



The Complex Case of Positioning the Foundation Degree: Making Sense of A Degree That Is Not A Degree

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Abstract

The Foundation degree was launched in 2001 and has enjoyed growth but remains a controversial qualification. Foundation Degree Forward, the body charged by the UK government with providing a 'national network or expertise to support the development and validation of high-quality Foundation degrees' is championing the marketing of the Foundation degree and the government has poured a lot of resources towards its functions. The complexity of positioning the Foundation degree emanates from lack of clear differentiation. The performance of Fd graduates in organisations, continued support from the government and the employers will affect the long-term image of the qualification. While acknowledging some well founded arguments for the case for Fds this paper points out that the wholesale shift from the Higher Nationals (HNs) to Fds might have been too drastic. The paper argues that there was merit in re-engineering the HN's and avoid the huge amounts of resources expended on promoting the Fd. The Wagner Task Force Report to Ministers (2004: p3) could not have been more explicit about the challenge for Fds in stating "The need for them is clear, and the achievements of the first three years are impressive. There are still many challenges to be met if Foundation degrees are to become embedded as an integral part of our higher education system. However the first period of any innovation is the most difficult."

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1. Introduction

Gutman and Miaoulis (2003: p105) point out that "A problem that arises too often is that marketing communications promise benefits that the institutions are unable to deliver." This view is consistent with the state of the Foundation degree (Fd) within the United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education establishment. As a brand the Fd is in limbo without a foothold in the market, something which could be attributed to the fact that the programme is relatively new on the higher education market. An important question that may be asked is whether the launch of the Fd was political gimmicking or a well founded move meant to change the education system in the UK. The government would want 40% of the adult population at level 4 education which includes degrees and diplomas by 2020, up from 29% in 2005. If more people are to see the Fd as a bachelor's degree the government would be happy with that confusion as it gives the impression of a more educated society and that would help fulfil their desire to paint a positive picture by default. At this point students would question if it is a degree, industry would be confused while academic institutions face the daunting task of trying to persuade the doubters that it is a credible qualification.

Education is the cornerstone of social and economic development and governments the world over should respond to commerce and industry needs by investing into the appropriate programmes that will ensure appropriate education programmes are delivered by institutions from primary through to higher education levels. The Wagner Foundation degree Task Force Report (2004) points out that the Foundation degrees have developed into a single brand which has got a number of products, which could be classified in a variety of ways. This prompts a number of pertinent questions about the authenticity of the qualification, its relevance to the needs of society and the fact that most institutions moved in to run it without concrete closely monitored trials. This would have helped develop the right models for effective delivery. This might be the reason for doubts about the efficacy of the Fd as an answer to the skills deficiency in the country. Much as there are many questions unanswered with university delivery of the Fd already the momentum has picked up with Further Education Institutes (FEIs). The situation on the ground presents a mixed picture with both universities and further education colleges delivering it. The two offer different experiences in both social life and

pedagogy. While mutual cooperation between universities and further education colleges is enriching and is common, the situation facing the Fd is complex as the FELs have been empowered by the government to award the qualification with the guidance of Foundation Degree Forward (FDF), thus removing the tried and tested experience and authority vested with universities. FDF has now taken a much more complex role of promoter, referee and owner of the qualification.

According to Foundation Degree Forward, the body charged with providing a 'national network or expertise to support the development and validation of high-quality Foundation degrees':

The Foundation degree is a distinctive higher education qualification which was established in order to provide new opportunities for vocational, progression in a way which is both academically rigorous and employment related. Foundation degrees, therefore, integrate academic work with work-based learning and are characterised by close collaboration between learning providers and employers in the design, development and delivery of the award. The key characteristics of a Foundation degree, as defined by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (England), are: employer involvement, work-based learning, accessibility, flexibility, articulation and progression. (<http://www.fdf.ac.uk/files/INBRIEFWhatIsAFoundationDegree.pdf>, accessed 16.07.07)

The Fd is not a conventional bachelor's degree despite having the word degree in its name, neither is it a Higher National Certificate or Diploma, though it takes the same duration to complete. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) points grading equates it to the Higher National Diploma, that is a 240 credit rating compared to the degree, that is the bachelor's degree which attracts 360 credits. The Fd is a relatively new product in Higher Education (HE) and has many doubters who would question its merits and demerits, and there will be those who are totally confused about its existence or value in view of the multitudes of vocational and academic qualifications. It would appear the prospective student is not clear as to what it is, the government assumes or imagines that it is the best in meeting new challenges in society and industry and is the best way to equip society with degrees, the employer is rather confused about the differences and the unfortunate academic has the unenviable task of selling it.

While a lot has been documented attacking or in defence of the Fds the debate about their efficacy is alive. The debate has not helped in clearly delineating the Fd from other qualifications as a unique qualification, different from other offerings other than in terms of its name. In the main there is no concrete position on what is, should be, would be or should have been. The credits obtained are equivalent to those obtained on HNs and the progression is to the conventional bachelor's degree. The positioning is further distorted when the Fd is offered in institutions where the bachelor's degree and the HNs are on offer. While this suggests that the Fd is neither of the two it creates a distorted picture to the stakeholders in conceptualising what it is or what its unique characteristics are. It would turn out that the state has put forward resources for it to be delivered and therefore it should be offered. There are fundamental questions that remain unanswered in the whole debate about Fds. If government had not vehemently pushed and poured in resources for the delivery of Fds in HE and now extending to FE provisions would many institutions have offered them? Probably not. If the emphasis in the provision is on work-based learning it is not inconceivable that HNs are designed on that basis given they had work experience as an option. The Higher National Diplomas and Certificates are still being offered in most HE and FE institutions and remain popular with students, industry and academic institutions. The case for Fds remains a challenge for the state. The task of marketing or more specifically positioning the Fds rests with FDF and the reality of prospective students, the employer, the academic fraternity and society at large having to first accept and see the value of Fds vis-à-vis other provisions in the more or less the same threshold of learning is a daunting task. The one big question continues to be whether or not this is a unique education provision. The name Foundation degree suggests that it is a building block to a degree but certainly this would not be the best response to industry needs from the arguments put forward by the government. Therefore while the Fd is supposed to be the best response to the waning popularity of the HNs it would sound like the case of putting old wine in new bottles.

In the main the challenge is the change in the perception of the qualification across the divide of the various stakeholders. In that respect it is critical that FDF embraces relationship marketing. That needs close cooperation and clearly communicating policies and good practices across institutions. It is expected that all organisations embark on relationship marketing as Gronroos (2004: p99) observed "...the phenomenon itself – a relationship approach to taking care of interactions with customers – is as old as the history of trade and commerce." In view of this argument it is imperative that FDF makes an effort to create harmony across the different stakeholders in order to encourage symbiotic relationships and also create the right scope for the dissemination of information. He further argues that often a customer relationship goes beyond a single transaction of a good or service and the related processes include more than the primary goods and services which are core elements of the service offering and those elements are equally important and require effective management for successful marketing. Morgan et al (2004: p365) observe that:

Employers generally are not clear about Foundation degrees and what holders of the award are able to do, and we may be unwittingly contributing to this lack of clarity by retaining the HNC and HND names instead of getting rid of all of them altogether.

It is clear that there are multitudes of problems and challenges in the planning and delivery of the Fd. What makes the whole process more complicated is the validation role that FDF should play as put forward by the Dfes:

To address this and to widen the choice for further education colleges, and other colleges without degree-awarding powers, we will establish a new national network of universities – “Foundation Degree Forward” – to offer a dedicated validation service for foundation degrees. It will also act as a national centre for foundation degree expertise, liaising with sector skills councils and professional bodies to draw up frameworks for foundation degrees covering a wide range of skills needs.

(<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/expand.shtml>, accessed 13.07.07)

The idea of a national validation centre is consistent with the need for expanding the Fd provision nationwide in UK. However, it sounds premature to come up with such a gigantic move when the Fd qualification is yet to gain a foothold on the marketplace. Further complicating the situation is the delivery of the Fd by FEIs which would need careful planning and restructuring in order to give the students a semblance of the challenges of being in university or simply experiencing the challenge of pursuing higher education in a challenging way in both environments, especially with all necessary academic processes being carried out at the respective institution.

2. Purpose of Study

This paper seeks to delve into the dynamics of the Fd with the intention of cutting an edge on how it is positioned vis-à-vis other qualifications and what its future prospects are. A number of issues will be considered as follows:

- In discussing the positioning of the Fd the writer will seek to evaluate perspectives of the various stakeholders. In the main various perspectives will be considered, that is the government, the prospective student, the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the employer's perspective and society in general. Certainly this is a typical case of multiple stakeholder perceptions. The different views must be taken into account in coming up with a strong strategic position.
- Ultimately the Fd is part of the HE provision which should help in fulfilling the needs of the various skills requirements in the public and private sectors and consideration will also be given to how the Fd stands relative to other higher education course provisions. Consideration will be given to the implications of giving Fd awarding powers to FEIs.
- It is the intention of this paper to raise issues about the content and mode of delivery of Fds vis-a-vis the conventional bachelor's degree and the higher nationals with a view to ascertain whether the case is about marketing substance in providing value or simply pandering to political whims for the broader agenda for winning elections.
- Ultimately the paper will critically evaluate the implications of progression to the conventional degree upon completing the Fd. This will consider whether this will be a case of mixing oil with water or it is just a matter of logical progression. This issue is considered given that Higher Nationals seemed to offer a bit more theory in their pedagogy than the Fds.

3. The Concept of Positioning and Branding

Ries and Trout (1986) in Kalafatis et al (2000: 417) state that, “Positioning starts with a product. A piece of merchandise, a service, a company, an institution, or even a person ... Positioning shifts the emphasis of marketing from the product to the battle for your mind.” It is important to note that this view suggests that in the main positioning is about the meaning or symbolism people will attach to something. Essentially the notion of positioning is about the view or perception taken in respect of a given phenomenon. Arguing along the same lines Bradley (2003: p57) states that “A position is a complex set of perceptions, impressions, and feelings and it is important to note that customers position organisations and feelings and it is important to note that customers position the organisations' value offering with or without its help.”

Groucutt (2006: p 104) defines re-positioning in two integrated ways as follows:

Firstly, “The physical re-positioning of the brand into current and future potential competitors. Indeed, by physically re-positioning the brand contact will be made with the competitors. Secondly, the repositioning of the brand in the mind of the consumer. It is the consumer that has to be persuaded that the brand is right for them.” While the view taken by Groucutt is inclined towards commercial activities, the principle of re-positioning is equally applicable to the re-positioning of a service or an education programme which in this paper is the Foundation degree.

The Fd was launched as a replacement for the waning HNs and from a marketing perspective that was product rejuvenation or replacement at the end of the product life cycle. However, the actual implementation amounts to extending the product range since the HNs are still on offer seven years after the launch, thus defeating the argument that the Fd was their replacement.

In a recent article Maringe (2006) suggests that customers, that is students in HE now exist in positional markets, where institutions compete for the best students while the applicants compete for the most preferred institutions and

universities are bound to be good at a number of things but not everything, hence universities need to play to their strengths in their quest for excellence. He further asserts that the positioning process which includes the development of an institutional brand or image, determining the market segments to be served and crafting a communication strategy that will help consolidate institutional capacity. This view brings the argument full circle that universities are marketing entities which need good branding as the image spills into their offerings.

Knox (2004: p106) states that “During the late 1980s and early 1990s, brand management practices spread to services and business-to-business organisations.” It is important to note that the Fd as a qualification is a brand and carries certain connotations which at this point are not positive. Successful branding requires effective strategic planning and sustained management so as to ensure a strong unique selling proposition (USP) especially in view of the clutter of academic, professional and vocational qualifications in the UK education market. Essentially the Fd requires a clear positioning strategy and promotion to consolidate its standing in the consumer’s mind. However, the multitude of stakeholders which the positioning strategy should take into account makes the process complicated. Lepineux (2005) observed that the stakeholder theory is weak as epitomised in the following shortcomings:

- A controversial definition
- There is a wide spectrum of players with a high degree of variation
- It is problematic to try and balance their interests
- There is a lack of a strong normative framework
- Normative and empirical streams are separate

These disparities make it difficult to develop a concrete position that can help in coming up with a solid position that can be easily generalised to all stakeholders in respect of an embracing positioning of the Fd. The fact that the Fd as a qualification involves a number of parties in its delivery and in turn has to appeal to a number of players creates complications in positioning. The players involved in the design of the curriculum of the Fd include the government, the employer, FEI and HEI. The successful positioning of the Fd would require that it appeals to the students and the employer is pleased with the Fd graduates and the government is satisfied with the national skills base. According to the website, <http://www.determan.net/Michele/mposition.htm>, accessed 18.04.07.

“A good position is: (1) What makes you unique (2) This is considered a benefit by your target market”.

The Fd qualification has been portrayed as unique by the government and its respective promotional organs. However, it is not clear if the prospective student and employer see it as unique. In the euphoria of launching the programme there is a lot of unsubstantiated claims which may not be holding in the long run and it may prove that the student, employers and employer organisations may not find the programme appealing in the long run. Ultimately the challenge on the qualification is in the delivery by the graduates upon completion and being tasked in organisations which will determine success or failure of the qualification. In an article reflecting the development of the Fd at the University of Glamorgan Gibbs (2002: p 239) in Morgan et al (2004: p365) states that:

Granting trust to the brand usually requires an understanding and reassurance of the competence of the brand, and the consistence of that importance plus the existential belief in the veracity of the brand. Trust and consistency is built up over time and requires a drip feed approach.

In the main there are doubts about the delivery of the Fd and the effectiveness of some of the mechanisms that should be central to the delivery of the programme. The unconventional student coming from a widening participation background would need special support which could be lacking in some institutions, cooperation between universities or colleges with employers may be difficult to realise, student experience doing the Fd at university or at an FE college will be different hence bringing an element of inconsistency.

4. The Process of Positioning a Service

The concept of positioning is central to effective marketing as it places the product within the mind of the targeted clientele. This helps relate the product to competing and complementary brands in a manner that sets it apart as a unique offering which can be used in developing a unique selling proposition (USP). The process of positioning is complex as it encompasses multitudes of variables which may be at variance in shaping the overall customer mental picture of a service or good relative to other goods or services. Equally the measurement or determination of positioning is complicated as it is not visible being a mental process, ie, positioning takes place in the mind.

Brassington and Pettitt (2005) provide a three stage process in positioning, ie. firstly, conduct detailed market research and identify variables that are relevant for a particular segment; secondly, conduct further research to determine current products that offer the identified attributes in the segment, and thirdly, determine what the market would expect as the ideal level of the defined attributes and how they rank each brand’s attributes in relation to the ideal and to each other. Schutz et al (1995) suggests a number of positioning strategies borrowed from various authors and are summarised as

including product attributes, price/quality attributes, use or application, product class or by product user. These approaches would be appropriate in positioning the Fd with the only complication being the multitude of stakeholders whose intentions or objectives are not the same as far as the qualification is concerned.

Hooley et al in Randall (2001: p132) provides a four stage approach to positioning which has the following stages:

- Identify the competitors
- Analyse positions
 - Determine competitors' positions
 - Determine the competitive dimensions
 - Define customers' positions
- Decide amongst positioning alternatives
- Track the positioning

The UK government launched the Fd as a replacement for the HNs which from a marketing perspective would fall into the concept of product development, ie a new product in an existing market. The competitors were and still remain the HNs in the form of the HND and HNC. Positions were analysed and it was determined that the HNs were no longer appealing, ie they had entered a declining stage in their life cycle. The Fd was considered more appealing because of its work based learning approach and that potential students would require a programme that enhanced their chances of getting a job. The Fd has been positioned as the qualification of the time with a far-reaching appeal which incorporates

- Are high quality teaching and learning based qualifications
- Are underpinned by a genuine partnership between employer, provider and employee
- Are truly work-based in design, content and delivery
- Popular with employers and employees
- Deliver personal employability skills, specific vocational skills, and a lifelong learning capability

Efforts have been made by the UK government to ensure that the development of the qualification is tracked over time and the Wagner Report to Cabinet (2004) is evidence of tracking the positioning of the qualification. What is not clear is what is happening to the HNs given that they continue to be provided by FEIs and HEIs who are also providing the Fd. This amounts to duplication of effort and resource wasting as the qualifications are supposed to achieve the same end result. There is also unnecessary tension between those who run Fds and HNs in the same institution fighting over student numbers for virtually the same purpose, ie. to offer students what is practically the first two years of a bachelor's degree.

While the characteristics of the qualification are meant to have are critical to providing relevant learning experiences for modern day challenges it is not yet clear if these aspirations can be fully realised. At the same time similar arguments could still be put forward in respect of the HNs. At that point the differentiation becomes unclear to the clientele and may not give the Fd a unique selling proposition and leads to confusion. There is doubt that the launch and subsequent follow-up action on the Fd was well thought, but there could be merit in restructuring and re-launching the HNs, which could have been cheaper and more convenient to implement. The government could draw from the experience of a lot of people in multitudes of institutions including the FEIs and HEIs who have delivered the HNs.

5. Understanding the Foundation Degree

Piercy (2002) presents a framework for "going to market" which provides the facets for effective marketing as illustrated as illustrated in table 1.

Applying the process of going to market on the Fd provides some insight on the value proposition of the qualification.

- The value definition of the Fd is provided in the Leitch Report that sought to overhaul the education system in the UK. The report underlined the importance of a new qualification that could better meet the needs of industry in the modern day. Information has been disseminated on various forums championed by FDF. The interpretation and subsequent understanding has been clouded by the qualifications clutter created by the continued delivery of the HNs. Scope to learn about the qualification has been curtailed as there is a clear rush to make the qualification the preferred one in FEIs and HEs.
- The value development of the Fd seeks the support of various players which include FEIs, HEIs, employers as partners, FDF which creates a complex scenario. The operations in the delivery of the Fd tend to follow the normal pattern of academic procedures. The motivation and commitment has been aided by the provision of funds to FEIs and HEIs for students to do such programmes. The responsiveness has been clouded in the continued delivery of HNs which the Fd is supposed to replace. At the same time so many questions are being asked about the uniqueness of the

qualification.

- The delivery of value poses the biggest challenges to the whole idea of the Fd provision. The inbound logistics are from largely the same background that HNs used to recruit from with a few more students coming from a widening participation background. The institutional behaviour is mixed in excitement that recruitment is aided by the support from FDF but confusing that the new provision has different demands on the mode of delivery and attitude of the student. Some of the students are difficult to motivate as they are not from academically inclined backgrounds. HEIs and FEIs are supposed to reinvent themselves in the face of new challenges posed by Fds. There is need for mutual cooperation with employers in both design and delivery of courses. But, it is doubtful if organisations would want to continue to work FEIs and HEIs in delivering the Fds for a long stretch of time. It is not inconceivable that the FD will simply transform into a Higher National where there is no partnership in design and delivery.

In emphasizing the case for Fds Morgan et al (2004: p 359) state that:

... There had to be a clear justification for introducing a new award in place of the existing HNCs and HNDs. Principally and pragmatically these opportunities included:

- *Flexibility of student choice (of modules to satisfy named Foundation degree awards e.g Finance, HRM, Marketing, Leisure and Tourism, reflecting existing and emerging vocational preferences.);*
- *Vocational relevance emphasizing the development of work-related skills;*
- *The opportunity to include APEL processes*
- *The development of Modern Apprentices and NVQs, which could be used as access points*

The opportunity for students to continue to undertake related components of the award during traditional academic holiday periods.

The Leitch report is often referred to as the spark for many changes in education. Below is a summary of the key objectives some of which have led to the development of the Fd. It is clear that the desire is to increase the proportion of people with a level 4 qualification into which Fds fall into from 29% in 2005 to 40% in 2020.

The Leitch report (Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills) sets four groups of targets for raising the level of adult skills in the UK by 2020. They were:

For basic functional numeracy and literacy: 95% of adults, up from 85 and 79% respectively in 2005.

(1) At level 2 (e.g. 5 GCSEs at grade A to C but also various vocational qualifications): 90% of adults, up from 69% in 2005.

(2) At level 3: 1.9 million additional level 3 attainments over the period as well as an extra 0.5 million apprentices each year.

(3) At level 4 (e.g. both university degrees as well as some professional qualifications e.g. in teaching and nursing): 40%, up from 29% in 2005. (<http://www.npi.org.uk/lites/leitch.pdf>, accessed 10.07.07)

Morgan et al (2004: p 354) state that:

The expansion of higher education (HE) during the 1980s and 1990s with government aspirations of a 50% participation rate (by students under the age of 30 by the year 2010) in HE has raised a number of concerns, amongst others, about the potential undermining of values, its relationships with society and its role in economic prosperity.

In emphasizing the need to expand higher education provision in UK, the Dfes argues that:

For all these reasons, we believe that our target to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent of those aged 18–30 by the end of the decade, linked to our wider aim to prepare 90 per cent of young people for higher education or skilled employment, is right. Moreover, since on latest estimates England currently has a participation rate for 18–30 year olds of 43 per cent, the further increase we need to achieve 50 per cent by 2010 is relatively modest. The chart overleaf shows how other countries compare, using the nearest comparable OECD measure. ... We welcome the fact that an objective review of the way in which the 50 per cent target is measured (the Initial Entry Rate) has just begun – led by the Office for National Statistics. Views are invited via the National Statistics website until the end of February 2003. The aim is to increase the rigour and transparency of the method for measuring our progress. (<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/expand.shtml>, accessed 13.07.07)

These arguments by Morgan et al (2004) and the Dfes further confirm assertions made in the Leitch report in emphasizing the pressures for increasing the need for higher qualifications, ie at level 4. In view of the political statements that this action makes it is inconceivable not to be skeptical about the expansion of education provision in that it carries both a principle of development and political appeal no wonder Tony Blair prime minister of the UK (1997 – 2007) had his key policy centred on what he termed Education! Education! Education!

The Fd is portrayed as a unique qualification and is relatively new on the market and has experienced phenomenal growth since its launch in 2000. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which is Higher Education standards inspectorate describes the FDF as summarised in table 2.

There are various routes into the Fd and out of the Fd as follows:

In their promotional materials Foundation Degree Forward suggest that the best Fds:

- Are high quality teaching and learning based qualifications
- Are underpinned by a genuine partnership between employer, provider and employee
- Are truly work-based in design, content and delivery
- Popular with employers and employees
- Deliver personal employability skills, specific vocational skills, and a lifelong learning capability

FDF will be positive about their role given that they were created to promote the qualification as a desirable one. In a pamphlet entitled *Guide to Foundation Degrees in the North West* they argue that they are “designed to equip you with the knowledge and skills needed by employers. ...Contain a mixture of academic work and work-based learning”. This framework is best illustrated in table 3.

Rowley (2006) discussing the risks of business of Fds raises a number of pertinent issues which present huge challenges to the whole process of operationalising the delivery and her arguments are centred around the following issues:

- Most students targeted for Fds have skills and backgrounds which do not conform to models or expectations of higher education. The majority of these unconventional students may have little experience of education beyond compulsory school education to age 16, and tend to face difficulties adjusting to the demands of studying at the level of Fds.
- The approaches to cope with full and part time (and other modes of engagement) will be diverse and the “approach that many HEIs have embraced to survive in a regime of reducing per capita student funding is unlikely to accommodate this diversity well, which, in turn, has implications for resource models for responding in this marketplace.” (Rowley, 2006: p7)
- In assuming that HEIs and FEIs can use their experience in product design, and market knowledge gained from delivering undergraduate programmes in vocational disciplines, and HNDs and HNCs is a dangerous assumption given that – foundation degrees are different, but this approach could lead to the re-emergence of re-labelled HNDs and HNCs.
- A key tenet of Fds is working in partnership and this is not easy and that could lead to half measures in trying to realise some kind of partnership, moreover with the suspicions of a any new service or product organisations would be hesitant to commit themselves. There is a second tier of partnerships which is HEIs and FEIs which have different cultures in both delivery and student roles and experiences in learning.

The multitudes of issues facing the development of Fds necessitates that “... Foundation degrees require a responsive and dynamic curriculum development process in order to enable them to respond to local demand, without compromising quality.” (Rowley 2006: p10)

6. Consolidating the positioning of the Fd

The then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke is quoted in January 2003 as stating:

We will drive forward foundation degrees, making them the main work-focused higher education qualification. One of their key features is that employers play a role in designing courses, so both they and the students can be certain that they will be gaining the skills that are really needed in work.

(<http://develop.ucas.com/FDCourseSearch/About.htm>, accessed 15.01.07)

The government would be expected to support the Fds, being something they have invested heavily into. The government decided to shift away from the popular Higher Nationals. There were reviews made before the introduction of the Fd that suggested that the popularity of the Higher Nationals was waning. In that respect it could easily be a case of making work-based learning mandatory and thus rejuvenating what was already a successful brand. This approach could have saved resources and would have been easier to drive unlike the mongrel created by way of introducing the Fds. It is not that Fds do not work, neither is this discussion suggesting that the Fds cannot be made to work but it is an expensive, complex and risky route for HEIs and FEIs to deliver. Such money could have gone into curriculum development instead of promotion and could have gone some way in mitigating the case for the inadequacy of resources for the welfare of teaching staff and revamp higher nationals.

Rowley (2006: p15) argues that her article “explicitly acknowledges that a government policy-led innovation that seeks

to introduce a new higher education qualification poses risks at a variety of different levels, for employers, FEIs, HEIs, their staff and students.” This position underlines the real challenges facing the Fds. While the future of Fds will be determined by government policy and actions it remains a big challenge as to the pace of adoption of Fds as an acceptable and preferred qualification by the multitudes of stakeholders who will ultimately determine the success or failure of the qualification.

In The Foundation Degree Task Force Report to ministers professor Wagner (2004) points at a number of important issues about what had been achieved and what needed to be improved for progress in the delivery of the Fd as follows:

- Fds present an opportunity for a new qualification provision to meet the identified skills requirements and the challenge is doing so in partnership with the employers and utilising work-based learning tools
- The complexity of the positioning is alluded to in stating “Further education colleges are providers of Foundation degrees but they bring a range of experiences than universities. Employers seeking to develop their workforce have needs that drive their perceptions of what Foundation degrees should provide. Regional Development Agencies are looking for ways to generate the economies of their region. The funding bodies and government have their own imperatives.”(Wagner Report, 2004: p 3)
- The general delivery of Fds seems to conform to the characteristics originally set down but more needs to be done on the aspects of the programme which are work-based and this would require HEIs and FEIs to be innovative.

The Chief Executive of Foundation Degree Forward, Derek Longhurst in Forward (April, 2007: p12), the Foundation Degree Forward Journal summarises the Hefce report on Fds providing statistics on the qualification which have been tabulated in table 4 and 5.

The number of students for 2006/2007 is significant and that suggests a growing interest in the programme. The most interesting statistic from the table is the proportion of female students. This is reflective of the programme’s appeal for widening participation given that most females have been denied education for a variety of reasons. It is important to note that the high likelihood of employer support implies that industry values the qualification. Part of the reasons for the growth of numbers can be attributed to the substantial funding that was provided to Foundation Degree Forward to promote the qualification. While the brand has not yet gained a foothold in the HE market it would appear with time that market will be receptive and with experience HEIs and FEIs will adjust their practices and improve both the content and the pedagogy of the qualification.

It must be clear that the growth of the Fd is reflective of the enormous amounts of money that were expended in order that there is a shift from HNC and HND as the DfES puts in clearly in suggesting:

For institutions, we will offer additional funded places for foundation degrees from 2004, in preference to traditional honours degree courses; so that the numbers studying traditional three-year courses will remain steady, and growth will come predominantly through this important new route. We will also provide development funding for institutions and employers to work together in designing more new foundation degree courses, discussed in more detail in . For students, we will provide incentives for those doing foundation degrees, in the form of bursaries which might be used either for extra maintenance, or to offset the fee for the course. We will provide £10 million in 2004–05, rising to £20 million in 2005–06, for these incentives.

7. Conclusions

The principle behind the launch of the Fd is far-reaching and well founded. The modalities of operationalising the Fd presented a rare scenario of combinations with a potential for disasters as alluded to by Rowley (2006) in raising the risky aspects in the business of Fds. The demands on institutions for the need to learn and relearn practices and incorporate students from unfamiliar backgrounds and experiences while introducing a new programme with a different approach would impact on the effectiveness of the affected institutions.

The yawning skills gap needed to be addressed and so was the waning relevance of the HNs. A partnership of delivery between institutions and with employers and employer organisations is an authentic move but one that is fraught with a number of clear and real potential disasters. The first problem in this stakeholder puzzle is the practicality of operationalising that partnership of design and delivery where these relationships have often been suspicious if not accusatory of each other. HEIs and FEIs do not always cooperate and there is a feeling of competition and suspicion of standards hence the need for stringent monitoring and direction where validation agreements are in place. While employers benefit from the availability of appropriate skills their long-term commitment to educational programme is likely to be brought into question.

The Foundation degree is a relatively new qualification only launched in 2000. However, any product whose branding does not offer a unique identified suffers from market suspicion. It would not be wrong for the market to see the Fd as an imitation of a degree given the name or the HNs given the UCAS points rating and the duration of delivery. To the

extent that a number of institutions are continuing to deliver HNs and most of them continue to attract more students than Fds the positioning of the Fd is shrouded in confusion and it will take a long time to overcome despite the deliberate effort the state has made to shift focus away from HNs.

While numbers are looking healthy for the Fd as presented by HEFCE it is important to take into account the fact that the real problems have not yet started. Once there is a substantial critical mass of the graduates of the Fd and being expected to perform the criticism might be raised. At the same time on the delivery it does not seem obvious from the available literature and reports the added strain for teaching where it is extremely important to invest a lot more into student support.

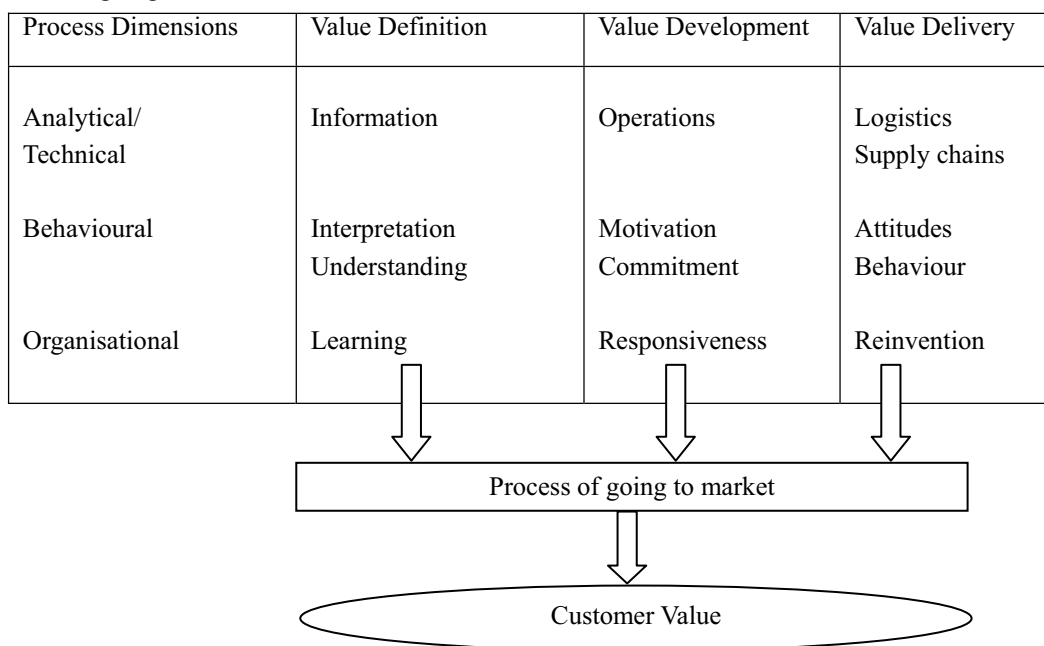
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Table 1. Process of going to market



Piercy(2002: p7)

Table 2. Characteristics of the Foundation Degree

The generic outcomes identified below are taken from the descriptor for the qualification that has been used to represent the Intermediate level within the FHEQ. By comparison, holders of Foundation Degrees should be able to demonstrate:

- Knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles in their field of study and the way in which those principles have developed;
- Successful application in the workplace of the range of knowledge and skills learnt throughout the programme;
- Ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, and the application of those principles in a work context;
- Knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s), and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in their field of study and apply these in a work context;
- An understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge in their field of study and in a work context.

Typically, holders of Foundation Degrees would be able to:

- Use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis in their field of study and in a work context;
- Effectively communicate information, arguments, and analysis, in a variety of forms, to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively in their field of study and in a work context;
- Undertake further training, develop existing skills, and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume responsibility within organisations; and have:
- Qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment and progression to other qualifications requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making;
- The ability to utilise opportunities for lifelong learning.

Source: Adopted from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.asp> accessed 17.04.07.

Table 3. Routes into and from the Foundation degree

ROUTES TO	FOUNDATION DEGREE	ROUTES FROM
• Work • Level 3 vocational qualifications • Advanced Apprenticeship • A-levels • Access to HE • Professional Qualifications • Non-vocational HE • Voluntary/community activity		• Honours degree • Higher level NVQs (eg level 5) • Higher vocational qualifications • Work • Professional Qualifications • Voluntary/community activity

Source: FDF, Learner Progression guidance

Table 4. Statistics on the Foundation degree

Factor	2006-2007	2005-2006
Total Number of students	60, 925	46, 780
Number of part-time students	27, 000	20, 000
• 46% of FD students are taught at HEIs and 54% are taught at FEIs. • 56% of part-time students are taught in are taught in HEIs. • 77% of part-time students are supported by their employers. • 64% of students are aged 21 or over. • 75% of students are female. • The proportion of non-conventional students has been increasing and that is confirming that wider participation is working.		

Source: Forward (April, 2007: p12), the Foundation Degree Forward Journal

Table 5. Resources to support our strategy (£m)

	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	Per cent Increase in cash terms in 05-06 over 02-03
Foundation Degree development	0	9	11	12	
Foundation Degree incentives	0	0	10	20	
Total					

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/expand.shtml>, accessed 13.07.07