

Foundation Direct

Centre for Excellence
in
Teaching and Learning



Interim Self-Evaluation Report
1st March 2005 – February 28th 2007

16 July 2007



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1.0 Summary

Foundation Direct was established in March 2005 with the aim of providing: a support service for all University of Portsmouth Foundation degree students delivered by tutors at a Drop-in and Virtual Centre; PDP units that include careers management support; support for other stakeholders in Foundation degrees (employers, FE colleges and professional bodies) and a centre for research into Foundation degrees and the dissemination of good practice. In the two years of its operation the Director, Operational Manager and seconded staff from the University who represented the excellent practice that had been recognised through the award of the CETL, a partner college tutor and external appointees have been building on existing University student support systems and developing enhanced provision tailored to the specific needs of Foundation degree learners.

During the first two years of operation Foundation Direct has:

- Established the newly built Foundation Direct Centre that provides tutor support for learners who drop in, high specification rooms used by students for group work and private study, APEL guidance, pre-entry and IT training support materials and an IT training room and training for students and staff.
- Developed a Professional Development Unit (that includes careers management) through a pilot study with the FdA Early Years Care and Education and evaluated and rewritten the PDU Unit for the subsequent Early Years intake and FdA Education Administration.
- Worked with employers, FE colleges and professional bodies to:
 - develop new Foundation degrees in Education Administration, Creative Technologies and Enterprise, and Government;
 - provide staff development on Foundation degrees;
 - review Foundation degree marketing;
 - develop support materials for mentors including a training website;
 - provide curriculum development support for partner colleges.
- Disseminated the ideas of the CETL through the Foundation Direct website, staff development workshops, consultation, conferences and seminars both within the University and to the national audience.
- As a research centre: evaluated its support provisions and started research in learner's identity and success, work-based learning in Foundation degrees and employer engagement. This research involves collaboration with Foundation Degree Forward, the Open University "PILS" Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the "Practice Based Learning" project at the Universities of Ulster, Northumbria and Bournemouth.

Foundation Direct is on target in its aims to provide comprehensive support for Foundation degree students and other stakeholders in these degrees. It is too early to provide thoroughly researched data on the impact of the CETL but there are very positive responses about the quality and feel of the Centre, the impact of the PDU on learning and retention and 'Mentor Direct', the mentor support website, is already gaining recognition within the University and serious interest from other HEIs. Foundation Direct is progressing the University's commitment to Foundation degrees and education that supports workforce development needs and is already demonstrating the potential to become a National Centre for research and consultation on Foundation degree development to the sector.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Institutional Context

The University of Portsmouth is committed to Foundation degrees and all that they reflect about the current and changing context of higher education. The agendas of accessibility and widening participation, progression and lifelong learning, partnership, economic regeneration and the role of the university in a global knowledge based economy are all included within the University of Portsmouth's draft Strategic Plan for 2007 -2012, which also states,

"We will continue to work actively with employers, SEEDA, Sector Skills Councils, the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Lifelong Learning Network and other agencies to identify potential new developments aimed at new sectors of the market".

(University of Portsmouth Strategic Plan 2007 -2012, Consultation Draft, p 8)

Active support across the University for the Foundation Direct CETL bid reflected this commitment and the support provided by Foundation Direct to enhance and expand the University's Foundation degree provision is now central to the new Strategic Plan.

The University and partner college Foundation degree student numbers have been maintained since the launch of Foundation Direct despite problems with funding for health-related programmes and the withdrawal of Home Office funding for Police Studies. During those two years, growth in Business and Management and University taught education programmes represents a healthy underlying growth in numbers. Foundation Direct has added a new resource to support these existing programmes providing mentor support, consultation on quality enhancement particularly in relation to work-based learning and curricula design for employer engagement. Foundation Direct is also active in helping the University refresh its portfolio of programmes with the development of new programmes in Education Administration (2006 start), Creative Technologies and Enterprise (2007 start) and further programmes that are moving toward validation: Government (February 2008 start) and programmes in Education and Information Technology and Engineering scheduled for September 2008 starts (the latter in association with the Hampshire and Isle of Wight LLN). These new programmes will add to the thirteen Foundation degree awards currently on offer. The new programmes will also diversify the types of awards, bringing in more work with SMEs, additional distance learning challenges and more variation in the forms of work-based learning on offer by adding greater emphasis to work-based projects in some programmes and further accredited training at work elsewhere.

2.2 Contents of the Evaluation

This report provides an evaluation of the achievements of Foundation Direct during its first two years of development until the end of February 2007 and includes comments on the one month (February 2007) during which the Foundation Direct Centre was open as a drop-in resource for students. This

evaluation is set against the aims of the CETL as set out in the Stage 2 bid to HEFCE, which is reproduced in Section 3.0 below. Section 3.0 also explains the development and staffing strategies and pedagogic aims of Foundation Direct. The Sections 4.0 through to 6.0 explore the workings of Foundation Direct and the interim findings emerging from the work of the CETL. Section 7.0 draws on these findings and points to the research questions and strategies that have emerged. Section 8.0 reflects on developments in disseminating the work of Foundation Direct and Section 9.0 explains future plans. Finally an appendix is added in Section 9.0 indicating significant developments since the end of February 2007 that suggest pointers to the future scenario.

2.3 Purpose of the Evaluation

This evaluation has been completed both to assist the CETL team in its further thinking, planning and actions and to inform the University and external audiences of the lessons learned from the work of Foundation Direct to inform future good practice in relation to Foundation degree curriculum design and learner support. This report will also be used as a measure against which future progress can be analysed and evaluated in reports to the Foundation Direct Steering Committee and the final summative report to HEFCE and the sector on the CETL in 2010.

2.4 Evaluation Approach

The evaluative approach used in the writing of this report involves a synthesis of the reflections of the various stakeholders in the work of Foundation Direct. For the team of staff at Foundation Direct this process included reflecting on progress and development measured against “benchmark” statements they had written when they joined the team and a series of SWOT analyses on the sub-projects for which individual members of the team took lead responsibility. The SWOT analyses drew on feedback from students and tutors, quantitative data on involvement in various aspects of the Centre’s activities and early research findings from focus groups with relevant stakeholders. The teams’ reflections and SWOT analyses have been edited by the Director and represented as the Findings part of this report, see Sections 4.0 to 6.0 below.

The first draft of this report was considered by the University’s Learning and Teaching Committee on 27 April 2007 and the second draft was considered by the Foundation Direct Steering Committee on 15 May 2007. Additional information particularly on research developments (Section 6.0) have been added in the third and final draft completed on 16 July 2007.

3.0 Aims of the Foundation Direct CETL

3.1 Aims of Foundation Direct

Foundation Direct builds on the University's recognised good practices in supporting learners in their study and career management, work-based learning traditions and an emerging reputation as a provider of Foundation degrees. The purpose of the CETL is to bring together these practices in a holistic way with, as stated in the Stage 2 bid to HEFCE, the aims to provide the following:

- 1) *A physical and virtual centre that provides a blend of campus-based and e-learning support to meet the needs of the University's significant and growing number of Foundation degree students.*
- 2) *Centre Tutors offering a mixture of generic and subject specific guidance for on-campus and distance learners.*
- 3) *Career management skills tailored to the needs of Foundation degree students.*
- 4) *Personal Development Planning PDP units that structure support through the student lifecycle with pre-entry activity, on-entry assessment, progress reporting, professional skills development and career and progression planning.*
- 5) *A single point of reference for employers, FE colleges and professional bodies who are engaged with Foundation degree students through curriculum development, collaborative delivery, shared good practice and staff development.*
- 6) *A centre for research into Foundation degrees and dissemination of good practice within the national context, in collaboration with the HE Academy, Foundation Degree Forward, the Centre for Recording Achievement and other CETLs.*

(Stage 2 bid for CETL funding, Oct 2004)

3.2 Developing the Aims

The CETL was in temporary accommodation for its first 19 months and during this period the six aims of the CETL were progressed as three relatively separate areas of activity relating to the Drop-in Centre, the development of the PDP and support for other stakeholders. Following analysis of feedback from students, tutors and other stakeholders, adjustments were made in the progressing of the aims.

The key changes were that the Drop-in Centre was re-conceptualised as: a location where students could find immediate answers from duty tutors without booking tutorials; a provider of workshops on various professional development, IT and study skills topics, as and when needed by students given the timetables of their learning; and a place where bookable private study and group study sessions could be organised by learners. This enriched the original idea of a tutorial (including online) service that offered answers to frequently asked questions and spaces in which classes for Foundation degree students could be offered.

The PDP unit has been re-designated and suitably adjusted to become a Professional Development Unit (PDU) with clearer focus on integrated learning, communities of practice and professional standards. Take up of the Unit by existing Foundation degrees has not been as rapid as planned. There are two reasons for this: firstly the variability in the curriculum design and professional/sector skills requirements of some University Foundation degrees makes change difficult in the short term and secondly the pilot with the FdA Early Years has indicated that the amount of curriculum re-planning required is too much for some course teams. All new Foundation degrees are going to include versions of the PDU and an adjusted timetable for existing Foundation degrees involving either adoption of the PDU or access to the support materials of the PDU through alternative online means is planned. Furthermore the support mechanisms for course teams provided by Foundation Direct are being adjusted.

The expected consultation offered to partner colleges as well as University course teams and meetings with employers and other engagement strategies are being developed but slower than anticipated. With greater understanding of the potential offered by Foundation Direct requests for help have increased particularly since the CETL was located in its proper home. Support for the 'other stakeholders' has had far greater emphasis on the provision of mentor support than envisaged. A Mentor Direct website including training modules has been developed. There has also been completely unanticipated work involved in reviewing the ways to market Foundation degrees.

Details of developments can be found in Sections 4.0, 5.0 and 6.0 respectively.

3.3 Developing the Foundation Direct Team

The aims of Foundation Direct were initially developed by an internally seconded team. The Centre Director (a National Teaching Fellow with expertise in work-based learning) was appointed in March 2005, the Operational Manager in May 2005, followed by a team of developers comprising staff from the University's Academic Skills Unit, Careers Development, the Library, the Learning Media Department and the online distance learning section. This group represented the excellent practice that had been recognised through the award of the CETL. From early in 2006 researcher developers were recruited on 2-3 year contracts from outside the University to work on the developing aims indicated in 3.2 relating to the support centre, the design and writing of online support materials for learners and business and the research and evaluation of developing practice.

3.4 Reflections on the Staffing Strategy

There have been a number of clear advantages in the way the Foundation Direct team has developed, as follows.

- The secondment of staff from within the University was a way of giving recognition for past excellent practice. Furthermore the seconded staff were able to give impetus at the start of the CETL's work bringing

together a blend of pedagogic ideas and practices. They were also able to induct the staff who had been recruited from outside the University.

- The secondment of a tutor from a partner college into the team established a practice whereby people with expertise in different Foundation degree subject areas were employed to help liaison with Foundation degree course teams and help develop course specific materials.
- The developmental approach to staffing has meant that Foundation Direct has maintained flexibility in its staffing budget enabling it to draw in additional staff as opportunities and challenges arose. For example, the offer of support from the NHS to develop pre-entry courses for health-related programmes afforded the opportunity to co-fund a Pre-entry Developer from June 2006. At the same time as students and staff began expressing concern about their own IT skills and abilities in working within a Virtual Learning Environment, an IT tutor with FE experience was brought in to support both students and staff with their IT and blended learning needs. More recently at the stage when there were newly developed materials and practice to research, a research assistant was brought into the team to work alongside the researcher who is co-funded by Foundation Degree Forward to look into the emerging issue of employer engagement in relation to the University's newly validated Creative Technologies and Enterprise programme.

The policy of staffing to meet emergent needs will result in future research appointments, administrative support and an Educational Technologist (specifically to support the migration to the new Victory VLE and development of the FdA Government). There will also be an additional appointment to further develop careers management material, continuing the work of existing staff from Careers who now have other priorities.

3.5 Staff Development and Pedagogic Approach

The Foundation Direct team have benefited from staff development through: briefings from the Director; attending in-house training on teaching tips, WebCT, disability and learning issues; attending HEA, CRA and FDF workshops; external conferences; and through mutual support. The result of this development is a team who have now adopted an eclectic approach to learning crystallised out of newly learned and previously held views. Through working and researching together and presenting their ideas and practices to others, the group has enhanced the University's capacity for change.

The emergent pedagogic approach centres on the process of developing communities of practice within learners and within their work-based mentors (Wenger, 1998). In developing learning objects and processes, the focus is on confidence building and the provision of support as and when required: the team recognise that busy employees and companies who are concerned about economic competitiveness are willing to learn when the new knowledge is needed and so the idea of "just in time" knowledge is a key learning and teaching strategy in the Foundation degree context. Ideas about the types of knowledge have been clarified and the motif of the "three domains of learning" (Barnett and Coate, 2002) relating to subject knowledge, practical

knowledge and self knowledge has been adopted in constructing reflective processes for learners and their mentors. Emphasis on professionalism (Winter, 1995) and Reflective Practice (Schön, 1991) have also been adopted as a way of raising learners' aspirations and developing their skills as they are led through the processes of integrating work-based and academic knowledge whilst reflecting on professional development. The affordance of e-learning is being explored and exploited through staged online learning processes that provide 'access and motivation', 'online socialisation', opportunities for 'information exchange', knowledge construction and learner 'development' (Salmon, 2004). In the assessed Professional Development Unit developed by Foundation Direct, levels of learning (Bloom, 1984), constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999), narrative transcripts (Jackson, 2005), assessment by review to capture 'ancillary' and 'unintended learning outcomes' (Lyons and Bement 2001) and the ideas of complex learning, its relation to work-based learning and its assessment (Knight, 2005) are brought together.

4.0 Findings: the Foundation Direct Centre and Tutors

4.1 Aims and Overview of the Foundation Direct Centre

The aim for the Centre was to provide support for Foundation degree students who were known to be different but the nature of this support was not yet clear. In development the Centre has benefited from student feedback as noted in 3.2. Students requested group work-common room spaces.



Advice from Foundation degree course leaders, the University's Academic Skills team (ASK) and the Mathematics Department staff who offer mathematics support to students across the University, emphasised the need for a welcoming environment. Visits to other CETLs have also helped shape the nature of technical facilities and layout of the rooms. The emerging Centre is a physical and virtual centre that provides a blend of campus-based and e-learning support with:

- drop-in learning facilities and workshops, online resources, telephone and web tutoring;
- an environment that encourages students to feel that they 'belong';
- well equipped and bookable group-work rooms;
- workshops in the study rooms or the IT training room:
- white boards, video facilities, flipcharts and computers.

Drop-in Rooms

The opening of the Foundation Direct Centre has, for the first time, provided Foundation degree students with a social learning space in which they can practice presentations and conduct independent group work.



The group working rooms are already being well used by students on the Early Years, Learning Support, Education Administration and Paramedic Science Foundation degrees.

Feedback from students has been extremely encouraging. One Paramedic Science student said:

“Being able to book a room to work together is really useful because getting together to work outside of shifts is really difficult. We get shift time set aside for studying, and I think we'll forward book a room for the next month or two to make the most of it.”

The freedom to work without supervision from lecturers was also cited by a first year Learning Support student as a major benefit:

“We can come in and get ideas together and not get disturbed by anyone. Our ideas are our own then.”

Lecturers also like the informal atmosphere:

“As a Foundation degree tutor I love the rooms on offer at Foundation Direct as they are very student and tutor friendly spaces: we are allowed to bring in a cup of something, they are airy, have all electronic devices on offer and the round tables are wonderful for group work. And the Foundation Direct team are very happy to even make a cup of coffee for the tutors should they need one.”

Tutor Support

Support offered by Foundation Direct tutors at the Drop-in Centre has been well received. Students appreciate the one-to-one contact afforded and clearly value the practical support. Enquiries are mixed but centre on writing skills, referencing, APEL, IT-related areas such as using WebCT, the Athens online library system to access online literature and software tools such as Excel and Word.



“The facilities at Foundation Direct are very beneficial to us as students. It is always open and people are on hand to assist in any way they can.”

(Year 2 Paramedic Science student)

“They were really very helpful, in person and on the phone, approachable and understanding. Both gave me some tips and a few ideas I hadn't thought of. I know where to go now for 'technical' help!”

(Year 2 Learning Support student)

Feedback from students indicates that the ‘on demand’ service offered by the Drop-in Centre was suited to their shift work and family commitments and were especially pleased that the Centre tutors operate on a ‘while-you-wait’ basis. The presentation of the Centre as part of a package that includes the Professional Development Unit and the Mentor support system was also thought to mean students would be more aware of it than the complementary University specialist ASK and Maths Café organisations which were on offer.

Online and Workshop Support

Alongside ASK booklets and study guides that are available through the Centre, further online and paper based support materials are or will be developed supporting IT, study skills, professional behaviour, numeracy and hints on spelling, paragraphs and so on. These subjects were selected following discussions with course leaders and students as to their desirability.

A course lecturer for the FdA Business Management said:

“We find maths is a problem for Foundation degree students *and* undergrads, and we organise workshops in basic maths and stats to try to deal with this. If [Foundation Direct] can develop more study guides like the ones you’ve shown me and put them online, it would be very useful.”

Workshops organised by Foundation Direct have also been welcomed by students especially those focusing on WebCT. Further workshops will be run on writing, referencing and other subjects as demand requires. A pre-entry course is to be piloted in the spring of 2007 for the Health Foundation degrees (for whom it was primarily designed) and this proposed programme will be adopted by the Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) at the University of Southampton. This development will involve the secondment of the Foundation Direct pre-entry developer to work part time on LLN projects at Southampton.

4.2 Lessons Learned

The Foundation Direct support centre and online support service had only been operating for one month two years after the start of the CETL. Already there was good feedback from students who felt valued and course tutors who enjoyed the space and support provided. Early lessons suggest that:

- well timed workshops covering problem subjects scheduled when needed by the course will be well received;
- the bookable space offered to learners made them feel special and valued;
- routine support for learners on general study skills and professional development issues would be of added value and could relieve; pressure on busy course tutors;
- the centre support works well where course teams can present Foundation Direct support as part of the curriculum design package offered to learners;
- the second semester in the academic year was not a good time to launch the Foundation Direct Drop-in Service.

5.0 Findings: Professional Development Unit and Careers

5.1 Aims and Overview of the Professional Development Unit

The Professional Development Unit (PDU) was developed out of the original aim to provide an online and fully embedded Personal Development Planning (PDP) unit that could be re-purposed to suit the needs of different Foundation degrees. As noted in 3.2 the unit has been developed as a Professional Development Unit (PDU) to reflect the overarching aim of helping students to develop and build on their professional capabilities and to engender professional approaches to learning. This change of nomenclature has also been important for staff and curriculum development reasons as indicated in Section 5.3.

The PDU was piloted with the 2005-06 entry of the FdA Early Years Care and Education at the University of Portsmouth and Alton College. Following a successful year, the materials underwent review and expansion in June 2006, including provision for the second year of the Early Years degree and re-purposing of first year materials for the FdA Education Administration. In 2007-2008 two new Foundation degrees and two existing programmes are expected to incorporate the PDU.

Figure 1 schematically illustrates the central role of the PDU within a Foundation degree. The unit is designed to structure support throughout the student lifecycle with pre-entry activity that helps induction into the degree and leads to the on-entry writing of a 'Benchmark Statement'. The support materials provided within the PDU are structured to be available 'Just-in Time' as illustrated by the 'learning loops' in Figure 1 that connect the PDU to the taught in-class and work-based units, providing relevant support at the time that that support is needed. Generic professional and study skills and careers guidance tailored to the specific Foundation degree are provided. ASK, Library and Careers staff have all been involved in the development of the PDU.



As students progress through the PDU they are asked to reflect on, integrate their work-based, academic learning and growing understanding of self and write about this integration in a series of Progress Reviews. To assist the students, they are offered the 3 domains of learning model as shown on the screen shot from the online unit where this is introduced (Figure 2).

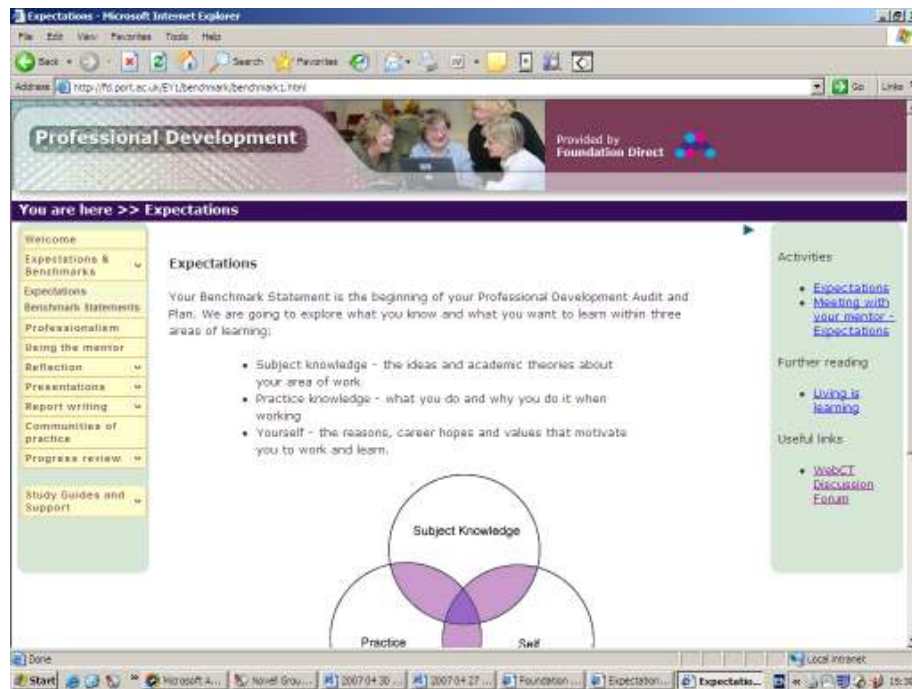


Fig 2: PDU screen, Expectations and the 3 domains of learning

5.2 Lessons Learned

Following evaluation of students’ experiences of the pre-existing PDP unit and the PDU pilot that replaced it, the Foundation Direct team have concluded that structured online learning presented in a blended environment works: students respond to the challenges; enjoy the exploratory learning afforded by the online design and develop professional community skills.

Structured Progress Reviews

Evidence from feedback tells us that students with experience of the previous NVQ “tick the box” approaches to reflection expressed satisfaction at this more academically engaging way of reflection involved with the 3 domains approach. Writing a sequence of Progress Reviews was seen to encourage students to measure their own success and built confidence.

“I, like most of us, thought 'reflect on my benchmark, but it's too soon. I haven't done anything!' How wrong was I? When I read through my benchmark I realised how much I have learnt already and how my ideas for the future have changed.”

(From a draft Review written at week 10 shared with students on the PDU discussion board)

Exploratory learning within a supportive online community

Feedback from the pilot PDU already indicates students who on-entry were apprehensive about the IT and online elements of the degree develop general IT confidence from their explorations and shared learning in the PDU's online learning environment. The external Examiner commented:

“I continue to be very impressed by the culture of ‘blended learning’ that is emerging as a strong feature of the [Early Years] programme delivery... I believe [the online PD Units] to be exemplary and indicative of innovative and high quality practice for contemporary learners. I continue to urge staff to document and disseminate their experiences of the highly effective partnership with Foundation Direct here. This has the potential to make an interesting research project.”

(Mary Whalley, Leeds Metropolitan University)

Professional Development within a Community of Practice

Students are shown how to conduct online discussions with guidance material that replicates the approaches used in listening skills workshops and points to the criteria through which students online interactions are assessed. Guidance is provided through examples of appropriate and inappropriate responses to online postings. Through these examples students are encouraged to ask questions, add points to the discussion, suggest the relevance and practical applications of the posted ideas and synthesize the online debate. The intention is to take the advice on ‘netiquette’ with which learners in a virtual environment are familiar and take it to a professional level.

When reflecting on their personal learning students are asked to reflect on their career ambitions and professional standards. Career opportunities are flagged up and professional standards and ethical issues introduced. Transformations in students can be remarkable:

“When I wrote my benchmark I was unsure what I wanted to do after the Foundation degree, but thought I'd continue childminding. Now after only a few months I realise, although I have loved childminding, I now feel I want to move on. I'm fed up with changing nappies, doing potty training and having toys everywhere! Since October I have been teaching level 3 qualifications in Home-based Childcare and have found this really enjoyable. I am able to use all the knowledge I am learning doing the Fd. I now feel I'd like to teach adults childcare permanently.”

Students happily use the discussion boards to share openly with others enjoying the opportunities to work not just with students from their own institution (discussion board groups mix students from different institutions). They are introduced to this online “community of practice” through an exercise where they share advice on how to study and key points they have learned and post the “top ten tips” agreed within the group for others to read. The following “tips” reflect the integrated nature of learning.

“Allow children the opportunity to resolve situations themselves, enabling them to problem solve, negotiate, learn acceptance and recognise others needs.”

“Nursery world, Early Educator and the DfES website are our most popular resources.”

“Get your research done early, remembering to take notes for your bibliography.”

“Get someone with little or no knowledge of early childhood education to proof read your assignments.”

Through the emerging community of practice, students learn to blend their learning at university with their practice in the workplace and reinforce the links between the two. By working with their peers in class in the same way that they would with their colleagues at work, the boundaries between the two arenas are eroded, creating more support for the individual student, a professional outlook and, as a consequence, increased retention. For example, one student who, for personal reasons had to interrupt her studies for a year, asked if it would be alright to stay involved with the PDU and has done so by regularly joining the discussion board.

6.0 Single Point of Reference for Foundation Degree Stakeholders

6.1 Aims and Overview

To provide support for employers, FE colleges and professional bodies who are engaged with Foundation degree students through curriculum development, collaborative delivery, shared good practice and staff development. This aim has been developed in three ways:

- Developing a mentor support system;
- Curriculum development support;
- Analysis of marketing.

6.2 Mentoring Support

Mentoring of students in work is often seen as an additional burden by employers and potential mentors. Also in many workplaces there is a lack of suitable mentors. Mentor Direct is designed to provide whatever the level of support required through an engaging and interactive support system that offers mentors the opportunity to meet other mentors online. Mentoring training materials have been developed out of best University and published practice. These materials have been adapted to the needs of Foundation degrees and multimedia delivery. A Mentor Project Team has acted as an editorial board in the production of materials with additional feedback from external experts at Sheffield Hallam University, the Practice Based Learning group headed by the University of Ulster and the Open University.

The Mentor Direct website (Figure 3) was launched in February 2007 and provides: interactive mentor skills training, downloadable resources, Foundation degree course information, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), information about mentoring for students and discussion boards. Online blended learning workshops in mentoring practice are proposed in a future stage of Mentor Direct development.



Fig 3. Foundation Direct's online mentoring support: Mentor Direct.
<http://mentordirect.port.ac.uk/>

6.2.1 Mentor Support: Future Plans

In little over a month of operation there has been significant interest in the Mentor Direct website. Mentors and students (the target audiences) constitute roughly half the number of registered users on the website (Figure 4). Guests comprise parties from other HEIs, FE Colleges, the HEA and the University of Portsmouth who have expressed interest in the site and who provide formative feedback.

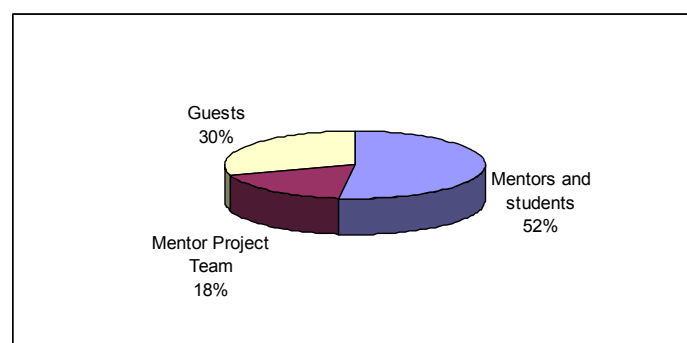


Fig 4: User profiles registered at Mentor Direct website (total number of users = 50).

Training workshops have been run for University Foundation degree teams, support and resources have been provided for other sections of the University (Careers, Library, and Science faculty) involved in other forms of mentoring at the University and staff development on mentoring will be offered at Bath Spa University in July 2007. The following evaluative comments are amongst the many received:

“I am impressed by the mentoring materials received as a new mentor.”
(Early Years mentor)

“The content of these modules seems at first sight to be excellent...All novice mentors will find these modules extremely helpful.”
(ASK Tutor, University of Portsmouth)

The development of mentor support was not expected to be as significant as it has become but it is emerging as a major strategy in employer engagement and employer engagement is proving to be a major issue for Foundation degree development for the University and nationwide. Building engagement through mentor involvement, not least by training existing students to be future mentors in their workplaces may turn out to be very significant and will be evaluated.

6.3 Staff and Curriculum Development

6.3.1 Staff Development: Workshops and Development Grants

Workshops have been offered through 2005–2006 on Foundation degrees and APEL, work-based learning, supporting learners, engaging employers and professional development. The innovatory ideas that were introduced at the workshops were consistently recognised as ‘relevant’ or ‘very relevant’ by

more than 75% of the Foundation degree tutors present. Agendas for development work arose from discussions as follows:

- The development of online guidance on claiming credit for prior learning including experiential learning: tutors had reported a reluctance to award credits for experiential learning.
- Converting the Personal Development Planning unit into a Professional Development Unit (see Section 4.0).
- Developing guidance on work-based learning projects to help the introduction of commercially relevant projects.
- Marketing research (see 5.4).

Through 2005–2006 grants of up to £3K per year for two years were offered “To support the development of, or enhance existing, Foundation degrees at the University” and “To assist in the dissemination of good Foundation degree pedagogic practice”. Only one grant was awarded and five further staff were encouraged with their development plans by receiving support in the presentation of their work in conferences.

2005-2006 was an early stage in the life of the CETL and staff development was focussed on awareness-raising at a time when staff were unforthcoming in suggesting new ideas. The picture had changed by 2007, after an ‘away day’ with Foundation Direct in July participants reported they had developed a clearer picture of the role of Foundation Direct in supporting staff, partner organisations and learners. The day revolved around facilitated discussions on how to work smarter in the delivery of Foundation degrees.

The outcomes of the workshop are:

- Action Learning Groups will be established in which University and partner college tutors explore the further development of the Foundation degree market, the sharing of materials by provider colleges across Foundation degrees, the use of Podcasting, exploration learning and creativity in curriculum design. Other topics will be added.
- Requests have been received for development grants to support online critical and creative thinking materials, employer engagement activities, impact analysis, and additional requests are in the pipeline.

The shift from awareness raising activities to staff development that results in action is a complex process that could be researched, although not by Foundation Direct. The important variables are probably related to timing, the growth of understanding and the growth of ownership of the development agenda.

6.3.2 Curriculum Development

In collaboration with the University’s one stop shop for Industry “Purple Door” and relevant academic departments, curriculum development work has included discussion on interpretations of the QAA Foundation degree framework, work-based assessment strategies, designing online learning and the use of the University’s VLE. It has also contributed to the development of the Foundation degrees in Education Administration (validated 2006), Creative Technology and Enterprise (validated 2007) and work continues on

proposed programmes in Government (proposed starts in 2008) and Engineering (no date fixed) working with the Hampshire LLN.

This is perhaps the most important staff and curriculum development work where Foundation Direct staff have facilitated meetings of employers, sector skills councils, Foundation Degree Forward and tutors to explore possibilities and shape curriculum designs.

6.4 Marketing Foundation Degrees

A ‘Mystery Shopper’ analysis carried out by Foundation Direct in December 2006, has been the catalyst for a proposed new strategy for marketing Foundation degrees and other work-based and post-graduate awards that have direct relevance to business. The “business to business” strategy will be recommended to the University’s Strategic Planning Group.

7.0 Research

7.1 Research Strategy

The aim is to develop a scholarship of teaching for working with Foundation degree students involving research in the following three areas:

- The Foundation degree student.
- The learning support provision for Foundation degree students.
- Foundation degree curriculum design.

The objective is to establish the evidence-base for effective, efficient and sustainable learning support for Foundation degree students in relation to:

- The Foundation degree students' identities, approaches to learning and career and progression aspirations.
- Learning support for Foundation degree students at work and in FE/HE environments through Foundation Direct and mentor provision.
- The blend of work-based, classroom and e-learning.

A staged programme of research has developed involving a literature review of best practice, evaluative research and then progression into the investigation of substantial pedagogic research questions. During the final research stage there will be collaboration with other HEIs and relevant bodies to extend the sample base for Foundation Direct research. Over the last year, Foundation Direct has established relationships with a number of external partners, most notably the Open University's PILS CETL and the 'Practice Based Learning' project, based at the Universities of Ulster and Northumbria.

7.2 Research Progress

Research is on schedule. A Literature Review has been ongoing to discover the learning and teaching support practices that have worked in relation to: Personal Development Planning; mentor recruitment and training; and pre-entry, Drop-in Centre and IT training support. As Foundation Direct materials and services have been developed, evaluative research has been put in place to analyse what works. Data is still being analysed although initial feedback on the PDU suggests a very positive student response.

A project that utilises baseline quantitative information on Foundation degree students to research the social and demographic factors that might impact on Foundation degree student retention and achievement has reached the draft report stage.

Information being gathered from initial evaluations of support systems being developed includes data that relates to emerging research in four areas: the PDU, mentoring, the Drop-in Centre, and work-based learning.

7.3 Lessons Learned

As development work on the above topics progressed, it became clear that there are important areas of overlap between them that potentially carry greater significance for student development, confidence and satisfaction. Out of these developments research questions have emerged relating to:

- The social context, the nature of peer support and the personal identities and backgrounds of each learner and the part they play in how well students engage with their course. The types of additional support students might need, and the approaches to learning that are most suitable. Through a joint questionnaire, interviews and focus groups, the team hopes to find some answers to these questions, building up a synthesised view of student learning on Foundation degrees.
- The affordances offered by blended learning technologies. The Centre has purchased a small amount of software and equipment from an additional capital funds bid to explore:
 - The use of ‘podcasts’ for student learning (augmenting current research being led by the University’s disability group into the effectiveness of podcasting for students with disabilities).
 - The value of streamed video and the use of a video booth that allows students to record their thoughts either as a vehicle for ‘personal reflection’, or as a feedback mechanism for commenting on the Foundation Direct provision.
 - The use of virtual classroom software in enabling distance learning support for the students in the area of IT, academic skills and disability advice. The provision of this environment has also revealed an opportunity to evaluate this type of product as a means to enhance ‘student collaborations’ on group project work for what are often remote learners.
 - The use of a software solution that allows for ‘Communities of Practice’ and reflection on continuing professional development to extend beyond the end of the degree courses (current WebCT offering is restricted to course cohort and access ends for alumni).
- The effective engagement of employers in the creative technologies research with the FdSc Creative Technologies and Enterprise has been co-funded by Foundation Degree Forward.
- The impact of Foundation degrees on learners nationally: this project links to a FDF funded impact analysis research project. A specific impact analysis is also being developed by a Portsmouth Foundation degree course leader looking at the impact of the FdSc Medicines Management on work practices.
- The navigation of blended learning moments by Foundation degree students (funded by HEA).

The richness of the developing research suggests that Foundation Direct is developing the capacity to become a core player in the researching of Foundation degrees.

8.0 Dissemination

8.1 Dissemination Strategy

A staged approach to dissemination that moves from raising awareness through gaining understanding to action and embedding processes has been adopted. Foundation Direct is also committed to collaborative activities to add to the impact and cost effectiveness of dissemination activities and this is being realised through work with the HEA, Foundation Degree Forward, the Centre for Recording Achievement, other CETLs and Universities. The strategy has been translated into an effective plan with the following outcomes.

8.2 Dissemination Activities

University briefings have included meetings with senior staff, reports to University and Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees, presentations at Learning and Teaching weeks and the Annual Staff Conference and staff and curriculum development events (see Section 6.3).

External audiences have been briefed through: their representation on the Steering Committee; presentations at regional and national HEA, CRA, SEEC and FDF events, at international conferences and blog sites, through visits to and from FE Colleges, Universities and Health Service bodies in the region and Universities nationally; papers have been submitted for publication in educational journals and an FDF edited book and a Foundation Direct mentoring support case study is to be included in a future publication; the Foundation Direct website, a newsletter and pamphlets have been produced and circulated; and collaboration with other work-based learning centres has occurred through the HEA's Expert Group on work-based learning.

8.3 Lessons Learned

Dissemination has been most successful when activities have been involved. The website and newsletters have not resulted in as much interest and collaboration as that emerging from: visits to Foundation Direct by University staff and external representatives; staff development activities including workshops, away days and curriculum planning; conference presentations and networking meetings with employers and through Lifelong Learning Networks. Key to the future success of Foundation Direct is the work that is done in collaboration with others rather than work for others.

9.0 Future Plans

9.1 Lessons Learned within Foundation Direct

Developments to date have been through an iterative process and through that process new connections and discoveries are being made; for example, the connections between the PDU and Mentor Direct have evolved so that it is now planned to offer mentor training as part of the PDU to ensure a ready supply of future mentors and potential recruiters to the Foundation degrees.

The CETL is developing understanding of:

- The needs of mature part-time learners who are in employment and ways to support them and build their professional development skills.
- Ways of engaging with employers that result in work relevant curricula.
- Ways of supporting and developing the availability of work placed mentors.
- Techniques for developing learners' communities.
- How to design curricula that can be re-purposed for different student groups.
- The preparation of learning materials for disabled learners.
- The provision of drop-in and online tutoring support for learners.
- Effective Personal Development Planning.
- Learning spaces.

9.2 Impact on the University

Foundation Direct will have a significant part to play in: developing and progressing the University's e-learning strategy, the development of new Foundation degree programmes, developing staff and supporting students and their mentors on Foundation degrees.

Foundation Direct already adds to the University's capacity to:

- Support distance and work-based learners.
- Develop new Foundation degree programmes.
- Develop blended learning approaches that use new technologies and the various affordances of online learning (e.g. "Just in Time" provision, online communities of practice, exploration learning).
- Support and manage the growth in APEL claims by students.
- Recognise and reward staff for their contributions to learning and teaching developments.

The future impact of Foundation Direct is uncertain. The following are possible future scenarios for Foundation Direct's support systems.

9.2.1 Drop-in Centre

The intake of new students at the start of the next academic year presents an opportunity to support the new student entry with pre-entry, induction and programmed support workshops from the beginning and this should result in a

rapid expansion of Foundation Direct support and tutoring. It is anticipated on the basis of the extremely positive response from existing users and the growing understanding of subject tutors that the Drop-in Centre offers a potential to relieve course tutors of the responsibility for many hours of tutoring.

“Once I realised the amount that you guys at Foundation Direct can and will offer to the students in terms of writing support, essay structuring, research question discussion, and lay out and display of charts and tables, I made sure I was sending students to you rather than cramming in a few minutes per student. We will also refer students to your helpline: I referred two this morning and two yesterday.” (Course lecturer for Early Years)

Lecturers on other degree programmes may well recognise that a Drop-in Centre approach has the potential to provide some of the tutoring support required by all students. There is immediate potential in the imminent administrative re-location of Foundation Direct in the Faculty of Humanities that the Drop-in Centre and online tutor service will merge with that already provided by the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies in that Faculty. There is discussion about extending the service to support students across the Faculty. Beyond that there is the possibility of merging Foundation Direct online and Drop-in tutoring with the service currently offered by ASK to provide a cross University drop-in and online support system.

Through such support the Foundation Direct Centre has the potential to play an important role in facilitating access and retention of widening participation and work-based students, and hence contribute to the University’s commitment to increasing its proportion of such students.

9.2.2 Professional Development Unit

The PDU is being incorporated in all new Foundation degrees. The level of student satisfaction with the pilot programme and other programmes now committed to the PDU, supplemented with confidently expected data on improved retention and progress should persuade existing Foundation degree teams to commit to the work of redesigning their programmes and incorporating the PDU. The PDU would work successfully as a unit in any degree, with appropriate repurposing, and its online delivery blended with in-class support makes it ideally mobile. Already there is a request to re-purpose the PDU for a Masters programme in the University. Development for the Fd Creative Technologies will use the PDU as the vehicle for induction into the spine of the degree. As the PDU is migrated to the University’s new VLE “Victory” it will benefit from the additional affordances: portfolio, additional communications and anti-plagiarism possibilities. Streamed video materials will also be incorporated through 2007-2008. There are proposals for a Foundation Direct funded project from the Fd Creative Technologies tutors to use video-making students on that degree to make podcasts on topics related to student support, work-based learning methods and so on.

It is also planned to make PDU materials available as an optional resource in a separate website, based upon the core pedagogy of the PDU. This could result in potentially unlimited adoption of the PDU materials and would progress the University’s development of its PDP agenda.

9.3 Supporting Foundation Degree Stakeholders

9.3.1 Mentor Support

There is enormous potential in the further development of mentor support materials. Demand for Foundation Direct mentoring support resources has been voiced by the University's Business School, the Careers department (for ethnic minority students) and by the University's Disability Advice Centre. External interest in access to Mentor Direct has been expressed by several academic institutions including two HEA subject centres, the Open University, the Universities of Huddersfield, Bath, Bath Spa, Winchester, Central England, Greenwich and at least one Further Education college. Victoria University, Melbourne, has also expressed interest. A number of these institutions are potentially interested in purchasing access to the site and materials for their own mentor support frameworks.

In addition a networking system of e-mentoring for students without a suitable mentor in their workplace is being considered and further work is planned to develop mentor training within the PDU to ensure a ready source of mentors in the future.

9.3.2 Curriculum Development

The proposed expansion of Foundation degree national student numbers from the current 60,000 to 100,000 by 2010 suggests significant work for the future. New Foundation degrees are already developing in new ways. Both the FdSc Creative Technologies and the proposed FdA Government are planning to use the PDU as a spine to the degree and innovations in work-based learning are also being offered. With the Creative Technology programme the degree has been developed with employers engaged in content discussions through focus groups and engagement issues are the subject of a Foundation Direct/FDF research project. This model needs further exploration and this may materialise through the curriculum development process currently being discussed within the Fd Engineering Curriculum Group of the Hampshire Lifelong Learning Network.

9.3.3 Staff Development

For some staff development has moved to a stage where the Foundation degree framework, issues relating to employer engagement and work-based learning and teaching are understood and Action Research Groups are appropriate staff development approaches (see Section 5.3.1). For others, both within and without the University, awareness raising staff development will continue. There is potential to include such an agenda within the University's post graduate certificate for higher education teachers and this will be explored.

9.3.4 Research

Foundation Direct has expanded its initial research aims which largely focussed on evaluative research into its own practice as research questions

have emerged. The Centre has attracted outside funding for: a co-funded project on Employer to Engagement and a fully funded project on the impact of Foundation degree studies on students and their places of employment from Foundation Degree Forward; an HEA funded project on “Students’ navigation of blended learning affordance” and is a collaborator in a HEFCE funded National Teaching Fellowship project “Evaluating PDP and E- Portfolios” that is being led by the University of Bolton. Many of these research projects are exploring and hopefully establishing methodologies that will result in longitudinal research. The research capacity at Foundation Direct and the promised research output suggests that the Centre will produce significant findings on Foundation degrees in relation to student support and other related questions. As a consequence the Centre has the potential to become a centre of national importance.

9.3.5 Dissemination

Foundation Direct is building the reputation of the University as a centre for Foundation degrees as evidenced by our collaborations with FDF and other dissemination activities. Dissemination has now reached the ‘Action’ and ‘Embedding’ stages with the materials developed by Foundation Direct being considered by new groups within the University and at other institutions. Furthermore dissemination for ‘Awareness’ and ‘Understanding’ now includes the first of the planned study tours from other HEIs to Portsmouth and has included an online ‘blogging’ conference with the University of Southern Queensland. The dissemination of research findings (as in 9.3.4) will be a key activity in the next three years and beyond.

10.0 Glossary

APL/ APEL	Accreditation of Prior Learning/Accreditation of Prior (and Experiential) Learning Through APEL, credit can be assigned for both certificated learning and for learning which has been acquired through experience which has not previously been assessed, measured or certificated.
ASK	Academic Skills Unit: offers support to both students and staff on academic and information skills.
Athens	Athens is a system of authentication that ensures rights to access electronic products such as databases or electronic journals.
Benchmark Statement	At the beginning of the PDU learners write a benchmark statement against which they can measure and report on their learning progress in future reports.
CETL	Centre for Excellence in Teaching & Learning
CoP	Community of Practice: refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem, collaborate over an extended period to share ideas and find solutions.
CRA	Centre for Recording Achievement
DfES	Department for Education & Science
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions
Fd	Foundation degree
FE	Further Education
FDF	Foundation Degree Forward
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
LLN	Lifelong Learning Network
Maths Café	The University of Portsmouth Maths department offers students support in Mathematics through meetings held in the informality of various café settings around the University.
NHS	National Health Service
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
PILS	Personalised Integrated Learning Support Centre: the Open University's CETL
PDP	Personal Development Planning
PDU	Professional Development Unit
SEEC	South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation & Transfer
SEEDA	South East England Development Agency
Victory Vista	The name given to the University of Portsmouth virtual learning environment
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
Web CT	The proprietary name of the University's virtual learning environment

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