

Work-based and work-related learning in Higher National Certificates and Diplomas in Scotland and Foundation Degrees in England: A Comparative Study

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Background

Providing appropriate education and training for people who are in, or who will enter, occupations at associate professional or technical levels has emerged as an important policy issue in recent years. This is part of a wider interest in the role of higher education (HE) in the development of vocationally relevant skills and employability, and the related issue of skills utilization in the economy. However there has been a significant divergence in policy responses to this issue between Scotland and England.

In England, a new policy framework has been established which has encouraged the development of Foundation Degrees (FDs) as alternatives to Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds). The emergence of FDs in England was associated with a growing concern about a perceived skills deficit at the intermediate level, and a related concern to remedy perceived deficiencies in existing courses and qualifications. The policy framework which has shaped the development of these new qualifications has emphasized the importance of *work-based learning* (WBL) and *employer involvement* in the design and review of programmes, and where possible in the delivery, assessment, and the monitoring of students.

However alongside these concerns, relating to skills deficits, there were other policy objectives. These focused on increasing and widening participation in HE, and helping ensure that provision was more flexible, and provided opportunities for a wider range of people including those in work. Associated with this was an expectation that new qualifications should provide students with the opportunities for progression to honours courses in universities. Universities have been given the role of validating these qualifications, and are involved in their development and delivery in a significant number of cases. Colleges now have the right to apply for validation powers, but it is expected that universities will continue to have the dominant role in this respect. This role for the universities, and the emphasis on providing progression to honours degrees, raises an issue of possible conflict between the more academic demands of

university provision, and the strong emphasis on vocationality and WBL in FDs.

In Scotland, by contrast, there has been an absence of a strong policy steer for change. Higher National (HN) programmes have continued to enjoy a relatively high level of support from the devolved government, and there has been no pressure from that quarter to replace them. However there was recognition that there was a need to update and rationalize these programmes. The HN Modernization Project (2003-08) was established to achieve these objectives. Higher Nationals (HNs) have continued to be developed and validated as national qualifications under the auspices of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), with no involvement of universities as validating authorities. The *design principles*, which guided the HN Modernization programme, emphasized that these qualifications should continue to be focused on preparing people for intermediate level occupations, although their role in enabling progression from and to other qualifications, including bachelors degrees, is also recognized. The design principles are far less prescriptive than the *Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Benchmark*, which guides the development of FDs, with respect to issues such as WBL, employer involvement in delivery and assessment, and progression to degree level study.

As a result of these developments we now have quite different policy frameworks in England and Scotland for the qualifications which are designed to prepare people for the same sections of the occupational structure. This research, undertaken jointly by researchers in the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRL) at Glasgow Caledonian University and the Open University, has been designed to consider how the differing national policies are implemented at a local level, and the implications of these differences in approach for the students involved. In particular we have focused on the implications for students of the differing emphases on WBL, employer involvement and progression to bachelors degree level study.

The Study

The study was designed as a comparative one in which data was drawn from matched samples of FDs in England and HNs in Scotland. In the first fieldwork stage we examined the nature, extent and intended role of WBL or work-related learning (WRL) within these programmes, and considered the ways in which employers have become involved. It was based on a sample of 38 foundation degree (FD) and HN programmes drawn from a wide range of subject areas which included the Agriculture and Land-Based sector; Art and Design; Computing; Early Education and Child Care; Engineering; Fashion/Beauty; Hospitality/Travel and Tourism; and Sport and Leisure. The second fieldwork stage explored the participants' experiences of WBL or WRL in a sub-sample of three matched pairs of FDs and HNs. These were drawn from the fields of Early Years, Hospitality/Travel and Tourism, and Fashion. Questionnaire data was gathered from 111 students, and interviews were carried out with 43 students or employer representatives. The third fieldwork stage focused on the transition of these students into employment or further study, and was based on national data and data gathered, where possible, from a follow-up of our second stage sample.

Key Findings

- ***A wide range of approaches to WBL and WRL within both the FDs and HNs – but more opportunities for this type of learning within FDs***

A number of approaches to WBL and to WRL can currently be found within the FDs and HNs, and there are considerable similarities between the approaches taken in the two frameworks. Given the policy requirement that WBL be an 'integral feature' of FDs it is not surprising that some WBL, and/or WRL, featured in *all* of the English programmes we studied. In Scotland, staff who are developing and implementing national HNs have flexibility to incorporate WBL or WRL at a level which they see as appropriate, or to omit it from their programmes.

A number of innovative alternatives to traditional WBL were observed. These involved approaches to WRL that build on the practices and capacities of the particular sector, for example the use of virtual WBL companies within the developing multimedia sector. Although examples of innovative WRL can be found within the HNs, making WBL a requirement of FD policy does

appear to have resulted in this being a stronger feature of provision in England.

- ***Students in both countries comment positively on the learning opportunities provided through WBL and WRL***

Most of the students from both countries regard WBL or WRL as very important, and were strongly supportive of the role of both WBL and WRL in their programmes. The interviews suggested that students place considerable value on carefully constructed WRL where it provides exposure to aspects of the workplace that they might not otherwise experience. This included: projects defined by top industry professionals; simulations where access to 'live' working situations is difficult; or opportunities to market their own ideas to real customers.

- ***The culture of the sector, acting within both countries, can mediate policy divergence to produces similar practices***

There is considerable evidence that the culture, structures and opportunities of the particular occupational sectors have led to similarities in the approaches to WBL and WRL in both countries. In particular where professional structures have a strong role in determining the nature of initial training, or they have shaped approaches to supporting learning within work (e.g. early years), then the effects of this influence are evident in both frameworks. In other sectors the absence of a culture of employer engagement in training and development of new employees can make WBL and WRL harder to establish. In addition, in some sectors flexible working patterns may provide opportunities for involving staff from industry as part-time teaching staff. Again programme organizers in both countries take advantage of these opportunities. Thus we would argue that the culture of the sector is *mediating* the divergence in national policy and producing some similarities within the WBL/WRL practices of these programmes.

- ***Employers in both countries are reluctant to devote time to WBL and WRL, and this is a major constraint that programme organizers work with***

Programme organizers in both countries reported that it was time consuming and sometimes difficult to secure employer involvement, particularly in delivery and assessment. These difficulties can be viewed as another factor which mediates the implementation of potentially divergent policies, and results in similarities in

practices. The process of securing employer involvement, and the nature of this involvement, was again influenced by the culture of the sector. Those working in sectors with well established networks of employers with positive attitudes towards training, for example the early years sector, appear to be able to use industry networks to promote various types of employer involvement. In other sectors, such as the hospitality or creative industries, programme organizers drew on their own personal networks in their attempts to involve employers. In most cases employers who had been involved in the design or delivery of FD or HN programmes were clear that this could only be done on a limited basis. Inputs would need to be brief and there appeared to be no appetite to get involved in summative assessment, although some contribute to formative feedback to students.

- ***There are more part-time FD students, and greater integration of their WBL, when compared to HNs in Scotland***

National data indicate that while 40% of FD students were part-time in 2007-08, only 28% of HN students in Scotland were part-time. Our own sample of HNs reflected this predominance of full-time courses. Many that did offer a part-time route did so by letting students ‘in-fill’, that is attend sessions selected from a predominately full-time programme. We found more examples of FD programmes that were designed specifically for existing employees. FD part-time courses were also more likely to require students to draw on their learning through work as part of the learning process. In contrast the part-time HNs we studied permitted, rather than encouraged or required, students to draw on their existing work. Evidence from interviews in the early years sector suggests that the process of integrating existing work with analytical approaches and theory provides a powerful learning opportunity.

- ***While progression rates to further study are high within both frameworks, there is evidence of higher progression rates to a bachelors degree from FDs***

National data indicate that 57% of full-time HN students progress to some form of education or training, while 68% of full-time and 51% of part-time FD students are undertaking further study. It is perhaps unsurprising that progression is a strong feature of the FD framework since it is an explicit policy aim and a requirement of validation. Some FD programme organizers have suggested that the need for progression has significantly shaped the

content of courses. In some cases this has led to decreasing the emphasis on WBL considerably within Level 2. Although progression onto further study is not an explicit aim of the HN framework in Scotland, we found that progression rates were also high within our Scottish sample; however there is limited evidence of this influencing the content of the HN programme. Where students need to develop or strengthen their academic skills or knowledge base in order to succeed in the new course, ‘bridging’ programmes are often established, and this preparation for degree study is located within the university.

- ***Students on FDs tend to receive the ‘full tariff’ for qualifications when entering further study, while many HN students receive only partial or no credit***

All of the FD students in our sample who progressed to further study gained the ‘full tariff’ of Level 1 and 2 credit, thus entering directly onto Year 3. Students in our Scottish sample who were progressing onto a bachelors degree were not always able to receive the full credit for their existing qualification, and in some cases received no credit at all. National data also suggests that students seeking entry to one of the pre-1992 institutions are more likely to enter at a lower level than those at a post-1992 university.

- ***Some students reported difficulties in obtaining related work, or progressing within their occupations***

We found the number of full-time students who were in related work almost a year after completion was low in both our FD and HN samples. However a number of issues emerged in our interviews with those who were seeking related work. A number of FD interviewees described potential mismatches between their hopes for work and the employment market they faced on graduation, even prior to the current recession. These resulted, they suggested, from the lack of related employment that was available in their region, or from employers requiring honours degrees rather than the FD. Even the part-time FD students, who had all continued in related employment, were disappointed to report limited or no financial returns on their qualification. Further research would be needed to clarify these initial indicators from graduates, and to explore the match between FD development and demand for labour.

Implications

- ***Balancing the national and local/regional roles of HNs and FDs***

We have noted that HNs have been developed for the most part as national qualifications, while FDs have a much stronger local or regional dimension. While there are strengths in each of these approaches, further consideration should be given within the HN framework to ways in which developments might be more responsive to local needs - in appropriate circumstances. At the same time those planning FD programmes need effective support for the complex task of analyzing local or regional needs to ensure that *demand* from employers and students is sustainable, and that students have local and national job opportunities.

- ***Recognizing the value of WBL and WRL and increase these learning opportunities, particularly in Scottish HNs***

Students on both FDs and HNs value WBL and WRL, and we suggest that opportunities to develop more innovative approaches to WBL and WRL for both full-time and part-time students should be explored, particularly within Scottish HNs. With regard to part-time students we have noted the more integrated approaches to WBL found in part-time FDs, and suggest it may also be useful to develop this approach within part-time HNs in Scotland.

- ***Developing WBL and WRL which grows along the grain of the sector***

We have suggested that WBL and WRL have flourished in both frameworks where it draws on the structures and culture of the occupational sector, and grows along the grain of existing practices. This has led to the development of a number of innovative forms of WRL. The aim of encouraging further growth in both WBL and WRL, in both frameworks, may be promoted by retaining and celebrating the widest possible view of WBL and WRL, whether in the workplace or in other appropriate contexts.

- ***Developing a realistic approach to working with employers***

The study was funded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), Universities UK and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA).

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Our research reports on the difficulties faced by programme organizers in both countries in engaging with employers, and in particular in securing their involvement in programme delivery and assessment. Again the extent and forms of engagement that were found are influenced by the occupational sector. In reassessing policy in both countries it is important that this reality is addressed, and that programme organizers are supported in making constructive links with employers which follow the grain of the sector. This suggests any expectations that employers will be extensively involved in assessment, particularly in relation to FDs, should be scaled down.

- ***Recognizing the contribution of HNs and FDs as transitional qualifications onto further study, and thereafter employment***

High levels of progression onto further study has emerged as a positive outcome of both the modernized HNs and the new FDs. We suggest that future policy needs to firstly recognize the current position of many HNs and FDs as transitional qualifications, and secondly begin to put in place measures which will better support their role in developing higher level skills and knowledge. As a brief stimulus to this debate we offer the following potential implications.

- *We need better means of exploring demand with employers and potential students, and these should take account of the transitional role of these qualifications*
- *We need to strengthen links for joint curriculum planning between staff in colleges and higher education institutions*
- *We need better management arrangements to support the transitional role of some HNs and FDs*
- *We need to understand the distinctive contributions of HNs and FDs to the learning pathways that their students construct*