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## Really useful qualifications and learning? Exploring the policy effects of new sub-bachelors degree qualifications

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How to cite:

Edmonds, Nadia; Fuller, Alison; Hillier, Yvonne; Ingram, Robert; Little, Brenda; Reeve, Fiona and Webb, Sue (2009). Really useful qualifications and learning? Exploring the policy effects of new sub-bachelors degree qualifications. In: 39th Annual Conference of the Standing Conference on university teaching and research in the education of adults (SCUTREA), 7-9 Jul 2009, Cambridge, UK.

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Version: [not recorded]

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## **Symposium: Really useful qualifications and learning? Exploring the policy effects of new sub-bachelors degree qualifications**

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### **Introduction**

This symposium addresses the conference theme of the relationship between policy, practice and research by critically examining policy discourse in lifelong learning and the role of research in understanding policy effects.

In the last decade major new policy initiatives in the UK have attempted to articulate and respond to the needs of the so-called knowledge society in the context of lifelong learning (DfES, 2003 (a); Leitch, 2006). Employers have been urged to invest in workforce development as one way of increasing competitiveness (DIUS, 2007, DIUS, 2008) and successive government-led initiatives have sought to increase and widen participation in higher education both to meet economic needs - the human capital argument - and to address social imperatives of equality of opportunity and social inclusiveness. The emergence of the knowledge society has also been used to drive a new 'vocational' emphasis in higher education teaching and the curriculum, most recently through the emphasis placed upon foundation degrees (FDs).

The foundation degree (FD), introduced in England by government in 2001 can be seen as one attempt to synthesise these competing economic and social justice agendas (Doyle, 2003, Webb, Brine and Jackson, 2006). FDs were positioned as meeting a perceived need for workers with intermediate level skills in the UK workforce, whilst also increasing and widening participation in HE by providing a more accessible route in to and through HE to bachelor degree level.

It is interesting to note that the major government-sponsored committee of inquiry, established in the late 1990s to make recommendations about how UK higher education should develop in the next twenty years (the Dearing Committee) had endorsed the continued expansion of HE at sub-Bachelors level. It is in this context that the 50 per cent participation target was set for England in 2001, to ensure that 50 percent of the 18 -30 year old populations would have an experience of higher education by 2010. Scotland with an age participation index of 45% was closer to achieving this target partly because of the significant role played by the colleges and their provision of sub-degree vocational qualifications

(Gallacher, 2006). Not surprisingly, the government's 2003 White Paper (DfES, 2003a) just a few years after publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) sought a new way to promote the expansion of HE in England, principally through the (newly-established) FDs. As Robertson's (2002) wide-ranging international review of intermediate-level qualifications, undertaken in the early 2000s against the back-drop of government proposals for the FD noted it is not only the supply of sub-Bachelors degree that has been patchy but that employer demand continues to be weak too.

FDs were the first major new higher education qualification to be introduced in England since the diploma of higher education in the 1970s (Parry, 2006). Parry also notes it was the first time that a short-cycle qualification carried the title 'degree' rather than diploma or certificate, though some have suggested that the use of the term 'degree' stretches the concept beyond its normal usage in order to create an illusionary parity of esteem (Gibbs, 2002). Yet, arguably one reason for needing to introduce a new sub-bachelors degree qualification in England was the perceived failure of the further education sector and newly unified higher education sectors to widen access and expand higher level vocational education especially in comparison to the practices in Scotland. Remarkably, in England, the numbers of students on sub-bachelor degree qualifications did not expand during the period 1989-1993 to the same extent as those on first degrees, according to Parry (2006). He argues that when publicly funded expansion came to an end in 1994, English higher education had acquired a new and different balance of qualification levels and modes, and the role of further education had been reduced. This was very different to Scotland where further education and short-cycle (sub-bachelor degree qualifications, vocational qualifications in the main), played an important role in widening access to higher education (Parry, 2006).

Since their introduction in 2001 these programmes have expanded considerably and the target of 100,000 students by 2010 is expected to be met (HEFCE, 2008). By 2007, there were nearly 30,000 FD students, compared with 27,425 HND and 15,465 HNC students (HEFCE 2007). Take up of the HND/C, the two long established higher level vocational qualifications, had been in decline (in England), largely as a consequence of students' growing preference for attainment at first degree level. The introduction of the foundation degree in 2001 has driven further diversification of the HE system by creating higher level courses in areas and occupational roles (e.g. classroom assistant) that previously did not have specific higher level qualifications associated with them.

Strategically the policy effects of foundation degrees seem to be providing new ways to address widening participation and attract students from a broad range of backgrounds including vocational qualifications (HEFCE, 2008). In particular part-time FDs are providing a new route to higher level study, including for those in employment (HEFCE, 2008). They are recruiting a majority of females, a majority of whom are mature and they are studying for new qualifications, in the

main, in education, perhaps driven by new regulatory changes for employment in Children's Services. Undoubtedly, these programmes and cohorts are different from the higher national vocational qualifications they have superseded. Interestingly though, given that FDs are new vocational qualifications, vocational qualifications are not the predominant entry route (HEFCE, 2008 analysis of 2005-06 entry data). There are differences between full-time and part-time FDs entrants, with BTEC level 3 showing the largest proportional growth among the full-time entrants and previous experience of HE still the most dominant entry route for part-time entrants. But, A levels or equivalent (including AS or Scottish equivalents) are the predominant highest qualification on entry, for both modes, though rather more so for the full-time route. Approximately 50% of graduates from FDs go on to gain a bachelor degree (HEFCE, 2008).

At the outset, FDs were expected to be developed and delivered through innovative partnerships between employers, higher education institutions, colleges and relevant professional and occupational bodies. They were also expected to include significant amounts of 'authentic and innovative work-based learning' (QAA, 2004). As such, they can be seen as another component of government educational policies seeking to redress the balance between academic and vocational qualifications at various levels within the compulsory and post-compulsory education and training systems in the UK. Hyland (2002) reminds us that within the UK attempts to enhance the status of vocational education and training generally and create parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning goes back a long way - at least to the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Hyland, 2002, p.287). The discourse about vocational education and training, continues to be about 'other people's children' (Hyland, 2002, p.288; Wolf, 2002, pp56- 97) and draws on the social class divide that clearly exists about the value of vocational versus more general or academic studies (see Hyland, 2002). Arguably, the foundation degree, with its work-based learning components and vocational emphasis has had to struggle to get away from being talked about as 'sub-degree' and so perceived as of lower status to first degree courses. Compounding this, is that they are perceived as for less able students (Connor and Little, 2007), indicated in terms of lower and different entry requirements for FDs. Further, issues relating to the need to ensure that vocationally based learning is meaningful in an academic context, and to balance more theoretically oriented curriculum content with professional workplace practices have been raised by those responsible for designing and delivering FDs (Greenwood and Little, 2008, p. 54).

As noted above, FDs sit within widening participation policies and discourse. As such, they may appear to represent degrees of difference (not 'more of the same') in a mass system of higher education which have 'possibilities for increasing diversity of opportunities in the knowledge-economy for both women and men from traditionally excluded groups' (Webb et al., 2006, p. 564). Some suggest that FDs do indeed have the potential to further democratic and

economic priorities (see for example Doyle, 2003). Others question whether the outcome will be democratisation of higher education or further differentiation, in respect of the labour market value placed on certain credentials, the relationship between learning and identity as experienced by those undertaking and completing FDs, and their concurrent and subsequent socialisation and positioning within occupational structures in the labour market (Webb et al., 2006).

Clearly, as we have argued here, a lot of policy hope is being pinned on the FD as the first new qualification to be developed in the UK since the 1970s and further empirical research is needed. This is the rationale for bringing together in this symposium paper, three theoretical and empirical studies which have, in different ways, investigated the policy discourse of lifelong learning and its effects on policies for widening participation in adult and higher education, work-based learning and lifelong learning in England and Scotland.

### **Paper One: 'Diversity in HE isn't new'**

The Higher Education institutional landscape has radically changed and expanded over the past 50 years. In 1962 and just prior to the Robbins Report, there were only 24 universities (Scott, 1995). By 1992/93, following the abolition of the binary divide there were 70 universities (comprising the former Universities and the former polytechnics) (HESA, 1995). By 2008, there were 109 universities (Universities UK, 2008). A breakdown of students by level of study for 1962/63 indicates that there was a total of 321,000 students studying at 'other undergraduate' (sub-bachelors degree), bachelors and post-graduate degree levels. More recent figures indicate that by 2007 there were nearly two million UK students in the 'HE sector' (HESA 2008). There has been a strong trend towards first degree and post-graduate level study since the early 60s. Forty plus years ago the majority (62%, 199,020) of students were pursuing sub-Bbachelors degree level qualifications but by 1979/80 the majority (56%) were pursuing first degrees (NCIHE 1997), and this trend has continued.

Over the last 50 years, the nature of the HE system changed and expanded to include a wider range of providers and this goes some way to explaining the increasing proportion of the age group participating (four % in the 1940s, currently just over 40 %) . Drawing on the well-known analysis proposed by Martin Trow the UK system would be categorised as elite up until the mid 1980s (enrolling up to 15% of the age group), increasingly establishing itself as 'mass' (enrolling up to 40%) during 1990s and pushing towards 'universal' status (enrolling more than 40%) in the last few years.

Although it is clear that the system has significantly expanded, the statistical evidence and findings from recent research remind us that diversity and complexity are not new features of the HE landscape. As Scott pointed out, presenting expansion as a straightforward and linear transition from elite to mass is over simplistic and masks the fact that heterogeneity has long been a

characteristic of the HE landscape (Scott, 1995, p. 3). In this regard and in terms of the focus of this paper, sub-Bachelors degree level vocational qualifications have a long-standing history.

Changes in the way the sector is defined, funded, planned, branded and referred to are important. Of particular significance is the promotion of the term 'Higher Education' since the abolition of the binary divide in 1992 and the establishment of higher education funding councils. Higher education (HE) refers to all courses of a standard higher than A levels, Scottish Highers or BTEC National Certificate/Diploma. In contrast with the previous distinctly non-inclusive terminology of 'university' and 'non-university' used to differentiate between types of institution offering higher level provision, the usage of the term 'HE' provides a more all-encompassing umbrella. The more recent usage of the term 'Level 4' in policy to include NVQ level 4 as well as HNC/D, Dip HE, Foundation degrees, bachelor degrees within the same 'big tent', reinforces and extends this approach. The influence of the Level 4 'brand' on discussions about and policies relating to, access to, and achievement of, higher level qualifications has been further strengthened by the government's introduction (following its acceptance of the recommendation in the Leitch Review of Skills) of a new Level 4 public sector agreement target, that at least 40 per cent of the 19 plus population should have achieved Level 4 by 2020. However, despite the promotion of the term Level 4 in policy statements and initiatives, segmentation and stratification of qualifications within HE persists.

Aside from the reconfiguring and labelling of institutions and provision that has taken place, the expanding landscape is also rooted in the wider social and economic change that has driven the growth in importance of educational qualifications over the past 40 or so years. In the late 1970s, Ron Dore (1976) in the *Diploma Disease*, identified and analysed the phenomenon of the growing importance of qualifications and associated credential inflation with industrialisation, bureaucratisation and the growth of State. The development of more complex divisions of labour in industry and the emergence of increasing numbers of white collar, managerial and professional level jobs, provided routes to social and economic mobility for those staying on in education and acquiring more credentials. An important trend here has been the transition of occupations, such as teaching, law and nursing, to 'graduate professions' and the raising of the levels of qualifications required to enter professional training pathways. For example, before the teaching certificate (sub-Bachelors degree level) was phased out in the early 1970s, to be replaced by the B Ed degree, access to teacher training was possible through the attainment of O levels rather than the A levels now required to access a similar course.

Credential inflation helps explain why increasing numbers of young people are entering HE, particularly to pursue bachelors degrees, as this is now the gateway to a wider range of 'good' jobs (e.g. associated with high status and attractive terms and conditions). It also helps explain why more people in mid-life are

entering HE to upgrade their levels of qualifications to help them compete with the growing number of well-qualified young people and to help them change careers (Fuller, 2007). The expansion in participation is then a phenomenon which reflects wider social and cultural trends (such as the opening up of labour market and higher education opportunities for more social groups), as well as economic and policy changes.

In this symposium, I will draw on recent qualitative research<sup>i</sup> that is exploring the attainment of different sorts of higher level qualifications, over the past forty plus years. Individuals' accounts suggest that there was already considerable diversity in higher level provision and the higher education institutional landscape in the late 1950s and 1960s. The study provides evidence which support Scott's point (1995) that variation in HE is not new. Put crudely, 'then' there was a small and diverse sector; 'now', there is a large and diverse sector.

### **Paper Two: A comparative study of HNs in Scotland and FDs in England** *Policy*

In contrast to the policy shift that established foundation degrees (FDs) in England, within Scotland higher nationals (HNs) have continued as the main framework for vocational sub-bachelors degree HE qualifications. In Scotland HNs are national qualifications developed and validated under the auspices of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), largely taught in Scotland's colleges, with very little provision located in higher education institutions (HEIs). While HN programmes have continued to enjoy a relatively high level of support from the devolved government in Scotland, and there has been no pressure to replace them, there was recognition of the need to update and rationalise them. To this end a five-year Modernisation Project (2003-2008), overseen by SQA, aimed to 'ensure that these qualifications remain fit for purpose and provide the Scottish economy with relevant labour market skills' (SQA, 2007). The importance of core skills was also emphasised.

In comparing the policy frameworks several points of contrast emerge. The main focus of the revised HN programmes continues to be their role as vocational qualifications, and progression to degree level study has not been emphasised. However, it is apparent that a significant number of students now do use these as transitional qualifications, including to degree studies. Whilst employer engagement in the revised HN programmes is also encouraged this is largely focused on the development phase of the qualifications rather than extending to the delivery and assessment phases as outlined in the policy framework for FDs. Finally while overall objectives for HNs are identified, they are far less prescriptive than the QAA Benchmark for FDs (QAA, 2004) and work-based learning is not a mandatory element. Therefore, it can be seen that the modernisation project had fairly limited objectives. It did not set out to undertake a critical review of HNs, of the kind associated with the introduction of FDs in England, or reshape provision significantly, because the political impetus for this did not exist in Scotland.

### *Implementation*

The aim of the research<sup>ii</sup> has been to examine the effects of these two divergent policy frameworks on programme design, and on the experiences of learners and employers. In particular we wanted to compare opportunities for work-based learning (WBL) and work-related learning (WRL) within these programmes and explore the nature of employer involvement that had evolved. Data was obtained from an initial sample of 38 programmes, 16 FDs and 22 HNs, by undertaking interviews with programme organisers and relevant SQA staff.

We found a range of approaches to WBL/WRL in both our FD and HN samples, and considerable overlap between the two frameworks. For example both extensive and short term placements, college based work-based learning environments (with external 'customers'), simulations of key areas of work, and the use of part-time staff with current industry experience to support learning, all feature in each of the Scottish and English frameworks we studied. Elsewhere we argue that this is in part due to the key influence of the occupational sector, its culture and orientation towards training, acting on programmes in both countries (Reeve et al, 2007). The sector can be viewed as mediating the effects of the policy divergence and producing similarity. In pointing to these similarities it is important to be clear about the real, and perhaps growing, differences that can be found. All of the FDs included WRL and most some WBL; many combined several forms of WBL/WRL. There were also new and innovative forms of WRL emerging within some FDs, such as industry-set projects, as designers sought to find ways of involving employers in the delivery of programmes. In contrast while a few professional HNs had extensive WBL most had more isolated opportunities for WRL, and some, such as the HN in Computing, had none at all. Interviews with some programme organisers indicated that the FD benchmark had influenced their attempts to maximise WBL.

Another important area of difference is the approach taken to WBL for part-time students. Students studying on part-time FDs, in education for example, must be in relevant work and are required to draw on that work in assignments for significant parts of their programme. In contrast several HN programme organisers in our sample pointed to the 'possibility' of part-time students making links between their studies and knowledge from relevant work. The most formalised approach was found within an HND Engineering where students were able to focus their assessed project on a work issue. Thus it appears that the part-time HNs permitted and sometimes welcomed students using relevant WBL opportunities rather than requiring them to do so as part of programme design.

### *Student experiences and outcomes*

Elsewhere we explore in more depth the experiences of students and employers who are involved in WBL/WRL on six of the sample programmes (Gallacher et al, 2009; Reeve et al, 2008). Space prevents us from reporting on this stage of the

research but it is worth noting that students on *both* FDs and HNs consider that WBL/WRL is very important in developing their knowledge, understanding and skills. They value it for the different kinds of learning opportunities it provides and in the case of full-time students as a 'foot in the door' to the labour market. In the final stage of our research we attempted to identify their current work/study situation 10 months after completion. Obtaining data was difficult with destinations identified for 110 students and 18 unknown. Interviews were eventually secured with only 19 students, and as a consequence we need to be cautious about drawing conclusions from this small sample. However, these interviewees raised some key questions which point to the need for further research.

We found that few had, at that point, entered relevant work. This may of course reflect a number of factors, including the short time scale of the research. Progression rates on to further study were high, in line with national statistics which indicate that for the FDs 68% of full-time and 51% of part-time students continued studying (HEFCE, 2008), whilst for the HNs 57% of full-time students continued (Scottish Government, 2008). National statistics for those entering employment are difficult to compare and lack detail. For the FD only 39% of students entering employment were in 'graduate jobs' after six months, although 3.5 years on 54% were (HEFCE, 2008). National statistics for the HNs suggest that those entering employment do so at an associate professional or technical level (49%) or at a higher professional or managerial level (22%) (Scottish Government, 2008b). Within our FD sample a significant proportion of the employed students had not been able to enter related work, for example hospitality FD students were selling mobile phones and one fashion FD student was now working at a junior level in a bank. Interviewees explored disparities between their expectations whilst on course and their experience of the labour market. For example several hospitality students suggested that few jobs in their specialism actually existed in their local area, and they lacked the mobility to move to the major conurbations to seek work. In the fashion industry both students and the programme organiser had come to realise that employers were not sufficiently aware of the FD qualification, nor were they prioritising the 'making skills' emphasised in that FD, instead they recruited honours graduates with 'flair and creativity'. This has led to the withdrawal of the FD itself as a separate qualification. This example, though idiosyncratic, raises big questions for research about how institutions can work with employers to ensure that supply matches demand. Even where supply and demand appear to be matched as in the case of part-time employed students on the Early Years FD, students still reported a lack of tangible returns on their qualification in terms of promotion or pay, mirroring the poor returns reported elsewhere in the sector by Knight *et al* (2006). They did however report other benefits such as taking on new and interesting work within their existing setting. Interviews with HN students did not highlight similar issues, perhaps due to the more established nature of that framework.

Our research suggests there is a need to examine the nature of the relationship between the programme of study, including its WRL/WBL elements, and subsequent experiences in the labour market. That is, we need to examine the role of these qualifications in securing work and how graduates draw on their learning in work. In this regard it is interesting to note further policy divergence emerging between England and Scotland as a consequence of the current Scottish policy focus on *skills utilisation* (The Scottish Government, 2007; 2008a) rather than boosting the supply of qualifications.

### **Paper Three: Foundation degrees: A focus on employed part-time FD students**

#### *Introduction:*

FDs have from the outset been positioned as a route for part-time employed students to participate in HE. Therefore the fact that the proportion of FD students on part-time programmes, remains fairly constant around at 43%, is contrary to initial policy intention (HEFCE 2008) and in this paper we draw on research carried out into the experience of students<sup>iii</sup> on such part-time FD programmes to identify specific features and discuss implications.

#### *Different 'types' of foundation degrees*

Foundation degrees have been created in a wide range of subjects but with dramatically different rates of popularity and take up. The three least popular Foundation Degree categories (economics, human and social geography, and psychology) recruited 15 students in 2005-2006 while the three most popular (Education Studies, Art and Design and Social work) recruited 7,790 students (of which education accounted for 4,310) (HEFCE 2008).

The data provide two distinct 'types of FDs, those relating to state regulated employment sector (education and social work) in which most students are part-time mature women and those in the private sector in which students are more likely to be young, full time entrants.

#### *Part-time foundation degrees for employed students and the policy context*

Specific features of the policy context can be seen as creating this picture. Within the fields of health, social care and education in particular, the redefinition of jobs is the cornerstone of the modernisation and remodelling of the workforce (Butt and Lance 2005). "The radical changes to the children's workforce in terms of both structure and practice has meant new job names and roles are continually emerging and are subject to constant change" (Simon et al, 2003). Part of this change has been the 'professionalisation' (Brennan and Gosling, 2004, p3) of many roles in education and children and young people's services, previously seen as low skilled and requiring no or low levels of qualification.

The concern to raise standards in the children and young people's workforce through professional development is a key aspect of the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES 2003b) and is targeted at existing post holders, relying on their

continuing professional development to access appropriate levels of qualification and progress to new 'enhanced' roles. Effectively, this policy context has provided the demand for foundation degrees in education and social work, as intermediate level qualifications and as part-time, work-based programmes, FDs have provided an ideal vehicle for the accreditation of this workforce. Demand has been created by both specific accreditation requirements to access new roles (such as Senior Practitioner in the case of Early Years Care and Education) and specific funding streams to meet or subsidise the cost of fees.

### *The experience of students on part-time foundation degrees for employed students*

We have identified a number of features of student experience which derive from the particular employment contexts we researched including Early Years, public service management, teaching assistant, youth workers.

#### *1. Perceptions of Work-based learning and the impact of studying on work*

Responses relating to the impact of the work role on the experience of the course were mixed with many valuing the close relationship between the course and their work but many also reporting that the demands of work constrain learning opportunities and that they experience a tension between 'learner' and 'worker' identities.

Students referred to change of job or promotion within their organisation and/or seeing their work profile change to include more responsibility and autonomy as a result of doing the FD. Students referred to specific improvements in practice and a more reflective, critical and questioning attitude to their practice even where they had stayed in the same job. HEFCE data shows that six months after qualifying 49% of part time students are in 'graduate jobs' although only 37% are in jobs for which the FD was a requirement (HEFCE 2008). There is evidence that although employed FD graduates may not be 'promoted', their job roles are 'enhanced' as a consequence of undertaking the FD.

#### *2. Professionalism and 'professionalisation'*

Students see the FD as contributing to their 'professionalisation'. However, there is also acknowledgement that this is not necessarily recognised by others, in terms of status, esteem or pay. Where higher level training is optional it is not seen as contributing to the status of the job role.

The extent to which students felt their current role had the defining characteristics of 'professionalism' was mixed. Professionalism involves social recognition – and for many this was a result of their participation in the FD. This was specifically related to the HE nature and level of the course. In terms of the pragmatic issue of recognition and qualification, respondents showed an awareness of the perceived value and 'currency' related to HE and its role in enabling professional progression.

Whilst there is little difference in the average salary of male and female full time FD students 6 months after qualifying, there is a very marked difference in the average salary of male and female part time FD students (a difference of £14,000 in the upper quartile, HEFCE 2008). The salaries of part-time qualifiers to a large extent reflect their employment before and during study. The data reflect the fact that most students on foundation degree programmes relating to caring and teaching support roles are women and these are low paid occupations. Progression within HE can be seen as linked to a motivation to access graduate employment with better remuneration (for example teaching assistants going onto graduate status and routes to qualified teacher status).

### *3. Employer support of professional development whilst on the course*

We found a mixed picture in terms of employer support for these part-time students consistent with HEFCE data where 36% of employers provide financial support, such as paying fees, and 44% only provide other support, such as study leave (HEFCE 2008). In our studies, where students were released from their normal work duties to undertake course related study, there was acknowledgement that employers were demonstrating their commitment to the students' professional development. However, some students perceived that this was the extent of the support their employers offered and some felt that the employer saw time away from work to undertake study as a 'day off'. Students were often very appreciative of the support provided by individual colleagues at work and the importance of the role undertaken by work based mentors or learning facilitators was clearly evident but did not necessarily extend to feeling supported by the organisation. HEFCE data shows that only 25% of part-time students have their fees paid by their employer (HEFCE 2008) although 35% gain financial support overall. A recurring theme in our data was that the FD although functioning as CPD was seen by employers as individual professional development and as a personal cost that should be borne by individuals.

### *Conclusions*

Distinctive 'types' of FDs have emerged with part-time FDs providing employees in the state regulated employment sector with a route to qualification and contributing to the 'professionalisation' of a range of roles. However, this 'professionalisation' is contested and student experience suggests a dynamic interaction between participation in FDs and evolving work role with more research needed to better understand this dynamic.

### **Conclusion**

Fuller's paper argues that diversity and differentiation in UK HE are not new phenomena. But overarching system expansion, from elite, through mass and now arguably universal HE system (in Trow's terms) has generated new inequalities, deepening social stratification – what is FDs' track record on this? (both in terms of access *to* HE and access *from* HE i.e. questions of trajectories). What values underpin such differentiation and do such values work against any moves to try and develop parity of esteem between different pathways *in to* and *through* HE. In this context, we note that Greenwood and

Little's 2008 report (separate from symposium paper) concluded that very many FDs had yet to capitalise on the intended levels of integration of academic and work-based learning, and of employer engagement (seen as distinctive features of these innovative HE programmes). But it could be questioned whether this intended distinctiveness might actually work against considerations of 'parity of esteem' (even though government explicitly sought, through FDs, to expand HE provision that was *not* 'more of the same').

Reeve and Ingram's paper (comparing English and Scottish policy developments in respect of sub-bachelors HE provision) argues for further research into the relationship between HE programme and subsequent labour market experiences, both in terms of trajectories and utilisation of knowledge and skills in the workplace. In this respect it is noteworthy that current Scottish policy is highlighting skills utilisation *in* the workplace (rather than focussing on the supply of high level skills *to* the workplace). This is interesting in light of evidence that part-time FDs are associated with changing skill demands of existing jobs.

Edmonds and Hillier's paper focuses on the distinctive nature of part-time foundation degrees and tensions between the continuing personal and professional development (through FDs) of low-skilled (knowledge) workers in so-called knowledge-intensive sectors of employment (public sector/ education; health and social work) and the potential of FDs to facilitate personal trajectories within such employment sectors. Are FDs helping individual employees to shift from being low-skilled to high-skilled knowledge workers in these knowledge-intensive sectors? Whilst FDs may be addressing some of the key issues raised by the Leitch review of skills (*viz.* upskilling the existing workforce) they also highlight the contested nature of professionalisation and modernisation within certain employment sectors.

Webb and el 2006 paper (separate from symposium paper) rehearses a number of theoretical positions relevant to FD developments, including concepts of learning careers, individual agency and the need to apply positional conflict theory to understand the returns on education and individual career trajectories. In particular it notes that the expansion of HE has resulted in wider social and cultural trends, including opening up the labour market and HE opportunities for women. But the question remains do FDs exhibit these characteristics? Are there distinctive gendered outcomes of FDs (both in terms of immediate and longer-term learner trajectories)? Further, how do certain FD practices (e.g. the operation of APL and recruitment of those without traditional HE entry qualifications) relate to learning cultures and identities that learners develop, and the ways in which these positional 'goods' are used in the competition for jobs (and/or promotion?)

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We conclude this symposium paper by identifying the following emerging issues for consideration:

1. The contribution that FDs are making to the diversification of provision and student population
2. The student's positioning in the labour market
3. The interaction between students' academic and work-based learning and the use of enhanced skills and knowledge in the workplace
4. The student/worker understandings of identity, including professional and learner identities and the implications for their role in the workplace
5. The continuing relevance of sub-bachelors level qualifications in the contemporary economic climate

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<sup>i</sup> This research was funded by the ESRC, award number RES-139-25-0232 and by a team of researchers at Southampton University. For details visit [www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe](http://www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe)

<sup>ii</sup> {NOTE: The study is funded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, (SQA), Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), Universities UK and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA)}

<sup>iii</sup> (Edmond 2004; Edmond, Hillier et al. 2007; Edmond and Price 2007; Edmond 2008; Hillier and Rawnsley 2008)