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The Importance of an Effective Partnership between the Employer and Institution in Successful Foundation Degrees

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Background

Staffordshire University Regional Federation (SURF) consists of Staffordshire University and 11 further education colleges in Staffordshire and Shropshire. SURF is a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)-recognised funding consortium established during 2000-01 and has a history of running Foundation degrees.

Foundation degrees have been found to have inherent challenges which have been highlighted in a number of studies (Benefer, 2007). The main issues include:

- employer engagement;
- supply versus demand;
- employer loyalty to individual staff rather than the institution;
- level of work-based learning;
- support of PDP (Personal Development Planning);
- employer involvement in assessment.

SURF has found that Foundation degrees delivered at university sites, rather than through further education colleges, are often more supply-driven and less likely to succeed. Watson & Bowden (2005) talk of Foundation degree failure if the focus is at the supply side, and although they are talking at national level this can be also be applied at an institutional level. York Consulting Limited (YCL) (2004) found that there was a lack of employer interest in, and understanding of, Foundation degrees; however, as a result of marketing and increased work within the SURF community, Brownless & Kingsley (2007) showed that 90% of employers were aware of Foundation degrees.

Benefer (2007) noted that employer involvement in course design can be problematic where multiple employers are involved. This can result in individual employers feeling left out or ignored where they perceive their needs are not being met to the same extent as another employer.

This case study explores how Staffordshire University has

addressed issues of employer engagement and how the degree of employer engagement is critical in addressing the issues above.

Changes in practice

When setting up Foundation degrees it is important to manage employers' expectations about what will be achievable. Staffordshire University has developed staff to enable them to match employer expectations to the award. By keeping them involved in the development process, employers will be able to see how their requirements have been matched to modules and course assignments. Institutions must make it clear to employers how much time employees will need for studying and the level of commitment they need to study for the award. Expectations around award content are often negotiated between the university, the company and the college supporting the delivery of the award. The university develops awards to include a level of responsiveness to employer expectations, allowing pathways within awards.

YCL (2004) demonstrated a tension between further education colleges (FECs) and higher education institutions (HEIs) within the validation process and the standards required by the validating institution. SURF has identified this as a recurring theme with employers and FECs, and supports the validation process to ensure responsiveness to employer timescales and sufficient flexibility to develop a Foundation

degree which meets the needs of all stakeholders.

Staffordshire University has a Flexible Learning Approvals Panel (FLAP), created to encourage the rapid development of programmes of 60 credits or less. This enables the University to provide accredited programmes and recognised qualifications meeting a wider range of needs such as continuing professional development (CPD), professional/skills updating, work-based learning (WBL) and learning for leisure. FLAP has allowed the University to be more responsive to employers' needs, allowing a faster validation process than the method for traditional degree awards. Around 70 awards have been validated via FLAP during the last two years. The panel has been used to validate programmes that can be incorporated into Foundation degrees, although the Foundation degree award itself must still undergo a traditional 'full' validation process.

SURF has worked on two projects in the area of supporting WBL, both of which were funded by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) and have drawn on the experiences within the partnership in creating materials for use by stakeholders. These projects have focused on communication between institutions and the employer, providing documentation to support the process (SURF WBL <www.projects.staffs.ac.uk/surfwb/> and an online support point (SURF WBL-Way <www.projects.staffs.ac.uk/wblway/>)

to deliver those documents, as Staffordshire University recognises that not all employers wish to view documents through a virtual learning environment (VLE).

Measuring success

The experience of SURF shows that where developments are demand-led they are overwhelmingly more successful than supply-led awards.

In September 2007, the Federation had over 1,000 learners on 30 Foundation degrees running in its 11 partner colleges. All these awards are considered demand-led with significant input from employers into the design and development of the award and, where possible, into its delivery and assessment of learners. The retention rate for Foundation degrees is at least 2 percentage points higher than the average retention on all higher education awards delivered in the FECs.

The work undertaken to enhance relationships with employers and sector skills councils has resulted in the successful development of Foundation degrees in a wide range of areas including:

- business skills, including leadership and project management;
- manufacturing, mechanical, electrical and electronic and polymer technology;
- creative arts including dance, design, interior design, heritage;
- construction;

- motorsport technology;
- complementary therapies.

Employers involved in university Foundation degrees in the arts, media and design sector said that they engaged in the development of these awards because, for the first time with any training organisation, they were asked what they wanted *before* the training was designed.

They can be partners, however, but real involvement will only follow real self-interest. The Foundation degree will only take off if each employer recognises it as addressing the specific needs of their business and employees.

(Smith & Betts, 2003, p.227)

Looking forward

SURF WBL-Way (2008) was a two-year project focused on the delivery of materials to stakeholders and communication across the SURF Foundation degree community. The project has worked on developing a personalised support point for work-based learning, allowing all stakeholders to have access to the information they require. This includes giving employers and mentors direct access to information about:

- Foundation degrees and degrees delivered at local colleges relating to their business area;
- learner details, including links to course descriptions and module handbooks;
- news feeds from relevant skills councils and funding bodies.

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About the author

Fleur Corfield has worked for the last ten years in education and her focus for the last four years has been in supporting work-based learning. She has project-managed the two WBL JISC projects mentioned in this case study and is now working in programme management supporting strategic change at Staffordshire University.