

**Stakeholder perspectives on
Higher Nationals and Foundation degrees
at City College Norwich**

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Summary

For many years, the Higher National Diploma (HND) and Higher National Certificate (HNC) formed much of the sub-degree provision offered by City College Norwich (CCN). Since the national introduction (2001) of the Foundation degree (Fd), CCN has developed a number of new Fd programmes at this intermediate level provision.

This project collected information, views and perspectives on the two qualifications from a number of stakeholders. The interviews were ordered into national, institutional and programme perspectives.

Thus, this report presents information on the BTEC Higher Nationals and Foundation degree at the macro level, providing a background to the two qualifications, an outline of the main characteristics and where the qualifications 'fit' within the National Qualifications Framework. The report also reviews the two qualifications at an institutional level. The developmental process for Foundation degrees was discussed and interviews were undertaken with staff involved with either the Fd and/or HND/C. The report also presents the perspectives of staff, students and employers on the two qualifications while the discussion draws together the main, recurring points raised in the study concerning both HND/Cs and Fds.

A number of key points arose from the interviews. For example the main benefit of the Fd appeared to be the added flexibility the qualification had in terms of local development and past delivery adjustments. As a result it was felt the curriculum of the Fd could be developed to meet local needs and be up dated and re-validated on a much more regular basis than was possible with the HND/C. The involvement of several partners in developing and delivering an Fd, whilst seen as important and beneficial, also had inherent difficulties – issues concerning small employers and time constraints being just two. There still appeared to be some lack of awareness of the Fd and its key features both with employers and students alike. Similarly both employers and students were unclear as to where the Fd 'sat' within the qualifications framework and, therefore, credit value and progression options were not always clear. Programme Managers who currently delivered HND/Cs indicated that employers would need to be 'kept on board' with any move towards Fd provision with employer input seen as crucial. Also it was apparent that there is still a need to educate staff, especially those involved in IAG who are the first point of call to potential future students, and attending/future students as to the position and worth of the Fd and the 'real' progression route options available to them post the Fd.

1. Introduction

For many years, the Higher National Diploma (HND) and Higher National Certificate (HNC) (together referred to as Higher Nationals (HNs) in this report), formed part of the recognised sub-degree provision throughout England and Wales, and both were still offered by City College Norwich (CCN) under its higher education (HE) provision. However, since the introduction of the Foundation degree (Fd) CCN has developed a number of new programmes at this intermediate/sub-degree level provision. However, post a college wide restructure and following a review of CCNs provision under the HE category, which currently included a mixed HN and Fd portfolio, CCN has decided to move to a mainly Fd provision portfolio, like many Further Education Colleges (FECs) within England. With many FECs similarly following the move from HNs to an all Foundation degree HE provision, there may be lessons of best practice that can be taken from the management of HNs to assist with the management of Fds. Similarly, HNs have had a rich employer engagement history within several subject sectors, current employers often having gained the same qualification during their training/educational years. Thus, it was important to understand which subjects and at what levels, if any, the two qualifications were understood.

This project aimed to review these variable factors for future course development, procedure or management improvements and establish any best practices that could be taken from HNs to help the management of Foundation degrees. The project and resulting report were approached in three parts. Firstly, the Higher Nationals and Foundation degree were reviewed at a macro (national) level, outlining the background to these two qualifications. Secondly, the Fd and HNs were considered at an institutional level, detailing college provision and the perspectives of a number of interviewees who had college-wide involvement with the qualifications in either managerial, administrative or other roles. Finally, the project provides a programme level view regarding HNs and Fds from a number of programme managers/lecturers, students and employers.

2. Methodology

Qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews conducted over a 6 month period (Jan.–June 08) that provided information on the perspectives and experiences of a number of relevant stakeholders. These stakeholders included CCN

staff, CCN students and employers involved with the two types of HE provision (Foundation degrees and HND/Cs).

In approaching City College Norwich (CCN) staff, Heads of Schools were contacted in the first instance with an explanation of the project. Contact with programme managers/lectures was requested, with a view to carrying out interviews. Having made contact and interviewed programme lectures, arrangements were made with these same staff to interview students and employers with whom they had contact for the respective qualifications. In addition to City College staff, a small number of staff from external institutions/organisations kindly agreed to participate in the project and to be interviewed.

In most cases, interviews were conducted face to face, the exception being interviews with external partners, which were conducted via the telephone. Interviews ranged between approximately twenty and fifty-five minutes. Permission was sought to record interviews, which was agreed in the majority of cases and this allowed detailed analysis of the various contributions.

The resulting interviews were categorised as those which provided a national perspective, those which provided an institutional perspective namely from staff who, whilst not having an involvement in delivery, have an involvement with the qualifications at an institutional level, and finally the perspectives of students, programme managers/lecturers and employers at an individual programme level.

3. National Perspective

Part 1 of this report describes the BTEC Higher Nationals and the Foundation degree at a macro level, providing a brief background of the two qualifications and an outline of the main characteristics. Figure 1 shows how the qualifications 'sit' within the framework for higher education qualifications and the National Qualifications Framework. In order to gain a national perspective, representatives from both BTEC and Foundation Degree Forward (*fdf*) were invited to take part in interviews and whilst *fdf* declined to take part, input was provided by BTEC.

3.1 Background to the Qualifications

The BTEC HNDs and HNCs were described in a BTEC publication as:

“The BTEC Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) are Level 5 higher education qualifications, widely recognised by universities and professional bodies. There are more than 150 qualifications available, suitable for students aged 16 and above. The HNC is often studied part-time alongside full-time employment. A Higher National student will develop management and other higher level technical skills required by employers. After a period of usually two years, students often progress to the final year of degree programmes. Higher Nationals can be studied in both FE colleges and universities” (Edexcel, 2008).

The Higher Nationals (HND and HNC) were long established qualifications having been developed in the early 1970s, prior to which, these courses were previously the responsibility of professional bodies. The remit of the original Business Education Council was “... to rationalise and improve the relevance of sub-degree vocational education in FE and HE colleges and Polytechnics” (Edexcel, 2008). Thus, the HND and HNC were accepted and recognised qualifications. A report in 2002 highlighted the scope and range of the delivery of HNs:

“Traditionally, FECs have delivered a wide range of HNCs and HNDs, many originally funded through the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and transferred to the HEFCE in 1999. In 2001-02 there were around 52,000 HNC or HND students at 195 FECs, with an additional 61 universities and colleges of higher education offering some 38,000 HNDs. All of these HNC and HND courses are funded by the HEFCE.” (HEFCE, 2002:5).

Unlike the Higher National qualifications, the Foundation degree was relatively new having come into existence in 2000 (pilot) and first taught in 2001/2. Foundation degrees were awarded by individual HEIs and as such there was no national awarding body. However, Foundation Degree Forward (*fdf*) was established in 2003, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, as a national body to support the development and validation of Foundation degrees, together with supporting employer engagement:

“fdf’s primary objective is to support the development of high quality Foundation degrees. fdf works in partnership with all relevant agencies, institutions, organisations and interest groups to ensure that the development of Foundation degrees is driven by the needs of employers and students.” (fdf, 2008)

fdf promotes the Foundation degree as being a qualification that integrates academic and work-based learning, generally delivered by colleges or universities. There was also recognition that the qualifications were to be designed in partnership with employers, the aim of this was to equip students with the appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills for that sector. A HEFCE (2002) report highlighted that, distinct to an HND, a dedicated progression route to a full degree was to be a guaranteed requirement of any Fd programme:

“FDs have been designed with the dual purpose of a specialist end qualification in itself, and as a progression route to an Honours Degree.” (HEFCE, 2002:5).

HEFCE reported that *“... nearly 72,000 students were registered, or were expected to register, on foundation degree programmes.”* (HEFCE, 2008:2).

Finally, whilst the HNs and Fds have co-existed, there appears to have been an openly held Governmental assumption that the Foundation degree, would supersede the long established Higher National Diploma (HND). A copy of a letter from Charles Clarke, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, regarding higher education funding and delivery 2004-05 stated that the Government expected *“... to bring the number of Foundation Degrees to around 50,000 full-time equivalent places by 2005/06, taking account of courses converted from HNDs ... with Foundation Degree places outnumbering HNDs in due course”* (DfES, 2004).

3.2 Qualification Characteristics

The following information provides a brief outline of the main characteristics regarding both the Higher Nationals and Foundation degree qualifications.

3.2.1 Higher Nationals (HND/HNC)

Edexcel was the awarding body that held the licence for BTEC Higher Nationals, which currently includes the Higher National Diploma (HND) and Higher National Certificate (HNC). The HND and HNC were recognised as ‘applied learning’, vocational qualifications that have been available for *“... around for 25 years, their reputation is second to none and they continue to grow and develop”* (Edexcel, 2008: 3). The HND was delivered in both further education colleges (FECs) and universities and can be awarded by BTEC itself or under licence by an HEI:

“The Licence Agreement was devised in conjunction with our Higher Education Institution customers and recognises the autonomy of degree-

awarding HEIs in developing, delivering and franchising BTEC qualifications as institutionally-validated awards.” (Edexcel, 2007).

The Higher Nationals were unit/module based qualifications, the number of units studied dependent on the level and size of each qualification, *i.e.* HNC or HND. Therefore, students could achieve passes for individual units. The assessment, rather than being exam based, took the form of ‘real-life’, work-related case studies, projects and assignments marked against a criterion based method referenced against learning outcomes. The units were graded either as fails, pass, merit or distinction. The HND/Cs could be studied full or part time with the HND traditionally being full time and the HNC, in particular, being studied part time alongside employment. Typically, an HND/C would take two years to complete.

HND/Cs have been developed with key industry representatives and the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to meet both employer and student requirements. The National Qualification Framework for HND has a national specification, thus standard specifications wherever the student was located within England and Wales. However, there was scope for some local differentiation and “... mode of delivery and course content may sometimes vary due to the input of employers in the area, and their local resources of a centre” (Edexcel, 2008: 7). The HND and HNC were stand alone qualifications at level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework, Figure 1 displays the equivalent qualifications.

Responsibility for the quality assurance of the HND and HNC awards rests with Edexcel. However, it was necessary to differentiate between HND/Cs that were delivered as part of the NQF and those that were delivered under licence by institutions with their own awarding powers. Where HNDs were delivered as institutional awards, ‘licensed centres’ were required to complete an annual institutional review and submit this report to Edexcel. However, where delivered as part of the NQF, the provider was subject to BTEC quality assurance procedures.

3.2.2 Foundation Degree (Fd)

Foundation degrees could be studied within a higher education institution (HEIs) or further education college (FECs). However, the Foundation degree currently has to be awarded by an institution with degree-awarding powers. Therefore, those delivered by FECs will be awarded by a partner HEI. Similar to the HND/C, Foundation degrees were designed to “... integrate academic and work-based

learning through close collaboration between employers and programme providers” (QAA, 2004: 3).

The Foundation degree was to incorporate academic knowledge and understanding with specific vocational skills and competencies. Specifications should include intended outcomes and a balance of intellectual and practical skills, which “... show that these are set appropriately for a qualifications which falls within the Intermediate level of the FHEQ” (QAA, 2004a:3). The Foundation degree would normally be conducted over two years on a full time basis, but could also be studied part time, usually over three or four years.

As with the Higher National qualifications, there was input from employers, particularly local industry, and national sector bodies in the design and review of programmes:

“Some providers have worked particularly closely with employers, while a few have collaborated especially closely with their Regional Development Agency (RDA) and/or Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in the development of their courses.” (HEFCE, 2002: 3).

However, whilst HND/Cs have national specifications, Foundation degrees have been developed and validated by individual institutions. Therefore, programme specifications were designed in isolation to other programmes focusing on local requirements.

In terms of progression, as highlighted in a HEFCE report Foundation degrees were intended to provide “... smooth progression to honours degree programmes, sometimes involving participation in a summer school, and then one year of further full-time study, or the part-time equivalent” (HEFCE, 2008:44). However, as with Higher Nationals, Foundation degrees were to be recognised as a ‘stand alone’ qualification.

Responsibility for quality assurance and validation of a Foundation degree, whether delivered in an HEI or in a partner FEC, lies with the awarding institution. Therefore, the HEI will be subject to the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency. Foundation degree qualifications benchmarks were developed in November 2002 and revised in October 2004, which set out the purpose, characteristics, content and outcomes of any Foundation degree programme.

3.3 Qualifications Framework

Both the Higher Nationals and Foundation degrees were recognised within the National Qualifications Framework and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (Fig. 1).

National Qualifications Framework (NQF)		Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)
Previous levels (and examples)	Current levels (and examples)	
5 Level 5 NVQ In Construction Management † Level 5 Diploma In Translation	8 Specialist awards	D (doctoral) Doctorates
	7 Level 7 Diploma In Translation	M (masters) Masters degrees, postgraduate certificates and diplomas
4 Level 4 NVQ In Advice and Guidance † Level 4 National Diploma In Professional Production Skills Level 4 BTEC Higher National Diploma In 3D Design Level 4 Certificate In Early Years	6 Level 6 National Diploma In Professional Production Skills	H (honours) Bachelor degrees, graduate certificates and diplomas
	5 Level 5 BTEC Higher National Diploma In 3D Design	I (intermediate) Diplomas of higher education and further education, foundation degrees and higher national diplomas
	4 Level 4 Certificate In Early Years	C (certificate) Certificates of higher education
3 Level 3 Certificate In Small Animal Care Level 3 NVQ In Aeronautical Engineering A levels		
2 Level 2 Diploma for Beauty Specialists Level 2 NVQ In Agricultural Crop Production GCSEs Grades A*-C		
1 Level 1 Certificate In Motor Vehicle Studies Level 1 NVQ In Bakery GCSEs Grades D-G		
Entry Entry Level Certificate In Adult Literacy		

† Revised levels are not currently being implemented for NVQs at levels 4 and 5

Figure 1. The structure and details for the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). (SOURCE: Quality Assurance Agency, 2006).

3.4 Interviews – the national perspective

Interview A, below, presents some of the main points made during an interview with a BTEC representative. The interview covered a broad remit and provided wide ranging and current information and perspectives on the Higher Nationals.

3.4.1 Interviewee Person ‘A’

An interview conducted with Person ‘A’, a BTEC representative, provided an informative outline of the current ‘landscape’ for BTEC HNs.

Following visits to various universities throughout the UK it was acknowledged by the interviewee that the feedback regarding Fds was positive, “I’m hearing a fairly consistent message that where they’re successful they’re very successful and that’s great, but where they’re not successful ... they might recruit for a year or so and then lie fallow.” However, notwithstanding the views held by many college staff, regarding the lack of national marketing for Fds, the interviewee described, quite strongly, that Government weighting, certainly in England, had been towards the Fd:

“... it hasn’t been an equal playing field. There has been a very strong campaign, and still is, in favour, in England anyway, in terms of Foundation degree promotion and support ... despite that, and despite the fact that we haven’t marketed HNs for five years or so, HNs were still more than holding their own in terms of numbers, which is quite interesting...”

This interviewee described how other parts of the UK were ‘pro’ Higher Nationals:

“... in Wales you’re seeing HNs as the sub-degree of choice, very few Fds, but where there are Fds they’re specialist and they are successful because they are meeting defined niche markets”.

There was an acknowledged reduction in HNs within certain subject areas. For example, hospitality and catering, sport and leisure, health and care, art and design and land-based areas, and in such cases it was felt that this was due to the impact of alternative Fd provision. However, other sectors, such as construction, engineering, computing and business, were said to have strong HN registrations. Employer support was cited as a reason for the continued interest in these sectors, with HNs being considered nationally the “... heritage qualification ...”, due to previous generations of employers having undertaken the same qualification themselves. However, there was also a recognition that BTEC did not wish to “... set our cap

against a heritage model ...”, and that the awarding body was commencing a revision of its qualifications.

With regard to progression, it was recognised that although progression was not ‘guaranteed’ and not considered in the structure of the qualification, as it had been with Foundation degrees, there was still an expectation that:

“... in most cases it would be a 2+1 [2 years HND with final year of a degree] progression to a degree programme ... there’s a lot of universities which would quite happily accept a HND diplomate on a 2+1 top up but equally there are others that might say 2+2 [2 years HND with second year entry to a degree] so it isn’t an automatic thing. It’s very much a working relationship established between particular college providers and mainly a couple of likely universities that people might go on to.”

Although it was confirmed progression would feature in the forthcoming review, the point was made that the HNs were undertaken by a considerable proportion of mature students who did not wish to continue their studies. There was also recognition that there appeared to have been considerable confusion in the wider perception of the credit value of the HN qualifications for progression. In addition to the credit value, it was also confirmed that the qualification curriculum was not designed with progression in mind and, as a result, there was limited emphasis on generic higher level skills. Where delivered under licence, HEIs could consider progression in terms of the qualification design. However, NQF specifications “... were not consciously designed to accommodate progression links.”

Also highlighted by the interviewee were the main similarities and differences between the HNs and Fd qualifications. In terms of levels, it was commented that both now equated to 240 credits and both were often described as sub or intermediate degree qualifications. However, a key difference was:

“... the Foundation degree, of course, has the work based learning imperative, whereas the HND is work related and there is a subtle and fairly crucial difference there ... and if you’re going to do work based learning properly you’ve got to do it properly, work relatedness is easier to achieve.”

The fact that the HND had a national specification was highlighted together with the fact that the quality assurance (QA) was similarly a national process; “Our QA process is very well regarded ... it’s a very rigorous process.” The HNs have assessment grading protocols and grading descriptors, which presented a “... very

different assessment grading regime from the Fds ... very different.” The option of being able to complete an HN unit by unit, taking individual units as time or other resources permitted and returning to complete the remaining units at some future date was considered to be beneficial for the student.

In terms of employer involvement, it was acknowledged that there was considerable engagement with employers at a national level, specifications being written in consultation with employers together with the professional bodies and the appropriate Sector Skills Councils. A three stage scrutiny procedure was carried out together with the final accreditation by QCA. On a local basis, it was expected that colleges offering the HNs would ensure they had appropriate links with local industry and employers, which could be demonstrated to external examiners; “... there is a strong expectation that if you are running vocational qualifications you’ve got to keep our link with the appropriate vocational organisations locally up to speed.”

Interestingly, as part of the review process, BTEC were reported to be looking at developing a special variant of the BTEC licence for colleges that were to gain Foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP), which would effectively allow institutional validation powers:

“... if a large college gets FDAP in a couple of years time ... they may wish to ... embed an HNC within the Foundation degrees because that’s quite common practice ... There’s room, certainly for Higher National Certificates, to be embedded in Foundation degrees as happens quite a lot already. The best proponent of that is the University of Plymouth who have got 36 Foundation degree pathways with embedded HNCs.”

However, it was felt that in view of differing grading protocols for the two qualifications, a “... slightly more relaxed percentage marking for Foundation degrees, where you have an embedded HNC within a Foundation degree [resulted in] tension between the two.”

Finally, it was reported that registrations on the HN programmes delivered by direct funding were down on the previous year. However, those under licence had increased, with 24 of the 55 universities delivering under licence reporting increased student numbers in the academic year 2007/08.

4. Institutional Perspective

This section of the report presents issues surrounding the two qualifications at an institutional level. Section 4.1 provides a 'snap shot' of the current courses available at CCN and student registrations. The developmental process for Foundation degrees is presented along with the inclusion of a procedural flow chart to illustrate City College Norwich (CCN) processes. Four interviews were undertaken with staff who had a central services involvement with the Fd and/or HND/C, either in a management, quality assurance, information giving or administrative role. Also included here is an interview that presents the experiences and perspectives of a staff member who had recently developed a new Fd programme.

4.1 The Foundation degree and Higher Nationals at City College

Whilst the BTEC Higher National awards have been offered by CCN for many years, Foundation degrees were first offered (excluding pilot) from the academic year 2002/3. Appendix A shows the Higher Nationals and the Foundation degrees offered to students by CCN. In addition to this provision, a number of additional, new Fds were being developed that were subject to validation at the time of writing.

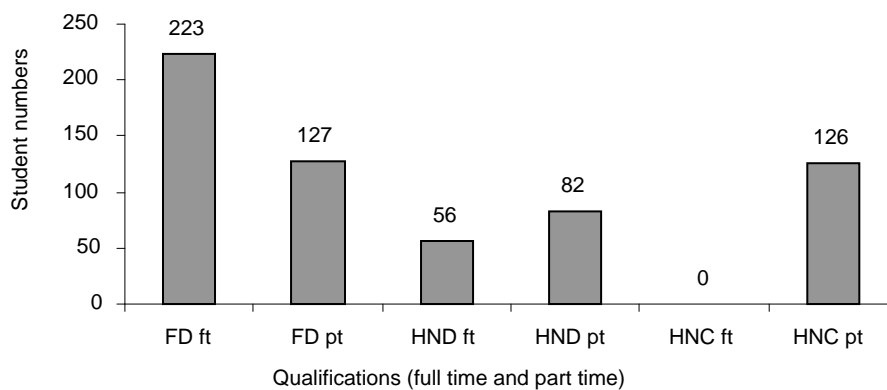


Figure 2. College registrations on the Fd and HND/C courses. Fd and HND/C Students: Current registrations from Feb 2008 (all years) (HND f/t includes Fd Aviation, Hospitality and Travel Management available to overseas students only (n=14))

Various progression options were available to students studying either HND/Cs or Fds at CCN. These articulation routes had been developed to provide access onto full Bachelor degree courses. Each Fd had a specific 'top up' course while HNs had bridging courses available to students. Most of these courses were delivered at CCN or by the partner HEI.

4.2 Development of Foundation degree awards

There had been debate that the introduction of the Foundation degree would simple lead to 're-badging' of HNDs. Indeed, Government policy seemingly accepted that this would be the case as highlighted in the DfES (2003) White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, which stated the aim to "... make the foundation degrees the standard two-year qualification by enabling HNCs and HNDs to be incorporated into the foundation degree framework". However, CCN were keen to ensure that their Foundation degree provision were developed as new. Rigorous procedures have been introduced to monitor the development of new Fds, from initial idea to delivery (Fig. 3).

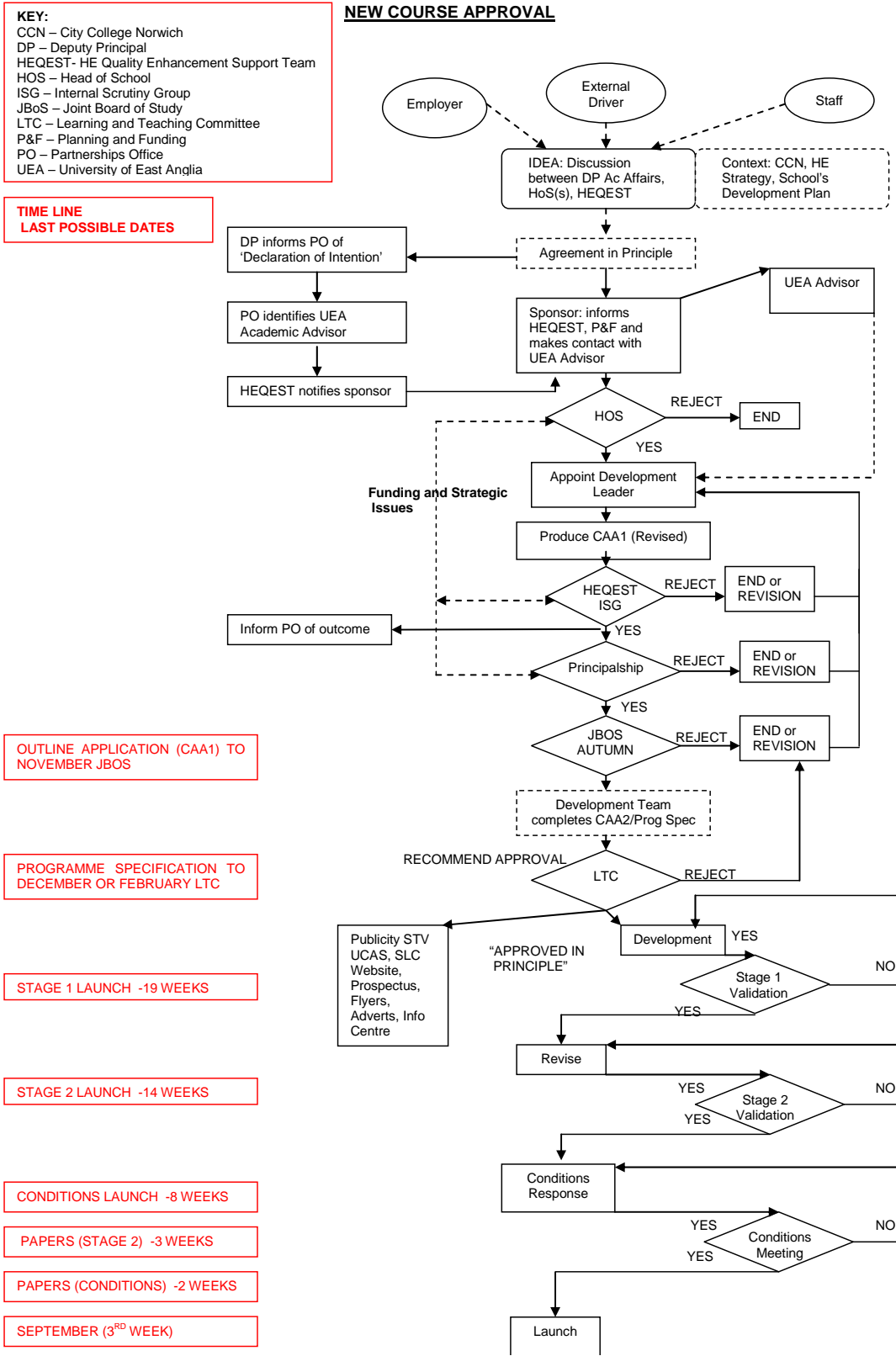


Figure 3. CCNs procedure chart for developing and implementing new Fds at the college

The processes required of an FE provider in offering either BTEC (NQF) HNs or Foundation degrees differ at key stages. HND/Cs have their content and specifications written and produced nationally by the awarding body, Edexcel. However, a Foundation degree required the provider to write and develop the specification. A similar variation also existed in regard to the assessment of HNs and Fds. The HNs assessment criteria were again nationally set, whilst the assessment criteria for Fds were developed locally. The validation process was also significantly different between the qualifications. The HNs would have previously been approved and validated by Edexcel in conjunction with Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). However, in producing an Fd as a local qualification, the provider/college itself would have been involved internal in the scrutiny and validation process, together meeting the requirements of the external awarding HEI and Quality Assurance Agency. Thus, a much greater amount of time required for a college to develop an Fd. Figure 3 provides the processes involved in developing new Fd programmes, while Appendix B provides details of CCNs re-validation procedure for Foundation degrees.

4.3 Interviews – Institutional perspective

Interviews included both CCN staff and staff from partner organisations who were involved at the institutional level (e.g. student services) who gave their views of the Foundation degree and/or HND, which provided the ‘institutional perspective’.

4.3.1 Interview B

Interview B provided information on the growth and development of the Fd within CCN together with perspectives of the BTEC qualifications.

One of the key points discussed by the interviewee was the change in specification flexibility for the Higher Nationals. The BTEC HNs had been offered by CCN for a number of years it was considered that HNDs both met broad objectives and had some scope for local flexibility. However, the opinion was that this element of flexibility was lost when, in 1998, BTEC introduced a “... more prescriptive model for HNDs”, followed shortly afterwards by further specification revisions that were increasingly centralised, and although it was acknowledged that the qualifications could still be ‘flexed’ by introducing new, locally developed modules, essentially the qualification followed BTEC specification. It was agreed that the earlier more flexible model did give some scope for local employer input into the curriculum, however, this

was considered minimal as employer requirements were deemed to have been incorporated at the national level when the HNs were developed.

The opinion expressed, was that by 2002, the BTECs delivered as part of the NQF were:

“... wholly prescriptive and they introduced different regulations concerning assessment, the determination of grading profiles for students, and of course controlled the content of the award ... it meant that all that local flexibility the local flavour, in the design of a course, not necessary the delivery of a module ... was lost and these were universal awards then, available nationally”

The initial introduction of the Fd took place alongside a number of changes in the regional HEI/FEC partnerships, which included a change of partner HEI for CCN in 2005/6 which was due to HEFCE realignment.

Whilst it was discussed that the introduction of the Foundation degree led to a certain amount of HNDs being ‘re-badged’, as previously stated, it was highlighted that CCN tried to ensure that the Foundation degrees offered were developed as new provision:

“At City College we always avoided the temptation to do what some places did, which is to re-badge HNDs ... we always approached the development of our Fd portfolio as an entirely new curriculum offer, based on our experience of what we had done with HNDs, curriculum content, delivery methods, modular frameworks ... some colleges simply added an extra 60 credits onto an HND and called it a Foundation degree” ... [and] ... “if you look at some of our developments they have been true to the philosophy of Foundation degrees as we saw it, and [continue to] see them in the benchmarks ... in our early development of Foundation degrees we worked with ARU [Anglia Ruskin University] and we contributed to the ARU framework for Foundation degrees”.

There was recognition that in the initial stages of developing Fds, “... the college took its lead from ARU and the way in which ARU approached the Fd initiative.”

As Foundation degrees were taken on board and developed by CCN there was a:

“... view that the future was in Foundation degrees because the pioneering ones, Financial Services, Teaching Assistants, the Health Studies ... were proving successful. They were employer led, we got all of the engagement that was necessary, we could prove that we were doing it properly.”

A positive reputation was built in terms of the Fd development with CCN being represented at relevant conferences, such as HEFCE and *fdf* regional conferences, "... so they began to get, in a small way, some national exposure as good practice."

The new Foundation degree qualification was seen as a positive development in several ways:

"Not only could they be seen as more employer focused, more specifically vocationally directed to the needs of individual local employers, but they also attracted a funding premium and they represent better value for money."

This point concerning value for money was quantified in terms of the fees for an Fd and HND being the same but the Fd resulting in 240 credits (two years of an undergraduate degree), and HND (also taking the same length of time to complete) but "... gives you only 180 credits and an HNC 120 credits." As such, the Fd "... could be marketed as a much more valuable commodity". However, credit level changes had been made previously to bring HNs 'inline' with Fds (see Interview A earlier in this report).

CCN had been committed to a time consuming, but rigorous, development of Foundation degrees and the following were given as examples of good practice for the more recently developed Fds:

- Fd Interactive Media had a large consultation group of employers who influenced the design and development of the programme
- the development of the Fd in Public Sector Management was led by a number of staff from the PCT.

Other examples of good practice included annual college/employer conferences, where employers were invited to discuss ongoing Fd issues. For example, maintaining curriculum relevance, up-skilling, ensuring fitness for purpose, assessment strategies, *etc.* These conferences sought to include both employers involved in original development and to bring in new employers. Such meetings established that employers were looking for higher level skills from Foundation degree students, such as research skills, analytical skills, project management, which would count as preparation for higher study. Consequently these skills had been included in the Fd's core units.

Two issues regarding Foundation degree development were raised as issues that could be considered 'problematic'. The first was finding the 'right' person, within any given employer, with whom to discuss Fd development; "... the most difficult thing about employer engagement is finding the right people to talk to and then getting them released from their work to actually do the job. MOVE [the Lifelong Learning Network for the East of England] funding will assist if it is a new development within the region." There was a need to be aware of the potential Fd links whilst, in general, contact with employers was suggested as a way to overcome this. Secondly, it was highlighted that there had been a 'mixed' response to Fds by the respective professional bodies:

"... it would be unfair to blame Foundation degrees but in the general turmoil of the restructuring of the regional partnership, the re-alignment then of the regional arrangement, and coupled with that the dropping of HNDs and the introduction of Foundation degrees, a lot of that professional body contact recognition, formal accreditation got lost."

It was suggested that the seemingly 'less receptive' attitude of the professional bodies towards Foundation degrees could be overcome via detailed discussions with employers who could subsequently influence the professional bodies favourably.

"... there is a feeling that it's because everybody in the industry has been through the HNC/HND route and that's the way they expect their students to go ... they know the HNC/HND ... but I don't believe it's that strong and I think by some people that is used as a prop for not changing ... well actually when you talk to the employers in detail, they are not that adverse to new qualifications."

The interviewee expressed an expectation that professional bodies would recognise that HNs were not "... doing the business ..." and that with the introduction of Foundation degrees, they, themselves, could influence the qualifications at a national framework level and at a local curriculum design level. CCNs discussions with employers had highlighted skill shortages not in technical skills but higher level problem solving, presentation skills, analytical skills, communication, etc. and, "... part of the problem with the current lot of HNC/Ds is they have become more competence focused than skills focused ... I don't think it fits the bill anymore."

4.3.2 Interview C

A representative from CCNs partner HEI provided their perspectives on the qualifications and commented on the quality assurance and validation requirements of the HNs and Fds.

The HEI concerned did not previously validate HNDs but had taken on this role as part of its' new partnership arrangements. The remaining HNDs were seen to be in areas where the employers "... had a much more traditional view of what they wanted." It was felt that some subject areas found it easier to change, "... there were certain subject areas which took very easily to Foundation degrees", whilst, computing, engineering and building-related subjects were quoted as sectors that were taking longer to take Foundation degrees.

The interviewee felt that in terms of acting as a validating body, moving to Fds had meant they did not have to involve themselves with an additional awarding body and the expense that this incurred. However, there was a financial cost and time cost involved in meeting Edexcel's requirements to award HNDs under licence.

A number of benefits were cited for the Foundation degree:

"Foundation degrees allowed for colleges to be able to develop their own award without the confines of Edexcel [which] gave them a lot more freedom" ... [and] ... "They allowed the colleges to work very closely with employers to develop very, very, specific courses for them".

There was also a view that progression was easier from an Fd:

"I think you've got a much more flexible programme and it's a programme which makes progression easier, although you could progress from the HND. Progression from the Foundation degree seems to work more seamlessly."

One of the main differences between the qualifications was cited as the styles of assessment. For the HNDs it was felt to be:

"... very tick box, you've done this skill tick it off ... whereas the Foundation degrees are much more preparing people so they are ready for [further] study and you can see much more a string of development though the Foundation degree ... whereas with the HND they are doing little blocks and ticking them off, and I would hope the students come out of Foundation degrees with more maturity than they come out of with an HND, I think they are able to think for themselves more and the assessment is geared towards that much more."

It was also pointed out that HND students can resubmit assignments "... as many times as they want ...", and this was not favoured by the HEI.

Considering the points made so far by the interviewee, a number of further issues were cited that could be viewed as 'difficulties'. For example, issues involving employers that were highlighted included the fact that many employers were small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and that this had implications for both work placements and having an Fd that worked across the range of employers. An example given was landscape design, where many people were self employed "... so there's a need to manage that within the Fd framework."

It was also felt that employers expected the educational partners to put in a lot of development work and then only send a couple of students, not sending enough students to make it financially viable. There was an impression that some employers were expecting the FEC/HEI to provide in-service training "... on the cheap ...". In addition, "Students have to take a bit more time to do a Foundation degree than an HND and they [employers] don't like that it costs them more so they need to be aware they are getting some value added for that cost."

Finally, in discussing the recognition of the two qualifications, the interviewee stated:

"HNDs were perceived in traditional areas with quite high status within the industry and I think Foundation degrees need to build that up so they are respected in the same way ... HND is a qualification that people know and they know what people are going to come out with and its just a process of re-education with employers and we have found that where we have changed over [to Fds] after a year or so employers actually engaged with them extremely well."

4.3.3 Interview D

Interview D focused particularly on the information, advice and guidance (IAG) provided to enquirers at CCN since the introduction of Foundation degrees.

It was stated that the majority of HE provision titles offered as Foundation degrees were previously offered as HNDs. For example, business, computing, hospitality, creative arts and sports, health and exercise, were all formerly offered as a BTEC HND/C qualification.

In terms of the transition to offering Fds, it was acknowledged that:

"... there was a lot of problems at the beginning just convincing people that Foundation degrees weren't something from outer space, and were actually a perfectly acceptable qualification and would reasonably replace

an HNC and HND ... and in fact are better, because if you want to top-up they are easier to top-up from.”

This latter statement supported comments made in previous interviews and was quantified in terms of the credits received for each qualification, that the HND, in many cases, was considered to be equal to 180 credits and, therefore, required students to complete an additional 60 credit bridging course prior to a final 120 credit top-up year. Whereas the Fd was accepted as a 240 credit qualification.

The Fds apparent, protracted validation process was cited as a problem for IAG staff, in that it prevented them from being able to confirm to enquirers the availability of certain Fds. It was understood by the interviewee to be a result of national validation requirements rather than CCN *per se* or local issues, and was the case for Fds, such as Early Years Child Care in Education and Youth Work.

Students were also advised about the various CCN based ‘top up’ options available to them. However, there had been areas of confusion. For example, some students had misunderstood that taking the ‘top up’ year following the Teaching Assistant Foundation degree would then give them qualified teacher status, and, similarly, progression from a Health related Fd to allied qualified practitioner status. It was also reported that there were student misconceptions about the ability to take a Foundation degree followed by a subject specific ‘top-up’ that was provided outside of CCN. Having said this, the Hotel School was cited as an example of where both a Foundation degree and its articulation route to a subject specific bachelors degree were offered, and it was also noted that there were plans to offer similar subject specific ‘top ups’ to Fds in other Schools.

A further issue identified with Foundation degrees was the use of the definition of full time and part time, which had been observed to cause confusion in terms of the students expectations regarding attendance at college; “... they [the students] think that full time equals five days a week in college ...”, however, it was felt that there was now more of an understanding of the Fd structure and “... how they work.”

As had been identified with colleagues at other local providers, it was perceived that there had not been enough publicity regarding Fds nationally by the appropriate educational agencies. This had made it difficult at the time Fds were initially offered as they were not widely known. However, it was felt that the:

“... perception of Foundation degrees has improved greatly over the last couple of years. At the start there was scepticism, there was going to be whatever they brought in, ... I believe the message has spread much better now because we very rarely, I think if ever, now, get people enquiring saying I want to do an HND ...”

4.3.4 Interview E

Interview E, provided the perspective of one School within CCN, which had recently developed a Foundation degree.

The development of this particular Foundation degree involved a successful bid for funds submitted to MOVE, the Lifelong Learning Network in the East of England, which has provided FECs with additional funding for developing Fds in new subject areas. The funding, in this case, allowed the ‘buying-out’ of staff time to research and develop the course, and meet with employers “... to find out what the needs are within the industry, and we found out that there is a need”, whilst also meeting Government targets, set out in a 2005 Whitepaper.

Approximately twenty employers were involved overall in the partnership with CCN staff, and the team worked to develop and revise modules accordingly. However, despite being contacted, there was no forthcoming input from the appropriate Sector Skills Councils or Industry Councils.

Regarding this Fd, the proposed course outline was submitted to MOVE for review as part of the bid’s reporting process, and, eventually, went forward for validation to both CCN and UEA, who was the validating HEI. Having met additional stipulations the course was approved for delivery from September 2008. A number of (UCAS) students had already been recruited as part of the first cohort and a ten week pre-Foundation degree, introductory bridging course was held for students who had registered for the course through CCN. An induction was planned to combine the two groups in preparation for a September start. Approximately half of the students registered for this Foundation degree were working in a related employment sector. However, there was an expectation that all students would be encouraged to make use of a range of employers for the workbased learning component. It was also confirmed that there would be an onus on the student to find their own work placement, where they were not already employed in the relevant sector. However, this in itself was seen as part of the student’s personal development, making use of communication skills, etc. although the course team would assist when necessary

using their own links with employers. Progression options to a third year 'top up' had been developed with two local HEIs.

In the case of this particular Fd, because it was developed with MOVE funding, there had been contact with the former HE Faculty for support in developing the course. For example, with general assistance such as credit issues, module writing, assessment and anonymous marking, *etc.* There was also liaison regarding specification development with colleagues within the School who had previously developed Fds. At a much later date there had been a training session delivered by UEA staff which was also cited to be "... very useful ..." in providing information and support to those developing Fds. CCN's own validation panel was considered very helpful in providing critical feedback prior to the external validation process.

Areas cited to be of greatest use and support included the UEA training event mentioned, "... if in place on a regular basis it would be useful for staff developing an Fd", and it was also stated that although some administrative support had been available to minute meetings, additional administration support would have been helpful as there was a considerable amount of time and work involved in organising and producing the documentation for validation.

5. Individual Perspectives – student/staff/employer

A number of staff, students and employers were interviewed to collect their perspectives on the two qualifications, and this part of the report outlines the main points raised during these interviews. Unfortunately, it was not possible to carry out any interviews with employers that were involved with Foundation degrees despite attempts to make arrangements. This, in part, highlights the constraints on time, which has been summarised in the discussion. Section A sets out the interviews with respondents concerned with HND/C qualifications, while Section B provides information from those involved with Foundation degrees.

5.1 Section A: BTEC Higher Nationals - HND and HNC

5.1.1 Interview F

Interview F involved two HN students - one studying full time for an HND the other was studying part time for an HNC. Both already had employment with industry related small/medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

Commenting on what they considered were good points in relation to the HNs, the main benefit cited was that the HND had provided a good background and, thus, it appeared that breadth rather than relevance was singled out. It was also cited that both the HND and HNC allowed the opportunity to work; the HND, although offered full time, did not require full time attendance. This was significant to both students, because it enabled them to work in parallel to their studies.

The students talked at length about the importance of having work and/or access to work placements within the relevant field, this was perceived as a key benefit. The example given by them was the 'project unit'. This unit was perceived as much easier for students, such as themselves, with directly relevant employment to complete. Indeed, where employers could set 'real' problems for students to tackle was considered to disadvantage students not in course related employment. An important point considering that one of the course groups consisted of nearly all the students being in non-related employment.

In terms of aspects of the course that had not worked well, both students were disappointed in the lack of liaisons between course staff and their respective employers, which students considered to be 'zero' except for confirmation of attendance and a copy of the mark sheets. The students themselves seemed that they would prefer greater communication and contact between course staff and employers, with employers being given additional information as to how students were progressing. It was also felt that employers would have appreciated any additional information. The interviewees thought aspects regarding, contact could be improved, such as more reports being made available by tutors. It was also pointed out during the interview that where units were not directly related to current employment, employers would like information that indicated the benefits, particularly in cases where an employer was paying the fees.

The interviewee also suggested more general liaison between staff and employers, which could assist with the project unit. Whilst there was a recognition that tutors had a background and experience in the appropriate occupational sector there were also indications that the students considered some of the course content to be 'out of date'. There was also an acknowledgement that health and safety regulations could make visits difficult for both staff and students. However, again the interviewees thought students would benefit from a unit that was work based, even if this was not assessed.

In general, when asked their perceptions regarding the Higher Nationals and the Foundation degree, it appeared that in terms of the HNs, there was little understanding of the progression options available. It was apparent the interviewees understood that various qualifications have credit points that accumulate and permit progression onto a bachelors degree. However, the actual credit points available for each qualification were not known. While the general view was that an HND and Fd were of a similar level, with one student having been "... led to believe it [the Fd] is equivalent to an HND ...", there was an acknowledgement that they did not understand the differences between the two qualifications. One student simply commented that they had understood the Fd to be "... associated with a full [bachelors] degree ...", and that he would "... take one ..." if it was the next step. The students felt that progression routes were not necessary straight forward and that information, advice and guidance (IAG) was lacking in the college. Whilst they both mentioned that at the national diploma level there had been some guidance, ongoing information had not be forthcoming during their current courses and progression had only been raised informally in conversation with tutors, not as timetabled or planned sessions. It was stated that careers advice seemed to be available to the younger age group but not, it was felt, for older students. The students felt that even just one tutorial on progression issues and support for those applying to universities would be useful, and that from there, students could then be directed to sources of further support to follow up in their own time.

The students were asked what they thought their employers' knowledge was of the Higher Nationals and Foundation degrees. One student worked for two small employers. The first of his employers (with less than six staff) was only aware of the Fd qualifications from the student himself. This student's second employer, whilst fairly small, was part of a larger dealership that organised its' own bespoke training rather than staff taking qualifications within the national framework. However, the

second student stated that his employer seemed to favour the HNs, which the employer recognised as similar to "... an old style apprenticeship ...".

5.1.2 Interview G

Interview G was conducted with a second group of HNC students, all of whom were working full time alongside their part time two, year course. There was a mix of sponsored and un-sponsored students on the programme, and, again the interview raised many interesting points, particularly in terms of curriculum and course content.

Similar to interview F interviewees, this group were of the opinion that course content was not wholly relevant to their current employment, but that the qualification itself was viewed as key to improving their future employment prospects.

There were differences of opinion regarding aspects of the curriculum, such as its breadth and how useful the course was to their specific places of employment. This dichotomy of breadth versus depth was raised in connection to work placement projects. The interviewees recognised that there was a conflict between what they considered as 'employment specific' and the more general meeting of all course outcomes and Edexcel criteria. It was also felt that this applied to the grading of work, where difficulties arose because employment specific coursework did not necessarily sit well with graded course 'outcomes'; "They are trying to grade a variable project on a very set crib sheet". This highlighted the lack of local flexibility with the HNC curriculum. However, a broad base curriculum was also acknowledged to have benefits, as demonstrated when students were asked whether an Fd, which aimed to be more local employer focused, would be considered more useful than the HNC/D, which was recognised nationally:

"I think something broad based, I believe, is better. Even though it will be harder initially, but you're going to be better off in the long term ... you may stay in the engineering field but you may go from automotive to water industry, or a water industry to a marine industry."

Whilst it was considered that tutors had the appropriate sector experience, the students also felt that parts of the course were taught with a leaning towards those areas of the sector that tutors were experienced in. This introduced an unfavourable bias into the course.

As with interview F interviewees, the importance of experience and learning 'on the job' was expressed and, in conjunction with this, the need for educational institutions to ensure that curriculum provision was up to date:

"I go to work and then spent months and months and I am still learning systems and technologies ... technology changes and unfortunately colleges or whatever learning body it's going to be, are always ten - fifteen years behind ..."

Another major issue that arose from the interview, again, was the lack of knowledge regarding progression details and options. Despite most students being aware that they could use the HND to go on and complete a bachelor degree, knowledge beyond this was sketchy. The interviewees agreed it would be useful to know more about progression onward from an HND. This was highlighted by the fact that some thought that an Fd would "... follow straight on from the HND ..." while others stated "I think it is a degree after an HND" and "... different people tell you different things". When asked what they knew about Foundation degrees, two students were wholly unaware of it while two others were aware of it. Little was understood about where an Fd was positioned within the NQF by any of the interviewees.

There was some scepticism about the benefits of progressing from an HNC to an HND, "... it's not a higher qualification is it, it's just more modules at the same level ...", and employer requirements and employability appeared to be the persuading factor in deciding whether or not to progress onto the HN Diploma.

5.1.3 Interview H

Interview H was with HND/C programme staff at CCN, and collected information on curriculum, administration, student and employer perspectives.

With regard to possible transition from HNs to Fds the lecturers stressed that they themselves were not unwilling to change from delivering one qualification to another, such as HN to Fd. However, their concerns were focussed at possible resistance from employers, such as whether "... we can bring the employers with us." They felt any transition should be given careful consideration so as not to result in losing HE programmes and that it was key to keep employers involved. There was an impression by the staff that many employers did not like change, and it was suggested that employers would not feel happy committing to an Fd. This was perceived to be because it was 'unknown' and because of the commitment required

to complete a three year part time course, as opposed to the two years required for an HN.

There were also some concerns expressed about the acceptance of the Fd between employers, as stated by one interviewee:

“HNCs/HNDc are nationally recognised qualifications whereas universities tend to, apart from the core, put their own slant on them [Fds] so the currency of taking it from one firm to another might be somewhat tarnished but, once again, I don’t know if there has been any research done on them, the sort of portability.”

The fact that construction and engineering, as a subject area, was quite diverse and that there were many specialisms within sectors, would appear to be a major factor in terms of introducing Fds. It was recognised that a major selling point of Fds was that they could be made to ‘fit’ in with particular employer requirements. However, “... the difficulty is that students come from many employers and the challenge is to find an Fd that has to be sold to many employers.”. To meet the needs of a varied sector the interviewees suggested grouping similar employers together and developing differentiated Fds for each of the various areas. Alternatively, it was suggested by the staff to offer Fds with a common core (possibly more generalised than the current HN core units) and then specialised module options.

In terms of improvements to the HNs, the staff suggested a reduction in, what was considered to be, the time consuming quality assessment process, for sampling student assignments – both internal and external. Due to the large numbers of students on courses, assessments involved a considerable workload and the requirement to meet both Edexcel and HEI partner quality arrangements was considered burdensome. A second change suggested was to build in time for formal student tutorials. Currently, there was an understanding that this was part of the Fd framework. HN lecturers had found it impossible to include tutorials with students, with the students’ employment commitments alongside their study preventing an informal arrangement. Thus, student feedback for the HNs was collected via a simple end of unit questionnaire. The staff also commented on the need to meet the range of assessment targets provided by Edexcel, and that the assessment included rigid set learning outcomes, a point also made by the students interviewed. Students were encouraged to undertake assignments and projects that were relevant to their employment.

Liaison and relationships with employers were discussed at length. Generally, it appeared that, at a micro level at least, employers had very little direct input into course content and curriculum design, although employers did request feedback on student performance and attendance rates in some cases. However, whilst not getting involved, there was evidence that many local employers were satisfied with the HNs delivered by CCN. Examples were given of contacts with relevant local employers, organisations and links with a local centre that allowed students to make use of 'the latest technology'. When asked what could be done to foster and encourage further links, as might be the case for Fds, it was considered that this could be 'hit and miss' and depended on individuals faced with employers and company priorities and that some employers were committed to employee development whereas with others it may not take precedence. Again the different requirements of employers within the sector were highlighted and that there would be an expected need to introduce flexibility into any Fds to meet these varied needs. This was highlighted by the statements:

"... the fear from the employers is that if you go over to a Foundation degree there is a grave risk that you may choose a set of options that are just totally alien to what our business does, in which case we would rather stick to the old qualification. So what we would have to do right from the start is to build in an equal amount of flexibility into the Foundation degree."

And

"... it [a Foundation degree] would be centred around the employer, now we are talking about such disparate employers, there isn't an employer, it's a dozen employers or more ..."

The need to take into account the requirements of sector professional bodies and institutions was also raised, *"... you've got to get accreditation ... or otherwise it's useless."*

Once again, progression routes were highlighted by the interviewee as an issue. One interviewee cited an example observed in another educational establishment where Foundation degrees had been "sold" on the basis that having completed an Fd students' would only have to do one 'top up' year to achieve a bachelors degree:

"... but in reality, it was not the case. Most universities will not except a Foundation degree as being worth 240 credits, they let them have 180 credits and that's it ... you can't really say there is only one year top up, what we normally say is 'well let them join the second year of a degree"

course' ... [though] they can do that having the HNC/HND qualification ... so what seems to be a big advantage at first in reality is probably not an advantage."

Also there was confusion expressed in discussions regarding the Foundation degree being the next step on from an HNC, as highlighted by the statement "... there is a huge body of students with HNCs and HNDs and it was unclear how they would progress onto a Foundation degree if they wanted to."

5.1.4 Interview I

Interview I was conducted with a Training and Development Manger from a local employer in a relevant sector and provided an employer's perspective of the HN qualifications.

The employer in question had a staff of approximately 180 employed in technical roles, a signification proportion of whom, had at some time, attended City College Norwich to study relevant courses. The firm not only sent its' employees to CCN to gain qualifications but also provided industrial placement visits for the School of Construction and Engineering. When discussing the benefits of continued staff training and development it was stressed that "... the biggest challenge to future expansion and limit to growth is recruiting engineers of the calibre that we require so we have to invest in the future."

Commenting on the HND the following insight was provided:

"HNDs from my generation are absolutely brilliant because there is a very good underpinning knowledge, which is supported by practical experience. There's many people in engineering who put more faith in a student with an HND than somebody coming from university ... the HND students can hit the ground running, university students take a lot longer to slot in."

Whilst this project was not specifically concerned with the bachelor degree, the above gave an interesting view on the 'vocational' nature of the HND being highly valued by this employer. However, the interviewee did state that graduates were employed by the company and despite the opinion expressed above, it was felt that once employed, graduates often "... move on quickly ..." within the firm. There was an opinion that specific work roles required different qualifications. The HND was seen as better suited for the 'hands on' engineer while a bachelors degree was more suitable for a 'top level design' engineer.

Admittedly, the interviewee knew less about the Foundation degree and knowledge was limited to what had been read. However, the general understanding was that the Fd was "... taking somebody beyond the BTEC type qualification to prepare them for going on to do an undergraduate course."

This, again, appears to indicate a level of confusion regarding progression routes, and how the Fd was incorporated into the qualifications framework. There was also an indication that staff with this employer were interested in progressing to a bachelor degree. However, the lack of suitable courses available locally was cited and an example given of a student travelling to the University of London to gain the required subject specific bachelor degree.

The fact that the Fd would probably require a greater input from employers for the work based learning element did not appear to be a significant issue to this employer, who described the benefits of work based learning as excellent: "... we always encourage that sort of scenario. If there's a project that's got to be done whether it's an apprentice or at a much higher level we would say 'ok, lets help you with this'." Components, materials and staff time in the form of mentoring were currently provided for student employees and the firm viewed work based projects as an opportunity to undertake some research and development.

Should an Fd come to fruition in this sector the employer expressed that he would like to be informed about the syllabus and units (both mandatory and optional) on offer:

"... that's very important to all employers. It's not just to say 'ok, this guy well done', he's done his Foundation degree and he's ended up getting a degree in electrical engineering you know. It could be in data telecommunications, which is nothing to do with what we do. So employers like to be able to look at what actual units the students will be covering and perhaps influence their choice as well, so the syllabus and the content are very important."

Continuing further, the interviewee commented that the company would welcome the opportunity to have the chance to input their thoughts and ideas into the curriculum content of any new Fd qualification, although there was an appreciation that:

"... you might only send two students on the course so you are not in a position to really heavily influence the decision makers but we would still like to say what would benefit us as a company, as a local employer,

bearing in mind what I said earlier about how difficult it is to recruit people ...”

And

“... we don't just train for the sake of training it has to be linked to the forthcoming business plan, so we are looking for specific qualifications and skills to supplement our business plan.”

5.2 Section B: Foundation degrees

5.2.1 Interview J

Interview J was held with two (one mature, one young) first year Foundation degree students.

On being asked, what, if anything, they knew about the HND and HNC, neither student was aware of these qualifications although one had heard of BTEC. However, having said this, it also appeared that both students had little knowledge of Fds prior to starting on their courses. One interviewee had approached her employer regarding options to further study and was directed to the Fd. The student had to study within her own time but the employer did offer financial support. The second student appeared to have been aware of the Foundation degree simply because it had been suggested to her by a member of college staff.

With regard to what they saw as good points of the Fd, both students commented on the beneficial aspects of the course being employment based and that they could see links between the course and the workplace in work specific skills and in study skills, such as time management.

As with the HND/C students, it was agreed that some of the modules were currently relevant to their respective employment while others were not. However, they did think that they would benefit from the broad range of modules in the longer term; “... it keeps your options open for the future ...” with a good balance between subject skills and higher level ‘study skills’.

In terms of progression, one of the students was aware prior to commencing on the course, that the qualification could be used as a ‘stepping stone’ to a full degree.

However, the other interviewee was not aware of the option to 'top up' to a bachelors degree until after she had started the course. This interviewee was also under the impression that the Fd was at a similar level to Access courses. In discussing progression options, the students stressed that if they were to progress they would like to do so with a 'top up' specific to their employment sector. They also considered that information regarding progression would be helpful to then be more aware of their future options.

Finally, in terms of improvements, the students mentioned the induction process, which apparently varied considerably for each. One received a three day induction while the second had a two hour induction the day before the course commenced. This interviewee did suggest this might be that a group from the employer concerned all attended together and it may have been as a consequence of arrangements made with the employer.

5.2.2 Interview K

Interview K was conducted with, and provided the perspectives of, another two Fd students.

Both students had not previously been aware of Foundation degrees prior to commencing their courses, a similar experience as to the previous students, and neither student appeared to have any in-depth knowledge of Foundation degrees or understood their characteristics and aims. The students were also not aware that Fds were a relatively new qualification. One of the students had previously completed a BTEC national diploma and had applied for the previously offered HND in a similar subject, which was subsequently offered as an Fd qualification. Despite the fact that for one of the students, in particular, a vocational curriculum was an important factor in choosing the course, the course had not been chosen because it was a Foundation degree *per se*; "I wasn't looking at the qualification aspect, I was looking at what am I going to get out of it". Both students indicated that they would be interested in progressing to the third year 'top up' and they also knew that the third year option would be of interest to other students in their group.

On reflection, the students did feel there was a balance between the vocational and academic content in their Fd course, and commented that they had lessons that included "... higher level skills so you develop team work, presentations ..." too.

The issue of obtaining a placement for the work-based aspect of the course was also discussed. One student already had related employment while the second did not. However, both students had researched possible placements. The suggestion was made that perhaps CCN could have been more involved in setting up placements. It was pointed out by the interviewee that with a group of students all trying to seek work-based placements through a number of employers, each employer could receive several requests from individual students within any one year. However, if this was organised by CCN, any potential employer would have only to deal with one approach on behalf of all the students. It was also felt that contact via CCN could have more weight than individual requests from students, "...because its all very well us firing off emails, if this is important for the College then the College needs to do something about it not just getting us to knock on doors". The interviewees acknowledged that students did not want 'spoon feeding', but thought this might be an area of improvement for the College, students and employers alike.

5.2.3 Interview L

Interview L collected the perspectives of a Programme Manager with several years' involvement in the development of Foundation degrees and prior knowledge of Higher Nationals too.

It was stated that local market requirements and employer support were important factors in developing any Fd; "... you need to have a really sound market demand." It was highlighted that the School in which they operated had built good relationships with local employers, who had been involved in or indeed had identified a gap and gone on to lead on the development of Fds. "It's easier if you have got employers on your side as they really help you determine the idiosyncrasies of the programme to meet local needs and you fail if you haven't got employers on your side."

Liaison with and the input from employers was said to be variable between individual Fd programmes. Some had focused on a partnership with just one or two major local employers while others worked in partnership with eight or nine employers. The current developments for a new Fd had initially involved a smaller, more focused, group of employers, and it was acknowledged that it would have been difficult to get a large number of employers all together at any one time due to constraints on employers time. It was also highlighted that there were still employers who were not aware of Fds, "... which is still a problem and why fdf have increased their marketing ... to raise awareness." Generally though, the Fd was considered to support

employers; “I think local employers are very happy to support foundation degrees ... and are keen to be part of it and the review process and to put their points of view forward”

The local flexibility in developing Fds was stated to be in meeting not only employer but also student requirements;

“... if you do it properly you actually get a course that is designed to actually meet local student needs and you’re more likely to get more people subscribing to it than perhaps than the ‘off the shelf’ which you try to adapt but you’re quite constrained because of learning outcomes and that sort of thing ...”

As with the example in Interview E of a Fd developed within one of the other Schools, the School had secured access to MOVE funding for the development of one of its earlier Fds. These funds were used to buyout staff time, for example, provide cover via sessional lectures, etc., who could bring in the appropriate expertise. However, other Fds had not been successful in securing this funding and, in these cases, there was no opportunity to buy out staff time for the lengthy process of development, writing and developing the programmes validation proposal documentation.

In terms of procedures for developing a new Fd it was considered that there were support structures in place:

“... what we have now is a very clear process in the college that’s been laid down ... a very clear cycle of when all the things have to be done by ... and that is very helpful especially when you are new because I think it takes a few years of practice to write documents.”

The re-introduction of the Stage 1 validation process (see appendix 2) within CCN was also seen as a helpful move:

“... it allows you to have a really good scrutiny of all the documents [by] people who have had involvement of validations before, and its rooting out the problems ... before you get to the actual validation with the university ... that has been really really helpful.”

The interviewee felt this had lead to producing a better shaped, more professional course. Quality Assurance was met by “A very rigorous process in the college ...”, which includes two stages of approval (see appendix 2): “I think we’re getting much, much better at this because it is just part of the learning process.” An example

highlighting this was a recent team meeting regarding an Fd under current development, where every single module was scrutinised.

The Fd validation training event, as mentioned during other interviews, was also viewed as very positive action, "... for new people ... for revision, we had a joint workshop evening [with college and UEA staff] going right through the validation process again." Other useful sources of information cited were a UEA produced validation handbook and having access to information on the CCN intranet, such as handbook, flow charts, generic statements, QAA guidance, Norfolk Regulatory Framework document, *etc.*

It was stated that as required, progression routes had been developed for all the School's Fds with third year 'top- ups' and access to other courses in allied professions. It was identified that due to the nature of the employment sector relevant to this School, professional and statutory bodies had their own regulatory requirements, and that there was an expectation that there were more 'hoops to jump through' with future developments.

Generally, students studying on Fds within this School were employed within the sector or had voluntary placements. However, one Fd programme was highlighted as an exception to this experience. Therefore, for this programme a volunteer scheme had been established with an employer, to enable these younger students access to a placement within a relevant work experience environment. Again, it had been stipulated that there was an onus on the student to find their placements, and, again, it was considered that this provided useful experience in developing their higher level skills, but help could be offered by the School where necessary.

While discussing some of the similarities and differences between the HND and Fd, the large input of time was acknowledged for the developing and writing of an Fd. It was also acknowledged that an Fd involved a lot more commitments (time and labour) compared to an HND, which had a nationally produced specification. However, the aspect of local flexibility was quoted as being a benefit of the Fd:

"I think what is nice about the Foundation degree is they are much more based in work, there is a much closer affinity between assessment work and the work place. There is a lot more freedom, I think, with what students can explore, and the fact that they have local employer support means that we will teach and provide experience that is actually crucial to

what's needed in Norfolk for instance, rather than trying to fit in to a national qualification."

Notwithstanding the local focus of an Fd, it was stated that the Fd would be as 'portable' as an HND because there were generic core units, which would be applicable to any part of the country and the perusal by an external examiner was felt to have included an element of national benchmarking.

Work-based learning and higher level skills modules within an Fd were viewed as two of the main differences between the Fd and the HND.

Finally, the following comment summed up what it was felt could be learnt from HNDs to take forward as good practice to Foundation degrees:

"They [HNDs] were actually very good courses and they provided a very good grounding in the subject area and they prepared students to go on to degree level study. I think the Foundation degree actually prepares students perhaps that little bit more, extra credits, type of modules, to progress either here or to go to university or to go into professional training ... the only problem I remember with HNDs was that they didn't get refreshed very often and you could end up with some antique of a module, which didn't actually reflect today's society and be stuck with some sort of dire assessment practice ... and of course that detracts from the quality and the currency of what you are trying to do and to teach, whereas with Foundation degrees if we get to the end of a module or the end of a year and we need to change something there are processes through minor and major modifications that we can do, it's a formal process ... they are much more flexible and I think there is much more emphasis on work."

5.2.4 Interview M

Interview M collected the perceptions from a member of staff who had several years' experience teaching on the BTEC Higher National courses and, more recently, developing and delivering a Fd programme.

The interviewee highlighted what were considered to be the advantages and disadvantages with the two qualifications in the following statement:

"... the biggest problem I had [with the HND/Cs] was they were really prescriptive and lacked a lot of the academic side that really at that level was missing ... it was very kind of blocked modular ... very skills based, when in actual fact when writing up the Foundation degree one of the biggest things that was talked about with us by the industry was the fact that [with] people coming out of college and university it's a given that they are going to be skilled up, but what they really want is people who are

skilled and people who are good at communicating, networking, soft transferable skills ...”

In developing one of the more recent Fds, there was a partnership of both local employers and a leading agency all of whom, together with a professional body, worked closely with the college in the design of the Fds, which gave a balance of both academic and practitioner input to shape the structure of course. As the interviewee stated: “I do really feel like the Foundation degree was a team effort from the college and industry as well.” In terms of the HNs and Fd there was not felt to be a lot of difference in the requirements for quality assurance as both had internal and external procedures in place.

The Fd concerned was developed as a new qualification and although there was an influence taken from three or four ‘good’ HND units, overall, there was considered to be more continuity through the two years of the Fd: “... its about the whole picture and really instead of it being modular based [students] come in here in the first year and they go through a kind of journey where everything is tied together.”

In terms of support offered/provided by CCN for staff to develop Fds, in general, it was stated that this support was improving. The UEA training session was mentioned favourably, again, together with access to the college HE QEST ‘fund’, which was available to staff working on preparing validation documentation to allow them to be bought out. However, having stated this, the interviewee highlighted further training as an area that should be increased for staff developing Fds, particularly outlining and clarifying the documentation required for validation. Discussions had also taken place between the course team and other staff who had designed Fds, however, this was more of an informal arrangement and it was acknowledged that this also put pressure on colleagues’ time. It was stated that it was a considerable workload, to develop and write an Fd programme for staff already constrained by time.

When discussing the work-based learning element for a new Fd, it was made apparent that a large number of people working in this industry were freelance. Therefore, this could have impacts for those seeking work placements on this particular Fd. However, the course team was “... building a pool of mentors ...” together with organising “... people to come in and do master classes ...” to ensure there were connections with industry. As with other Fds, there was a certain onus on students to investigate their own placements as it was considered “... important that

students are independent and autonomous and part of the whole thing is networking and communication so handing everything on a platter is to their detriment". However, the course team could help as a 'fall back' option.

One of the major differences cited by the interviewee between the Higher Nationals and Fds was considered to be the inclusion within Fds of higher academic learning skills, such as team-working, research skills, essay writing and the work-based element of the course. Another difference cited was the flexibility of the Fd, which was considered to be an improvement to that of the HND in ensuring content could be kept up to date; "... there is flexibility to alter units as things go along ...", or to make more major changes, subject to re-validation. This apparent flexibility of the Fd was compared to an HN, the content of which had been written several years before but still taught in 2008 despite the outcomes being considered as no longer applicable. The inflexibility of the HNs marking scheme was also cited as a difficulty, with the requirement to assess and mark outcomes despite the fact that some outcomes may no longer be current within the industry concerned.

Finally, it was suggested that there was a "... huge improvement ..." in retention, on Fds compared to HNs, but also stated that more targeted marketing, in appropriate industry journals, would be a positive way forward rather than general advertising.

It was also stated that the course team had been developing a 'top up' progression route for students currently on this Fd and there was an obvious positive experience regarding Fds: "I think after the first year already I can see a much richer tapestry in the way the course is running from the HND."

7. Discussion

The research interviews presented in this report provide much information and insight as to the perspectives of Fd stakeholders across a range of levels from a national scale to personal. The interviews raised a number of issues that have been discussed and summarised here.

The national publicity for Foundation degrees in general was raised by several interviewees. This despite the opinion of the BTEC representative who had felt national publicity to have been weighted in favour of Fds. However, the opinion

expressed by Interviewee D who was involved in IAG and several other staff, was that the national marketing of the Fd by the Government had been very poor. This came across from staff who had found, through talking to employers, that there remained a lack of employer awareness of this qualification and also, to a certain extent, by students who, until registering for an Fd, had similarly not been aware of their existence and their particular characteristics.

In terms of local marketing, one member of staff suggested that college publicity for the Fds would be more effective if marketing was targeted appropriately. For example, making use of relevant industry journals rather than the use of general college 'flyers'. In view of the fact that many Fds had the aim of filling niche markets, targeted publicity would appear to make greater use of a limited budget in this context.

There appeared to be misconceptions held as to the credit value of the HN qualifications. The BTEC interviewee confirmed that the HND now had a value of 240 credits, but it was clearly not accepted as such by a number of providers. Hence the development of an additional 'bridging courses' offered where the HND has been accepted as having a value of 180 credits. Progression options for HND students, as a result, appear to have been variable, with some HEIs accepting students onto the final year of a degree whilst others will accept students only onto the second year. Foundation degrees, which have a stipulated requirement for a 'top up' year, require students to complete a further 120 credits to obtain a bachelors degree. However, there were queries over the transferability of all 240 credits from an Fd programme to a new, top-up programme in another institution.

In addition to the credit value, there was also a recognised difference in the curriculum in terms of progression to a full degree. As pointed out in Interview A, the HND was not specifically designed to account for progression whereas this was an inclusive requirement for the Fd. This was also noted in a number of the staff interviews where they felt the Fd benefited from the inclusion of academic and higher level skills, which were lacking in the HND and as cited by the partner HEI, whilst students have always been able to progress from an HND, progression from a Fd was felt to be 'more seamless'.

The predominant advantage of the Fd, cited by many Lecturers and Programme Managers was its flexibility, which permitted the revision of curriculum content in order

to ensure that the qualification remained up to date. Conversely, it was generally agreed that this was not possible with the national specification of the HND, which was not revised annually and nor was there scope to introduce local flexibility. In addition, the assessment criteria required by BTEC was cited as being very rigid in nature and 'outcome based' whilst, again, the local development of the Fd enabled development of a targeted but flexible assessment structure.

There was a concern from HN programme managers that any development of Fds within certain Schools would discourage employers' involvement with any new developments, which was echoed by an employer despite an apparent willingness to consider Fds. Bearing in mind the interviewee represented a reasonably large employer the benefits of staff development were highlighted and it was felt that employers would wish to be involved in the development of new qualifications, particularly in terms of the curriculum content.

Both the HNs and the Fds received input from employers, sector skills councils and professional bodies. However, with the BTEC qualifications this input was generally at a national level, while the input from stakeholders was more local level with Fds. Thus, as quoted by one of the programme managers, the Fd suits the needs of both local industry and local students. Although it might be argued that the HND/C having a nationally devised specification was, therefore, a nationally recognised qualification, as proposed by HND/C students. However, there was also an opinion that Fds developed with a 'generic core' would offer the same 'portability' as HNs.

The aspect of having local employers and industry involved in the development of Fds was considered as not only beneficial but rather key. One member of staff highlighted that if employers were not 'on board' Fds would not succeed. A key difference highlighted by the BTEC interviewee was that HNDs were 'work related' but Foundation degrees were 'work based', and whilst it was seen as an advantage to have a vocational work based element to the qualification, engaging with employers was also cited as challenging, with its own difficulties. For example, the time consuming process of establishing links with the appropriate person within a local employer was highlighted by one interviewee, while another highlighted that arrangements for meetings to be attended by multiple employers as difficult due to the time constraints on employers. Indeed one member of staff indicated a particularly low 'turn out' to two meetings arranged by the School. The first was for employer input into the development of an Fd programme while the second was

arranged to meet and provide information to employer based mentors. In a similar vein, another difficulty cited was the nature of many employers within East Anglia with a high number of SMEs or freelance businesses, and notwithstanding the time implications for small employers, there was also a recognition that this could impact twofold on Fds: 1/ engaging employers to assist with work placements and 2/ the release of employees to actually undertake a Foundation degree.

Time constraints were also raised as a difficulty for College staff involved in designing and developing new Fds, which, quite clearly, was not an issue with the pre-written HND/C specifications. Although use had been made of MOVE funding to buy out time for development and writing the specifications for a number of Fds, not all proposed Fd development had been successful in securing funding. However, college funding, from HE QEST, had been identified as an alternative funding source with which to 'buy out' staff time, and this was cited as very helpful. Additional administrative support in preparing Fd documentation for validation was cited as a particular area for improvement where assistance would be very welcome.

In terms of training and development, staff had found a joint FEC/HEI training event on the preparation of a Foundation degree particularly useful, which was cited as being helpful for both new and existing staff. It was highlighted that useful information was also available from the intranet, via Blackboard.

As might be expected, student interviews gave very focused perspectives of their individual experiences. Issues were raised that might have applied to any qualification or course rather than specifically to HNs or Fds, nevertheless, those issues were relevant for discussion too.

Despite the fact that HNs were not work-based qualifications, the HN students acknowledged the benefits from working in a related industry that were brought to the course, or at least having access to a relevant work place. As such these views would seem to favour the Foundation degree's objective of being work based or including a work based element, such as work placement.

Students currently studying HNs highlighted the need to maintain an up to date vocational curriculum, as industries were subject to ongoing change and, similarly, this would apply to the Foundation degree as another vocationally orientated

qualification. However, here, the Fd was perceived to have an advantage, in being able to facilitate and incorporate developments with a local employer focus and input.

The lack of information, advice and guidance (IAG) on progression options was an issue for the majority of interviewees. Students specified that they would have appreciated much more IAG regarding what options were open to them in terms of progression onto further qualifications post completion of Higher Nationals. However, there also appeared to be similar issue regarding Fd students not being very knowledgeable about the level of the Fd in comparison to other qualifications, and again, their options regarding progression post completion.

Organising work placements was also raised by one Fd student who suggested there should be greater college input regarding contacting employers for potential work placement as several students may contact the same employers regarding work placement opportunities, and a central college contact system would be better. It was also felt that if employers were contacted with a request from CCN this might have greater impact and a more positive outcome. A number of the Programme Managers had indicated in their interviews that the onus was very much on students to arrange placements and that this enabled the student to engage in some of the higher level skills required by the Fd. Indeed, the students did not expect to be 'spoonfed', however, there did appear to be a valid issue being raised here.

In conclusion, despite the differences between the HNs and the Foundation degree and, in particular, the HNs being 'work-related' and the Fds being 'work-based', there appeared to be a number of similarities, such as the breadth offered by the curriculum in both qualifications. Also, both qualifications had involvement and input from industry, Sector Skills Councils and Professional bodies. However, where this input was at a national stage for the HND/C development similar input was locally based for the Fd. It was highlighted that the Fd was a qualification that could be locally developed and validated, thus providing the opportunity to develop and maintain a qualification to meet local employer and student needs was considered as key by many, although not without difficulties in engaging employers. Another main difference and plus point of the Fd was the ability to 'tinker' with the course content, allowing adjustments to be made to best suit delivery and needs.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Fd and HND/C courses currently available at CCN

Foundation degrees
Business Management
Financial Services
Retail Financial Services
Business Computing
Teaching Assistants
Health Studies
Sport, Health & Exercise
Public Services
Hospitality Management
Leisure and Events Management
Licensed Retail Management?
Management of Culinary Arts
Travel and Tourism Management
Music Practice
Performing Arts
Interactive Media (Motion Graphics)
HND
Civil Engineering
Construction
Mechanical Engineering f/t
Electrical/Electronic f/t
HNC
Civil Engineering
Constructions
(HND top up) Mechanical Engineering p/t
(HND top up) Electrical/Electronic

Source: City College Higher Skills directory Full-Time and Part-Time Higher Education Courses 2008 Entry

(Additional Foundation degrees are listed in this directory but are currently subject to validation)

Appendix B: College Re-Validation process chart

KEY:
 CCN – City College Norwich
 DP – Deputy Principal
 HEQUEST- HE Quality Enhancement Support Team
 HOS – Head of School
 ISG – Internal Scrutiny Group
 JBoS – Joint Board of Study
 LTC – Learning and Teaching Committee
 P&F – Planning and Funding
 PO – Partnerships Office
 UEA – University of East Anglia

TIME LINE
LAST POSSIBLE DATES

OUTLINE APPLICATION (CAA1) TO NOVEMBER JBOS

PROGRAMME SPECIFICATION TO DECEMBER OR FEBRUARY LTC

STAGE 1 LAUNCH -19 WEEKS

STAGE 2 LAUNCH -14 WEEKS

CONDITIONS LAUNCH -8 WEEKS

PAPERS (STAGE 2) -3 WEEKS

PAPERS (CONDITIONS) -2 WEEKS

SEPTEMBER (3RD WEEK)

RE-VALIDATION PROCESS

