

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

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ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE  
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Agenda Item 8

TWO YEAR PART-TIME FOUNDATION DEGREES POSITION PAPER

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COVER SHEET

To consider a position paper.

**Action in response to ASQEC Committee, Minute 19.65**

- Position paper on two-year part-time Foundation Degrees
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## **Quality Enhancement of Accelerated Foundation Degree Provision from a Curriculum Redesign Perspective**

### **1. The Issue of Accelerated Foundation Degrees and the Redesign Challenge**

The University identified quality concerns in its validated Two-Year/Three-Semester (2Y3S) accelerated Foundation Degrees and paused validation of new provision and revalidation of current provision using this model where standards were not being met. The principles of whether standards were being met included, for example, student retention and success and also student loading within a condensed programme particularly the length of the study day. Over time, 2Y3S provision had often become the College preferred vehicle for the delivery of the exit qualification within a Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) funded through the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Within this context the challenge of the pilot re-design was to develop a model which would support student success and seek to displace resource-constrained, *simulated* work-based learning on College premises in favour of *authentic* work-based learning in the employment setting.

While the former setting provided (in the original curriculum scheme) high levels of quality assurance and control on learning and skills development, the significant resourcing and constraints on supervision and equipment was responsible for heavy loading of student effort on campus in order to deliver the learning hours required within an accelerated programme.

The redesign aim was accordingly to focus on easing learning congestion on campus through a pedagogic shift that better captured and credited the significant learning that was implicit, authentic and role-contextualised in the workplace.

### **2. Redesign Aims for Accelerated Foundation Degrees**

A redesign candidate was presented for pilot in the form of the Foundation Degree (FD) in Civil Engineering at Belfast Metropolitan College. This FD was also the exit qualification within a Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) funded through the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Given the apprenticeship context, the interplay between on and off the job training was of particular relevance in the pilot. Furthermore, in this FD, employers were highly engaged and

favoured shorter models of delivery rather than, for example, the standard model of 3 years part-time.

The pilot was supported by the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment (subject expertise) together with the University Centre for Higher Education Research Practice (CHERP) (design expertise).

### 3. Programme Redesign

Critical to redesign in the context of Apprenticeships is the onus on learning outcomes that ensured that participants were being upskilled on the job – and not simply being awarded credit for prior experiential learning.

The redesign focused on the learner journey with workplace learning authentically and explicitly linked to learning hours, and a detailed, session-by-session timetable to help gauge student loads.

A range of complex logistical constraints gave rise to a redesign strategy which partitioned the Certificate, in the first instance, from the main provision. This facilitated the redesign of the first three modules of the programme in readiness for September/October start in 2018 with the College programme staff working closely with a curriculum design specialist from CHERP at Ulster. Post completion of the initial modules a rolling programme of redesign has continued.

At the early stage of the pilot CHERP, working with College representatives completed a review of module design. As a result of this review the following issues were concluded:

- Opportunities to maximise learning within the workplace needed to be identified. This would offer greater flexibility within curriculum design, in terms of *where* students learn, and could ease learning congestion on campus.
- The work-based learning (WBL) component of module design should be considered as the equivalent to independent learning hours (IL). This would include ring-fenced time for study and development e.g. reflection, access to online learning environment, assessment preparation. In the context of Fd Civil Engineering, this equated to 2 hours per working day.
- Following consultation with employer stakeholder representatives, it was concluded that 2 hours WBL/IL per day was acceptable as long as this did not impact negatively on the 'day job'. 1 hour per day had been agreed previously.
- Module outcomes were then to be reviewed to determine the knowledge and skills that could feasibly be developed in the work place.
- Assessment methods should be reviewed to establish where any could be undertaken in the workplace e.g. observational, reflective, competency-based, project-based approaches. Where there is scope for assessment re-design, this would prompt an associated review of module learning outcomes, as an iterative process.
- Authentic assessments, that may be undertaken in the workplace, are to be encouraged (where possible) as they are more likely to meet employer needs whilst meeting module and programme level outcomes.
- Following assessment review, it was concluded that some assessments were not mapping to existing module learning outcomes and could potentially be removed to

reduce student and staff workload. In other cases, some modules were over-assessing and could be streamlined. The Ulster University Workload Equivalence Guide was shared to provide a framework for design.

- Consideration should be given to group work as a rotational activity during campus-based learning due to the limitations of physical resources in some cases.
- Content must be retained to assure PSRB requirements and PSRB assessment approaches must also be met. Consideration could be given to blended/flipped learning approaches to deliver declarative content online during WBL/IL time.

#### 4. Performance Outcomes and Redesign Conclusions

Following the initial curriculum supported redesign process, satisfactory progression to Year 2 of the FD was achieved, and the Faculty has continued to work closely with the College on revisions to subsequent Year 2 modules. The model has assured the full use of the 15-week teaching semester which is an important element within this pilot as the number of teaching hours per module are significant (c. 60 hours per module) and the length of the study day remains an important consideration.

##### *Performance*

In terms of the specific matter of student success, detail below is provided on the main non-continuation/first year metrics applied to all provision at Ulster and its partner institutions. In September 2019, the year end for the first year of the pilot programme, of the 22 students registered on the programme 21 proceeded to year 2. This sits alongside success 1 and 2 metrics of 95.5%. It is noted that 3 students were coded P3 and, as such, were to carry a 20-credit point module as a resit into the next academic year.

Program	Program Name	MOA	Campus	Year	Early Leavers	Early Leavers %	Non-Returers	Proceeded	Award	Fail	Repeat	LOA	Resits	Other	Total	Attrition No.	% Attrition	Success 1 %	Success 2 %
7641	FdEng Civil Engineering MIL PT	P	MIL	1	0	0	0	21	0	0	1	0	0	0	22	0	0	95.5	95.5

Whilst there were no major concerns raised in terms of student success from the metrics as presented above, there were a number of underpinning matters of note in terms of quality assurance, which were raised directly in advance of the examination board in September 2019. These matters included the following:

- The scheduled Examination Board could not sit to consider the full profile of marks as required at the end of the academic year as marks were missing for CIV139 Surveying for Civil Engineers. This was not brought to light until the actual Examination Board when the External Examiner had already travelled to carry out their review of work.
- The External Examiner scaled marks for the entire cohort in one module due to over-inflation, specifically, CIV144, Civil Engineering Technology and Materials.
- CIV141 Mathematics and Structures has been required by the External Examiner to be reviewed in terms of marking and assessment.

- The External Examiner required a review of the operation of the moderation process in general for CIV144 and CIV141.
- The Partnership Manager received no evidence of the operation of quality procedures over the summer semester in relation to the student voice (no minutes of the staff-student consultative committee) and course review (no course committee minutes).

### *Redesign*

As offering direct support for this process, the Faculty and curriculum development representative from CHERP are of the view that the support required had resulted in the redesign process being resource-intensive. Consequently, there are concerns pertaining to the sustainability of rolling out this model.

The Curriculum Support from Ulster and Faculty also found the pedagogic concepts involved in redesign challenging for the culture of programme design and delivery at the College, particularly when concurrently delivering a programme and working to redesign in tandem. Arguably, also the nature of the programme in the pilot which necessitates high contact hours, alongside the need to ensure content was not lost within the redesign for PSRB compliance can pose conceptual challenges in the redesign process. The concurrent delivery and redesign, particularly alongside the clear understanding of how conceptual questions could be addressed, has tended to lead to more of a repackaging of modules within extended teaching weeks rather than the organic development of a programme which worked alongside employers to develop a clear model of Higher Level Apprenticeships within foundation degrees. In short, dual processes may have lent more to redesign rather than holistic and organic programme development.

It is also noted that supportive documentation has also been published in this area recently that was not available when the pilot began, for example, the QAA Characteristics Statement on Higher Education in Apprenticeships (2019). This statement clarifies the requirement for at least 20% of off-the-job learning (through day release, block study, online study, self-directed study or job shadowing, but which must not be part of an apprentice's normal work duties). Most Foundation degrees require 30% off-the-job learning. In most sectors, this is usually delivered over one day and one evening, but the constraints imposed by civil engineering employers only leave the possibility of one-day delivery. Normally, off-the-job training can only be received by an apprentice during their normal working hours.

In addition to the challenge of delivering contact hours as outlined above, apprentices as employees are entitled to 5.6 weeks of statutory leave per 12 months. The 2Y3S model necessitates three full semesters of delivery, which amounts to 45 weeks per 12 months, leaving challenges in terms of statutory leave entitlement.

For these reasons, it is recommended that the model requires further development to optimise the full potential and transferability of design (redesign) to FDs generally. Accordingly, an interim model such as the Two-Year plus one-Semester solution (2Y+1S) can be used or, alternately, the longstanding 3 year part-time model.

## **5. The Interim Solution – Two-Year plus One Semester Foundation Degree**

Students on this two-year, one-semester mode study 40 credits in semester 1 and 40 credits in semester 2, as is the norm for a part-time FD. They then take a further 20 credits in the intensive

summer semester in years 1 and 2, which means that after two years of study, the only module to be completed is the work-based learning module, which is a synoptic level 5 project, and can be completed in semester 1 of year 3.

One of the major disadvantages of the 2Y3S model is that it necessitates study over three 15-week semesters with no breaks, over two full calendar years, where students take 40 credits each semester over three semesters (40/40/40). The two-year one-semester model, on the other hand, uses the six-week intensive summer semester only for the delivery of one 20-credit module (40/40/20) thereby allowing the employees/students to take annual leave, and relieving some of the pressure on these employees/students working 80% of their time and engaging in off-the-job training for the remaining 20%. An additional and important benefit of this new model is that normal regulations apply whereas the 2Y3S mode regulations necessitate high performance and do not accommodate failure easily.

The accelerated model has already been approved and implemented successfully for a business-related Foundation degree in South West College. It is also noted that the recent FdEng Civil Engineering programme at South West College has also moved the fast-track provision to the accelerated route with further discussions to take place with the programme team regarding future models for Foundation degree HLA linked provision in this area.

A point of note when adopting the accelerated model is that with September intake, studies would normally end at the completion of their Work based Learning module at the end of semester 1, as studies extend into the third academic year. Articulation to Ulster programmes is currently normally in September of the academic year and where this model is used students/apprentices would not be articulating nor undertaking studies between January and September of the same academic year. The potential for January articulation to Ulster is thus an important consideration where feasible.

## **6. Recommendations on the Strategic Development of Foundation Degrees**

The University is currently in a phase of strategic positioning and support for development and compliance of HLAs including the establishment of an Apprenticeship Hub and staff to support business development of provision. Interest in the continued provision and further development of HLAs within our College partners is strong as is the increasing momentum within Ulster to expand provision in this area across non-MaSN provision.

Within this evolving context the following recommendations are made for consideration:

1. Development of a strategy that aggregates demand within sustainable frameworks for sectors. (*Apprenticeship Hub*)
2. Development of a set of Ulster Principles around Higher Level Apprenticeships within Foundation degrees which include setting out how work based learning can be incorporated within the Higher Level Apprenticeships in Foundation degree model (*Apprenticeship Hub, CHERP and Quality Enhancement*)
3. Development of a 'rough guide' design toolkit following an apprenticeship model to share with the sector including advice on including, for example, the authentic use of work

experience or work-integrated learning; modes of delivery; use of approaches to learning such as blended learning; work-based assessment. (*Apprentice HUB, Quality Enhancement*)

4. Cascade a support model for Colleges to assure the rollout of the principles and rough guide toolkit in a timely and effective matter (*CHERP, Faculty Partnership Managers, College representatives and Course Directors*)
5. The establishment of a Task and Finish Group to oversee recommendations 1 to 4 above in semester 2, 2019-2020.
6. Any further programmes within our partner validated provision seeking to redesign their current provision should do so as a separate exercise to current delivery and bring forward the full (re)designed curriculum for consideration.
7. The use of the accelerated or part-time models until any potential new model is agreed as above.