits. Programmes will provide a clear progression route to honours degrees in a related subject and to professional qualifications or NVQ level 5.

How did they come about and why?

The foundation degree was launched in England and Wales in February 2000 by the then secretary of State for Education David Blunkett. In his words:

‘The foundation degree will raise the value of vocational and technical qualifications making them an attractive first choice for many students. A two year route to a degree with a high market value 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 years honours degree is right for them’. (Foreword to the Foundation Degree Consultation Paper, February 2000).

The DfEE sent out this consultation paper in February 2000 and it provided background information on the foundation degree as well as giving some examples of existing courses or projects which contained constructive suggestions for the foundation degree such as the new associate degree offered by a network of local further education colleges and Middlesex University. Responses were requested to the document in the form of a set of questions.

This raised an initial awareness of the foundation degree and prompted discussion as to what it was to be, what it would do and who it was for. In July 2000 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) sent out a foundation degree prospectus inviting bids for the prototype foundation degrees which were to receive development funding as well as funding for the additional new students the courses would attract.

Bids had to be returned by October and the chosen consortia were informed of their success in November. Few guidelines were provided either in the original consultation document

or in the foundation degree prospectus as to the actual framework of the degree instead a list of ‘core features’ were set out and the expectation was that each foundation degree would develop along lines most appropriate to meet the specific needs of the local area.

These core features are considered essential to any foundation degree:

- Employers must be involved in both the design and delivery of the course. Employer support is essential.
- Both practical and theoretical skills as well as key skills must be developed within the course and it is essential that these skills are subsequently applied in the workplace.
- The Quality Assurance Agency in its national Qualifications framework stated that the foundation degree would be at intermediate level but no attempt was made to impose a credit framework. However, it is generally accepted that the foundation degree will attract 120 credits at Level 1(HE) and 120 credits at Level 2 (HE), but there are variations to this model. Credits should be transferable and many foundation degrees intend to offer students partial completion awards such as a certificate of higher education.
- The foundation degree has to articulate to at least one honours degree but it is important to remember that progression won’t just be to an honours degree. It may be to some other higher level professional qualification or to a promoted post in work and many students quite correctly will see the foundation degree as a qualification in its own right.

Foundation degrees:

- are designed by employers often working with National Training Organisations
- are a mix of work related specialist skills and academic learning
- include key skills
- focus on the sectors important in today's knowledge-based economy
- will take into account previous experience
- are flexible
- are delivered locally
- are validated by a university
- are designed to make employees 'work ready'
- are part of lifelong learning with many progression opportunities.

Foundation degrees are intended to:

- increase career prospects
- improve earning potential
- gain the skills that employers are looking for
- be work related so graduates are ready for a job from day one
- lead on to further professional qualifications
- enable successful students to top up to honours degree
- widen participation by encouraging students who would not normally take a higher education course to do so.

Foundation degree students should be able to study at:

- college
- workplace
- home
- university
- on Line

or a combination of these.

Who are they for?

Foundation degrees are targeted at a variety of potential students and there is quite a significant difference between a full-time and a part-time foundation degree in terms of the type of student who might be interested in the course.

Part-time courses tend to be targeted at students who are already in employment, be it full-time or part-time, and who want to upgrade their skills to enhance their career prospects within the same job role or to allow them to transfer to some new job role perhaps in a different vocational area.

These students will be attracted to the foundation degree because of the flexibility of delivery and the fact they can study locally either at an further education college or in some cases even in their place of work. They will also be attracted because the entry qualification for foundation degrees clearly

take in to account their relevant work experience and in many case do not insist on formal educational qualifications. Much of the assessment is through portfolio building or work-related assignments so this again cuts down on the time input required from the student as well as ensuring a core feature of the foundation degree - work-based learning and application of skills in the workplace - is ensured.

Full-time courses will tend to attract younger students from schools or further education colleges who require a degree level vocational qualification but whose results were perhaps not good enough for them to access an honours degree course immediately. Some of these may be students who would previously have enrolled on Higher National courses both Higher National Diplomas and Higher National Certificates but this is not to say that in some vocational areas and for personal reasons the Higher National qualification might still be the student's first choice.

In the case of full-time students, arrangements will be made to provide relevant work experience during the course.

Students may be able to obtain financial support. For further information on this please check:
www.dfes.gov.uk/hestudents/index/shtml

Where can I find out more?

There is a wealth of information freely available on the web and also in paper format.

The DfES has a web site for the foundation degree with much useful information as well as hyperlinks to other relevant web sites. This can be accessed at www.foundationdegree.org.uk

The DfES has also produced three publicity leaflets: FD01 for Career Guidance Professionals, FD02 for employers and FD03 for potential students. These are available from DfES Publications who can be contacted on 0845 60 222 60.

Several of the new foundation degrees have developed their own web sites and a particularly good one is the Foundation 4Success Consortium at Leeds Metropolitan University. This can be accessed at: www.lmu.ac.uk/foundation4success

A support team has been appointed to help with foundation degree development and they have useful information on their web site. You have to register to use it but this is usually a very simple process. This can be accessed at: www.foundationdegree.pwcglobal.com

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