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PRACTICE PAPER

A Foundation Degree Uncovered: Packaging a Realistic Programme in Response to the Widening Participation Agenda

Marion Stuart-Hoyle (marion.stuart-hoyle@canterbury.ac.uk)

Department of Sport Science, Tourism and Leisure, Canterbury Christ Church University,
North Holmes Road, Canterbury Kent CT1 1QU

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Abstract

This paper investigates the critical issues associated with meeting higher education widening participation goals in the provision of industry-led vocational qualifications. It focuses on the design, validation and launch of a part-time only foundation degree (FD) at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), whose delivery via residential teaching weeks and the virtual learning environment signalled a new approach to designing a programme which in theory meets most industry and student needs. Despite all efforts to ensure that the FD was designed in direct response to the specific needs of Kent's tourism industry in 2003, the paper highlights the problems associated with securing long-term, meaningful employer support and the implications for this FD development.

Keywords: Foundation degrees; Curriculum development; Widening participation; Distance and e-learning; Industry involvement

Introduction

The widening participation agenda has emerged as an integral part of the life of higher education (HE) staff at all levels, whether working in a teaching or in an administrative role. Sir Ron Dearing's National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, published in 1997, noted the decline in existing intermediate level qualifications and recommended that future expansion in HE should be at this level in the interests of widening participation. In 2002 the government set out its plans for widening participation in its White Paper on higher education, clarifying its commitment to "ensure that the expansion (in HE) is of an

Marion Stuart-Hoyle started her career in teaching at a further education institution delivering a Higher National Diploma in Travel and Tourism Management and has been a principal lecturer in Tourism Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University since 1995. Her doctoral research focused on the development of Tourism as a subject in higher education. Her current teaching interests include Tourism Marketing and Heritage Tourism and her research focuses on teaching and learning strategies that take a blended learning approach.

appropriate quality and type to meet demands of employers and the needs of the economy and students” (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2002: 60). Furthermore, that expansion was envisaged to be in the form of “two-year work-focused foundation degrees; and in mature students in the workforce developing their skills” (DfES, 2002: 60). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) followed suit in its five-year Strategic Plan (2003-2008), making widening participation the focus of one of four core strategic aims, striving to push forward the agenda “in such a way that a person’s background and previous educational and life experiences do not deter them from considering what higher education has to offer” (HEFCE, 2003: 12).

All higher education institutions (HEI) have been developing widening participation strategies that broadly reflect national policy as above. For example, in 2001, Canterbury Christ Church University College’s (CCCUC) ‘Widening Participation Strategy and Action Plan’ stated:

If students from traditionally under-represented groups are to be attracted and retained, it is necessary to focus on those cultural changes that may be required for changes to learning and teaching styles (CCCUC, 2001: 1).

Cultural change in this case has been a slow realisation that the very students who might need to be reached cannot, in fact, attend classes on a regular basis in the traditional manner and they are likely to be in full-time employment. Blended learning approaches have become, therefore, a strategy for reaching previously untapped markets in the form of online programmes, using tools such as Blackboard or WebCT. Add to this HEFCE’s commitment to foundation degrees (FDs) that “will play an important part both as the main vehicle for continuing expansion and in widening participation”, and programmes that should be “accessible, flexible and relevant to employer needs” (HEFCE, 2003: 13), and herein lies the trigger for the development of industry-led, innovative FDs that reflect government thinking on widening participation.

This paper seeks to shed some light on the process that underpins the development of a degree programme that is launched in response to demand (i.e. employers say it is needed) and which reflects an institution’s various policies, notably that relating to widening participation. There are rewards to be reaped from researching, designing and launching a new Tourism programme in response to a genuine claim for its provision from industry representatives. However, it would be naïve to assume that even a programme specifically requested by industry would go according to plan, as this paper will endeavour to clarify. The discussion begins by revisiting the rationale for foundation degrees as the ‘way forward’ for expansion of the UK’s HE industry. It then turns to the relevance of long-running curriculum content debates for programme development at sub-honours degree level before focusing attention on the recent development at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), where a part-time foundation degree has been launched in response to significant industry demand. It is hoped that the experiences of developing an FD at CCCU will prove useful to those academics who may in the future be charged with a similar responsibility.

The rationale for foundation degrees

The 'foundation degree' was launched by David Blunkett in 2000 with two major aims: "to widen participation for social inclusion and to increase participation for economic competitiveness" (Foundation Degree Task Force, 2004: 2). It has been argued that the launch was much more to do with the government's desire to achieve these policies than any attempt to deliver a carefully designed concept which responded to demand (Smith and Betts, 2003). Perhaps as a result of this, the public face of foundation degrees has been more than confusing. However, by September 2004, 24,000 students were enrolled on foundation degrees (compared with 4,000 in 2001-2002), around half of which were part time. At the time, over 800 foundation degrees were on offer across the UK, with full-time applications up by 50 per cent for 2004-2005 (FDTF, 2004).

One of the defining characteristics of FDs was the central role that employers should play in their design and delivery, engaging them in these processes either through direct consultation or through relevant sector skills councils (DfES, 2002). Sheehan, (2004:26) highlights a range of challenges facing those designing successful FDs, including the need to ensure that employers are given the opportunity to make "meaningful contributions ...for example, [in] course design and structure, and the mentoring of students during work experience". The case study presented here indicates that, even with the best efforts of those involved, no amount of employer 'engagement' with curriculum design and development automatically results in the achievement of recruitment targets with full employer support.

Another feature of FD development was to be the "strategic links ...and collaboration between HEIs and Further Education Colleges (FEC)" (Longhurst, 2004: 5). FE/HE partnerships in any form are likely to result in challenges for quality assurance (Smith and Betts, 2003) and for staff development associated with cultural differences (Lyle and Robertson, 2003). These challenges can be seen in the case study that follows.

According to UCAS, in September 2004, under the banner 'Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Services', there were 220 full-time and 57 part-time foundation degree programmes managed by 86 and 33 institutions respectively, ranging from universities, to university colleges, colleges of higher education and further education colleges. Programme titles ranged from the basic 'Tourism Management' to 'Golf Course Management', 'Outdoor Adventure Management' to probably the most popular, 'Tourism and Hospitality Management'. The broad range of programme titles reflects a similar proliferation over the last 20 years or so at honours degree level, where programme titles have exercised our minds (see Stuart-Hoyle, 2003; Airey and Johnson, 1997) and led some to question the wisdom of overly specific titles which would seem to suggest that a plethora of jobs might be available to successful graduates in otherwise highly specialist, competitive fields.

Curriculum development and the relevance of subject benchmarks

In 2001 the concept of subject benchmarks became a reality after several years of fear and speculation that they would 'straightjacket' academics into delivering a set curriculum (see Botterill and Tribe, 2000; Stuart-Hoyle, 2004). They were in fact developed as a means for academics to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a subject-specific manner and, perhaps more important, reflected the expectations about the standards for the award of a qualification at a given level (QAA, 2000). The benchmarks devised refer to bachelors degrees with honours. In 2002, the QAA published its qualification benchmark for foundation degrees, the key generic outcomes of which are detailed in Panel 1.

Knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles in their field of study and the way in which those principles have developed

Ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, and the application of those principles in a work context

Knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s), and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in their field of study and apply these in a work context

An understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge in their field of study and in a work context

Panel 1: QAA benchmarks for foundation degrees

Source: Adapted from Longhurst 2004

As yet there have been no attempts by QAA to devise subject benchmarks for foundation degrees, and it is likely that such a venture would cause some concern among those who have already been charged with the task of launching an FD. This concern would not be, as in the case of bachelor degree subject benchmarks, for fear of limiting spontaneity and creativity in curriculum development, but because of the apparent lack of clarity among those who are being charged with their development of their purpose within HE (for example, their market position in comparison to the very successful and well-established Higher National Diploma). Exactly which markets are they seeking to target?

As a subject community that has a long-established record of cautious but healthy concern for Tourism's perceived respectability and strengthening conceptual base, it is perhaps understandable that there have been signs of apprehension and, in some cases, frustration at the prospect of what appears to be a familiar tale unfolding. This tale is arguably one of unchecked and unstructured proliferation of programmes that have been the cause of increasing and unwelcome workloads for individuals who have become embroiled in HEIs' desire to expand their portfolio of programmes in accordance with government strategy.

This paper will now uncover the planning process that underpinned the development of an FD package at CCCU in 2003-2004. The experiences at CCCU and the lessons learned may serve as a useful illustration of the mechanisms and stages involved in developing a FD.

Developing a foundation degree in tourism and hospitality management

Lyle and Robertson (2003) highlight four strategic considerations that might be taken into account when initiating a foundation degree, based on their experiences of developing sport-related FDs at Northumbria University. These are: widening participation; recruitment benefits; establishing a 'regional presence'; and developing HE/FE links. However, in the case of the FD development at CCCU, the key impetus for launching an FD in the tourism field did not initially come from these four strategic considerations. It came from a repeated, formal request from the region's tourism industry (through the Kent Tourism Alliance, KTA) to develop and offer a qualification that would enable Kent's experienced employees within the tourism and hospitality industry to 'upskill' effectively while remaining in full-time employment. KTA was envisaging a vocationally relevant part-time HE qualification with considerable academic rigour, which was not available at the time through any of Kent's HEIs. The four strategic priorities listed above would, however, be addressed if a development of this nature went ahead. It came as no surprise, therefore, when the university offered both moral and resource-based support to ensure that the development was progressed immediately.

In broad terms, there are four key stages involved in developing a new programme which are now explored:

- Consultation/market research
- Programme design
- Programme validation
- Launch and recruitment

Consultation/market research

Previous research into the role that industry should and has played in the development and delivery of Tourism undergraduate programmes revealed a tendency in a number (but not all) of HEIs to pay lip service to 'industry involvement'. Interviews with Tourism academics at the turn of the century revealed a reticence in some cases to engage with industry throughout the curriculum design, development and delivery process owing to a number of factors, including cost, time and 'nervousness' about what industry would actually require (Stuart-Hoyle, 2002). However, notwithstanding KTA's support, a relatively new concept such as the foundation degree needed to be pursued with caution. It was therefore deemed imperative to consult with the region's industry in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. This would also reflect the DfES's need to see employers engage in the design of FDs and the institution's commitment to working with employers at a local and regional level, in turn, fostering a closer relationship with the business community.

In January 2003, a day-long consultation exercise was carried out at the university, during which the two institutions involved in the proposed programme (CCCU and the local FE college) considered a range of programme design, content and delivery issues. The Kent Tourism Academy (KTA), whose purpose was to act as a clearing house for all education and training development and provision in Kent, acted as 'host' to the event, which was well received by the 20 tourism/hospitality businesses around the table, including Hoverspeed, Tourism South East (formerly SEETB), Leeds Castle, Chatham Historic Dockyards. This consultation exercise contributed significantly to the ultimate design and, more important perhaps, to the delivery mode of the foundation degree. The consultation exercise considered eight key topics as seen in Panel 2.

The purpose of the new programme
The sector skill to be developed
Knowledge/academic development
Mode of delivery
Assessment methods
Use of mentors
Typical courses
Employer commitment to the programme

Panel 2: Foundation degree – employer consultation exercise: key topics

The list of topics was drawn up following discussions between the two education institutions involved and KTA. The outcome of this consultation exercise, many conversations with other tourism industry representatives and a systematic trawl through existing FDs in the field resulted in the development of a part-time only FD in Management of Tourism and Hospitality, which is explained with the aid of the programme's structure in Appendix 1.

Programme design

A student undertaking a foundation degree on a part-time basis is likely to have little or no academic background, heavy work commitments and very specific motivations for study (Sheehan, 2004), factors emphasised by the majority of industry representatives at the consultation exercise. It is for this reason that the FD at CCCU needed to be developed in a flexible format, focusing on non-traditional forms of learning and assessment. It is no

coincidence that this approach reflected one of the institution's learning and teaching aims which is to "develop greater flexibility in its approaches to learning in order to address the learning needs of all students including: those studying at a distance from the institution; those on franchised programmes; and those studying part time and/or in work-based environments" (CCCUC, 2002: 1).

Therefore, the model found in Appendix 1 is delivered using a blended learning approach, through the use of the virtual learning environment (Blackboard) and residential teaching weeks (two in each year). One characteristic of the FD is to "empower people to survive through building self-confidence, independence, flexibility and adaptability" (Longhurst, 2004: 5), and it is believed that this has been achieved in adopting this innovative approach to delivery and learning. This method of delivery was recommended by the employers sitting around the table at the consultation exercise; they felt strongly that this was the only way the programme would be a realistic option for employees, and that this flexible approach to delivery would receive the employers' support, critical if the programme was to recruit. Of course, delivering higher education in this way was not pioneering; the Open University has been offering degree study at a distance for many years. It was, however, the first time that a part-time FD would be delivered combining these teaching and learning approaches.

The design of the courses offered within the programme were based on both the consultation exercise (i.e. industry perceived need) and the teaching team's research into similar programmes. The programme structure takes a flexible pathway approach, whereby students follow a programme of core Business courses, with an introductory industry-based course and a work-based course at Level 1, and can specialise in Tourism or Hospitality Management at Level 2 through their option courses. Further specialisation occurs at Level 2 through the work-based study course, which sees students capitalising further on their work experience and developing their research skills.

Despite the fact that this is not an honours bearing award, it is apparent that the two years of study incorporate the vast majority of the original National Liaison Groups (NLG) minimum core curriculum and the more recent subject benchmarks for Tourism. This, in turn, places successful students in a strong position with regards to honours articulation within 15 months, a requirement of all foundation degrees, should they wish to progress. It was clear during the consultation exercise that employers felt that the academic content of the programme should be very strong and that sector-specific skills should be integrated into what they regarded as the 'heavier, but valuable academic courses'.

There has been much discussion at national level about the nature of work-based, work-related or work-relevant study. In the context of this development it is useful to see the different approaches to work-based learning. The Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (Laycock, 2003) uses the term 'work-related learning' to distinguish between part-time students already in employment who may embark upon 'work-based learning' in their workplace and full-time students who may be required to undertake 'placement learning' as part of a vocational course. The former clearly applies in this case, and it is for this reason that the FD can claim that *all* the learning is work-based, a distinctive feature or 'unique selling point' (USP) of the programme.

Partner/collaborative issues: seeing through the politics and cultural differences

Lyle and Robertson (2003) are adamant about the importance of the transparency and quality of the HE/FE partner relationship in developing a new foundation degree. In this instance, the FE partner was working with CCCU on a tourism-related programme for the first time. The agreement took some time because the usual validating university had to grant clearance for the collaboration with CCCU. The working relationship throughout the programme's development and eventual launch was a good one, characterised by open discussion, clear allocation of responsibilities regarding the teaching, and, most important of

all, a shared belief that the FD was a positive move towards filling a recognised gap in the market.

However, in line with Lyle and Robertson's experiences, there are a number of issues which could be described as 'critical success factors' when trying to overcome the clear cultural differences between HE and HE in FE. These can be summarised as:

1. Always make sure that an operations manual is in place (in this case, a Memorandum of Agreement) that details each institution's responsibilities with regards to administration and quality assurance processes, to name just two key issues.
2. Ensure that the 'hidden' time and effort required to facilitate the design of new courses is costed into monies paid to the FE partner because FE staff are not generally given 'time' in their week (when teaching up to 28 hours) to develop new learning materials and learn new skills such as Blackboard.

Validation and recruitment ...promises, promises

Validated in July 2003, the modest goal was to recruit 15 new students for a March 2004 start (following a two-day Orientation to Higher Education course in February). This unusual start time was, again, at the request of the employers, who were unanimous in the view that this was the quietest time within the sector, and therefore a good time to 'release' employees for their first residential week. A month before the start, with 14 students waiting to start their studies, the first signs that all was not well began to emerge. One major supporter of the FD felt they could no longer release their employees from the workplace for the residentials, or pay their fees, as previously promised. Another employer withdrew support, and the programme was suddenly down to just eight students. Both partners agreed that the programme should be allowed to start with this small cohort (a clear financial loss) on the understanding that the March 2005 cohort would have to total 15. What, then, is the moral of the story? Not all education institutions will willingly incur such financial losses, however strong the perceived benefits of meeting strategic goals. Should such developments be avoided for fear of being left with a disappointed group of potential students?

Conclusions

It is the clear view of the teaching team and the relevant departments at each institution involved in this initiative that the FD has been a successful project, in so far as innovative teaching and learning methods have been employed that are allowing HE to reach those parts of the Tourism and Hospitality sector that have not been reached before. The broader benefits to both institutions in terms of meeting strategic goals have, to an extent, overshadowed the success of the development from a student and staff perspective. The small cohort of graduates (and their employers) is already reporting the positive impacts that their learning is bringing to the workplace.

Employer commitment to, and involvement in, foundation degrees is imperative according to government, but, as Smith and Betts (2003: 236) comment:

If the Government fails to provide the incentives for employer involvement they will have failed to learn from the experience of previous initiatives.

The harsh reality is that, however hard we try to make the involvement with employers genuine and meaningful (resulting in their feeling compelled to support employees in the form of release to study and financial contribution to fees), it is impossible to prevent employers retracting their support. This FD did not recruit again. Despite continued expressions of interest from potential students, they were unable to secure the necessary financial support or release for the residential weeks from their employers. Faced with financial constraints and falling profits, the human resource or training budget is the first to

suffer. Unless employers are offered real financial incentives to support and release workers to study, this tale will be retold again and again across the sector. Widening participation is all about encouraging those individuals who would not ordinarily consider entering HE an opportunity to do so. It is not about raising their hopes and subsequently dashing them because government does not provide the finances required to turn employer support 'in principle' into a reality.

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Appendix 1

Foundation Degree: Management of Tourism and Hospitality

Orientation to Higher Education Course
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Level 1	CORE Socio-cultural and Psychological Perspectives 20 Credits	CORE Financial Resource Management 20 Credits	CORE Marketing and Communications 20 Credits	CORE Human Resources and Legal Issues 20 Credits	CORE Tourism and Hospitality: the Business Environment 20 Credits	CORE Work Based Study 1 20 Credits
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PLUS
 Research Methods (All Students – non-classified)
 Vocational Language Skills (Optional – non-classified)

Level 2**	CORE Information Systems and ICT Applications in Tourism and Hospitality 20 Credits	Vocational Language Skills* 20 Credits	Event Management 20 Credits	Transport Systems and Management 20 Credits	Incoming and Domestic Tourism 20 Credits
	CORE Work Based Study 2 40 Credits	OR Tourism, Sustainability and the Environment 20 Credits	PLUS TWO OPTION COURSES FROM		
			Strategic Hospitality Management 20 Credits	Heritage Arts and Entertainment 20 Credits	Risk Management 20 Credits

Access to Honours – non-classified***

* Those students following a Language in Level 1 would continue their Language Studies in Year 2. Those opting not to study the Language in Level 1 would take Tourism, Sustainability and the Environment in Level 2.

** All students take the two Core courses PLUS Language Studies OR Tourism, Sustainability and the Environment PLUS two option courses. Option courses will be subject to student need/demand and staff availability and a maximum of four option courses would run each year.

*** Students can complete an Access to Honours Bridging course in the final term of the programme - this is not credit rated but allows for smooth progression to Honours level study following successful completion of the Foundation Degree where appropriate.