Developing higher skills in the UK workforce: A guide to collaboration between higher education and employers
Foreword

Lord Sainsbury’s recent review of the Government’s Science and Innovation Policies (The Race to the Top), acknowledges the vital role that higher education (HE) has to play in an internationally competitive economy through the creation of knowledge and skills. While higher education has a long-established role in developing well-rounded, flexible graduates and in continuing professional development, less well known is the role HE plays in developing those already in the workforce - through bespoke training, short courses and work-based learning. However, HE needs to and can do much more. The Leitch Review presents a world class ambition for delivering a highly skilled workforce in which more than 40 per cent of employees are qualified to Level 4 and beyond.

To deliver this challenging target will require a shift in culture moving workforce development from a cottage industry in HE into the mainstream and driving up employer commitment to developing their workforces. Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) have a major role to play in working with HE to make that shift - in stimulating employer demand for HE; communicating employers’ priority knowledge and skills needs; supporting HE providers in planning and delivering employer and employee-focused provision and in connecting employer demand with HE supply.

We need to bring what is unique about HE and the best of it, combined with greater flexibility and an approach tailored to business opportunities and solutions which employers want for their employees. HEFCE is already supporting a range of joint projects between HE and SSCs, but we want to extend these and strengthen relationships further. SSCs are already working closely with Lifelong Learning Networks and in the development of Foundation degrees. However, for many colleagues in the HE sector, SSCs are still unfamiliar. Similarly for those coming to HE for the first time, the range of organisations and activities can be daunting. We together with the SSDA have commissioned these two reports and an accompanying Directory of HE specifically to help those who need an introduction to some route maps to closer working between HE, SSCs and employers. As we look forward to the establishment of the Employment and Skills Commission in 2008, we hope these guides will be just the beginning of more such collaborations.

Professor David Eastwood
Chief Executive, HEFCE
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1. Rationale for collaboration

The widening remit of higher education

Many HE institutions have already built up excellent working relationships with employers through their research and enterprise programmes, and the increasing impact of lifelong learning networks. A growing number are developing models for delivering higher level skills in a way that meet the needs of employers and employees. But all HE institutions need to grow their capacity to engage on a large scale with employers, in ways adapted to their different profiles and missions. Those activities should share equal status with research and academic activities. ‘Business facing’ should be a description with which any higher education institution feels comfortable.


Collaboration between higher education (HE) and employers is not new. Employers have long sponsored university research programmes and knowledge transfer projects. Many universities have business development units and entrepreneurial departments that work proactively with employers to develop in-company programmes, intensive post-graduate courses and continuing professional development programmes. For more than a decade higher education institutions (HEIs) have been responding in a variety of ways to calls for enhanced graduate employability as part of a widening HE remit embracing wider participation in HE and the national skills agenda.

The changing global economy has given fresh impetus to employer/HE collaboration. There is a drive, particularly through Foundation degrees, for customised undergraduate programmes designed in partnership with employers. Indeed, the government recently announced1 that it has asked the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to develop a new funding model for HE that is ‘co-financed with employers, achieves sustained growth in employer-based student places and introduces the principle of employer demand-led funding’. HEFCE has been asked to support an additional 5,000 employer co-funded student places in 2008-09, with support for at least an additional 5,000 additional student places each year until 2010-11.

The focus on the adult workforce and development of increasingly flexible provision is extending the mission of HE beyond its responsiveness to traditional full-time student demand to the education and skills needs of employers in their respective sectors.

1 Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (2007) World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England
Raising our game on workforce skills

The UK must commit to achieving by 2020, world class high skills, exceeding 40 per cent of the adult population qualified to Level 4 and above.


The case for employers and HEIs to collaborate in addressing the nation’s education and skills agenda has never been more compelling. Projections put the UK’s skills needs on an ever-upward trajectory. By 2014 over 45 per cent of all employment will be in managerial, senior administrative, professional and technical occupations.2

The seminal Leitch Review of Skills in 20063 provides a detailed analysis of the UK’s future skills needs against the background of burgeoning global competition. The review makes an urgent call for the UK to ‘raise its game’ on skills to deliver prosperity and social justice. Perhaps the biggest challenge concerns higher level skills4. To achieve world-class higher level skills the review calls for a commitment to raising the proportion of the UK’s adult levels of around 30 per cent.

Skills and qualification levels

The most common measures of skills are qualifications. Nationally-recognised qualifications are grouped into different levels, with the higher levels at Level 4 and above. (For example, Foundation degrees are at Level 5 and honours degrees at Level 6.) Vocational qualifications at Level 4 and above include Higher Certificates and National Diplomas (HNCs/HNDs), and higher level National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Higher level NVQs are delivered in the workplace but can form part of vocational degree programmes.

Level 3 qualifications include A Levels, BTEC National Diplomas and Certificates, and Level 3 NVQs. Advanced Apprenticeships include a certificate and NVQ at this level.

Challenges

Long-standing issues need to be addressed if employers and HE are to rise to Leitch’s call to action on higher skills. In 2003, the Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration5, echoed widespread employer concerns about the job-readiness of graduates in the UK.

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4 The term ‘higher level skills’ refers to the knowledge and skills required to undertake new and developing roles aligned to levels C and I of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications which are equivalent to levels 4 and 5 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). See http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_5889.aspx for further details.
It found a mismatch between the needs of industry and programmes offered by universities. While the review reported some very positive findings, businesses found it difficult to engage with universities in a strategic dialogue about skills requirements.

This might be due, in part, to another finding of the review, the ‘dead hand’ on innovation placed on HEIs by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

Yet innovation is fundamental to HE/employer collaboration, for it involves a fundamental shift away from the traditional relationship between institution and learner. Workforce development is based on a tripartite relationship between provider, employer and learner/employee, where the employer is as much the customer as the individual.

The ‘students’ themselves – often mature, experienced employees – make new demands on institutions more used to selecting and tutoring traditional full-time, on-campus HE students. Provision for workforce development needs to address the requirements of a more diverse student body.

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Changing the targets away from the sole focus on young people aged 18-30 will transform the incentives of HE providers to work with employers, delivering a step change in liaison between employers and higher education institutions.

The Review recommends a rebalancing of the priorities of HE institutions to make available relevant, flexible and responsive provision that meets the high skills needs of employers and their staff.

Opportunities
Those rising to the challenge stand to reap handsome returns. The need for higher workforce skills presents huge opportunities for employers, HE providers and learners to work together for mutual benefit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BENEFITS TO EMPLOYERS</th>
<th>BENEFITS TO LEARNERS</th>
<th>BENEFITS TO THE PROVIDERS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>“It changes the way they think about what they do – more receptive to new ideas, more analytical.”</strong></td>
<td><strong>“Career progression is very important to me… and I’m glad to be with a firm that recognises that.”</strong></td>
<td><strong>“We see a huge demand for higher education from people in employment.”</strong></td>
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<td>Stephen Miller Salons</td>
<td>Edmund Nuttall employee</td>
<td>Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Partner in programme development and delivery – provision tailored to employer needs</td>
<td>• Opportunity to achieve graduate-level skills and qualifications – having ‘missed out’ on traditional HE</td>
<td>• Growth and additional student numbers for co-funded provision</td>
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<td>• ‘Grow your own graduates’</td>
<td>• Builds on existing skills and experience</td>
<td>• New income streams</td>
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<td>• High-level, high-quality programmes accredited to HE standards</td>
<td>• Feel valued – growing in the job</td>
<td>• Shared programme development and delivery</td>
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<td>• Flexible delivery – minimal time off the job</td>
<td>• Affordable – earning and learning</td>
<td>• Curriculum innovation – integration of academic and work-based learning</td>
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<td>• Work-based projects benefit the organisation</td>
<td>• Combination of practical and academic learning</td>
<td>• Highly credible vocationally-focused provision</td>
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<tr>
<td>• More highly skilled and flexible workforce – improved performance and competitiveness</td>
<td>• Nationally-recognised, high-status qualification</td>
<td>• Enhanced graduate employability</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Enhanced reputation as good employer – better quality applicants and higher retention</td>
<td>• Enhanced confidence and career prospects</td>
<td>• Better understanding of employer needs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Springboard to further achievement – higher qualifications, professional accreditation</td>
<td>• Wider participation – mature learners enrich student body</td>
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<td>• Opens up vocational progression routes</td>
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</table>
### Types of higher education provision

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<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Awarded by</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificate of Higher Education/University Certificate</td>
<td>Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) Certificate level (C) National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 4 120 HE credits</td>
<td>Covers the basic concepts of a subject. This level of study is usually a first step towards a higher qualification.</td>
<td>Institutions with degree-awarding powers granted by the Privy Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher National Certificate</td>
<td>FHEQ Certificate level (C) NQF level 4 150 HE credits</td>
<td>Vocational courses with some work related experience. Assessed through projects and practical tasks. Typically studied part-time through day release.</td>
<td>Awarding bodies (such as Edexcel) or institutions with degree-awarding powers granted by the Privy Council.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diploma of Higher Education</td>
<td>FHEQ Intermediate level (I) NQF level 5 240 HE credits</td>
<td>Typically studied full-time over a period of two years.</td>
<td>Institutions with degree-awarding powers granted by the Privy Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher National Diploma</td>
<td>FHEQ Intermediate level (I) NQF level 5</td>
<td>Vocational courses with some work related experience. Assessed through projects and practical tasks. Typically studied full-time over a period of two years.</td>
<td>Awarding bodies or institutions with degree-awarding powers granted by the Privy Council.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foundation degree</td>
<td>FHEQ Intermediate level (I) NQF level 5 240 HE credits</td>
<td>Integrate academic and work-based learning to equip individuals with knowledge and skills relevant to their employment. Are designed in partnership with employers and delivered flexibly.</td>
<td>Institutions with degree-awarding powers granted by the Privy Council.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honours degree</td>
<td>FHEQ Honours level (H) NQF level 6</td>
<td>Develops an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of the discipline. Full-time courses are typically three years in length.</td>
<td>Institutions with degree-awarding powers granted by the Privy Council.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters degree</td>
<td>FHEQ Masters level (M) NQF level 7</td>
<td>Either a taught course or research programme (sometimes a combination of these). Most of the study is at a level that is at the forefront of an academic discipline. Courses are typically one year (full-time).</td>
<td>Institutions with degree-awarding powers granted by the Privy Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>FHEQ Doctorate level (D) NQF level 8</td>
<td>Awarded for the creation and interpretation of knowledge which extends the forefront of the discipline, usually through original research. Typically requires three years of full-time study.</td>
<td>Institutions with degree-awarding powers granted by the Privy Council.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to the qualifications listed on the previous page, HEIs, further education colleges (FECs) and awarding bodies (subject to validation by an institution with the appropriate degree awarding powers) may also offer short professional or continuing education courses across all levels of the FHEQ.

The table above relates to qualifications in England. Credit and Qualification Frameworks for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are available at www.qca.org.uk/qca_8150.aspx. Trials of the new National Credit and Qualifications Framework will continue into 2008. The proposed framework will be a unit-based qualification framework underpinned by a system of credit accumulation and transfer.

**Foundation degrees**

The Leitch Review implementation plan describes Foundation degrees as an ‘excellent example of collaborative working between universities, FE colleges, employers and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)’. Foundation degrees are designed with employers and combine academic study with workplace learning to equip people with relevant knowledge and skills to improve performance and productivity. Academically rigorous and vocationally-focused, Foundation degrees are crucially dependent on effective collaboration between HE and participating employers.

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**Example**

__Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)__ have developed and delivered short courses at HE level for __Novartis Vaccines and Diagnostics__. LJMU’s Industry-focussed Business Development Team acts as the gateway to the university’s expertise and co-ordinated a response from the university when the Partnership for Learning and a Train to Gain broker alerted them to Novartis’ pressing need for specific training in microbiology.

LJMU developed short courses in partnership with Novartis and delivered them both at the university and on the employer’s site to ensure that training became embedded within everyday processes and procedures. As a result of the collaboration, Novartis were able to satisfy business critical requirements set by external regulators and ensure that employees were equipped with key skills. LJMU now have a longer term relationship with a major employer and have also enhanced their capacity in the area of microbiology training provision.

Adapted from Stepping Up: meeting the Challenge for Higher Level Skills (with the permission of the North West Universities Association).

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**Foundation degrees** were introduced in 2001 to connect the world of work more effectively to higher education. They can be highly customised and flexibly delivered to meet the needs of employers and individuals/employees in work.

Foundation degrees are self-standing programmes (equivalent to two-thirds of an honours degree) as well as platforms for progression to further learning, qualifications and professional accreditation. Validated by universities, many are delivered with further education colleges through Foundation degree partnerships. There were just under 61,000 Foundation degree students in 2006-7, and numbers continue to grow.

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6 Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (2007) _World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England_
2. Planning and co-ordinating higher education/employer collaboration

Given the fundamental role of employers within Foundation degrees and the burgeoning demand for employer involvement in other further and higher education programmes, it is important that HE providers plan and co-ordinate such links as far as possible. Ad hoc approaches from different parts of the same institution or consortium will frustrate employers.

Example
In an institution as large and vocationally-active as Newcastle College, it is important to co-ordinate contacts with employers that are made at different levels and in different parts of the organisation, including the college’s School of Employer Engagement. A central database of employer contacts has been created to pool information and facilitate communication across the college on employer links.

Planning will help to make best use of scarce resources. Stages of a planning cycle are offered below.

**Research**
- skills needs intelligence, employer consultations and surveys

**Networking**
- Employers, trade/professionals sector organisations, partners, learning partnerships etc

**Partnerships**
- agreement, action plan, resources

**Programme Development**
- employer input to content, admissions procedures, modes of delivery (esp. work-based learning), validation

**Programme Delivery**
- learning agreement, employer involvement through mentoring, in assessment, etc

**Review**
- employer input to programme evaluation

**Promotion**
- key messages to employers, methods used.

**Planning cycle**
Facilitators

A variety of organisations - national, regional and local – have a stake in supporting HE/employer collaboration. They can be useful sources of information, advice and access to networks. They may be able to provide more hands-on support through brokerage or as members of HE/employer forums, Foundation Degree partnerships or programme validation panels.

Potential partners include:

- **Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs)/Employment and Skills Boards.** Central to the government’s National Skills Strategy, RSPs are forums where businesses and skills organisations work together to meet the skills needs of regional economies. They set out how the delivery of adult skills, workforce development, business support and labour market services can provide the best support for Regional Economic Strategies.

- **Foundation Degree Forward (fdf).** Funds institutions, SSCs and other organisations to undertake projects, research and other initiatives that will support Foundation Degrees and employer engagement with higher education more generally. *fdf* also holds events and provides consultancy services, data, and publications for HE providers and employers to support the development of high quality Foundation degrees.

- **Higher Level Skills Pathfinders.** Pilot programmes led by university associations in the North East, North West and South West extend the Train to Gain service for employers to higher skills levels. The pathfinders will provide a brokerage service for employers to help ensure that provision is fit for purpose.

- **Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs).** Funded by HEFCE, these new local networks of universities and colleges work with employers and other partners to develop vocational progression routes into and through HE.

- **Sector Skills Councils (SSCs).** The 25 employer-led, government-licensed SSCs, have a pivotal role in articulating employer demand for skills and ensuring the supply of appropriate learning provision at all levels.

- **Higher Education Academy Subject Centres.** These provide subject-specific support for enhancing the student learning experience through a network of 24 centres located within higher education institutions.

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7 See Higher education working with employers: Directory relevant organisations, available at [www.fdf.ac.uk](http://www.fdf.ac.uk)
8 Details at [www.traintogain.gov.uk](http://www.traintogain.gov.uk)
9 More details at [www.unis4ne.ac.uk](http://www.unis4ne.ac.uk), [www.nwua.ac.uk](http://www.nwua.ac.uk) and [www.herda-sw.ac.uk](http://www.herda-sw.ac.uk)
10 For more details, see Higher Education and Skills for Business: Collaborative working between HE providers and Sector Skills Councils, available at [www.fdf.ac.uk](http://www.fdf.ac.uk)
11 Further details of Higher Education Subject Centres can be found at [www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/networks/subjectcentres](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/networks/subjectcentres)
Example

**Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs)**, developed through **SSCs**, are strategic action plans that are fundamentally altering the way skills are demanded, delivered and developed throughout the UK. They map out what skills employers in their respective sectors need their workforces to have now and in the future, and the learning provision required to respond to those needs.

Access to public funding for skills development will increasingly be determined by the demand and supply identified in the Agreements. HE providers have a key role in their development and delivery.

The Sector Skills Agreement for audio-visual industries developed through **Skillset** was the first SSA to forge a partnership between an SSC and **HEFCE**. In the first stage of the partnership Skillset and HEFCE agreed that:

- they would work together to develop the Screen Academy Network of universities and colleges, with HEFCE inputting expert advice as well as funding
- Skillset course kitemarking and accreditation arrangements would incorporate HEFCE funding criteria
- Skillset would support HEFCE work on the strategic development of HE provision for the sector.

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**Example**

**fdf** has the national remit for funding the employer-led SSCs to produce guidance and frameworks to support HEIs in developing Foundation degrees which meet sector requirements and which are responsive to National Occupational Standards (as appropriate) as well as meeting the requirements of the QAA Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark.

The **British Chambers of Commerce (BCC)** has signed up to a national partnership campaign with **fdf** to promote Foundation degrees to employers in the Chamber network. The campaign is being piloted with employers and HE partners in five regional Chambers.
3. The demand for higher skills

Identifying skills needs

National labour market research points to an ever-growing demand for managers, professionals and technicians. Many sectors report skills gaps and shortages in these areas.

Detailed sector-specific skills intelligence is published by SSCs. Such intelligence informs the ‘demand’ side of the councils’ Sector Skills Agreements and, where available, their Foundation Degree Sector Frameworks.

More ‘drilling down’ can be done through other published labour market information and skills surveys. These include the Regional Economic Strategies produced by Regional Development Agencies and skills reports produced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Where particular sectors are local LSC priorities for workforce development, detailed local analysis of those sectors may be available.

This background intelligence can form the basis of a dialogue on skills needs between employers and HE providers. This might take the form of a survey or consultation event. Informal soundings can be taken through networking and other contacts.

Staff from 145 higher education institutions requested copies of e-skills UK’s IT Insights research of the sector’s skills needs.

Stimulating demand

Because the demand for higher skills is relatively undeveloped among UK employers (evidenced in part by HE’s small share of the workforce development market), HE providers need to be proactive in promoting what they can deliver to meet employer and employee needs. This is particularly the case with Foundation degrees which, despite their growth and focus on meeting employer skills needs, are still relatively new and unfamiliar to many employers. dfdf regards the stimulation of employer demand for higher education as a key priority which it seeks to make central to its partnerships with Sector Skills Councils.

Institutions wishing to tap into the workforce development market are increasingly adopting the sales and marketing techniques of business. Some have successfully held employer awareness-raising events, often on an employer’s premises, with support from a partner such as an SSC. Contacts made at such events need to be vigorously followed up.

Example

More than 50 employers and apprentices attended an event at Leeds United Football Club to promote Leeds Metropolitan University’s Foundation degree in Health-related Exercise and Fitness. The event was followed up with a dinner for employers.
A proactive approach adopted by some institutions with larger, often public sector, employers is to carry out a training needs analysis of an employer’s middle and senior management. Dedicated business development units within institutions may lead such activity. These units can support marketing and promotion to employers through both direct activity and through sharing their expertise.

**Example**

Building on existing links with the City Council, Newcastle College’s Lifestyle Academy was able to broaden discussions with this major employer to identify GP exercise referrals as a high priority and area of skills shortage. The council was engaged in playing a leading role in developing and delivering a Foundation degree tailored to addressing this need.

HE providers that are successfully building relationships with employers have cited having enthusiastic staff with recent industry experience as an important factor. Those that are building on existing good links with employers and training providers delivering Apprenticeships are at a considerable advantage. Colleges with their own Apprenticeship units and links to managing agents are particularly well placed to raise awareness of HE progression opportunities among Apprentices and their employers.

Nevertheless, the progression of work-based learners into HE is limited, even when clear progression routes are in place. The many factors that continue to inhibit progression make this a challenging agenda requiring proactive approaches from both employers and HE.

**Key promotional messages**

Activities to promote workforce development HE to employers should be based on consistent ‘messages’ which make the business case. Research has been carried out to test the most effective messages for employers. The messages recommended as a result of this research – and any others identified through consultation and testing with employers – need to be prioritised and tailored to address the needs of the target audience for the HE programme, as the ‘hot buttons’ to press may vary significantly from one sub-sector or region to another. The more customised the messages to employers are, the more likely they are to make an impact.

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12 DfES (2006) Foundation degrees: message testing. Available at [www.fdf.ac.uk](http://www.fdf.ac.uk)
Examples of key messages for employers

• Better quality recruits

“The opportunity to gain a higher education qualification and professional status is a big selling point when recruiting.”
Slack & Parr

• Flexible entry requirements – experience can be as valid as formal qualifications
• Flexible, tailored to your needs

“The work-based projects of the Foundation Degree are closely aligned to the needs of the business.”
Rolls Royce

• Improved workforce performance and productivity
• Increased employee motivation – higher staff retention

“Progressing our Apprentices on to HE helps us to keep good people and give them parity of esteem with graduates.”
EDS UK

• Meets skills shortages – grow your own workforce

“The nursing cadet programme with progression to the Foundation Degree enables us to grow our own workforce.”
Sunderland Teaching Primary Care Trust

• Work-based learning – little time off the job, minimal disruption
• Projects directly related to your business

“Feasibility studies carried out by employees during the course have delivered process improvements and cost-savings.”
Ford Motor Company

• You are closely involved in delivery
• Potential to accredit company training programmes
• Extremely good value compared to private sector training
• Direct links to further qualifications and continuing professional development (CPD).

Additional source: From Apprenticeship to Higher Education, UVAC 2005
**fdf** provides Foundation degree promotional materials free-of-charge and its website offers successful examples of employer engagement that can be utilised by institutions. **fdf** will soon be launching a web-based resource that identifies a process and a range of potential models for the development of employer and provider partnerships. It will also provide materials to support these partnerships.

**Using the media**

Targeted advertising, flyers and other media can be effective tools in drawing the attention of employers to the benefits of Foundation degrees and higher education generally. Course leaders with little expertise in this area may benefit from professional advice available from institutions’ marketing and communications units. Where PR tasks are delegated or contracted out, course leaders should ensure that they have editorial oversight of draft copy and ‘sign off’ material before publication.

Participating employers, who will often have considerable marketing expertise, are powerful promotional allies. Their endorsements add substantial weight to promotional material. They are also useful in testing draft material.

Case studies, well-written and focused, are invaluable promotional material for employer briefings and media packs. They can be readily converted into feature articles for trade journals, provide the basis for a more general ‘picture stories’ or used to support other publications. Once in the public domain, especially on the web, a good case study can rapidly raise the profile of a course and enjoy a long shelf-life.

At www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_employers/case_studies, **fdf**’s website offers a range of employer case studies in both video and text formats. They cover employers in the public and well as private sectors, and SMEs.
4. Developing HE programmes to meet employer demand

Employers as partners in course development

“A lot of institutions start from the wrong end, devising a Foundation Degree and then find some supportive employers. You’ve got to start with the need and then develop a course to meet that need. It’s about listening and responding, rather than dictating the provision on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.”

Manchester College of Arts and Technology

Clearly it is important to have employer input to the development of vocationally-focussed HE programmes which are intended to meet the needs of employment. Foundation Degrees, especially, are crucially dependent on employer support. Employers represented on steering groups take a leading role in ensuring the design of a programme is fit-for-purpose. Such involvement helps to reinforce the commitment of employers to the course and encourage their further involvement in delivering the programme.

Wider employer consultation may include a consultation event, a web-based consultation or individual meetings with employers. Such consultation should consider the mode of delivery as well as content.

Much discussion will relate to the provision of work-based learning. Learning in the workplace often raises questions about the ability of full-time provision to provide meaningful work-based learning beyond placement experience. Although full-time provision can meet minimum expectations for work-based learning, flexible, part-time modes of delivery may better meet both the university’s programme validation requirements and the needs of employers and individuals. A key consideration for employers is the time required to release employees for study.

Example

Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College’s part-time Foundation degree in Sport and Leisure Management was made as flexible as possible to enable employees to participate. Attendance is required one day a fortnight, with an ‘open door’ for students to attend at other times to suit their work and family commitments. This flexibility has enabled employees to participate from well outside the area as the reputation of the course has grown.

Restricting input to employers on the steering group may give one dominant partner or small group of employers undue influence, with the risk of skewing the design in favour of special interests. A balance may need to be struck between specific employer demands and the broader requirements of programme validation.
Aerosystems International teamed up with Yeovil College to develop a trainee programme spanning Advanced Apprenticeship and a Foundation degree, with the prospect of further progression to Honours. The company had reservations about an internet module because it had no use for website development skills. A compromise was agreed whereby the module was adapted to accommodate the use of web-based technology, which the company uses in an asset-tracking system.

HE providers need to guide employers on the development and validation process and be mindful of jargon that may be commonplace in HE but baffling to employers. A significant employer contribution to the process may be to couch programme documentation in language that can be readily understood in the workplace.

Sources and tools

The University of Bath is working with Airbus UK and other aerospace associated companies to develop a demand-led curriculum to support the introduction of new composite materials technology within the industry. The project will focus on how HE and FE institutions within the South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder partnership can accredit existing Airbus in-house composites material training. The project will support the future development needs of Airbus employees and will also create generic and industry-specific resources that can be used more widely across the aerospace sector.

A range of documentation and guidance is available to help HE and employer partners collaborate on course development. These tools are useful not only in helping to ensure the quality and currency of provision; they can also take much of the spade-work out of programme development and enable the partners to focus on tailoring the programme to their needs.

- **Academic Infrastructure.** This is a range of documentation developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to define clear and explicit standards for public information and as nationally agreed reference points. The infrastructure enables employers developing partnerships with HE to understand the academic context in which HE programmes are developed and participate more effectively.
Components of the Academic Infrastructure are:

- **Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education.** Sections particularly relevant to HE/employer collaboration are those relating to collaborative provision (Section 2) and work-based and placement learning (Section 9).

- **Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)**

- **Subject Benchmark Statements**

- **Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark**

- **Guidelines for Preparing Programme Specifications.** Of central importance to the development, approval and review of HE programmes, the specifications set out the kinds of information that an institution provides about its courses. Each specification clarifies what knowledge, understanding, skills and other attributes a student will have developed on successfully completing a specific course. It also provides details of teaching and learning methods, assessment and subsequent career opportunities, and states how the course relates to the qualifications framework.

- **Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning.** This is particularly relevant in the context of accrediting prior experiential learning (APEL) acquired in the workplace.

- **Guidelines for Student Progress Files.**

  - **Foundation Degree Sector Frameworks.** Developed by employer-led SSCs, the frameworks include Foundation Degree curriculum templates. These typically provide indicative content that give a head-start to curriculum development while leaving ample room for manoeuvre.

  - **National Occupational Standards (NOS).** These are the nationally-recognised standards of workplace competence, developed and kept up to date by SSCs. NOS provide a common ‘language’ for dialogue with employers and help to ensure that academic learning is applied effectively in the workplace.

  - **Validation guidance.** Extracts from *fdf*’s validation handbook provide a checklist of questions (see page 23) to guide programme development that are particularly relevant to employer involvement.

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13 Available at [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure)

14 A list of Foundation Degree Sector Frameworks is available at [www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/sector_skills_councils](http://www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/sector_skills_councils)

Checklist
Questions that are particularly relevant to employers involved in the development of Foundation degrees:

• Has the design of the curriculum taken account of National Occupational standards where they exist and/or has the curriculum drawn upon the relevant Sector Skills Council Foundation Degree framework?

• How does the provision relate to any relevant professional body requirements and/or systems of accreditation?

• Is there a balance and integration of employment-related skills and broad-based academic study and content?

• Is work-based learning embedded in the programme of learning?

• Are the arrangements for the management and supervision of workplace learning systematic and clear?

• Are there systems in place for the continuous briefing of employers?

• Do the learning outcomes demonstrate the integration of work-based learning and the academic programme of study?

• Are there learning agreements in place to define the specific outcomes intended for the workplace learning, the responsibilities of employers, students, mentors and academic tutors?

• Where employers are contributing to the delivery of the programme, how are these contributions designed and integrated?

• Are employers involved in the assessment of students?

5. HE/Employer partnership in delivering HE programmes

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities

Discussions and briefing events held by the HE provider with employers and learners at an early stage help to ensure that respective roles and responsibilities of the three partners are clear at the outset. This should be underpinned by a written undertaking, often in the form of a Learning Agreement, signed at the start of the programme and subject to regular review.

The employer role particularly concerns the work-based dimension of the programme, which may be substantial. In addition to meeting the relevant health, safety and other workplace regulations, employer responsibilities covered in the Agreement are likely to focus on providing:

- workplace induction of the student, including communication of the student’s role within the organisation
- appropriate learning opportunities in the workplace for the student, with access to appropriate people, information and facilities
- supervision and monitoring of the student through a dedicated workplace supervisor or mentor
- regular feedback to the student and appraisal of performance
- liaison with HE tutors and assessors.

The HE provider’s part of the Learning Agreement should include the support the university or college will provide to enable the employer to fulfil their role. This might be:

- induction into the provision and management of work-based learning
- supervisor/mentor training
- briefing on assessment procedures.

Where the employer is involved in assessing a student’s work (see below), this and the HE provider’s role in supporting it should also be included in the Agreement.

Work-based assignments

HE modules, aided by mapping to relevant National Occupational Standards, can be closely related to workplace practice. The potential for aligning assignments to business objectives provides a significant incentive for employers to be closely involved in the design and delivery of work-based projects.

Employers have an important responsibility to ensure that students are provided with a range of experience to support their studies and access to the organisation’s human and material resources at levels commensurate with their assignments. In return, students’ work-based projects, particularly the extended projects that typically round off the final year, can provide a valuable consultancy service to the employer.
Example
Manchester Metropolitan University is working with Foundation Degree Forward, the University of the Arts London, Tesco and My Knowledge Map to develop a Foundation degree for the retail sector. The qualification will be delivered using a combination of e-learning materials, residential delivery and online support to ensure that all employees can access the provision. Whilst Tesco is heavily involved in the development of the Foundation degree, the intention is that the programme will be available across the retail sector and will establish consistent national provision that employers and learners will regard as central to their workforce and personnel development strategy.

Example
The assignments of two Britax trainees doing an Engineering Graduate Apprenticeship at Kingston University resulted in a design component patent that brought significant benefits to the company.

The work-based project of an employee doing a Hairdressing and Salon Management at the University of Derby provided a greatly improved appraisal process for her employer, Stephen Miller Salons.

Workplace mentors
Workplace supervisors or mentors have a pivotal role in facilitating the successful delivery of the work-based HE programmes. Key aspects of their role are to:

- agree a workplace learning programme with the student
- ensure that students’ learning programme is recognised in the organisation and appropriate time and support provided
- act as a point of contact between the employer and the HE provider
- provide academic and pastoral support to the student in the workplace
- facilitate and monitor the work-based projects, ensuring that the learning in the HE modules is effectively applied in the workplace to the benefit of the employer as well as the student.

Work-based supervision and mentoring requires close collaboration between employer and provider to ensure that supervisors have the skills to facilitate learning and development in the workplace. HE providers should ensure that mentor training is available to enable employers to provide this crucial support to their learners.
Involvement in work-based assessment

Mentors or other designated employees may also be engaged in assessing some elements of the work-based learning. Such assessment can take many forms, including:

- case studies
- presentations
- reports and project work
- observation of practical work
- personal development plans
- evidence portfolios.

Employers taking on this role usually do so by mentors ‘doubling’ as assessors. With appropriate training and quality assurance measures in place, this both helps to spread the delivery workload and strengthen employer engagement in the HE programme.

Accrediting Prior Experiential Learning

Employer participation in assessment can include assisting with accrediting the prior experiential learning (APEL) of learners. Employees may possess substantial experience that might be accredited through APEL arrangements to provide exceptions from parts of a course. Employers may be able to help candidates to provide evidence of their knowledge and skills for presentation at APEL interviews, usually in the form of portfolios.

Guidelines on APEL form part of the Academic Infrastructure outlined on page 20.

Employer involvement on-campus

Employer involvement in delivery need not be limited to work-based learning. They can be invited to contribute in other ways, such as through lectures and participation in seminars.

Example

An idea successfully put into practice at Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College has been a sport and leisure industry forum organised by the students, where employers from different parts of the sector are invited to participate in one of their university sessions.
Engaging employers in HE achievement and review

Graduation events present an opportunity for HE providers to cement relationships with participating employers and generate ‘repeat business’. They also provide a showcase for promoting HE programmes to new employers. Such events provide excellent promotional material through press releases, articles, case studies and photographs.

Programme review provides a further opportunity to keep employers engaged. Although formal review will normally take place annually, feedback should be continually gathered from employers informally via workplace mentors and review meetings. As far as possible this feedback should demonstrably influence future provision, so that employers can see that their views are being taken into account by HE providers. This will provide evidence to employers and others that HE provision is responding to the needs of industry.

For more information

Two recently-published companions to this guide provide complementary information and advice on collaboration between higher education and employers. Both are available as downloads at www.fdf.ac.uk.

• Higher education working with employers: Directory of relevant organisations (2007)
  A who’s who of organisations supporting HE/employer collaboration. Entries include links to relevant information and advice available.

• Higher Education and Skills for Business: Collaborative working between HE providers and Sector Skills Councils (2007).
  A guide to how HE and SSCs are working together for the benefit of learners, employers and institutions.