Dos and Don’ts
for
Working with Employers and Developing Successful Foundation Degrees
and other Work-related, Accredited Higher Education Programmes

Blueprint for Success
Building HE–FE Capacity to Address Employers’ Skills Shortages and to
Contribute towards Workforce Higher Skills Development

Paper 2

John Benyon, Belinda Mckee and Katie Morris
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Section 4  Common features of successful foundation degree programmes

4.1 Do remember the features of successful foundation degrees that the research has identified, both in terms of inputs and outcomes

- Improved confidence levels of graduates
- Positive effects on the workplace and improved employability
- Life-changing experience for many students
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- A curriculum that is highly relevant to the world of work brings success
- Evidence of considerable workplace improvements
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This list of dos and don’ts is intended to provide a straightforward guide to working with employers and to developing work-related successful higher education accredited programmes.

The information provided is a synthesis of the knowledge gained from two studies undertaken by researchers based at the Institute of Lifelong Learning at the University of Leicester:

Successful Foundation Degrees
A Study of the Role of Employers and Other Key Factors

Employers’ Engagement with Foundation Degrees
Report on a Study of the Experiences of Ten Employers

There are many successful models of higher education accredited programmes, with variations in all aspects of their development and delivery. This guide does not cover them all, but attempts to highlight some of the most significant points.
Blueprint for Success
Section 1  Partnership development

The evidence shows that the successful development of work-related higher education accredited programmes needs to be in partnership with employers. However, there are a number of different models which can often be equally effective, with the driving impetus coming from an employer, or a college, or a university.

The dos and don'ts in Section 1 are all examples that need to be considered before extensive resources are committed to the development of a programme.

1.1 Do challenge the rationale for developing the programme

- How have you assessed demand?
- Who is the target audience?
- What expertise is there within the institution?
- Why does your institution want to develop programmes with these employers/in this area?

1.2 Don’t commit resources to developing the programme if the stimulus is one-sided, for example if the college or university want to go ahead, but the employers do not see the relevance

- Where does the impetus for the new programme originate?
- Are all partners fully committed to the project?

1.3 Don’t just rely on any existing informal arrangements that may be dependent on particular staff contacts

- Would the partnership survive if a key member of staff left?
1.4 **Do develop a business plan to evaluate your proposal**

- How does your proposal fit with the strategic plan of your institution?
- What is the likely lifespan of your proposed programme?
- How are you going to engage employers and market the programme to them?

1.5 **Don't assume that all employers are well informed about foundation degrees and the potential for accrediting ‘in-house’ programmes**

- Are you clear on the impact and benefits the programme will bring to employers and students?
- Do all the partners fully understand the standards and requirements for a foundation degree and for higher education courses?

1.6 **Do establish formal agreements with partners**

- What input will the employers have and is this fully understood?
- What input will validation partners have?
- What input will other delivery partners have?
- What systems will be put in place to facilitate good communication between the partners?
- Can any employers agree to send students on the programme on a contractual basis?
- Can you gain access to the facilities of your validating partner?
Section 2  Programme development

2.1 Do enable employers to contribute towards planning the content and curriculum in whatever capacity suits them best

- Will employers be able to provide guidance on the broad issues and strategic design?
- Will employers want to be involved in designing detailed curriculum content?
- Are there any existing non-accredited courses run by the employers that could be incorporated into the new curriculum?
- Have you considered the appropriate National Occupational Standards?

2.2 Do recognise that the curriculum needs to be highly relevant to working practices

- How will you ensure that the curriculum meets the varied needs of employers?
- How will you manage mixed knowledge levels of students?
- How will you manage mixed ability levels of students?
- How will you ensure that the curriculum is delivered using practical methods wherever possible?

2.3 Don’t underestimate the time required to develop a new programme from scratch

- Have you allowed sufficient time for consultation, re-drafting and validation?
2.4 Do consider what the most appropriate modes of study will be for the target group

- Are you aiming at full-time or part-time students?
- If you will have full-time students, how are they going to achieve the work-related components of the programme?
- How might flexible timetabling facilitate this?

2.5 Do critically examine each aspect of the programme and its delivery to assess its flexibility and to check that students’ priorities are its driving force

- Is the timing of the programme in the interests of students?
- Is the location of the venue accessible and convenient for students?
- Are the arrangements suitable for part-time students?
- Have you considered distance or blended learning?
- Will materials be available to students on line?
- How will peer group support be facilitated?

2.6 Do integrate the QAA’s requirements and those of any relevant professional bodies into the qualification

- Have you applied the criteria in the Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA’s) Foundation Degree: Qualification Benchmark and the QAA Codes of Practice?
- Have you checked with employers and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) for professional body requirements?
2.7 Don’t assume that all students will want to complete the full programme

- Is the programme available on a modular basis?
- Can students return after a break in their studies?

2.8 Do consider the potentially varied entry routes of students

- What arrangements are there for accrediting prior (experiential) learning (APEL) of students?
- Are there level 3 programmes locally that could provide a source of recruits to the programme?

2.9 Do put in place strong student support mechanisms, especially introductory systems

- What systems do you have to support students returning to study?
- Have you integrated introductory modules with frequent assessments?
- Have you planned prompt detailed feedback on the assessments to provide good guidance?
- How has the curriculum been designed to foster confidence building?
- How will you provide ongoing support for students as their circumstances change?

2.10 Don’t neglect the need to provide onward progression of students from a foundation degree to an honours degree

- What arrangements are there for students to progress on to an honours degree?
- Will the mode of study and location be the same for students who continue?
2.11 Do clarify arrangements and requirements for the validation of programmes at the outset of the planning

- How much notice is required for validation?
- Are there any existing validated modules that could be relevant?
- Is modular certification of programs available?

2.12 Don't design an assessment strategy that relies too heavily on one method of assessment such as essay writing

- Have you considered how to assess the work-related aspects of the curriculum?
- Have you integrated ‘live’ projects into the curriculum?
- Have you considered presentations and other forms of visual and verbal communication as part of the assessment process?

2.13 Do consider the impact that fee levels will have on recruitment

- What factors have you taken into consideration when setting the fee level?
- Will students be able to apply for any grants or subsidies?
- Will employers be contributing towards the costs of the fees?
- Can the fees be paid on a modular basis?
Section 3  Sustaining programmes and relationships

3.1  Do prepare a marketing strategy that covers both the initial launch of the new programme and ongoing mechanisms to maximise recruitment and viability

- Who are your potential students?
- How can you attract them to enrol on the programme?
- What publicity will be most effective?
- How will you continue to attract students on an annual basis?
- What help can the employers provide in effective marketing?
- What new markets might you look at?

3.2  Don't expect your curriculum to remain the same over several years

- How easy is it for you to make changes to curriculum content?
- At what point is re-validation required?
- Are there external factors that would require you to amend the curriculum?
- How do you keep abreast of new developments?
- How will employers alert you if the curriculum is not up to date?
- How easy would it be for you to change the mode of delivery, such as to distance learning, to attract a wider audience?
‘The university is very partner orientated and if we say that a module isn’t quite meeting our needs they move heaven and earth to make changes or write new modules at our request’

Centre tutor

3.3 Do establish comprehensive monitoring, evaluation and review processes

- In what ways do students have opportunities to feedback and comment on the programme?
- How do employers contribute their comments and could this be improved?
- Are there opportunities to feedback to a neutral source?
- What action do you take as a result of the feedback you receive?

‘The university is amazingly good in terms of support, ease of access, language, they talk very straightforwardly. There was a worry they might be very academic-orientated but they are pragmatic. Anytime we need access to them, the response is generally within 24 hours’

Manager in the public sector

3.4 Don’t rely on a single method of communication with partners

- How will you sustain ongoing engagement with employers?
- Have you set up formal communication systems with partners through meetings and reports?
- Have you established frequent, informal contact with partners through email and telephone systems?
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It has been a life-changing experience.

Student on a foundation degree
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