

5

Education and training: what students say

Foreword *Rebecca Duffy*

5.1 “I’m not someone to sit around”: from FE to HE media training
Alexandra McLoughlin

5.2 The value of networks in the acting profession: a graduate
perspective *Catherine Roberts*

5.3 Event management: education and the industry *Michael Kelly*

5.4 Putting into practice the MA in Creative Writing and
Authorship *Rebecca Duffy*

5.5 Foundation degrees: HE’s best kept secret *Rachel Papworth*

5.6 Developing life and employability skills *Erica Sosna*

Foreword

Rebecca Duffy > Rebecca Duffy is Network Manager at the Sussex Learning Network (SLN), where her responsibilities include student engagement and finance.

The articles below all feature, in different ways, student perspectives on vocational learning. Lifelong learning has often been described as a ‘supply-side’ enterprise, not necessarily concerned with the direct engagement of students. The Sussex Learning Network is something of an exception in that one of its work strands is student engagement.

To develop this engagement we created a project (building a website and researching case studies of successful vocational learners) that students could get involved in. This not only provided a valuable work experience opportunity but the case studies have been used by SLN Information, Advice and Guidance officers when talking to college staff and students about vocational learning. As Maggie Allgrove, SLN IAG Officer, notes in 4.5 <link>, prospective learners really listen when they hear a ‘real-life’ story from a student.

I invited a number of students to write for this e-book so that readers could get a real sense of what motivates learners and what factors they take into account when making choices. Each student writer has a perspective shaped by what they hope for from their particular career path, and we (for I’m one of them) share a non-traditional route into our chosen vocational course.

Also in this section, Rachel Papworth from Papworth Consulting contributes a summary of a substantial piece of research investigating student and employer perceptions of Foundation degrees. This includes an assessment of Foundation degree marketing and recommendations on how marketing could be more effective.

This section concludes with Erica Sosna’s contribution on ways to develop students’ life and employability skills. It draws on her research into improving the employability of Foundation degree students at the University of Brighton and outlines their perceptions of what they need.

For more student perspectives, read *4.3 Reflections on practitioner research: a case study of work placements for Foundation degree Biological Science students* by Steve Robinson.

5.1

<< start < previous next >

“I’m not someone to sit around”: from FE to HE media training



Alexandra McLoughlin > Alexandra McLoughlin, a student journalist specialising in music, worked for the Sussex Learning Network as a student consultant, contributing to the Student Network website and recording short films and audio interviews. She was awarded runner-up prize for the FE Sussex BTEC Learner of the Year award and is now studying BA (Hons) Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London.

This article explains how my course helped me develop my career. I am 18 years old and recently completed a BTEC National Diploma in Media Production at Central Sussex College in Crawley. This was a two-year vocational qualification course and I was a full-time student.

The course comprised 18 units including radio and television production, journalism, desktop publishing and music video. I learnt many skills that I hadn't thought were taught in schools or colleges. We talked about cinematography, video editing, photography, music videos and much more.

Before I started at the college I was at a secondary school. I wasn't sure which career path to follow and I was worried about my predicted GCSE grades which were quite low (four Cs and some Ds and Es). Despite trying hard to improve them I was having a problem concentrating during lessons because I was getting bullied.

It was in February 2006, just after my 16th birthday, that I knew my life had changed for ever. After listening to a Canadian Band 'Simple Plan' at the London Astoria, I met Brigitte Maenhout, a music reporter from a Belgian TV company. She has an interesting job, interviewing and taking pictures of bands and musicians. Later that day, when I saw her at the front of stage, I wished I was doing that sort of job.

I decided to try to follow Brigitte's example. I contacted record labels trying to get interviews with bands I like and, when I managed to get an interview with an American band called 'I am Ghost', Brigitte was kind enough to publish the interview on her website and to credit me as a guest interviewer. She also introduced me to Europunk (another online music website) and told me that I could do interviews for them.

To enhance my career as a young music journalist, I try to get involved with the media as much as I can. I arrange my own interviews with bands and write articles on record labels as well as doing reviews on albums, bands, venues, mainstream music, gigs, books and movies. I do all this work on a voluntary basis.

Moving on to the BTEC National Diploma

Although I could have continued at the same school to do 'A' levels, I decided to start afresh somewhere else, so I began looking around and getting advice from various people.

I contacted a lady from Connexions who knew me quite well from school. She gave me brochures for colleges in Sussex and Surrey. That's when I came across the BTEC Media course at the Central Sussex College in Crawley. This course was 50% written work and 50% practical and appeared to be quite 'hands-on'. I seem to learn faster this way so I knew it was the right one for me. It also seemed to fit in well with my abilities and dreams of one day becoming a music journalist and broadcaster.

One of the best things about my whole college experience was my teachers. They were very supportive and always there for us. Sometimes when I had an interview lined up during class hours, my teachers would let me leave class to do the interview. Even better, all my band interviews and reviews were counted towards my journalism grade.

Another good example of teacher support was when I was given press accreditation for the Glastonbury Festival in 2007 and 2008. Although I had to miss college for a week each time, my teachers were understanding and very pleased for me. The fact that they all believed in me made me feel even more confident. They all love my work and what I do and seemed to enjoy teaching me. They were pleasant to be around and I will definitely miss them. I was also able to borrow equipment from college, like digital and video cameras, before I bought my own.

I never expected college to be so pleasurable. I enjoyed everything about this course especially the fact that we used the latest media technology including professional video cameras and Apple Mac computers. By doing this BTEC course I was given the opportunity to meet interesting people in the media industry – journalists, photographers, musicians, producers and even Hollywood stars. It helped me to build up a huge contact list which I am sure will be beneficial for my future career.

By the time I started studying this BTEC course, I was already interviewing bands for Europunk. However, it became a lot easier to apply for interviews and press accreditation from many record labels because I could mention that I was a BTEC Media student.

I was also able to apply for a National Union of Journalists (NUJ) membership card. With this pass, I could sometimes get into events free, just by showing it as a proof of my identity. I could also go to any press conferences I wanted to. Consequently, I was given the chance to attend many events, including the 'Chelsea Player of the Year 2007', and the 'Indy Music Awards 2007'.

I also managed to secure press accreditation and a backstage press pass for the Glastonbury Festival in 2007 and 2008, and for the 2008 Great Escape Festival in Brighton. These were all remarkable experiences and helped me to develop my career and my networking. I have been backstage at venues such as the O2 arena, London Astoria, Brixton Academy, the Glastonbury Festival, Brighton Concorde 2, Brighton Engine Room and the Brighton Centre.

I have also done paid work experience for Brighton and Sussex Universities where I am a member of the editorial team for the Student Network website. I wrote monthly blogs about my experiences and also wrote up interviews and took photographs for the website. In my course I learnt how to edit videos and take photographs, and I also learnt some interview techniques which have been very useful to me and to my work for the Student Network. Practising these skills gave me more confidence and the courage to try to develop new ones.

Watch Alexandra's youtube [interviews with e-learning practitioners](#) at the ELT2 event.

As a BTEC student I also contributed to my college magazine Scoop. It was distributed free of charge to students and covered all six campuses at Central Sussex College.

I am proud to have been awarded the runner-up prize for the 2008 BTEC Learner of the Year Awards as part of the FE Sussex Spring Awards (sponsored by Edexcel) and I won the Scamp Award for the Most Promising Journalist 2008, sponsored by Central Sussex College.

The reason I decided to study at university was the fact that, although I've had a lot of experience in interviewing bands and of the media in general, I would like to have a broader insight into what being a music journalist and reporter involves. I would like to learn more about the rules and regulations, such as how law relates to journalism, and about copyright, which intrigues me.

I am delighted to have now taken up my place at Goldsmiths, University of London where I am studying a BA (Hons) in Media and Communications.

I am very determined to succeed and I'm not someone to sit around waiting for something to happen so I'm preparing my portfolio for when I apply for jobs in the future. Music journalism is a very competitive field. Eventually I would like to work for TV shows on channels such as MTV, where I hope to interview bands. My main aim now is to gain a solid academic background to support my career path.

You can read examples of Alexandra's interviews with bands [by visiting her blog](#).



The value of networks in the acting profession: a graduate perspective



Catherine Roberts > Catherine Roberts is an actor who has just completed the BA (Hons) Theatre Arts at Northbrook College Sussex. In 2007 she won the Foundation degree Learner of the Year award. As well as establishing herself in teaching and acting roles, she has worked part-time for the Sussex Learning Network as a student ambassador.

As a recently graduated actor, I can vouch for the fact that good networking is not just helpful to my career, but essential. If ever there was an industry that highlighted the quote 'it's not what you know, but who' then Performance and Entertainment is that industry.

Strangely enough, I started writing this article after spending at least an hour on my most frequented website www.facebook.com. But, in addition to checking up on my friends' latest gossip and scandal, I checked the Actor's Agency for any new castings, replied to messages about a teaching job I'm starting soon, and sifted through mailings from my favourite theatres about upcoming productions, discounts and opportunities. Proof, if needed, that online social networking is becoming as much about a person's career as it is about their social life.

Contacts through college

However, I have found that the most productive form of networking comes from people you meet through education, and later, in the workplace. For example, at my college we have many visiting theatre practitioners who provide lessons and workshops as part of the course. It is a fantastic benefit to meet so many industry professionals who can help you get work on graduating. I am about to take up a residential post as an admin assistant for a small theatre in Brighton because of contacts I made during such workshops at college.

Of course, it's not just the visiting practitioners who can provide these connections. The tutors and staff at any college are more often than not trained industry professionals. What better way to learn about a career than from the people who have experienced it for themselves? Tutors and teachers can also provide an instant contact to work for graduating students. For example, I now have a job teaching in an after-school drama club because I was referred by one of my tutors.

Another invaluable resource available to schools and colleges is work placements. In all branches of industry, these can often lead to offers of work or referrals to other related jobs. I was fortunate enough in my final year to be placed as a professional actor at Wimbledon College of Art, working alongside design students on one of their projects.

Consequently, I made contacts with numerous talented designers who will graduate soon and with two professional writers and directors.

One of these directors liked the show we created so much that he plans to take it on to a professional London theatre, funding permitting. If this goes ahead, it will secure me my first professional paid acting job and allow me to showcase myself to invited casting agents (another fantastic form of networking!). So I think placements are a very positive way forward for students close to graduation.

However, it's not enough just to know the right people – good networking comes from creating the right impression when you do. In the same way that you might change your Facebook profile to create a good impression on any potential viewers, it's important to be mindful of how you appear to people who could be potential future employers.

It is also important to take up any opportunity, regardless of the immediate benefit. For example, a few of my friends who are stage management students recently volunteered to help out on a theatre production in Chichester. It was unpaid work and they didn't even get their travel expenses reimbursed.

However, from contacts they met during the show they managed to get work experience in a top London theatre working on a big West End musical. One student has now been offered a highly coveted job as a follow spot operator at the same London theatre. Volunteering, if you can afford to do it, is probably one of the best ways to make contacts and appear keen about your career.

Online versus face-to-face networking

But, as I mentioned at the start of this article, the internet is a huge resource for networking and it's growing all the time. It's not just social networking that is popular now – networking for your career is widespread on the internet. It's the fastest, most effective way to transfer information and I find that I connect with a lot of my industry contacts through email.

The internet is also the cheapest and easiest way to publicise. With one blanket email you can inform a whole group about a show or event that you are hosting. Even better, creating an event on Facebook allows you to invite a huge list of people and view who plans to attend.

However there are pitfalls with this means of communication. At a recent conference I attended with the Sussex Learning Network, we discussed the pros and cons of online job application and, specific to my industry, the transferring of headshots and CVs via email.

The positives of this are obvious - employers can collate numerous applications and sift through them on the computer. It's also a paperless process so has benefits for the environment. But, as we discussed at the conference, can this form of application be as effective as a face-to-face meeting? The impression you can make with someone in person must be more genuine than one submitted on paper (for example, I have very naughty friends who have doctored their headshots!).

There is also a personal connection that occurs with face-to-face contact that beats anything you can read on paper. It's to do with personality and the way you present yourself and no amount of written words can match that. It is true to say that the majority of applications lead to interview and/or audition but I have heard of roles being cast before the actor and director have even met. With the ever-growing internet culture, it's important that this doesn't become the norm.

I strongly believe that good networking can make a huge difference to the amount of work a professional can get. This is particularly true of the entertainment industry but it applies to all industries. I think that if this is reinforced in schools and colleges, students will be able to prepare for the necessary amount of networking they will have to do when they start looking for professional employment.



Event management: education and the industry



Michael Kelly > Michael Kelly completed a business degree at the University of Galway and graduated from an MA International Event Management in 2008. He has set up an event management company in Brighton and worked for the SLN Student Network in 2008, setting up and staffing information events.

For my Bachelor of Commerce degree I studied subjects such as business, finance and accountancy but I realised that this field of study was not something I felt passionate about. So I decided to enrol on a Masters degree in International Event Management, where I completed modules that would help to develop my understanding of the event industry. This article will try to evaluate the various influences that have helped shape my knowledge and understanding of events, with a particular focus on education, training and experience gained through working.

When I enrolled on the MA in International Event Management, I had a naïve belief that the subjects taught would fully prepare me for the event industry. After attending lectures for a few weeks I realised that this would not be so and that, if I was to succeed, I would have to try to apply this knowledge to real-life scenarios. From these scenarios I would be able to develop a wider understanding.

When I think back to the course content, I feel happy with what it offered and what I achieved from it. It tried to offer students understanding of the key needs of the international events industry by covering events marketing, international partnerships, sponsorship, risk management, innovation and entrepreneurship.

With regard to these topics it did offer good knowledge and a sound understanding of industry basics. Having said that, it was perhaps too academic and may have lacked a vocational approach, which I believe would help prepare the graduate slightly better. Most subjects were academically based, with performance based on essays and presentations.

One module, 'Project Management', required students to theoretically design and plan a large fashion event in Brighton. For me this was by far the most informative and practical module on the course and the one that I took most from. To complete the module, students had to perform a variety of tasks such as develop, manage and maintain a working budget. The subject introduced me to industry techniques such as how to use and maintain Gantt charts. With all this in mind, I maintain that the course offered more than a simple qualification: it helped me develop a basic understanding of the industry, and that helped me get my foot in the door.

The course allowed me to network with other like-minded individuals and this helped me to join a newly-formed event company. I understand now that networking is one of the great benefits offered by educational institutions. Since finishing the course my training and education has been tested and developed further through working in the event industry.

Experience is key

I have helped set up a creative event management, production, promotion and design company called [Triptych Events UK](#), which offers a wide variety of event services – ranging from production management, event logistics and operations to private party planning, corporate functions and product launches. It has been my work with Triptych Events UK that has helped me to develop my career the most.

Through Triptych I have been involved in several large-scale events. We have just completed a contract that involved planning and organising the Village Street Party 2008 in Kemptown, Brighton. We were in charge of planning and booking all necessary sub-contractors such as toilet hire, sound company hire, hiring a Health and Safety Officer, liaising with St John Ambulance, Select Security and City Clean. This has helped me to develop a list of the costs associated with implementing a major community event.

We have also helped run the Lounge on the Farm Festival in Kent. At this year's festival in July our role involved stage management of all five stages across the site, plus hiring, rigging and programming the lighting requirements for the main stage. All the roles that I have fulfilled for Triptych Events UK have been extremely helpful in my development. This kind of practical experience is something that cannot be taught in a classroom and needs to be experienced.

I am fortunate enough to have been part of the Student Network (SN), working on behalf of the Sussex Learning Network (SLN), and it is something I am proud of. The programme is designed to promote vocational learning and the idea is that vocational learners are the best people to help promote it. Through the SN I helped to organise three college information days in colleges around Sussex and I was involved in all aspects, from planning through to implementation.

This involved both pre- and post-event marketing responsibilities such as writing press releases. From my time with the Student Network I have realised that educating and informing people about their educational options is very rewarding. At each of the open days I was on hand to offer information and support to students enquiring about further and higher education. I found the experience of working with the Student Network very rewarding. It's a pity that opportunities like this are not more widely available.

I feel very fortunate that I've been able to develop my experience and understanding of the event industry. Since completing my postgraduate training I have realised that the course offered me a good basis of knowledge from which I have tried to progress my career.

Study and education within the event industry is still in its infancy and courses such as the one I completed are helping to create frameworks which promote better knowledge and understanding of the various areas. This in turn helps the industry to develop. However, those who wish to progress in the industry must gain experience in the working environment.

Putting into practice the MA in Creative Writing and Authorship



Rebecca Duffy > Rebecca Duffy is Network Manager at the Sussex Learning Network where her responsibilities include student engagement, finance and editing. Whilst working at the SLN she also undertook a part-time Master's degree at the University of Sussex (MA Creative Writing and Authorship).

This brief article reflects on the writing skills I've picked up and how I've found them helpful. When I explained to Chris Baker, Director of the Sussex Learning Network (and my line manager) that I wanted some study leave to do a Masters degree in Creative Writing, his eyebrows shot up. What did creative writing have to do with finance management or student engagement?

I agreed that I would make up the time spent away from my desk (one day every two weeks), and persuaded him that the course would develop my policy-writing skills and help me mentor the student writers with whom I worked. And Chris, who has always supported staff aspirations for personal development, obligingly signed the relevant forms.

I had just finished a two-year Certificate level course in Creative Writing and had picked up a leaflet about a new Masters degree run by the University of Sussex's Centre for Continuing Education. The aim of the course was to foster writers' professional development and get them well on the way to finishing their first novel or poetry collection.

But although I wrote poetry, and had adapted and written drama for the stage, I didn't feel I had a novel in me. I just thought I'd enjoy it, and signed up. I was also attracted by the academic content of the course – 'Authorship studies' wasn't something I'd heard of before.

After talking to the course convenor, I realised that it could help satisfy my intellectual curiosity. I had quite a few questions left over from my previous studies in literature and communications. What's the point of creative writing, and how can one understand it in relation to other forms of writing? What are the principles of successful writing? What is the relationship between the writer and their audience?

On the first day of the course, over 20 part-time and full-time students squashed themselves into a little seminar room. A kind of fellow-feeling emerges when writers get together. I think it's something to do with realising you're not the only one who sits alone at a desk on a regular basis, making something up, and not entirely understanding how or why.

Looking back, I did have the opportunity to address some of my questions, and did a fair bit of writing into the bargain (one short play, one short story, two monologues and over thirty poems). The creative writing workshops helped me to evolve an intuitive sense of what worked and what didn't, although it wasn't until I started the creative project (equivalent to the dissertation) that I really started to understand the mechanics of my own writing.

Even now, embarking on my first radio play, I still feel a bit like I'm writing intuitively, with only the most rudimentary kind of map. Many writers (such as Ali Smith, for example, speaking at the 2008 'Small Wonder' Short Story Festival) think that's all you can do.

I was one of two part-time students who worked full-time. The other was a doctor, who I think should receive a special medal when the day comes to graduate. I have no idea how he managed it. For me, it was all quite do-able, although very hard work when it came to completing each 5,000-word term paper.

Had I not been working full-time, maybe I would have got my teeth more into the intellectual side of the course. Maybe I would have written a novel. However, there were other benefits to do with being at work, namely, the opportunities to apply my new learning to what I was doing at work.

I manage a small team of students who worked part-time to help me develop a website with case studies. Media students were employed to carry out the interviews and write them up. Some of these were already very experienced; however, I took a more active role with helping others. It was immensely satisfying to take creative writing techniques – such as voice, character and story – and encourage students to use them in non-fictional settings like articles, audio interviews and video. I saw their work develop and I learnt from their work, too.

Recently, I was asked to lead on the editing of this e-book entitled *Bringing Higher Education within Reach*. I saw this not only as an opportunity to get some editing experience, but also to learn a lot about lifelong learning. The articles in the e-book are documents written by people who have worked in lifelong learning and experienced the changes taking place in the UK education and employment sector. I think the most important thing I've learnt from this is that you can't separate an understanding of your subject matter from writing it down well.

Many styles of writing are like creative writing, in that they document an experience from a particular point of view. The fiction writer might create that experience, but it still aspires to a kind of authenticity in that it comes from somewhere a bit deeper than pure technique. Whether it's a policy document or a comedy sketch, I find it helpful to imagine that there's a voice, an audience, and a story to be told.

Foundation degrees: HE's best kept secret



Rachel Papworth > The SLN commissioned Papworth Research & Consultancy to assess approaches to marketing Foundation degrees (Fd). Rachel Papworth's report drew on a workshop involving five Sussex Fd providers, 11 focus groups with a total of 82 current and potential Fd students, and eight telephone consultations with employers.

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This article summarises the findings of research undertaken for the SLN by Papworth Research & Consultancy between March 2007 and February 2008. We assessed the effectiveness of approaches that had been used to market Foundation degrees (Fds) in Sussex, and explored the potential effectiveness of other approaches.

To complement work undertaken by others, the SLN had been piloting a range of approaches to marketing Fds with the support of partner universities and colleges. These included the following approaches:

- Developing Learning Opportunities, a web-based one-stop-shop for potential learners, employers and advisors, providing information about applying for HE in Sussex
- Collaborating with the Sussex Council of Training Providers and Aimhigher to produce and maintain the Foundation Degrees in Sussex website, which provides information about Fds to employers and potential students
- Providing case-study examples of potential learners on its website
- Developing and distributing a range of leaflets promoting provision in specific curriculum areas
- Developing and distributing leaflets about a range of issues of interest to potential learners
- Symposia where practitioners discussed and addressed issues relating to Fds, including marketing
- Establishing an SLN marketing group, a cross-provider forum of marketing professionals from Sussex HEIs and FEIs, to discuss Fd marketing and promotion
- The Student Network: an organisation led by students for students, created with the support of the SLN and aimed at existing Sussex-based vocational students and people considering a vocational course. It promotes vocational learning through events and through its website, which contains news and views from students, information about courses, and links to other websites
- The Foundation degree Learner of the Year Award, supported by the SLN as part of the FE Sussex Spring Awards. It publicly recognises a Fd learner for their achievements whilst raising the local profile of Fds.

Method

Our research involved two main elements: focus groups with learners and potential learners, and employer consultations. We held 11 focus groups with 82 people, each focusing on a specific area of the Fd market, as follows¹:

- Current Fd students, including one group of students in employment
- Potential Fd students in education
- Potential Fd students with additional needs (including mental health issues, learning disabilities, substance misuse, refugees/asylum seekers, homelessness, abuse).²

We consulted eight employers by telephone.

We set these activities in context through:

- A review of research reports, particularly:
 - HEIST & Foundation degree Forward (2006) Good Practice in the Marketing of Foundation degrees: A research-based guide for practitioners
 - Bournemouth University (2005) Foundation Degree Research Report
- A workshop with representatives of five Sussex institutions providing Fds.

Our research with learners and potential learners focused on five questions:

- To what extent were participants aware of Fds and how well did they understand the concept?
- From where did they get information about Fds and other learning opportunities?
- What leads people to choose a Fd and what puts them off?
- To what extent do Fds meet people's expectations?
- How does the experience of studying at a partner college compare to studying at a university?

Research findings

Below we summarise our findings on these questions, on what we found out from employers, and our recommendations.

Awareness and understanding

Unless they were doing a Fd or knew someone who was doing or had done one, people hadn't heard of Fds. We found low awareness of Fd among all groups, apart from those actually doing Fds (most of whom had found out about Fds 'by accident', usually because someone mentioned Fds when they were investigating, or even starting, other courses).

Further, people who had heard of Fds had a false impression of them (unless they were doing one themselves). The word 'Foundation' leads to Fds being confused with Arts Foundation courses and people assume that Fds are at a level significantly below [National Qualifications Framework \(NQF\)](#) level 4. For example, one participant told us "I thought it was a pre-degree, kind of getting you up to speed to be able to then do a degree".

This causes frustration for Fd students who find themselves having to convince family, friends and colleagues that their courses lead to useful, academic qualifications.

¹ We also aimed to convene a group of potential Fd students in employment and were unable to do so.

² These groups proved challenging to set up. We held one group at Horizons, a Community Learning project in Hastings, and two groups with clients of the Working Together project, ie people working with or for third sector organisations whose clients were in this category

Routes to Fds

Since most people haven't heard of Fds, how do people end up on Fds and where do potential Fd students find information about progression routes?

We did meet a few people who had chosen a Fd because they liked the model. However, most Fd students had found out about their course, and Fds in general, while discussing another course with their provider, or even after they'd started another course. For example, one University of Chichester student had started a Performing Arts course and hadn't enjoyed it. A fellow student who had transferred onto the Fd in Instrumental & Vocal Tuition told him about the course and he transferred to it too. Several had started their Fd without understanding what a Fd is.

Three factors had led students onto Fds: the subject, the geographical location, and/or a specific provider.

Subject:

Most Fd students had found their courses by looking at what was available in that subject. Sometimes their Fd was the only, or a rare, option for them nationally. For example, Instrumental & Vocal Tuition students at the University of Chichester told us that there are few options to train in Instrumental & Vocal Tuition, particularly for younger students and those not currently teaching music. This had hooked them rather than the Fd model.

Location:

With a few exceptions (those concerned about finances), young people wanted to move away from home to study. Conversely, most older students chose a provider close to home to avoid disrupting their established life. Those with additional needs defined 'local' tightly: clients of Horizons in Hastings were deterred by the idea of travelling to Brighton or Falmer.

Provider:

A significant proportion of Fd students, especially those at Plumpton and the Brighton Institute of Modern Music (BIMM), had started by selecting their provider and had then chosen their course from this provider's offer.

Sources of information

Most participants told us that they obtained information on progression routes independently. They used the Internet, provider literature (prospectuses) and direct contact with providers. Few used IAG agencies or reported that anyone had helped them get information.

Different types of people relied on different sources of information:

- Fd students in related work investigated options through sources linked to their job, such as consulting a local authority training handbook or a colleague who'd done a similar course
- A few level 3 students told us that tutors had suggested progression routes and that they'd been to HE/FE fairs. A few had met a Connexions Advisor at their college or spoken to the college's HE Advisor. Younger participants drew on the experience of siblings and friends
- Horizons participants relied solely on Horizons for information, advice and guidance
- Older participants in particular had found getting relevant information challenging.

Everybody wanted a single source of information about learning/training. They wanted a single website "that answers every question" or a one-stop-shop in their town centre.

Which Fd elements are attractive?

The elements of the Fd degree model that appealed to current Fd students and to people not studying for Fds differed, possibly because Fd students had a more sophisticated understanding of the Fd concept. Most of those not studying for Fds hadn't previously heard of Fds and were responding only to the brief introduction to the concept we'd provided at their focus group.

Once we'd explained to non-Fd students what a Fd was, they generally liked the concept. In particular, they liked:

- The staged approach to an honours degree
- Local delivery
- The opportunity to gain work experience
- The possibility of earning while learning
- (For older students) the flexible entry requirements

"Could be worth doing. From what you've said, it sounds like it's worth doing...Why would you not do a Foundation degree? Why doesn't everyone do a Foundation degree? If you want to carry on you can always do that, and if you don't then you can finish after two years, so what's the disadvantage of doing a Foundation degree?"

Research participants studying for Fds liked the following aspects of Fds:

- Work-based learning, which they liked because:
 - It would make them more employable
 - It provided a taster of the career they were considering, and enabled them to try out risky ventures in a supported environment
 - Those who had chosen a local course and those in industries that operate through networking welcomed the networking opportunities
 - Some prefer 'learning through doing'
 - Those in work are glad to be able to study without taking a career break
- Flexible/part-time learning hours:
 - Some had selected a Fd because it was the only part-time provision in their subject
 - Some employed students welcomed the opportunity to complete assignments in work time
 - Third sector workers wondered whether the Fd model would enable people to stop and start as necessary, for example if they lost their job
- Earning while learning (or learning while earning since many were working while studying)
- Employer involvement, which they felt ensured employers valued Fds
- Fds being higher level qualifications, with 'degree' in the title. This was particularly true among older students who were sacrificing earning time and wanted to get a high level qualification quickly
- Flexible entry requirements. Older students without the qualifications which are often standard entry requirements for degree courses, and level 3 students who were concerned they wouldn't get adequate grades, liked the interview-based assessment procedures. However, these procedures deterred some level 3 students who were confident of achieving good grades. They thought applying to a course that would accept them with lower grades might be setting their sights too low
- The staged approach to an honours degree, for four reasons:
 - The shorter-term commitment (especially those taking a career break and/or concerned about finances)
 - The opportunity to study for a lower level qualification as an interim step (especially those uncertain whether they were capable of an honours degree)
 - One Fd student liked the fact that, while waiting for her degree result, she would have Fd accreditation to show employers
 - One liked the idea of topping-up in a new location.

- Older students felt that a Fd would be more likely than an honours degree to attract students in their age group
- One had chosen a Fd because there was financial support for a Fd and not for an honours degree
- A few reported that more study support was provided with a Fd than with an honours degree

What puts people off?

The most common reason why people wouldn't consider a Fd was that, since their sights were firmly set on an honours degree, they saw no benefit in exploring this other option.

Other things that put people off Fds included:

- Concern that employers wouldn't value it (validated by the experience of some Fd students in related employment)
- Fds being seen as only for 'vocational' occupations
- Concern that changing tutor or environment to top-up might hold them back
- Whether having had financial support for a Fd they would be eligible for financial support to top up
- Third sector participants felt that the low paid would need employer support and many employers wouldn't provide support, or even employment secure enough to enable someone to make a long-term learning commitment
- General barriers to HE participation (such as caring responsibilities). Possibly some participants failed to recognise the extent to which a Fd might address these.

To what extent do Fds live up to people's expectations?

This question proved inappropriate. With low awareness of Fds and poor understanding of the Fd concept, most Fd students had started their courses without specific expectations of Fds.

How does studying at a partner college compare to studying at a university?

Most non-Fd students saw colleges as of a lower status than universities. Level 3 students saw going to university as an important part of their progression. "You go to school, you go to college, you go to university. Each one sounds a bit more prestigious than the last and, if you're just going out of college into another college, it doesn't have the same ring to it". Older non-Fd students thought employers would value qualifications from a partner college below those from universities.

The two groups of Fd students at university held opposing views. Most of the Instrumental & Vocational Tuition students at Chichester University would have been just as content at a partner college. Social Care students at the same university would not, believing that the quality of teaching would be higher at a university and that students at a partner college would be younger.

Fd students we met at partner colleges were at Brighton Institute of Modern Music and Plumpton College, each of which has a strong identity. These students felt they had the best of both worlds: they enjoyed their institution, some were studying near home, yet they would attain a university-accredited degree. Whether or not Fd students at partner colleges felt 'part of' their accrediting university depended on whether they were in a position to use the university's facilities.

Third sector participants felt that their clients would be less intimidated by colleges than universities.

Nonetheless, most agreed that fees for partner colleges and universities could be equal. One older participant suggested that lower fee levels at colleges would send out the wrong message. The exceptions were some (though not all) level 3 students: those who felt college provision was of a lower status than university provision felt fee levels should reflect this.

Employers' views

Employers told us that most employers are unaware of Fds despite Fds meeting employers' needs more effectively than do honours degrees.

The following aspects of the Fd model appeal to employers:

- Employer involvement in curriculum development
- Local provision
- The variety of learning methods, including non provider-based methods
- The shorter duration of Fds by comparison with honours degrees

Barriers to supporting staff to undertake Fds were same as for any training:

- Rapid staff turnover
- Being unable to afford to release staff for training

Employers regarded courses delivered by partner colleges as of equal status to those delivered by universities.

They suggested that the most effective way to involve employers in Fds (whether in curriculum development, providing work placements, or supporting employees to undertake Fds) was through direct contact with a provider, leading to the development of an ongoing relationship. 'Scattergun' marketing methods such as mailshots and email shots were routinely ignored.

They said that the key information they wanted when considering whether to support an employee to undertake a course was:

- Cost
- The amount of working time the employee would be required to devote to the course
- Course content

Recommendations

Marketing needs to be undertaken at two levels:

- What a Fd is
- Promoting individual providers and courses

The former is where provider collaboration is most appropriate. There is much work to do to raise awareness of Fds. Hardly anyone's heard of them, those that have hold a false impression, yet the concept is welcomed. This is compounded by the need to counteract the impression given by the word 'foundation'.

Which marketing messages will work?

Marketing needs to stress the factors that attract potential learners and address those that deter them, while being tailored to specific market segments. For example:

- An older potential student may be interested in local provision to avoid disrupting their family and working life. A younger, level 3 student, though they might consider local provision to reduce costs, may seek a degree course some distance from their family home
- Older potential learners may be attracted by not requiring A-levels for entry. High-achieving, younger, level 3 students may think this indicates a lower-status course
- Similarly, younger level 3 students who are concerned they will not achieve high grades may be attracted by lower entry requirements while high-achievers may be put off
- Someone planning to enter the labour market after a full-time course might benefit from being able to demonstrate Fd accreditation in addition to explaining that they are waiting for their honours degree result. This would be less important to someone who is considering studying part-time while remaining in employment.

Marketing must also give a true impression of the Sussex offer, reflecting the extent to which it matches the national Fd model, for example in the use of flexible teaching arrangements.

Which marketing media will work?

The main thing that all participants thought worked was personal contact with providers and students. Several participants reported that they would not have been on their Fd if it had not been for a specific conversation with a specific person. Focus group participants who hadn't heard of Fds started to consider them after they had heard the concept explained.

Participants wanted visits from providers and, ideally, Fd students. Recognising that this would be expensive, we talked about DVD resources, which students thought would work so long as they were up to date and presented to small groups.

Therefore we recommend:

- Building and collaborating on existing activities to promote Fds through personal contact at level 3 providers, ACE providers, community groups and public places, including visits from students and taster days
- Developing and promoting chat forums and DVD resources, including those provided by Foundation degree Forward (Fdf)
- Ensuring that those advising potential learners (teachers, careers teachers, careers advisors, parents, university admissions staff) understand Fds

Personal contact was also key for employers so we recommend building on work developing relationships with employers.

Participants were keen to access a single source of learning provision information. This supports the SLN's approach. Its Learning Opportunities website aims to be a one-stop-shop for information about Sussex HE provision. Potential learners are likely to welcome this as a step towards what they want, ie a single source for information about all provision (at all levels and in all areas).

Prospective students search print-based and internet-based material by subject (and sometimes location). This suggests that there is little benefit in listing Fds in a discrete section within a prospectus (unless this is in addition to presenting them by subject). Prospective students are likely to welcome the search function on the Foundation Degrees in Sussex website which enables them to search by subject and/or qualification and/or location (although, of course, it will only be used by those who are already at least open to the possibility of undertaking a Fd).

The SLN IAG team reports that IAG practitioners (tutors and IAG advisers) find the Foundation Degrees in Sussex directory useful. While individuals often express a relatively narrow range of subject interests, the directory enables advisers to access information across a range of subjects and bring other subjects of potential interest to individuals' attention.

Marketing materials designed to be looked at briefly (eg posters) need to use punchy messages to appeal to segments of the market. Since most people don't know what Fds are, the 'hook' must be what a segment of the target market might be seeking and the 'punchline' the fact that a Fd can provide this. For example *"Do you want to progress within your career? Do you want to gain a qualification without taking a career break? A Foundation degree may be the answer"*.

Older students suggested that “infotiselements” in local papers explaining the Fd concept would be helpful (an approach applied within the SLN’s marketing campaigns). Infotiselements, websites, and printed literature designed to be taken away can contain more information. Recognising that there is a limit to the amount of information that can effectively be included, participants suggested the following key messages:

- A Fd can be a stepping-stone to an honours degree
- Flexible study options
- The vocational nature of the training
- Entry requirements
- Course duration
- Accreditation level
- (For participants with additional needs) that needs would be met, eg free childcare or financial support

All Sussex providers should ensure that websites and prospectuses contain a brief introduction to Fds, including success stories of students studying for Fds or who have progressed to gain an honours degree or promotion at work.



Developing life and employability skills



Erica Sosna > Erica Sosna is a life skills educator with a background in public policy. She coaches care and educational professionals, young people and organisations. Her approach utilises innovative ways of improving focus, direction and productivity through enhanced self-awareness and emotional literacy.

This article focuses on issues raised during my research into improving the employability of students on Foundation degrees at the University of Brighton. Top of the list of ‘asks’ from students was the desire to build confidence, decide on direction and develop the skills necessary for successful self-employment and entrepreneurship.

With more adults than ever having access to higher education and with the cost of obtaining a degree increasing every year, this article explores how far we are meeting the expectation that a higher education means greater employability. We will explore what can be done to give students more skills, improve their sense of purpose and direction, and turn out more employable, well-rounded graduates.

It is only in recent years, since the development of the widening participation agenda, that university has been an option for the many rather than the few. The cynics amongst us may argue that this drive for participation came not so much from an idealistic zeal for accessibility as a desire to rake in the funds generated from another recent development in education, namely tuition fees and loans.

How can educators enhance employability?

Nevertheless, the government’s drive to have 50% of adults participating in higher education by 2010 appears to be on its way to fruition. Yet, as more and more people come to hold a degree, how are employers to discern which potential employees will serve them best? Furthermore, in an increasingly competitive market, what can we, as educators, do to fulfil our duty in enhancing the employability, and therefore the future, of our graduates?

Increasingly, careers departments and student experience Deans are acknowledging the need for careers guidance and employability skills to be included in the curriculum of existing degrees. The problem here is that the embedding of these skills requires academics to stretch a different set of muscles.

First, it requires them to be able to coach their students into identifying their specialist area or vocation, then to use interactive and dynamic methods of teaching to increase their ability to perform the ‘soft skills’ activities such as project management, networking and innovation that employers are increasingly seeking. The nature of academia does not necessarily lend itself to these education styles.

The meeting of this expectation is where a crucial role is played by the careers service and other supporting advice and guidance. The careers team can offer extra-curricular opportunities to develop skills beyond those traditionally acquired in academia. Moreover, the hosting of university-wide workshops enables students to move out of humanities or science silos and be exposed to others with different interests, approaches and views on the world – a useful skill for coping with the wider world beyond the university ‘bubble’.

Such programmes also benefit the organisation through economies of scale – saving time and money through developing a ‘whole school’ approach rather than developing these abilities through a tailor-made, subject-specific addition to the curriculum.

Effective programmes

So what kinds of programmes could really add value to the employment chances of our many new graduates? Certainly the development of work-based learning opportunities, pioneered within the Foundation degree model, offers a valuable opportunity to experience theory translated into real-life practice, to learn from practitioners and businesses and to begin to form the networks that can play such a crucial role in securing the job of your dreams in the future. At worst, a work placement will help you to realise what you don’t want to do – at best, it can be a passport of entry into a specialised and niche field.

Secondly, the evolution of personal development and self-awareness programmes can play a valuable role in increasing the confidence and motivation of students. Very few of us, prior to adulthood, were given a chance to really explore in depth our key talents, passions and skills, bar the usual cliché of “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Now, universities, careers services and employers can make use of an extensive range of personality typology tools including Myers Briggs, PRISM and Wealth Dynamics. These psychometric tests enable students to develop a better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and give some clue as to where they may best be applied.

This opportunity to understand your ‘type’ not only provides tremendous relief and esteem – for example to an artistic child, beleaguered and undermined by rational parents – but it also enhances people’s ability to understand and value difference and diversity, a crucial skill for successfully negotiating the relationships forged in any workplace environment.

Thirdly, there are the practical skills for employment, such as developing a great CV, acquiring relevant work experience, presentation and dress – these may seem outside academia’s remit, but they are truly crucial for employment in a world where appearances count. Bringing in outsiders – recruitment consultants, style advisors, last year’s graduates, vocational coaches – can all help build confidence, improve presentations and help new graduates showcase their talent in a compelling way.

Lastly, there is the need to address the skills gap for entrepreneurs and the self-employed. As the concept of ‘jobs for life’ moves further and further away from our focus, many of our graduates, particularly in the creative industries, media and design, will expect to become freelancers, sole traders or entrepreneurs. They will be working on short-term contracts, developing their marketing and brand in order to ensure a pay cheque at the end of the month, and developing the products and services of the future.

Currently, even our business studies education is rarely vocational enough to meet the concerns of the young entrepreneur. Can we train people to become risk takers? To act strongly on their intuition and to trust it? To hold strong to a visionary idea for the future even in the face of adversity and disagreement? To persuade their bank manager to part with a start-up loan?

Student expectations

Increasingly, the young adults and graduates I work with are looking to hone these skills. And they expect their place of study to support them by signposting to funders, networks, competitions and opportunities that may help them to get started in their area of choice.

Many of the under-19s I work with offer the opinion that formal education cannot offer them the experience and exposure they feel they need to succeed. They will cite Branson and Sugar as inspiration, men who have no formal qualifications, and Anita Roddick, a visionary social entrepreneur, who set up The Body Shop without business plans, a degree in finance or significant venture capital backing.

As the world of work becomes more complex, diverse and fast-moving, so too academia is required to shift to provide adequate preparation for future entrants into this world. Arguably, the more clear our students are on their direction and vocation, the more motivated they will be to take the required steps and the clearer the path on which they need to tread will be.

If we are to support them in acquiring this clarity, moving forward and succeeding, we need to look seriously at what we consider to be the life skills, self-awareness and employability talents they will need to possess to succeed.

As educators, we are being called to explore, in a collaborative fashion, how we can meet these needs. This is crucial, not just for our graduates' success but also for the success of our institutions that, in a competitive market, need to prove their value and performance to the student marketplace, funders and employers.

