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DRAWING ON 'WORK-RELATED LEARNING': A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HIGHER NATIONALS IN SCOTLAND AND FOUNDATION DEGREES IN ENGLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Policies for work-related higher education (HE) in Scotland and England have diverged in recent years. In Scotland, higher national certificates/diplomas (HNC/Ds) continue to provide the main framework for vocationally-focused HE learning, while in England there has been a decisive change associated with the establishment of foundation degrees (FDs). This paper reports on a comparative research project which has examined how work-based learning (WBL) or work-related learning (WRL) is being incorporated within these two frameworks. It draws on empirical research within six programmes, including full-time and part-time examples. Data was gathered using qualitative interviews with students, employers, course organisers and other stakeholders. In this paper we focus on the extent to which interviewees consider that they have been able to draw on the knowledge, skills and understanding developed through these WBL and WRL experiences in their subsequent work or further studies.

POLICY DIVERGENCE

The national policy framework for short-cycle work-related higher education provision has developed in markedly different ways in England and Scotland post 2000. Short-cycle, work-related higher education refers to higher education provision which has a particular emphasis on preparing people for the world of work, is focused on intermediate level skills and occupations rather than the higher professional level occupations, and is shorter in duration than the traditional undergraduate degree. In England a new policy framework has been established which has encouraged the development of foundation degrees (requiring the equivalent of two years of full-time study) as alternatives to HNC/Ds. In Scotland there has been no major policy shift of this kind; instead there has been continued reliance on HNC/Ds (requiring the equivalent of 1 or 2 years of full-time study respectively).

The emergence of FDs in England was associated with a growing concern about a perceived skills deficit at the intermediate (associate professional and technical) level, and a related concern to remedy perceived deficiencies in existing courses and qualifications at these levels (DfEE, 2000; Blunkett, 2001). There was a perception that HNs, having lost their employer roots, now lacked support from employers in England. Consequently the policy framework for the new FDs emphasised the importance of employer involvement), and in particular their role in design, delivery and assessment (DfES, 2004, QAA 2004). Furthermore 'innovative and authentic work-based learning' was given a key role, being viewed as an integral part of these new programmes (QAA 2004). Alongside the stated concerns relating to skills deficits, there were other policy objectives which focused on increasing and widening participation in higher education, and helping ensure that higher education provision was more flexible, and provided opportunities for a wider range of people including those in work. Associated with this it was expected that new FD qualifications should be of a style and quality which would enable people to progress to honours courses in universities via identified routes. It can therefore be seen that the policies lying behind these new qualifications sought to address a range of agendas, and it may be suggested that there are possible conflicts

associated with the aims of creating qualifications which are more employer led, but which also ensure opportunities for progression to honours degrees.

In Scotland HNs have continued to enjoy a relatively high level of support from the devolved government, and there has been no pressure to replace them, although 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 main focus of the revised HN programmes continues to be their role as vocational qualifications, and progression to degree level study, while recognised as a possible outcome, has not been emphasised as it has been in England. 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.

The divergence in policy and in practice between England and Scotland therefore provides the opportunity for a comparative study of these two systems which can contribute to our understanding of both. Given the high level of interest which there has been in recent years in the role of HE in the development of vocationally relevant skills and employability, and the related issue of skills utilization, it is hoped that a study of this kind can make a useful contribution to discussions regarding the development of policy and provision.

SAMPLE

The overall study has gathered data from the programme organisers for 38 programmes (16 FD, 22 HN) (see Reeve *et al*, 2007 for further details). In this paper we will focus on data from a sub-sample of six programmes, three from each country. These were selected to ensure that a range of approaches to WBL and WRL were present in the sample. Although these categories are not clear cut (see Brennan, Little *et al*, 2006) in this paper the term WBL will be used to describe activities that involve students being located in, and hopefully learning from, the workplace; while WRL will refer to the wider set of learning activities which focus on work but which may take place on campus, in the workplace, or indeed elsewhere. Within both the FDs and HNs frameworks examples of WBL and WRL can be found (Reeve *et al*, 2007). The comparative element was maintained by selecting cases within the same three sectors in each country, Early Years, Hospitality/Travel & Tourism and Fashion.

This paper will draw primarily on qualitative data gained from interviews with students, employers and other stakeholders. Initial interviews (30 student interviews and 13 stakeholder interviews) took place in spring 2007 whilst students were in their last year of study. Follow-up interviews were obtained with 19 students and 6 employers approximately 9-12 months after completion of the programme. The reduction in the sample was due to the difficulties of tracking down students and employers for such longitudinal surveys. The majority of employer interviews were obtained in the Early Years sector and it proved extremely difficult to secure interviews with employers in the Hospitality/Travel & Tourism and Fashion sectors. Interviews were also carried out with the programme organisers. In some cases they were able to provide information on the initial employment/study outcomes for the larger cohort. Thus we eventually identified destinations for 110 students and 18 remained unknown. Given the small sample size we need to be cautious about drawing conclusions from this data. However, these interviewees have raised some key issues which point to the need for further research in this area.

INITIAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

National data sets provide some indications of the likely outcomes for students completing HNs and FDs (although some difficulties in comparison arise from the different methodologies

applied). The most relevant data set issued by the Scottish Government combines information for HNC and HND students into one 'sub-degree' category.

Table 1 First destination of HN qualifiers from full-time programmes 2006-07

	Study/training	Permanent UK employment	Temporary UK Employment	Overseas employment	Believed unemployed	Other
Sub-degree	57%	31%	5%	1%	4%	2%

Source: Scottish Government 2008

It appears from Table 1 above that the majority of full-time students are using these HN programmes as a stepping stone to further study, suggesting that HN qualifications may be seen in this light as 'transitional qualifications' by some students. The majority of those who do enter employment do so at an associate professional or technical level (49%), or at a higher professional or managerial level (22%) (Scottish Government, 2008).

In England a similar picture emerges of high progression rates from FDs onto further study. In this case figures are available (see Table 2 below) for both full-time students, who are predominately younger students, and part-time students who tend to be mature and already in employment whilst studying their FD.

Table 2 Destinations FD qualifiers from English HEIs, 2005-06, six months after qualifying

Destination	Full-time		Part-time	
	No.	%	No.	%
Studying (not employed)	1,850	47%	240	13%
Studying and employed	825	21%	685	38%
Employed	1,015	26%	815	45%
Unemployed	105	3%	35	2%
Other	110	3%	15	1%
Total DLHE respondents	3,900	100%	1,790	100%

Source DLHE survey, quoted in HEFCE 2008.

The latest HEFCE statistical bulletin does not provide the same level of detail as the Scottish data regarding the types of employment that have been taken up by FD students. However they report that *of those in employment*, 48% of full-time and 49% of part-time qualifiers were in a 'graduate job' six months after completion. When data was gathered from the 2002-03 qualifiers it was possible to assess their employment outcomes three and a half years after qualifying, at this point the proportion in a graduate job had increased to 54%.

While the data sets provide broad indications of the likely outcomes for students there are frustrating gaps in our knowledge. In particular neither is able to show the extent to which those entering employment do so in a role which is related to the subject area of their qualification. Greater understanding should emerge as a result of the new Futuretrack programme of longitudinal research into the experiences of 2006 entrants to higher education (HECSU, 2008). In our small sample we have attempted to drill down further to identify those who gained related and unrelated work. The data that we were able to gather, detailed in Table 3 below, remains incomplete however since some programme organisers were unable to identify the outcomes for all students in the cohort.

Table 3 Known outcomes for students who completed their FD or HN in 2007, 9-12 months after completion

Course	No. on	No. in	No. in	No. in	No. in	No. un-	No.	No. with
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	course at initial research interview	related work only	unrelated work only	study and work	further study	employed	known not to finish course	unknown outcome
FD Fashion (FT)	17	1	3	1 (Ft study + pt work)	10		2	
FD H/T/T (FT)	9		2	1 (FT unrelated work + Pt study)	3			3
FD Early Years (PT)	7	2		5 (FT related work + FT study)				
HNC Early Years (FT)	25	5	2		14		4	
HNC Fashion (FT)	30	9 in work of which 2 were identified as in related self-employment			16	5		
HND H/T/T (FT)	40	8	9		11	4		8

The above provides a 'snap-shot' of the outcomes for these students 9-12 months on from completing their HN or FD. In line with national statistics progression rates to further study are high, on both the FDs where formal links to honours programmes are a requirement, and on the HNs where progression is not so strongly emphasised. All of the FD students in our sample progressed directly to the final honours year, a finding which reflects the high rates nationally (HECFE reports that 87% received full credit if progressing within their institution, whilst 60% of those who changed university did so (HEFCE, 2008)). In contrast students on the HN were not always able to obtain the maximum credit for their qualification. Those on the HNC in fashion did progress directly to the 2nd year of a linked HND. However students on the Early Years HNC were subject to a 'filtering' assignment which would enable staff to guide them towards entry at year 1, without any credit, if it was deemed necessary. Finally while HND travel and tourism students were able to receive the full credit for their qualification at the linked university, a post 1992 institution, transferring to an older HEI would mean starting at year 2. This differentiated pattern of progression from HN to honours programmes, across the Scottish HEIs, has been identified as a national issue (SFC, 2007). Thus in Scotland progression arrangements appear to be more complex, in contrast the emphasis placed on progression to honours within the FD framework appears to have eased the transition for students into these programmes.

Given the vocational emphasis present within both policy frameworks it is striking that, with the exception of the part-time Early Years FD, the numbers in work related to the occupational area of their qualification appear low. In the case of the full-time FDs only 1 student was identified as having obtained related employment on completing their programme, although 3 remained unknown. The HNs have a higher number of graduates entering related employment, although figures for the fashion HND were not disaggregated into related or unrelated by the programme organiser. Allowing for the uncertainty in the HND fashion data it appears that overall 16% to 23% of these HN students gained related employment. However, it has been argued (HEFCE, 2008) that a longer follow up period may be necessary to capture the eventual outcomes of these students, as some of those currently in unrelated work may move into relevant employment at some future point.

Our follow up interview sample reflected the above spread with 12 of the 19 student interviewees being in further study (although 3 combined this with related work), and 7 being in work only (4 related and 3 unrelated). Despite the small sample overall we obtained some rich interview data and a number of issues emerged.

Drawing on WBL or WRL experiences in further study

In the full-time examples we studied, the WBL/WRL experiences which had been included within the HN/FD learning process were not mirrored or extended on the honours route. Students perceived that there was 'no room' for work-based learning on the Honours programme they were involved in. The pressures of the dissertation were cited as the main reason for this by a number of interviewees. Students would, however, have welcomed further opportunities for WBL and WRL. For example Beatrice described her frustration with the 'hands off' approach of the BA Travel course (England), where theories or approaches to work practices were discussed but not actually implemented.

"like this year I am finding it more difficult because people are just talking like 'this is what we do' and 'it is like' whereas I am more hands on because in the Foundation Degree it was 'This is what we do and we are going to go out and do it'". (Beatrice, FD Hospitality, travel and tourism student)

Students who progressed from the HNC Early Years onto an Honours programme were also disappointed to find that a placement was not built into this course and suggested that this made their HNC experience even more valuable in seeking work. In contrast, WBL was a feature of the HND in Fashion to which most of our HNC Fashion students progressed. The approach to WBL/WRL had shifted however, on the HND it took the form of a placement, while the HNC experience had been organising a fashion shoot.

While students were not, in general, able to access new WBL/WRL in their honours programmes some students indicated that they drew actively on their existing WBL gained from their prior FD or HN. For example Beatrice describes how she relates new theories, for example on marketing, back to situations she encountered through her FD,

"So when they are talking and saying, 'This is why it works' I can say oh I will relate that back to what we did." (Beatrice, FD Hospitality, travel and tourism student)

Where possible she tries to interpret the 'broader' generalised material she is taught in the honours degree in terms of specific events, testing out new theory against her understanding of 'what works'. Conversely Lucy drew together her new theory and WBL experience from the HNC Early Years course to re-evaluate her practice and consider causes for some of the interactions she experienced in the past.

"Once it came to my Degree and I've looked at child development ... I've noticed how much, even though I hadn't really thought about it in my placement, that how the theorists work really comes into play and how children's knowledge can be expanded because of that adult, and its just sort of certain theorists that I had to look at that I was just like 'Oh so that's why when I was on my placement, this is why the lecturer said this is the sort of thing to do'". (Lucy, HNC Early Years)

It appears then that for a number of students in our sample the WBL gained on their HN/FD remains a live resource that they draw on in making sense of new theory from their Honours course.

Although students and programme organisers viewed the WBL experience that students brought with them to the next level as positive, one programme organiser, for the BA Travel in England, felt this came at a cost. In his view the WBL within the FD programme had taken time away from other academic teaching, leaving significant academic skills gaps which effected completion rates. These included a lack of experience in referencing theory and research skills. While no other interviewee suggested such a causal relationship a number of students and programme organisers also identified a significant 'step up' in academic terms that required new skills. Our part-time FD Early Years students appeared to be more confident in navigating the change in style required at Honours level. One suggested that it was important to 'suss out' individual lecturers to see where their preferences lay, towards journal articles and research data or towards reflection on examples from practice. In Scotland, students moving from HNs to Honours programmes were required to undertake bridging programmes. These focused on essay writing, referencing theory, avoiding plagiarism and introduced some research skills. Students in our sample suggested these courses were important in helping them to understand the new requirements, and they do not appear to be viewed as burdensome despite the extra time commitment. In contrast FD students in England were not required to undertake bridging

units in any of the examples we studied, although the BA travel programme organiser would have welcomed an additional semester of preparation.

One key difference which almost all student interviewees highlighted was the shift to more independent learning at the higher level. Students had to do more independent research on each topic, and had less access to lecturers in the much larger Honours cohorts. This was a particular concern to one FD student we interviewed who had come from a cohort of nine students into the Honours final year at a large university, where as she put it 'I feel like a number'. More positively, several students from across the FDs and HNs suggested that it had been their previous experience of WBL or WRL projects which had enabled them to cope with this. For example

"...and because you didn't have other peers or you didn't have your lecturers there to do it, you had to work that through yourself and it was very independent and I think I gained a lot of skills and knowledge of how to do that independently when I was out on placement and because of that I am now able to work through my Degree and sort of set deadlines."
(Jean, HNC Early Years, full-time student)

Elsewhere the programme organiser for the Fashion HND reported that students who had come from the HNC, and had experience of setting up their own fashion shoot, were much more confident when required to contact and work with freelancers on the HND.

One final shift that was reported by students was a change in industry focus on the new programme, perhaps to a new field or level. For example there was a distinct shift from the Fashion FD, with its concentration on making skills, towards developing the students' own creativity as a designer within the Honours year. Students suggested that they were still able to draw on their technical skills in the Honours year to support this shift. Those moving from the Fashion HNC onto the HND programme also described a distinct change in focus from general skills related to fashion to skills required for working within the film or theatre sector, although here there was a mixed response regarding the ability to draw on existing fashion skills in this new area. However in both these cases the students were continuing with the same provider and the impending change appeared to have been communicated to students effectively. A shift in content and level also occurs between the HND in Travel and the Honours programme at a linked University.

"I think the HND will take you so far, as I've explained to you it's the sort of width and there's a certain amount of depth there, but this industry needs strategic thinkers, .. we say you're tomorrow's leaders, and its getting them to think at a higher level." (Programme organiser, BA in Travel sector).

The width and breadth within the HND that she is referring to above includes preparing students for work in specific travel contexts at a practical level, for example booking tickets for customers or being part of the cabin crew. Whereas she suggests there is a greater need for leaders, managers and strategic thinkers. Students themselves appear to experience this as quite a problematic leap, with one suggesting there seemed no connection between the HND learning and that on the Honours programme.

Drawing on WBL or WRL experiences in work

With the exception of the Early Years FD students, few of our interviewees were in what they considered to be related work. While this hampers our analysis of the extent to which students are able to draw on the knowledge, skills and understanding developed via WBL/WRL learning in their subsequent work a number of key issues are beginning to emerge from the data.

The part-time Early Years FD students were, by requirement, all working in a relevant setting throughout the course. They refer to drawing on the knowledge, skills and understanding gained from the course in both sets of interviews, i.e. whilst still studying and one year after completion. A number of students suggested that the WBL modules had encouraged them to look differently at the everyday work they do, for example through using more analytical approaches to observing children's behaviour. They also report instances where they have been able to draw on the theory to deepen their understanding and change their practice. For example one student described how her new understanding of literacy theories led her to be more aware of the initial attempts at writing that were being made by children in her group,

seeing this 'scribbling on bits of paper' in a different light. This insight enabled her to extend the children's learning by creating more purposeful activities. These examples suggest that the WBL process is not only perceived as relevant, but that it is helping students to look at their work in a new and insightful way. Interviews with a number of employers indicated that increased awareness of underpinning theory was strengthening the practice of employees.

"...instead of just saying we're going to do this, this and this, their conversation now is a lot more in-depth about why they're going to do it, its not just we need to hit this early learning goal. Again it's the understanding of what they're doing and why they're doing it." (Employer, FD Early Years)

One stressed however, that what she was looking for was the 'art of marrying the theory and actually what goes on at the grass roots' that is 'actually getting them [theories] to work'. However, she suggests that while this is her ideal it is possible to do the FD 'academically' and although the FD was viewed as good personal development for the employee she has not seen a positive change in her organisation. We were unable to interview full time HNC Early Years students who had entered employment, in part because of the high progression rates to further study. However one interviewee who was combining further study with a part-time position in a nursery setting indicated how she drew on her observations of senior staff in her placement setting. She suggests this had helped her in both immediate practical ways, for example she drew on their particular approach to physical play, and more generally.

"observing how the nursery teacher and the primary school teacher communicate with the children has changed the way that I do it as well, I understand what works and what doesn't work [...] just general sort of practice skills that I've observed throughout my placement that I can then develop and go forward and do it as well." (Lucy, HNC Early Years, full-time)

So for this HNC student it is the practical skills and the opportunity to learn from others that she emphasises, in contrast to the analytical approaches emphasised by existing employees on the FD.

Outside of the early years sector the difficulty of identifying students who were now in related work, and hence might be expected to be able to draw on their WBL/WRL learning, was even more acute. Indeed the extent to which they did consider their job related to their FD/HN was an interesting point of discussion with a number of students in our sample. For example one FD Fashion student who has found part-time retail work in a small boutique was able to describe in some depth the aspects of her course, and the WRL elements, that she was drawing on in advising customers. Although neither she nor the FD programme organiser considered retail as 'related work', her employer suggested that a number of specific aspects of this FD were valuable. She highlighted as beneficial knowledge of collections, and an understanding of quality within the manufacturing process for 'designer' products. She concludes more broadly that this employee is now 'tuned in on how the fashion world works'. Elsewhere we interviewed two HND Travel students were now working in, what seemed to us, jobs which were related to their qualification. One was positive about the extent he could draw on his learning, highlighting a 'Customer Service module' as enabling him to deal with conflict with customers. He also suggested a specific WRL element (tour guiding) which had helped him 'because it's the same field'. Given his work role this seems a broad definition of 'field'. In contrast another student, Frank, considered that his work for an airline, processing bookings, is 'not really linked to what I learned at all'. He suggests that the learning he gained on the course would be more relevant to working in a travel agency (his preferred work option). His view of the same customer service module is that it is 'very generalized' and not helpful for his 'totally different' work. Thus relatedness is itself very much a matter of perspective.

Of course the ability to draw on learning from their FD/HN in work is not merely a feature of relatedness, or indeed the individual's views on that, but is tightly bound up with the context of work that these students enter. That is the culture of the organization, its structures and personnel, and the extent to which these encourage and legitimize the process of students drawing on this learning (Evans et al 2006). Those working in the early years sector appear, in the main, to have opportunities for introducing changes into their own practice and that of the wider setting. Some FD graduates have been given specific responsibility for developing new initiatives by their employers and have become viewed by them as an expert in that topic, in part because of specific assignments undertaken on the FD (e.g. developing liaison procedures

with new parents). In other sectors or organizations there was little scope for introducing new ideas. For example Frank described his current organisation as operating on an 'ad-hoc basis', without deadlines, and his own role as reactive. He suggests there is little scope in this role to draw on his learning.

CONCLUSION

We have outlined how policy in Scotland and England has diverged in recent years with regard to vocational higher level learning. Scotland has retained its HNC/Ds and reinforced their role as vocational qualifications charged with delivering the skills required in the economy. In contrast in England the new Foundation Degrees have been designed to both meet skills needs and enable progress to honours degree studies for new groups of students. In our small study we have found that the destination of students reflects national data sets. In both our Scottish and English examples progression onto further study, particularly on to honours degrees is high. In this sense the programmes studied are meeting the declared progression objective of FDs and providing added value for the HNs. Progression into related employment for full time students appears to be low in both frameworks, and strikingly so for the FDs studied. Given these two issues there is a need to examine the role of these qualifications, and the potential for them to be viewed as transitional qualifications for significant numbers of participants.

Nevertheless the students we interviewed who had progressed onto further study were able to identify specific aspects of the WBL or WRL which provided a resource for further learning. Indeed many were disappointed that such work-based learning opportunities were absent from their new programmes. Although we were unable to interview many students who had progressed to relevant work, partly because of the small numbers in this category, those on the early years FD were able to provide rich examples of the ways in which they continue to draw on their WBL. Some indicated that specific WBL assignments had enabled them to expand their roles in their setting and gain status and new responsibilities, although in general this had not been recognised by an increase in pay (Knight et al 2006; Murray, 2009).

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