

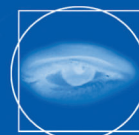


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Stakeholder perspectives on Higher Nationals and Foundation degrees

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1. Introduction

For many years, the Edexcel BTEC Higher National Diploma (HND) and Higher National Certificate (HNC) (known as Higher Nationals, HNs), formed much of the sub-degree provision throughout England and Wales. Since the introduction of the Foundation degree (Fd) in 2001, City College Norwich (CCN) has introduced a number of new Fd programmes at this intermediate/sub-degree level. However, post a college wide restructure and a separate review of HE provision, which included a mixed HN and Fd portfolio, CCN decided to move towards a solely Fd provision portfolio. This is in keeping with many Further Education Colleges (FECs) within England that were similarly following the move from HNs to Foundation degrees. However, due to the length of service, there may be lessons of best practice that could be taken from the management of HNs to assist or inform the management of Fds. For example, HNs have had a rich employer engagement history within several subject sectors, the current staff of employers having often gained the same qualification during their training/educational years. Therefore, it was important to understand which subjects and at what levels, if any, the two qualifications were understood.

This project aimed to review a variety of 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 HNs and Fd were reviewed at a national (macro) level, outlining the background to the two qualifications; secondly, the Fd and HNs were considered at an institutional (meso) level, detailing college provision and the perspectives of staff, either managerial, administrative or other, who had

college-wide involvement with these qualifications; finally, the project provides a programme level (micro) perspective from programme managers/lecturers, students and employers.

2. Methodology

Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews over a 6 month period (Jan.–June 08), which provided data and views on the perspectives and experiences of relevant stakeholders. These stakeholders included CCN staff and students, employers involved with Foundation degrees and HND/Cs, and partner Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and awarding bodies.

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 (for further detail see Schofield, 2008)

Interviews were categorised as those that provided either; 1/ a national perspective, 2/ an institutional perspective, or 3/ an individual programme level (the perspectives of students, programme managers/lecturers and employers).

3. The national perspective

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 Higher National Diploma and Certificates were described by BTEC 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 HND/HNC were developed in the early 1970s, having previously been 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/HNC were accepted and recognised qualifications. In 2002, a report 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).

Unlike the Higher National qualifications, the Foundation degree was relatively new having been introduced in 2000 as a pilot and first taught in 2001/2. Partner HEIs award Foundation degrees, thus, no national

awarding body exists for Fds. However, in 2003, Foundation Degree Forward (known as fdf) was established by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), as a national body to support the development and validation of Foundation degrees and 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 promote Foundation degrees as a qualification that integrates academic and work-based learning. There was also recognition that the qualifications were to be designed in partnership with employers, with the intention of equipping students with the appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills for each sector. A HEFCE (2002) report highlighted that dedicated progression routes on to a full degree were to be a guaranteed requirement of an 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 in 2007/8 that “...nearly 72,000 students were registered, or were expected to register, on foundation degree programmes.” (HEFCE, 2008).

Whilst the HNs and Fds have co-existed, there appeared to have been an openly held Governmental assumption that the Foundation degree, would supersede the long established Higher National Diploma (HND). 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

3.2.1 Higher National Diploma/Certificate

Edexcel was the awarding body for BTEC Higher Nationals. The HND/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). The HND was delivered in both FECs and HEIs and were awarded either by BTEC or by the HEI under licence.

“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 qualification studied (i.e. HNC or HND). The assessment, rather than being exam based, took the form of ‘real-life’, work-related case studies, projects and assignments marked using a criterion based method referenced against learning outcomes. Units were graded as fail, pass, merit or distinction. HND/HNCs could be studied full or part time with the HNC, in particular, being studied alongside employment.

HND/HNCs were developed with key industry representatives and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to meet employer and student requirements. The National Qualification Framework for HND has a national specification, meaning they have standard specifications wherever the student studied. There was some scope for 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). Both were stand alone qualifications set at

level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework (Fig. 1).

The NQF and the FHEQ

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 7 Level 7 Diploma in Translation	D (doctoral) Doctorates 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 5 Level 5 BTEC Higher National Diploma in 3D Design 4 Level 4 Certificate in Early Years	H (honours) Bachelor degrees, graduate certificates and diplomas I (intermediate) Diplomas of higher education and further education, foundation degrees and higher national diplomas
3 Level 3 Certificate in Small Animal Care Level 3 NVQ in Aeronautical Engineering A levels		C (certificate) Certificates of higher education
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).

Responsibility for the quality assurance of the HND/HNC rested 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 mirror HND/HNCs in that they could be studied within HEIs or FECs. However, the award of Foundation degree was from an institution with degree-awarding powers. Thus, those Fds delivered within FECs would be awarded by a partner HEI – though this may change in the future as some FECs may seek awarding powers themselves. Similar to the HND/HNC again,

Foundation degrees were designed to “...integrate academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and programme providers” (QAA, 2004). The Foundation degree was to incorporate academic knowledge and understanding with specific vocational skills and competencies. Course specifications, bespoke to each programme, 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). The Fd would be conducted over two years on a full time basis normally, but could also be studied part time often 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).

While HND/HNCs had national specifications, each Fd programme would be developed individually and validated before being offered for delivery. Therefore, programme specifications were designed independently to other programmes allowing a focus on local requirements.

In regards to progression, as HEFCE stated, Foundation degrees were to provide a “...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). However, as with Higher Nationals, Foundation degrees were to be also recognised as ‘stand alone’ qualifications.

Responsibility for quality assurance and

validation of a Foundation degree, whether delivered by an HEI or FEC, lies with the awarding institution. Therefore, the HEI will be subject to the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Foundation degree qualification benchmarks were developed in November 2002 and revised in October 2004, setting out the purpose, characteristics, content and outcomes of any specific Fd programme.

3.3 Interviews: national perspectives

Interviewee A:

Interviewee A was an Edexcel representative. The interview covered a broad remit, providing a wide range of current information and perspectives on the Higher Nationals and the current ‘landscape’ for BTEC HNs.

Following visits to various universities throughout the UK, the interviewee acknowledged 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.” (Interviewee A).

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...” (Interviewee A).

The interviewee went on to describe 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” (Interviewee A).

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 the land-based sector. 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 by the interviewee as a reason for the continued interest in these sectors, with HNs being considered nationally as the “...heritage qualification...” due to previous generations of employers having undertaken the same qualification. 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 a ‘guaranteed’ and not considered in the structure of the qualification, as it had been with the 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.” (Interviewee A).

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. Also, it was recognised 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 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.”

The interviewee also highlighted what they saw as the main similarities and differences between the HN and Fd qualifications. In terms of levels, it was commented that both 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.” (Interviewee A).

The fact that the HND had a national specification was highlighted together with the fact that the quality assurance (QA) also had 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, by the interviewee, 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 were 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 your link with the appropriate vocational organisations locally up to speed." stated Interviewee A.

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." (Interviewee A).

However, the interviewee did feel 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." (Interviewee A).

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

4. The institutional perspective

Four interviews were undertaken with staff who had a central services involvement with the Fd and/or HND/HNC, either in a management, quality assurance, administrative or information, advice and guidance (IAG) role. The perspectives of staff on the development of new Fd programmes is also included.

4.1 Foundation degree & Higher Nationals at City College Norwich

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 2002-03. A total of 16 Fd programmes were offered by CCN at the time of this project, ranging in subjects from health to teaching assistants and financial services to music practice. Just four HNDs were offered, in engineering, construction and electronics, which were mirrored in the four HNCs (for a complete listing of the programmes offered by CCN see Scofield, 2008). In addition to this provision, a number of additional, new Fds were being developed that were subject to validation at the time of writing.

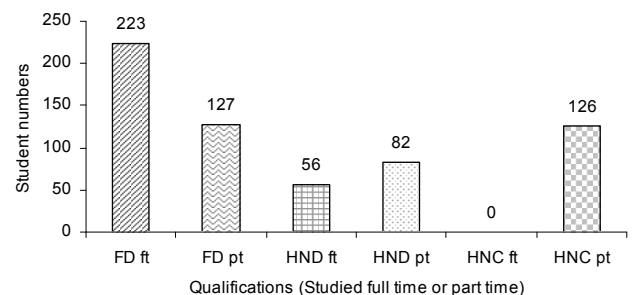


Figure 2. College registrations on the Fd and HND/C courses. Fd and HND/C Students: Current registrations Feb 2008 (all years). (HND f/t includes Fd Aviation, Hospitality and Travel Management available to overseas students only, n=14).

Various progression options were available to students studying either HND/HNCs or Fds at CCN. These progression 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 (University of East Anglia).

4.2 Development of Foundation degree awards

There had been debate that the introduction of the Foundation degree would simply lead to existing HNDs being 're-badged'. Indeed, Government policy appeared to accept this would happen, as highlighted in a DfES (2003) White Paper, which stated that the aim was 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 Fd provision were newly developed. Rigorous procedures were introduced to monitor the development of any new Fds, from initial idea to delivery (see Fig. 3 in Scofield, 2008).

The processes required of an FE provider in offering either HNs or Foundation degrees differ at key stages. HND/HNCs have their content and specifications written and produced nationally by Edexcel, while the Fd required the provider to develop the specifications. The same variation was also observed in the assessment requirements for each programme, with HNs assessment criteria being set at the national level and Fds set at the local level. The validation process was also significantly different between the qualifications. The HNs were approved and validated by Edexcel nationally, in conjunction with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). However, for an Fd the provider/college would 'drive the process' forward through internal scrutiny and validation processes and meeting the partner HEI and quality assurance agency (QAA) requirements. Thus, a much greater amount of time and effort were required for a college to develop an Fd.

4.3 Interviews

Interviewee B:

Interviewee B provided information on the growth and development of Fds 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, and until the 1980s, 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 modules locally developed, essentially the qualification followed a 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 had been 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" (Interviewee B).

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 2005/06 due to HEFCE realignment. Whilst it was discussed that the introduction of the Fd did lead to a number of HNDs being 're-badged' by other providers, it was also highlighted that CCN undertook to ensure that the Fds offered since 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” (Interviewee B).

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.” (Interviewee B).

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.” (Interviewee B).

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, etc., “...so they [CCN’s Fds] began to get, in a small way, some national exposure as good practice.” (Interviewee B).

The Foundation degree qualification was viewed 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.” (Interviewee B).

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” stated interviewee B, who went on to also state that the Fd “...could be marketed as a much more valuable commodity”.

CCN had committed to the time consuming but rigorous development of Foundation degrees, and two programmes were cited as examples of good practice, such as;

1. Fd Interactive Media that had a large consultation group of employers who influenced the design and development of the programme
2. the development of the Fd in Public Sector Management, which was led throughout by an employer

Also cited as an example of good practice by interviewee B was an annual college and employer conference, where employers were invited to discuss ongoing Fd issues, such as maintaining curriculum relevance, up-skilling, ensuring fitness for purpose, assessment strategies, etc. Such conferences sought to include both employers involved in original development and to bring in new employers. At these conferences it was apparently confirmed that employers were looking for higher level skills from Fd students, such as research skills, analytical skills and project management. Consequently these skills had been included in the Fd core and counted as preparation for higher study (Interviewee B).

Interviewee B cited two ‘problematic’ issues relating to the development of Foundation degrees. The first was finding the ‘right’ person/s from an 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.” (Interviewee B). Hence, 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. The second issue highlighted was 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.” (Interviewee B).

It was suggested that the seemingly ‘less receptive’ attitude of the professional bodies towards Foundation degrees could be overcome by 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.” (Interviewee B).

Interviewee B expressed an expectation that professional bodies would recognise that HNs were not “...doing the business...” and that with the introduction of Foundation degrees they could influence the qualifications at a national framework level, and at a local curriculum design level. Discussions between CCN and employers had highlighted skill shortages in 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.” (Interviewee B).

Interviewee C:

Interviewee C, a representative from the University of East Anglia, provided perspectives on the qualifications, quality assurance and validation requirements of the HNs and Fds. This HEI had not previously validated HNDs but had recently taken on the role following HEFCE’s re-alignment. Those HNDs that were remaining were considered to be in areas where the employers “... had a much more traditional view of what they wanted.” stated interviewee C. 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 cited as sectors that were taking longer to accept Fds.

Interviewee C 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 in support of the Fd:

“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” (Interviewee C).

Progression was thought to be 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." (Interviewee C).

One of the main differences between the qualifications was cited as the styles of assessment. The HND/HNC was considered to be simplistic in approach as Interviewee C stated:

"[HNDs are]...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."

Interviewee C also highlighted the fact that HND students could resubmit assignments "... as many times as they want...", and this was not supported by the HEI.

Interviewee C did raise a number of further issues that could be viewed as 'difficulties'. For example, issues involving employers included the fact that many employers were small and medium 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, thus "...there's a need to manage that within the Fd framework."

Another issue was that employers expected the educational partners to do most of the Fd programme development and establishment work, but then send just a couple of students, which would mean the course was financially unviable. There was also 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 [the employers] didn't like

this as it costs more. So they need to be aware they are getting some value added for that cost."

In discussing recognition of the two qualifications, interviewee C 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."

Interview D:

Interview D focused on information, advice and guidance (IAG) issues from the perspective of IAG for enquirers to CCN.

It was stated that the majority of HE provision titles offered as Foundation degrees were previously offered as an HND. Examples given were business, computing, hospitality, creative arts and sports, health and exercise, were all apparently offered previously as BTEC HN subjects. In regard to 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." (Interviewee D).

This latter point was supported by comments made in previous interviews and was quantified in terms of the credits received for each qualification. The understanding that in many cases the HND equated to 180 credits and, therefore, students were required to complete an additional 60 credit bridging course prior to embarking on a final 120

credit top-up, equivalent to a third year. Whereas the Fd was accepted as a 240 credit qualification and was perceived to allow direct entry in to a third year.

An apparent protracted external validation process was also cited as a problem for IAG staff, in that it prevented them from being able to confirm the availability of certain programmes, such as Early Years Child Care in Education and Youth Work.

Students were advised regarding the various CCN based 'top up' options available to them. However, there had been areas of confusion. For example, in regards to the 'top up' year, would it mean for those on the Teaching Assistant Fd would then be awarded qualified teacher status, or, alternatively, from a Health related Fd to an allied qualified practitioner status? It was also stated that there were misunderstandings about the ability to take a Foundation degree followed by a subject specific 'top-up' at another HE provider. However, 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 suggested that future plans were to offer similar subject specific 'top ups' to Fds across other schools in the institution.

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, as:

"...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." (Interviewee D).

Interviewee D went on to state that, as had been identified with colleagues at other local providers, it was generally 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 considered 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..." (Interviewee D).

Interview E:

Interview E provided the perspective from a School within CCN that had recently developed a Foundation degree. The development of this Fd resulted from a successful MOVE, the Lifelong Learning Network in the East of England, bid, which provided FECs with funds to develop Fds in new subject areas. The funds were to cover staff 'buying-out' time for researching and developing the programme and meeting with employers "...to find out what the needs were within the industry, and we found out that there is a need" for the programme.

It was stated that approximately twenty employers in total were involved to varying levels of engagement in the programme's development. However, despite being contacted, there was no input from the appropriate Sector Skills Councils or Industry Councils.

Interviewee E highlighted how the proposed course 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 (UEA was the validating HEI). Having met conditions and recommendations 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 it was stated how a ten week pre-Fd, 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 the September start.

Approximately half of the students registered for this Fd 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 work-based learning component. It was also highlighted by the interviewee that there was an onus on the student to find their own work placement, where they were not already employed in the sector. However, this was considered as part of the student's personal development by the interviewee, making use of communication skills, etc. It was stressed that 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, there had been contact and support from other CCN staff in developing the course. Examples given were general assistance with credit issues, module writing, assessment and anonymous marking. There were also liaisons regarding specification development with CCN colleagues within the School who had previously developed Fds. The interview did highlight a training session delivered by UEA staff, stating it was "... very useful ..." and "...if in place on a regular basis it would be useful for staff developing an Fd". CCN's own validation panel was also considered very helpful in providing critical feedback prior to the external validation process. There were areas cited that would have been helpful to have had support, such as administrative support for taking minutes of meetings and with the considerable amount of time and work involved in organising and producing the validation document.

5. Individual perspectives

A number of staff, students and employers were interviewed to collect their perspectives on the two qualifications. The main points raised during these interviews have been presented here, with interviews focussed on HNs first followed by interviews concerning Foundation degrees.

5.1 BTEC Higher Nationals

Interview F:

Interview F involved two HN students, one fulltime on an HND while the other was part time on an HNC and both were already employed with industry related 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, suggesting that breadth rather than depth was preferred. It was stated that both the HND and HNC allowed the opportunity to work alongside studying; the HND, although offered full time, did not require full time attendance. This was considered as important to both students.

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 cited by them was the 'project unit'. This unit was perceived as much easier to complete for students, such as themselves, with directly relevant employment. Indeed, where employers could set 'real' problems for students to tackle was then considered a disadvantage for students not in course related employment. An important point considering 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 communication between course staff and their respective employers. Existing rates of communication were cited as 'zero', except confirmation of attendance and a copy of the mark sheets. Both students appeared to indicate that they would prefer greater levels of communication between CCN staff and employers, with employers being supplied with additional information on the students' progress. An area the interviewees thought communication could be improved was by tutors making reports available to view. It was also felt that employers would have appreciated any additional information, whilst also pointing out that during the interview stage, where units were not directly

related to current employment, employers might like an alternative that did provide a benefit, particularly in cases where the employer was paying the fees.

The interviewees also suggested more general liaison between staff and employers would benefit all, especially in regard to the project unit. While the interviewees recognised that tutors had experience of the appropriate sectors, it was suggested that some of the course content was "...out of date...". It was also suggested 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.

When asked for their perceptions on 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 bachelors; 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 IAG from the college was lacking at this stage. 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 rather than being timetabled or planned sessions. Also, it was stated that careers advice seemed to be available to the younger age group but not, it was felt, for older students. Both considered that at least

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 about thoughts on their employers' knowledge regarding 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 qualification from the student. The second employer, whilst also fairly small, was part of a larger dealership that organised its own 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".

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 issues, particularly in terms of curriculum and course content.

Similar to the students in interview F, 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 stipulated criteria. It was also considered that this applied to the grading of assignments, etc., where difficulties arose because employment specific coursework did

not necessary sit well with graded course 'outcomes'. It was stated that "They are trying to grade a variable project on a very set crib sheet". This highlighted the lack of local flexibility within the HN 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 locally employer focused, would be considered more useful than the HNC/D that 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." (HN student).

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

Again, supporting interview F perspectives, the importance of experience and learning 'on the job' was highlighted 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 is going to be, are always ten to fifteen years behind..." (HN student).

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. They 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. There was little understanding of where an Fd was positioned within the NQF by any of the interviewees.

Maybe surprisingly, interviewees expressed 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...", while the ultimate deciding factor appeared to be employer requirements and employability in regard to deciding whether or not to progress.

Interview H

Interview H was conducted with programme staff from HND and HNC delivered at CCN. Data were collected on staff perspectives on curriculum, administration, students and employers.

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, typically from an HN to an Fd. However, they raised concerns about resistance from employers, by suggesting it was whether "...we can bring the employers with us?" The interviewees felt that any proposed transition should be given careful consideration, so that no HE programmes were lost and that keeping employers involved was key. The impressions of the staff were that employers did not like change, suggesting that employers would not feel happy committing to an Fd. This appeared to be because the Fd was apparently 'unknown' and because a three year commitment was required to complete an Fd part time, as opposed to two years for an HN.

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

“HNCs/HNDs 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 to sort portability.”

The fact that construction and engineering, as subject areas, were quite diverse and that there were many specialisms within those sectors, appeared 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 grouping. Alternatively, staff suggested offering Fds with a common core, possibly more generalised than the current HN core units, together with highly specialised module options.

In terms of improvements to current HNs, 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 further alteration proposed to the current format was to build in time for formal student tutorials. There was an understanding by staff that this was part of the current Fd framework, while HN lecturers had found it impossible to include tutorials with students as students’ employment commitments prevented an informal arrangement. Thus, student feedback for HNs was collected via a simple end of unit questionnaire. Staff also commented on the need to meet the range of assessment targets provided by Edexcel, and

that assessments included set learning outcomes, a point also highlighted by the students themselves. However, 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 interviewees discussed issues on how to foster and encourage further links, as might be the case for Fds, it was considered that this could be ‘hit and miss’, and was dependent on individuals within employers, company priorities and level of commitment that an employer had to employee development. Again, the varied requirements of each employer within the sector were highlighted and that there would be an expectation to introduce flexibility into an Fd to meet these needs, which was highlighted by the following 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 [the 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."

Again, progression routes were highlighted by the interviewees 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 a one year top up, what we normally say is well let them join the second year of a degree course. Well 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 during discussions regarding the Foundation degree being the next step on from an HN, as highlighted by one interviewee when stating that "There is a huge body of students with HNCs and HNDs and it is unclear how they would progress onto a Foundation degree if they wanted to".

Interview 1

Interview 1, a training and development manager from a local company relevant to the sector, provided an employer's perspective of the HN qualifications. The company had a approximately 180 staff employed in technical roles with a significant proportion having attended City College Norwich to conduct their studies. Not only did the company send its' employees to CCN to gain qualifications but also provided industrial placement visits for students in the relevant School at CCN.

Whilst discussing the benefits of continued staff training and development, the interviewee 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."

When giving their perspectives on the HND the interviewee stated that:

"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..."

The statement highlighted an important perception regarding the increased 'vocational' nature of the HND, which was highly valued by employers. However, the interviewee did go on to state that graduates employed by the company often "...move on quickly..." within the firm. This was probably due to the interviewee's expression that specific work roles required different qualifications. The HND was viewed as better suited for the 'hands on' engineer, while an undergraduate degree was perceived to be more suitable for a 'top level design' engineer. The interviewee admitted they knew little about Foundation degrees and their knowledge was limited to information from general literature. However, the interviewee was under the impression that the Fd was "...taking somebody beyond the BTEC type qualification, to prepare them for going on to do an undergraduate course." However, this understanding appeared, again, to show some level of confusion regarding progression routes and how the Fd was incorporated into the qualifications framework. Apparently, staff employed by this employer were interested in progressing on to bachelor degrees. However, a lack of locally available, subject relevant courses was cited as a problem. One example provided by the interviewee was that of a student who had to travel to the University of London to gain the relevant subject specific

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 the interviewee. They even 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, let's help you with this.'" Components, materials and staff time, in the form of mentoring, were currently provided for student employees and it was stated that 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."

The interviewee went on to state that he thought the company would welcome the opportunity to input their thoughts and ideas into the curriculum 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 Foundation degrees

Interview J

Interview J was held with two, first year Foundation degree students.

On being asked, what they knew about HNDs and HNCs, neither student was aware of the qualifications although one had heard of BTEC. However, it also appeared that both students had little knowledge of Fds prior to embarking on their courses. One interviewee had approached her employer regarding options to further study and was directed to the Fd, indicating the employer knew of Fds. This student stated how she had to conduct the study within her own time but the employer did offer financial support. The second student was aware because the Foundation degree had been suggested by a member of college staff as a progression option.

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 after the Fd, one student was aware, prior to commencing the Fd, 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 starting the course. They also thought the Fd was at the same level as an Access course. In regard to progression options, both interviewees stressed that, if they did go on, they would like to do so with a 'top up' specific to their employment sector. They also stated that information on progression would be helpful to allow them to be more aware of their future options.

In regards to course improvements, both students identified the induction process instantly. They both cited their experiences, which differed greatly between them. One received a three day induction while the other had just a two hour induction the day before the course commenced. However, this interviewee did suggest that the two hour induction might have been as a consequence of arrangements made with the employer, as a group were from one employer and all attended together.

Interview K

Interview K provided the perspectives of a further two Fd students, from different courses.

Both stated they had not previously been aware of Foundation degrees prior to starting their courses, which was consistent with a previous student's experience. Similarly again, neither student appeared to have any depth of knowledge regarding Foundation degrees, or understood their characteristics and aims. Neither were they 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 student in particular a vocational curriculum was an important factor in choosing a 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'. They also knew that the third year option would be of interest to other students in their group too.

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

Regarding issues around placements for the work-based aspect of the course, one student was already in related employment while the second was not. Whilst both students had researched possible placements, it had been stated that CCN could have been more involved in this area, such as setting up placements. It was highlighted by an interviewee that with a group of students all chasing work-based placements via a limited number of employers, each employer could receive many requests from individuals in a given year. However, it was suggested that if CCN were to act as broker for this then any potential employer would only have to deal with just the 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 of 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 'spoonfeeding', but thought this might be a simple area for improvement by the College.

Interview L

Interview L collected the perspectives of a programme manager with several years' involvement in the development and management of both Foundation degrees and Higher Nationals.

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 stated that the particular School had developed good working 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. The interviewee stated that:

"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."

However, the type of working structures with employers and employer inputs was stated to be highly variable between Fd programmes. Some Fd working partnerships had focused on just one or two, major, local employers, while other Fd partnerships worked with eight or nine employers. Current CCN developments of new Fd programmes 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 time. The interviewee 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." However, it was perceived that there was general support for Fds:

"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 interviewee did state that local flexibility, when developing Fds, needed to meet 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 the 'off the shelf', which you try to adapt but you're quite constrained because of learning outcomes and that sort of thing..."

In parallel to a previously cited example, this School had secured MOVE funding to help develop one of its earlier Fds. Part of the

funds were used to buyout teaching staff time by covering the costs of sessional lectures used as replacements for fulltime staff. However, this was not always the case, while in other cases Schools had not been successful in securing funds. Therefore, in such cases, there were no means by which Schools could 'buyout' staff time for the lengthy process of development, writing and developing the programmes' validation documents.

In regard to procedures for developing new Fds, it was thought that there were now 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."

It was stated that the re-introduction of a 'Stage 1 validation process' (see Scofield, 2008, Appendix 2) at CCN was helpful:

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

The interviewee also thought this had led to the production of a better 'shaped', more professional course. Quality assurance was considered to be "A very rigorous process in the College", which involved two stages of approval: "I think we're getting much, much better at this because it is just part of the learning process." An example cited to highlight this was a recent team meeting regarding an Fd that was under development where it was stated that every single module had been scrutinised. Another example cited to identify ways in which quality was being improved was an Fd validation training event where it was stated; "...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 was a validation handbook produced by UEA and having access to information on the CCN intranet, such as handbook, flow charts, generic statements, CAA guidance, Norfolk Regulatory Framework document, etc.

It was stated that progression routes had been developed for all Fds in each School at CCN with third year ‘top- ups’ and access to courses in allied professions. The interviewee highlighted that due to the nature of the employment sector relevant to that School, professional and statutory bodies had their own regulatory requirements, and that there was an expectation of more “...hoops to jump through...” with future developments.

It was stated that, 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. Therefore, for this programme a volunteer scheme had been established with an employer, to enable student access to a placement with a relevant working experience. Again, it had been stipulated that there was an onus on the student to sort their own placements, and, again, it was considered that this provided useful experience in developing their higher level skills. However, if a student was having difficulties, help could be offered by the School when necessary.

Whilst discussing similarities and differences between the HND and Fd, it was acknowledged that there was a large time commitment for the development and writing of an Fd. In general, the interviewee did perceive the Fd to require a lot more time and labour commitments during its development compared to an HND, which had a nationally produced specification. However, the aspect of local flexibility was cited as being a benefit for 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 experiences 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 still generic, core units, which would be applicable to any part of the country and that the reviewing by external examiners was felt to have included an element of national benchmarking. Also, 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.

The interviewee provided a final comment that summed up what was felt could be learnt from HNDs and taken 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”.

Interview M

Interview M collected the perceptions of a CCN staff member with several years experience of teaching on Higher Nationals and, more recently, developing and delivering on an Fd programme.

The interviewee summarised their experience with the two qualifications, in terms of what were considered to be the advantages and disadvantages, when stating the following:

“...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”. When comparing the HNs and Fd, there was not considered to be a lot of difference in the requirements for quality assurance, as both had internal and external procedures in place.

Focussing on a particular Fd, it was stated to have been developed as a new qualification and, although there were influences taken

from three or four ‘good’ HND units, overall, there was considered to be more continuity through the two years of the Fd: “It’s 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.”

When commenting on the support provided by CCN to staff when developing an Fd, this was stated to be ‘improving’. The UEA training session was, again, mentioned favourably. Access to the College HEQUEST fund enabled an alternative to MOVE funds for allowing staff to be ‘bought-out’ when preparing validation documentation. However, having stated this, the interviewee highlighted greater training as much needed for staff developing Fds, particularly outlining and clarifying the documentation requirements for validation. Advice and helpful direction had been given in discussions between the developing course team and other staff, who had already designed Fds, however, this was an informal arrangement and it was acknowledged that this put pressure on colleagues’ time. The ‘considerable workload’ was, again, stated in regard to the development and writing of an Fd programme for staff already much constrained by time.

When discussing the work-based learning element of this new Fd, it was stated that a large number of people worked freelance in this industry. Hence, there were potential impacts for individuals 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 an onus on the student to investigate their own placements. This, again, 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 between the

Higher Nationals and Fds cited by the interviewee was 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 perceived positively in comparison to HNs, the content of which could have been written several years before but was still taught 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 of these outcomes were highlighted as no longer current within the industry concerned.

A major point raised by the interview was the perception that there was a "...huge improvement..." in retention rates on Fds compared to HNs. However, it was also suggested that recruitment could be improved by targeted marketing of the Fds in appropriate industry journals, which would be a positive way forward rather than the general advertising currently used, which indicates that student recruitment was still an issue.

In a final positive supporting statement for Fds, it was stated that the course team had been developing a 'top up' progression route for students who were currently embarking on the Fd. This was the apparent positive experience gained from the Fd provided in the statement: "I think, after the first year, already I can see a much richer tapestry in the way the course is running from the HND."

6. Discussion

The data and findings presented here provide much, highly valuable, information and insight

on the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders across a range of levels of involvement, from national to individual. The outcomes from the interviews raise a number of issues, which have been summarised and discussed in this section.

The national publicity and marketing for Foundation degrees in general was raised by several interviewees as an area that needed improvement. This was contrary to the opinion of the BTEC representative who had felt national publicity had been weighted in favour of Fds. However, opinions expressed, such as interviewee D who was involved with IAG plus several other staff, was that the national marketing of the Fds 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, which was supported by interviews with other stakeholder groups here.

In terms of local marketing, one member of staff had suggested that an FEC's own publicity for Fds would show greater effectiveness if targeted more appropriately. For example, making use of relevant industry journals rather than using generic 'flyers'. In view of the fact that often successful Fds fill niche markets, the idea of specifically targeting publicity would appear to make greater use of a limited budget in this regard.

There were also apparent misunderstandings regarding the credit value of HN qualifications. Interviewee A, the Edexcel representative, confirmed that the HND had a 240 credit rating, but it was clearly not accepted as such by a number of providers. Hence the development of several additional 'bridging courses' being offered where the credit value was still perceived at 180 for an HND or had been established and thus maintained as the norm. As a result, progression options for HND students appeared to have been highly variable, with some HEIs accepting students directly on to

the final year of full degree programmes while other HEIs only accept students on to the second year of programmes. Foundation degrees, which have a stipulated requirement for a 'top up' year, required students to complete a further 120 credits in order to obtain a bachelors degree. However, experiences provided highlighted concerns over the transferability of the full 240 credits from an Fd programme towards a 'top-up' programme, especially when seeking to move to an alternative institution. Questions were raised over the perceived credibility of both Fds and institutions by students.

In addition to the credit value, another progression issue was highlighted. As detailed in Interview A, the HND, when designed, did not specifically take into account the wish/need for a progression route. However, this was very much an inclusive requirement for the Fd. This difference was noted in several 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 there was no barrier to students progressing from an HND and they had always been able to do this, progression from an Fd was felt to be 'more seamless'.

The predominant advantage of the Fd, cited by both lecturers and programme managers was the flexibility of the Fd. Specifically, the mechanism by which to revise the curriculum content was highlighted, allowing the qualification to remain current. Conversely, it was agreed that similar revisions were not possible with the national specification of the HND, which was neither revised annually nor was there scope to introduce local flexibility. In addition, the assessment criteria required by BTEC was cited as being very rigid and 'outcome based' whilst, again, the local development of the Fd enabled development of a targeted and flexible assessment structure.

There was a concern from HN programme managers that any proposed developments towards Fds within certain subject areas could discourage employers' involvement,

which was shared in part by an employer despite an apparent willingness to embrace Fds. This interviewee represented a sizeable, local employer, thus, the impact and benefits on staff development were highlighted and it was indicated that employers would very much wish to be involved in any such developments of new qualifications, particularly in terms of curriculum.

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 employers was at the local scale for Fds. Thus, as quoted by one of the programme managers, the Fd suits the needs of both local industry and local students. Although it could be argued that the HND/HNC was a nationally recognised qualification, having a nationally devised specification as proposed by HN students. However, it was suggested that Fds developed with a 'generic core' would offer the same national '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. Another difference highlighted in interview A was that HNDs were 'work related' while Foundation degrees were 'work based'. Whilst it was considered as an advantage to have a vocational work based element to the qualification, engaging with employers was also cited as challenging and with its own difficulties. For example, highlighted by one interviewee, was the time consuming process of establishing links with the appropriate person within the local employer, while another interviewee highlighted that arranging meetings with multiple employers was difficult, due to the time constraints on employers. Indeed, one member of staff indicated a particularly poor 'turn out' for two meetings arranged by that institution with employers. 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

employer orientated difficulty raised was the fact that many employers within East Anglia were SMEs or made up of freelance businesses. While notwithstanding the time implication impacts for small employers (SMEs), there was recognition that SME involvement 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 staff at educational institutions involved in designing and developing new Fds. Such time issues were clearly not encountered with the pre-written HND/C specifications. Although use had been made of MOVE funding to 'buy-out' time for development and writing of the specifications for a number of Fds, however, not all proposed Fd developments had been successful in securing funding. It was stated that at CCN, college funding had been sourced via HEQEST and was used as an alternative funding source with which to 'buy-out' staff time, which was cited as very helpful. However, additional administrative support, especially during the preparation of Fd documentation for validation was cited as a particular area for improvement and where future assistance would be very welcomed.

In terms of training and development, college staff had found a joint college/university training event on the preparation of Foundation degrees particularly useful, which was helpful for both new and experienced staff. It had also been highlighted that useful information was available from within the college's own intranet, via Blackboard.

As to be expected, students provided highly focused perspectives on their individual experiences. Issues were raised that might have applied to any qualification or course rather than specifically to HNs or Fds, nevertheless, such issues still hold relevance for discussion here too.

Despite the fact that HNs were not work-based qualifications, current HN students acknowledged the benefits from working in a related industry that were bought to the

course, or at least having access to a relevant work place. Therefore, such views would seem to favour the Foundation degree's objective of being work based or including a work based element, such as work placement. Similarly, the students studying HNs highlighted the need to maintain an up to date vocational curriculum, as industries were subject to ongoing change and, therefore, 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 local employer's focus and input.

The lack of information, advice and guidance 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 issues in regards to Fd students not knowing about of the level of the Fd in comparison to other qualifications and, again, their options regarding progression post completion of the course.

Organising work placements was also raised by Fd students, who suggested there should be greater College input regarding contacting employers for potential work placements. The example provided was that instead of each individual student contacting the same relevant employers requesting work placements, a central college contact system would be better, specifically to ease the impact on employers. It was also felt that if employers were contacted with a request from CCN this might have greater impact and, thus, a more positive outcome. However, a number of the programme managers had indicated that in their view the onus was very much on students to arrange work placements and that this was beneficial for the student as it enabled the student to develop their higher level skills. Indeed, students did not expect to be 'spoonfed', however, there did appear to be a valid issue being raised regarding impact on the

employer.

In summary, despite the differences between the HNs and Fds and, in particular, the HNs being 'work-related' and the Fds being 'work-based', there appeared to be a number of similarities. For example, the breadth of content offered in the curriculum of both qualifications. Also, both qualifications had involvement and input from industry, Sector Skills Councils and Professional bodies, however, where this input was obtained was distinct. At the national stage for HN development, while similar input was locally based for Fds. It was the fact that the Fd was perceived to be a qualification that could be locally developed with the opportunity to continue to develop and be vocationally 'maintained', via post validation alterations/modifications, and a qualification that met both local employer and student needs that, although not wholly without difficulties especially in engaging employers, was considered to be key as to the better qualification for students by most of the non-student interviewees in this study.

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