



Characteristics Statement

Foundation Degree

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About this Statement

This document is a Qualification Characteristics Statement about the characteristics of foundation degrees. It describes the distinctive features of foundation degrees in the UK.

The *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* was originally developed and published by QAA in November 2002, at the request of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). A revised version was published in May 2010: this Statement forms the third edition. It supersedes all previous versions of the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*. It becomes a reference point for the purposes of reviews coordinated by QAA from August 2016.

Qualification Characteristics Statements are a component of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards. Expectation A1 requires that:

In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

[...]

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

[...].

Characteristics Statements are closely linked to *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies* (the Qualifications Frameworks)¹ (also included in Expectation A1 of the Quality Code). They complement and contextualise the information provided within the Qualifications Frameworks, providing more detail about the distinctive features of qualifications at particular levels of the frameworks and/or of qualifications at any level, which are awarded in a particular way.

As this Statement is concerned with foundation degrees, it relates particularly to the 'Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5 on the FHEQ', which is in section 4 of the Qualifications Frameworks.

How can I use this document?

You may want to read this document if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of foundation degree programmes
- a prospective student thinking about undertaking a foundation degree
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of foundation degree graduates.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Statement can be found in QAA's glossary.² QAA has also published a general guide to quality assurance in higher education.³

¹ *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies* can be found at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2843.

² The QAA glossary is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary.

³ A general guide to quality assurance can be found at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality.

1 Context and purposes of foundation degrees

1.1 Context

Foundation degrees were introduced by the DfES in 2000 to provide graduates needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills.

Foundation degrees sit at level 5 of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). They are 'short-cycle' (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Foundation degrees are offered by many higher education providers. Further education colleges play an important role in providing foundation degrees. Some further education colleges in England and Wales have foundation degree awarding powers, which gives them the right to award foundation degrees at level 5 of the FHEQ. These powers are granted on a six-year renewable basis.⁴

1.2 Purposes of the foundation degree

Foundation degrees integrate academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and higher education providers. They build upon a long history of design and delivery of vocational qualifications in higher education, and are intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to employment, so satisfying the needs of employees and employers.

Foundation degrees may also aim to contribute to widening participation and lifelong learning by encouraging participation by learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher level qualification or prefer a more applied curriculum.

The purposes of foundation degrees are likely to be informed by the framework(s) for foundation degrees of appropriate Sector Skills Council(s). Although many foundation degree programmes are designed to meet the needs of the local employment market, some foundation degree programmes are targeted at national and international employment needs.

Foundation degrees provide self-standing qualifications of specific value, but can also provide opportunities for further (lifelong) study, which could take a number of different forms, for example: professional body qualifications or higher-level National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). In addition, foundation degrees can lead to a bachelor's degree with honours. Foundation degrees thus have a range of distinctive characteristics not necessarily present in other qualifications at level 5 of the FHEQ, or found in the initial parts of programmes that lead directly to bachelor's degrees with honours.

Foundation degrees may be offered as an academic, and in some cases technical, qualification within a Higher Apprenticeship.

⁴ See: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput.

1.3 Characteristics of the foundation degree graduate

Foundation degree graduates are able to demonstrate:

- knowledge and critical understanding of the established principles in their field of study, and understanding of the limits of their knowledge
- knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject and the ability to use established techniques to undertake critical analysis of information in order to propose solutions
- the ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems and to apply these in a work context
- the ability to apply their knowledge and skills to new situations, including in the workplace
- effective communication skills in a variety of forms and for a range of audiences.

Foundation degree graduates have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making. They are able to undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences.

2 Distinctive features of foundation degrees

2.1 Design

In foundation degree programmes, academic knowledge and understanding integrate with, and support the development of, vocational skills and competencies, taking account of the need for appropriate academic rigour. External reference points such as the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements, National Occupational Standards, Sector Skills foundation degree frameworks, professional body accreditation schemes and apprenticeship frameworks inform the design of foundation degrees, and are used in the approval of the programme by the relevant degree-awarding body.

Learning and work are closely interlinked within foundation degree programmes. Learning in the workplace can take many forms and serves a variety of purposes. When designing foundation degrees consideration is given to the ways in which the work-based learning is appropriate to the particular needs of the relevant employment sector or type of employer, and how the programme helps to provide the knowledge and transferable skills needed for employment. This consideration takes into account the variety of contexts in which the world of work can be represented, including different types of employers such as small and medium-sized enterprises, and self-employment.

Authentic and innovative work-based learning is an integral part of foundation degrees and their design. It enables learners to take on appropriate role(s) within the workplace, giving them the opportunity to learn and apply the skills and knowledge they have acquired as an integrated element of the programme. It involves the development of higher-level learning within both the higher education provider and the workplace. It is a two-way process, where the learning in one environment is applied in the other. Work-based learning can be achieved through many forms, including full-time or part-time work, integrated work placements, and real work environments. 'Working' in itself is not sufficient. Work-based learning requires the identification and achievement of defined and related learning outcomes.

The distinctiveness of foundation degrees depends upon the integration of the following characteristics: employer involvement; accessibility; articulation and progression, where appropriate, with or through higher education or further education; flexibility; and partnership. While none of these attributes are unique to foundation degrees, their clear and planned integration within a single award, underpinned by work-based learning, makes the award distinctive.

2.2 Employer involvement

Foundation degrees are intended to provide students with the knowledge, understanding and skills that employers and the labour market need. In order to achieve this, employers are involved in the design and regular review of foundation degree programmes. Employers are also involved in the delivery and, where appropriate and valid, assessment of the programme and the monitoring of students, particularly within the workplace. For further information, see the Quality Code, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

2.3 Accessibility

Foundation degrees increase access and widen participation into higher education, as learners can access foundation degrees from a range of starting points and with different entry qualifications, for example: apprenticeships, access programmes, NVQs, and professional certificates and diplomas (and relevant work experience). Programmes of study

are designed with work-based learning as an integral part of the programme, so it is possible for learners to 'earn and learn'. This enables students to access a higher education qualification while boosting their employability on graduation. The ability to 'earn and learn' also helps to widen access to higher education for those already in employment.

It is important that recognition is given to the knowledge, skills and understanding that an applicant for a foundation degree has already developed. These may have come as a result of learning through work, either paid or unpaid, and through other individual activities and interests. Such knowledge, skills and understanding can include certificated, non-certificated and experiential learning. **Rigorous arrangements for the recognition of prior experiential and/or certificated learning** are established and used to accredit the variety of learning and to assist learners in their entry to foundation degree programmes.

Further information on the recognition of prior learning is available in the Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*.

Further education colleges play an important role in the recruitment into, and the delivery of, foundation degree programmes. They also provide valuable links with local communities, and the knowledge and skill needs of their employment markets.

2.4 Progression

Clear routes that facilitate opportunities for successful progression from foundation degrees towards another qualification are a feature of foundation degrees. Such routes are established when foundation degrees are approved, and identify the link(s) between the foundation degree and other qualification(s). Such links may be to programmes offered by higher education providers and/or by professional and other educational organisations.

Higher education providers awarding foundation degrees may guarantee progression to at least one bachelor degree with honours programme, with the time required to complete the qualification being comparable to that involved in a traditional bachelor's degree programme. Progression from foundation degrees to another qualification may require a bridging programme. Such arrangements, when established at approval, ensure that learners progressing onto the next programme are adequately prepared.

A range of routes may be available, some of which are more commonly used than others. Information for students about progression arrangements is available through programme handbooks and prospectuses.

In cases where a learner could gain additional professional accreditation and/or qualifications in the course of studying for a foundation degree, the requirements of professional and vocational bodies are included as part of the approval process.

Foundation degrees are intended to provide the knowledge and skills that are necessary to enable employees to be versatile and adaptable in progressing to and within work. Employability is a key aspect in foundation degree programmes, and its inclusion equips and assists learners to enhance their employment opportunities, and/or allow them to prepare for a career change.

Careers guidance is important in enabling learners to take responsibility for managing their own careers and lifelong learning. For more information on careers guidance see the Quality Code, *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*.

2.5 Flexibility

Flexibility on the part of the higher education provider, the learner and the employer is central to many aspects of foundation degrees. It facilitates responsiveness to, for example, the needs of learners from a variety of backgrounds, and to the progressive and changing demands of employment. It is important that higher education providers delivering foundation degrees consider the range of requirements of the learners likely to enter their programmes.

These requirements may include:

- flexible delivery modes and study patterns, including full-time, part-time, distance, work-based, and web-based learning, with the flexibility to study, within reasonable limits, when and where it best suits the learner
- flexible progression routes, including links with other professional awards and with at least one identified honours degree programme
- flexible admissions requirements, including the establishment of effective procedures to assist applicants from diverse backgrounds who may be able to demonstrate their suitability for entry onto a foundation degree in a variety of ways.

2.6 Partnership

Partnerships between employers, degree-awarding bodies or other higher education providers, further education colleges and Sector Skills Councils are central to the concept of foundation degrees, and vital in providing programmes that are relevant, valid and responsive to the needs of learners and employers.

Partnership agreements clearly identify the needs and expectations of all parties. Information on aspects of such arrangements is available in the Quality Code, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

Each foundation degree is approved and awarded by a degree-awarding body. Degree-awarding bodies have the responsibility for assuring the standards of their awards, and also for ensuring that the quality of the learning opportunities leading to their awards are managed effectively, irrespective of who delivers them and where they are provided (see the Quality Code, *Chapter B10*). The degree-awarding body needs to be able to satisfy itself that the terms and conditions under which the foundation degree was originally approved have been, and continue to be, met.

The successful delivery of foundation degree programmes depend upon a range of partnerships that may include degree-awarding bodies, further education colleges or other higher education providers, employers and employer bodies, professional bodies, Sector Skills Councils, Local Enterprise Partnerships, the Skills Funding Agency, and others.

It is important that all involved recognise the primary responsibilities of the degree-awarding body for the standards and quality of the degree programmes offered under its powers.

Students can play an important part in negotiating programmes of study to meet their own learning needs in both the work and academic learning environments. These learning needs can be achieved, with guidance and agreement from the higher education provider and employer, through learning contracts.

2.7 Monitoring and review

Review procedures ensure that evaluation of all work-based learning is undertaken, and involves feedback from work-based learning providers. Employers participate in the regular monitoring and review of those foundation degree programmes that they are involved in. There are also opportunities for the learners to comment on their work-based learning experiences, and their comments are considered in annual monitoring processes. Additional guidance may be found in the Quality Code, *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review*.

3 Content, structure and delivery of foundation degrees

3.1 Content

Foundation degree programmes are designed to enable learners to benefit from the interpretation of ideas and the experience of practice within the wider context of employment, in which knowledge, understanding and skills are clearly integrated. By focusing on **learning within a work context**, this is underpinned by both technical and academic understanding. Foundation degrees lead to **learning outcomes that are explicitly relevant to both employers' and, where appropriate, professional employment needs**. Consideration of sustainability in the application of the knowledge, understanding and skills achieved enables successful progression both within employment and to honours level or other qualifications.

3.2 Teaching and learning

The knowledge, understanding and skills associated with foundation degrees may be delivered through a diverse and innovative range of methods that will reflect the diversity of learners' needs. The learning and teaching strategy for the programme identifies appropriate teaching styles and learning opportunities for foundation degree learners, as well as elements that may require additional resources, for example the **management of work-based learning**.

Foundation degree programmes encourage lifelong learning by providing sufficient opportunity for self-directed learning and reflection. This may be achieved by supporting learners to develop action plans to assist the learning process and demonstrate that their learning outcomes have been achieved.

In the interests of lifelong learning, students are encouraged to use tools, such as personal development plans, in conjunction with learning agreements where relevant, as a reflective learning tool throughout the programme, and are also provided with a record of their learning and achievement in the form of a transcript or other record of achievement.

Where learning contracts are agreed between the learner and the provider, they include the criteria for knowledge, skills and understanding.

3.3 Assessment

The assessment of each element of study within foundation degree programmes, including the **assessment of work-based learning**, is specified at the time the programme is approved. An assessment strategy reflects the type of learning and learners, and the nature of each element of study within the qualification. Assessment may include a variety of formal and informal, and formative and summative, techniques, provided the outcomes are capable of rigorous testing and independent verification. Through the combination of assessment of work-based learning, and other more traditional means of assessment, foundation degrees may integrate a variety of delivery modes and assessments.

Employers, where possible, are involved in the assessment of work-based learning.

Arrangements between higher education providers and employers are specified fully at the outset of any programme that involves working with another organisation, and include any training for employers that may be required in, for example, assessment procedures. For further information, see the Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*. Such arrangements are reviewed regularly as part of the

ongoing monitoring and review of the programme. In cases where employers are involved in the support of the learner and in their assessment it may be necessary to provide support in the form of mentoring or other types of professional development. For further information, see the Quality Code, *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* and *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

Related guidance and further references

This Statement is a component of the Quality Code, Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards.

Those interested in the academic standards of foundation degrees should read this Statement alongside other components of Part A and especially the Qualifications Frameworks. As this Statement is concerned with foundation degrees, it relates particularly to the 'Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5 on the FHEQ', which is in section 4 of the Qualifications Frameworks.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Apprenticeship frameworks

www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-frameworks-live-list

ASET Good Practice Guide for Work based and Placement Learning in Higher Education

www.asetonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ASET-Good-Practice-Guide-2014.pdf

HEFCE website, foundation degrees

www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2010/201012/

HEFCW website

www.hefcw.ac.uk

National Occupational Standards

www.ukstandards.co.uk/Pages/index.aspx

Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines

www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-higher-education/ni-apel-guidelines.htm

Northern Ireland Foundation degree Validation Framework Guidelines and Template

www.delni.gov.uk/es/foundation-degrees-ni-validation-framework

QAA, Qualifications Frameworks

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/qualifications

Frameworks for foundation degrees developed by some Sector Skills Councils
(see individual Sector Skills Council websites)

Appendix: Members of the advisory groups for the Foundation Degree Characteristics

QAA is grateful to members of the advisory group for revising and updating this document in 2015.

Alex Bols	Guild HE
Lesley Bryden	New College Durham
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