The impact of Foundation degrees on the workplace and students

A summary of research projects commissioned by fdf
1. Background

In 1997, the Dearing Inquiry\(^1\) published recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the UK. The inquiry highlighted an international consensus that higher level skills would be crucial to the economic competitiveness of all nations. It also indicated that future growth in UK higher education provision should specifically address a recognised shortfall in the number of adults with knowledge and skills at the associate professional level (levels 4 and 5 on the National Qualifications Framework) rather than further expansion of honours degree (level 6) provision. Existing qualifications at this level had been in decline for some years in terms of student demand and were not sufficiently informed by employer needs.

Foundation degrees were subsequently introduced in 2000 with the aim of addressing the projected requirements of the UK economy while offering a new and accessible route into higher education, particularly for individuals already in the workforce. Foundation Degree Forward (\textit{fdf}) was launched in 2003 to promote and support the development of high quality, demand-led Foundation degrees.

\begin{quote}
Dearing’s vision of the four main aims and purposes of higher education:
\begin{itemize}
  \item to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment;
  \item to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society;
  \item to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels;
  \item to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

\textit{Higher Education in the Learning Society (1997)}

\begin{quote}
‘\textbf{If we are to become a leading knowledge based economy we must create new routes into higher education and new forms of provision…We have to develop new higher education opportunities at [the intermediate level], orientated strongly to the employability skills, specialist knowledge and broad understanding needed in the new economy.’}

\textit{Modernising Higher Education: meeting the global challenge}
\end{quote}

A speech by David Blunkett, then Education and Employment Secretary, in February 2000

\(^{1}\) The final report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education Higher Education in the Learning Society is available at: \url{http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/}
1. Background

In 2006, the Leitch Review of Skills provided evidence suggesting that the requirement for enhancement of education and training for the UK workforce was imperative. The review highlighted that the UK compared poorly with other OECD nations in terms of the skills and qualifications held by the workforce, and argued that challenging aspirations for workforce development were necessary if the UK was to become a leading economy in the face of global competition. Leitch stressed the importance of improving adult skills across all levels by increasing employer engagement and investment in training and workforce development. The review also pointed out that improving skills would help to address serious social issues, such as deprivation and inequality, endemic in many communities.

A key recommendation of the Leitch Review was that by 2020 40% of adults should be qualified to at least level 4 (up from 29% in 2005). The review highlighted that as 70% of the workforce of 2020 had already completed compulsory education, the traditional focus on the education of younger age groups needed to be matched by extending opportunity to the adult workforce.

The potential for Foundation degrees to enhance the skills and knowledge of the adult workforce was recognised by the Leitch Review, and Foundation degrees subsequently became a key aspect of government policy when World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England, a report setting out how it would respond to the recommendations made by the Leitch Review, was published.

3.56 Concentrating too much on younger age groups could create further longer term problems for the amount and the use of high level skills in our workforce...As the Higher education White Paper stated, new higher education growth should not be 'more of the same', based on traditional three year honours degrees. Rather provision should be based on new types of programme offering specific, job-related skills such as Foundation Degrees.'


Since its inception, fdf has been engaged in working with employers to explore their specific education and training requirements, to inform understanding of how Foundation degrees can strengthen the performance of the workforce, and to develop programmes that specifically address employers' needs. However, in 2006, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) indicated that the fdf remit should be extended to encompass the stimulation of employer engagement across higher education and not just with Foundation degrees. This reflected a desire of both government and funding council for employer-led, work-based higher education to become more mainstream, rather than a specialist activity associated with a single qualification. Recent policy developments have reiterated the move towards increasing employer engagement with higher education. For example, in 2007, it was announced that 5,000 full-time equivalent additional student places would be allocated in 2008-09 for employer co-funded provision.

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2 The final report of the Leitch Review of Skills Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills is available at: www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/leitch_review/review_leitch_index.cfm
4 Employer co-funded ASNs were announced in World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England. Further details can be found on the HEFCE website: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/employer/cofund/
Commissioning of research projects

In 2001-02, there were just 4,320 students enrolled on pilot Foundation degree programmes in England. By 2007-08, this had increased to nearly 72,000 students on over 2,500 programmes and employer-led, work-based programmes had become of key importance within the higher education sector. Whilst there was a wealth of anecdotal information concerning the experiences of employers and students involved with Foundation degrees, limited research had been conducted, and little evidence existed concerning the impact of Foundation degrees. In was in this context that, in 2007, fdf invited tenders for two major research projects that would provide evidence of:

1. the impact of Foundation degrees on the workplace from the employer perspective; and
2. the impact of Foundation degrees on students and the student experience

The Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) and the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) were subsequently jointly commissioned to explore the impact of Foundation degrees from both an employer and student perspective. Foundation Direct, a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), based at the University of Portsmouth, was commissioned to undertake complementary quantitative research focusing on the student experience.

Additionally, fdf commissioned researchers at the University of Sheffield to carry out a systematic search and review of literature about Foundation degrees.
2. CHERI/LSN project

The CHERI/LSN project commenced in April 2007, with the identification of a sample of 20 Foundation degree programmes through which qualitative research analyses involving employers, current students and graduates could be undertaken. Programmes included in the sample had been running for sufficient time to produce at least one cohort of graduates and represented five broad employment sectors:

- Creative/design and media
- Business and management
- Early years/teaching and learning support
- Engineering/materials
- Uniformed/public services

Of the 20 programmes selected, 5 were delivered by higher education institutions (HEIs), 14 were delivered by further education colleges (FECs), and one was delivered by a private training provider. Thirteen of the programmes were part-time and designed for people already in employment relevant to the area of study. Programmes in this group were either designed for a particular employer or for a generic employment sector (for example, business and management or early years). Seven of the programmes were primarily for ‘potential employees’ – those looking to enter relevant employment – and generally involved full-time study. Foundation degree programmes designed for specific organisations where students were essentially full-time trainees were placed in the latter group.

**CHERI/LSN project**

Information was gathered from employers, current students, graduates and providers linked to 20 Foundation degree programmes. This involved:

- focus groups with 120 current students who had been studying for at least one year
- questionnaires completed by 318 incoming students
- interviews with 37 employers
- interviews with 27 graduates
- a case study written by practitioners associated with each programme (a short written narrative about the development of the programme, intended to be reflective)
3. Foundation Direct project

The Foundation Direct project aimed to complement the CHERI/LSN research by gathering data on the impact of Foundation degrees from the student perspective. This project involved a sample of 55 Foundation degree programmes that broadly reflected the national pattern of provision in terms of region, subject area and the type of institution delivering the programme. Course leaders were recruited to the project and invited current students and graduates to complete an in-depth online survey. The survey was completed by 184 respondents, 14% of whom were Foundation degree graduates. Of the current students who responded, 52% were studying full-time and 48% part-time.

**Foundation Direct project**

Questions covered areas such as:

- students’ motivation for enrolling on a particular Foundation degree programme
- the advice and guidance received by students prior to enrolment
- perceptions of the benefits associated with workplace learning
- experiences of flexible and blended learning on Foundation degrees
- students’ perceptions of the value of Foundation degrees in terms of current and future employment
CHERI/LSN researchers interviewed 37 employers about their involvement with Foundation degrees; their experience of sending employees on programmes or of receiving students on placements; and the impact of the Foundation degree on their employees and business/organisation.

Of the employers interviewed, 84% represented enterprises employing more than 100 people. The remainder were micro-businesses employing fewer than 10 people. The employers were from a range of enterprises, including large public sector organisations, media companies, building services companies and schools. Two-thirds of the employers had their own employees enrolled on a Foundation degree. One-third had links to a Foundation degree programme via students undertaking placements with them.

Employers reported a range of reasons for becoming engaged with Foundation degrees. The employers involved with 5 programmes had approached a university or college with a specific workforce-development need. This led to bespoke Foundation degree provision for organisations such as the Environment Agency and Nottingham City Transport.

The majority of the employers interviewed (24/37) had become involved with a Foundation degree that had already been designed and developed. In most cases it was an employee who brought the Foundation degree to the employer’s attention. Indeed, many employers only became interested and involved after the employee had enrolled on a programme. Employers reported that they became interested in Foundation degrees because they noted the industry relevance of a programme or enhanced performance of employees, and in some cases subsequently regarded the Foundation degree as ideal for other employees.

Many employers commented that they would have liked to have been more involved in the design and development of programmes as they felt they could contribute valuable knowledge and experience of the business. Indeed, several employers commented that they would have responded positively if asked by a provider to become more involved with the Foundation degree.

In some cases employers were approached by a university or college seeking work placements for their students. Other employers became involved in a Foundation degree development as a result of personal contacts and previous good relationships with an institution.

A small number of the employers interviewed (8/37) had no involvement in the design, development and delivery of Foundation degrees but offered some support and mentoring to employees undertaking programmes. These employers were largely from the education sector. It is important to note that these Foundation degrees drew upon a sector-approved framework but individual employers felt that they had no input into this framework.

Employers were generally prepared, however, to give freely of their time to support employees on a Foundation degree. Many were also prepared to invest in their employees by paying fees, providing bursaries, and providing contributions towards travel costs and books. Employers were also clear about immediate benefits to the company or organisation.

4. Employers’ perspectives
Perceived benefits for employers

Employers who had sent employees on Foundation degrees recognised the impact in the workplace. These employers reported that

- employees gained a broader understanding of the job and the industry
- employees performed better in the job
- employees were able to bring extra current and relevant knowledge to the company and share techniques
- employee motivation and commitment to the company increased
- employees demonstrated increased confidence in applying skills and knowledge
- employees cascaded the knowledge they acquired from the Foundation degree to their colleagues
- employees exhibited a willingness to take on tasks they would not have tackled before, better communication skills, and enhanced team working; they also offered well thought-out solutions to problems and an eagerness to learn and embrace wider aspects of the business

In addition:

- employers mentoring students on Foundation degrees found benefits for themselves including enhancing their own management skills and knowledge and providing challenge to their ideas and working practices

Employers offering work placements to Foundation degree students identified benefits including:

- students becoming a reservoir of well-trained and knowledgeable potential employees
- employees being motivated and enthused by mentoring students
- students working on live briefs being a source of additional labour – a particular benefit for small and medium enterprises

Interestingly, concerns were mainly raised by the group of employers who had no involvement in the design, development or delivery of programmes. Several employers in the education/early years sector were, for example, confused about the place and status of Foundation degrees amongst a plethora of initiatives within the sector. They commonly cited problems with recognition in the sector and commented that changes in government policy left Foundation degree graduates unsure of the professional status of their qualification.
5. Students’ perspectives

‘The challenge is to change the curriculum, the environment and the culture so that it meets the needs of learners, not to change the learner so that they meet the needs of the university.’
Geoff Layer (2005), Closing the Equity Gap? Leicester, NIACE

Incoming students in the CHERI/LSN survey:
- 60% were the first in their immediate family to attend university
- half had dependants
- 86% were living at home
- just over half had some previous experience of HE
- three-quarters held a level 3 qualification
- two-thirds of creative/media students were young (under 21 years of age)
- the majority of business and management students were aged 21-39
- 60% of early years/learning support were aged 21-39, a third were over 40

Why study for a Foundation degree?

The overwhelming majority of students (92% in the CHERI/LSN study) reported that a Foundation degree was their first choice of programme. Students also reported a series of positive reasons for undertaking Foundation degree study. Perhaps unsurprisingly, younger students were much more likely to state that they undertook a Foundation degree in order to get a job, whereas older students (aged 40+) were much more likely to state that they were studying to improve their performance in their current job.

Students taking a Foundation degree with a view to entering employment (‘termed ‘potential employees’ in the CHERI/LSN project) indicated the following reasons for enrolling on a programme:
- a desire to work in the relevant industry
- access to relevant work placements
- an interest in subject area
- a desire to study in their locality
- because Foundation degrees appeared to be more manageable than an honours degree
- because they considered the Foundation degree to be progression route from a level 3 course (for example, a national diploma)
Foundation degree students who were already employed (and therefore on part-time programmes) gave the following reasons for enrolling:

- a way of developing personally and professionally whilst continuing to work full-time
- to build on existing qualifications (many obtained years earlier) and on relevant work experience (some very substantial)
- a way to obtain a particular professional status
- more manageable than an honours degree
- delivered locally and was a ‘fit’ with work and family commitments
- their employer had suggested that they undertake a Foundation degree

Incoming students (recently enrolled) in the CHERI/LSN study reported the following reasons for enrolling on a Foundation degree:

- to enhance their career prospects – 82%
- to continue their education - 45%
- to do their current work better -28%
- out of interest - 25%
- to get a job – 15%
- to help change their career direction – 14%
- to increase their chances of promotion – 15%
- to help get a better job with another employer – 9%

**Information, advice and guidance**

The sources of information, advice and guidance (IAG) utilised by students prior to enrolling on a Foundation degree appears to be determined largely by their age. The studies also found that younger students are likely to be much better informed than older students about the Foundation degree programme they enrol on and the institution offering it. Schools, UCAS and HEIs and FECs are the main sources of information about Foundation degrees for younger students. Additionally, this group receives advice and guidance from teachers, family and friends. For mature students, the most likely sources of information are employers or internet searches. Advice and guidance is most likely to be provided by employers.
Students reported that they had utilised the following sources of information prior to enrolling on a Foundation degree:

- used a university/college prospectus/leaflet - 38%
- received information from their employer - 29%
- used a college/university website - 25%

The CHERI/LSN study revealed that many incoming students received little IAG prior to enrolling. Despite this, only 5% of the students who responded to the Foundation Direct survey reported that the course content was different to what they had anticipated and 90% reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of their course. It is of note, however, that 42% of students felt that the Foundation degree was more demanding than they had expected.

**Employer support**

Once enrolled, most students in employment found that support from their employer was forthcoming. The exception to this being students in early years/learning support roles, where financial support was less secure.

The Foundation Direct study found that 70% of students in paid employment received support from their employer. Of those who received support, 64% were given paid time off for study, 46% had their tuition fees paid and 36% had been allocated a workplace mentor.

**Benefits**

Foundation degree students perceived a range of benefits from undertaking Foundation degree study. Students who were already in employment and studying part-time responded differently to ‘potential employees’ who were studying full-time. This finding is perhaps unsurprising given that these two groups will, broadly speaking, be different in terms of the age of students, the stage of their career and their reasons for taking a Foundation degree.

Perceived benefits for full-time students looking to enter employment included:

- an opportunity to gain real business experience
- an opportunity to gain a broad knowledge of a specific industry
- development and enhancement of practical knowledge and skills
- development of critical reasoning and reflective skills
- an opportunity to gain employer contacts that will be useful when seeking employment
- gained confidence
Perceived benefits for students already in employment included:

- gaining new subject knowledge and an understanding of theories linked to workplace practices
- development of skills such as critical reasoning and evidence-based evaluation
- development of a range of transferable skills such as group working, communication skills
- an opportunity to share and discuss experiences and working practices, to learn from others and broaden ones horizons
- students on bespoke programmes met with individuals from different departments and broke down interdepartmental barriers
- some students gained promotion or additional responsibilities at work
- many reported that their studies had changed them as a person in terms of increasing confidence, learning to take initiative, interact with others, and adding a new dimension to life
- the Foundation degree provided an opportunity to get back into learning at higher education level

Future plans

The Foundation Direct study found that 91% of students rated their Foundation degree as very relevant or relevant to their future career. The study also revealed that the majority of students (71%) intended to progress to an honours degree upon completion of their Foundation degree, although a number anticipated that honours degree study would not fit with their work and personal commitments in the way that Foundation degree study had. The Foundation Direct study also found that 20% of students intended to take a professional qualification after graduating from a Foundation degree.

It is interesting to note that the age and employment status of students appears to have little influence on the proportion of students intending to progress to honours, whereas considerable differences were observed amongst students from different subject areas. Although these data must be regarded with caution since the survey covered only a relatively small number of students, almost all students undertaking business related programmes intend to progress to honours, in stark contrast to veterinary nursing and animal science students, of whom only 22% intend to progress.

HEFCE data5 reveal the outcome for Foundation degree graduates who progress to the final year of an honours degree. A first class honours degree is awarded to 8% of students, 32% receive an upper second, 28% obtain a lower second and 4% achieve a third class degree.

Available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008
Practitioners involved in the CHERI/LSN survey were aware of the need to be innovative, resourceful and flexible in developing and delivering Foundation degrees. They were also aware of the need for continuous evaluation and updating of the programme in order to maintain the currency of the programme and keep pace with changes in legislation or professional requirements. In developing case studies, practitioners identified a number of key issues relating to the design, development and delivery of Foundation degrees.

**Key issues identified by practitioners included:**

- **How to engage employers effectively and persuade them to become involved with Foundation degree developments**
- **Working in collaborative partnerships can be complicated and challenging**
- **Responding effectively to demand-led provision**
  Providers recognised that this is a time and resource intensive process but report ongoing problems with finding the time required and developing a professional client-facing approach
- **Difficulties in accommodating the work and study patterns demanded by employers**
  Whilst several providers highlighted this as an issue, many were developing flexible learning and teaching strategies and blended learning opportunities to accommodate employer and student needs
- **Student recruitment**
  Bespoke programmes are likely to have a limited shelf life and a limited pool of interested employers and students, whereas full-time generic provision can be seen as less risky in terms of the potential for student recruitment
- **Financial issues relating to early years/learning support programmes**
  Changes in government policy can lead to variations in the level of financial support available to students and providers
- **Student support**
  Providers recognise the need to ensure that students are suitable for programmes and have adequate support whilst they study
- **Raising employer awareness**
  There is still work to be done in raising employer awareness and understanding of Foundation degrees
- **Ensuring that there is a balance between the more theoretically oriented curriculum content and the work-based elements of a programme**
7. Conclusions

The findings of the CHERI/LSN and Foundation Direct studies indicate numerous positive outcomes for employers and students who become involved with Foundation degrees.

Employers who become involved with Foundation degrees report immediate benefits for their business. Employers who express concerns about the qualification are more likely to be those who have not engaged in the design, development or delivery of the programmes and therefore lack understanding of the distinct nature of the qualification and awareness of potential benefits. Within the early years and learning support sector in particular, some employers expressed frustration with funding arrangements and a concern about the professional status of Foundation degrees. Whilst these are undoubtedly key issues for the students and employers involved, these concerns are largely related to sector policy rather than the qualification.

Whilst employers and students are largely positive about their experience of Foundation degrees, the CHERI/LSN and Foundation Direct projects did highlight significant variability in the quality and sustainability of employer-led provision. Providers also reported a range of issues and challenges associated with employer-led, work-based provision. fdf recognises the issues faced by providers and in addition to providing a responsive, high quality consultancy service, has put in place a number of resources and initiatives that provide ongoing support for providers.

Employer-provider partnership management

A number of practitioners reported that engaging effectively with employers and working in complex collaborative partnerships poses particular challenges. In response to this, fdf has brought together resources and a staff development support service that will assist institutions in developing and sustaining successful partnerships with employers. The fdf Employer and Provider Partnerships service has been very positively received by the numerous universities and colleges involved in pilot activities.

Employer-based training accreditation

In March 2008, fdf launched the Employer Based Training Accreditation (EBTA) service. The aim of EBTA is to give employers the opportunity to get the training they provide recognised by higher education for credits and/or awards. The service provides institutions with a methodology for accreditation of employer-based training and support in developing new partnerships with employers. The service assists employers to navigate the complexity of the higher education sector and quality assurance bureaucracy. Since the initiation of pilot activities during 2006-08, the EBTA service has taken off extensively and there are currently 29 different initiatives at various stages of development, including some that involve SMEs. The success of the EBTA scheme and fdf’s work in establishing consortia of employers for development of sector-specific Foundation degrees has been explicitly recognised in Higher Education at Work; High Skills: High Value, the document in which government sets out its strategies for delivering the higher level skills strategy.

6 Details of Employer and Provider Partnerships are available at: www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/employer_and_provider_partnerships

7 Higher Education at Work; High Skills: High Value and details of the associated consultation process are available at: www.dius.gov.uk/consultations/con_0408_hlss.html
Foundation degrees: national communications strategy

In 2007, DIUS passed to fdf the responsibility for marketing and promoting Foundation degrees to employers. A communications strategy aimed at developing an informed awareness of Foundation degrees amongst employers was developed and national and regional campaigns are underway.

In 2007, fdf commissioned HEIST to establish the level of awareness of Foundation degrees amongst employers and other key stakeholder groups, against which the impact of communications activity can, in future, be evaluated. When HEIST undertook street intercept interviews with a sample of adults aged 18-50 who regarded themselves as open to training and development they found that 54% of individuals had heard of Foundation degrees. However, they noted a great deal of misunderstanding about the qualification. 29% of respondents believed that Foundation degrees are an entry level qualification that can lead on to the first year of an honours degree and 27% of respondents had heard of the name ‘Foundation degree’ but knew nothing else. Only 8% of respondents identified Foundation degrees as work-based learning, 7% knew that programmes are developed with employers and 6% recognised that they are an academic degree in their own right. It is very clear that if a greater number of potential students are to be made aware of Foundation degrees and provided with good, consistent advice about the qualification and programmes on offer, there is a need to improve access to and the quality of the information, advice and guidance (IAG) currently available.

“We will ask HEFCE to develop proposals to support expansion of accrediting employers’ own training to higher levels. We are learning from the early experience of Foundation Degree Forward’s (fdF’s) Employer-Based Training Accreditation scheme … We want to explore how this approach can be applied to SMEs as well as large companies.” [Paragraph 7.6]

Higher Education at Work; High Skills: High Value (DIUS 2008)

“We will review the lessons emerging from the employer-provider consortia supported by fdf in major sectors like ICT/Telecommunications, utilities, railways and biopharma and health technology.” [Paragraph 7.15]

Higher Education at Work; High Skills: High Value (DIUS 2008)

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8 The HEIST Foundation Degree Market Assessment is available at: [www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/key_documents_for_providers](http://www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/key_documents_for_providers)
Information, advice and guidance

The CHERI/LSN study revealed that many students receive little IAG prior to enrolling on a Foundation degree. **fdf** is leading a number of initiatives that seek to influence and support existing IAG services. **fdf** has produced high quality IAG training materials⁹ to support those who work with potential students. **fdf** is also working in partnership with unionlearn to enhance engagement with employees and stimulate adult workforce participation in higher education.

Achieving effective practice in the establishment, planning and delivery of full-time foundation degrees: a guide for universities and colleges

The reports highlight a number of issues that are specific to full-time Foundation degree programmes aimed at those looking to enter the workforce. While full-time Foundation degrees demonstrably provide a valuable route into employment, including for those who might not otherwise have considered higher education, it is a matter of concern that some programmes appear to have questionable levels of employer involvement and offer little opportunity for work-based learning. **fdf** has recently published guidance¹⁰ to support providers in addressing issues specific to full-time Foundation degrees and ensure high quality Foundation degrees are developed and delivered that address workforce needs.

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⁹ The **fdf** IAG training materials are available at:  
www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/iag_training_materials

¹⁰ Achieving effective practice in the establishment, planning and delivery of full-time foundation degrees: a guide for universities and colleges is available at:  
www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/fdf_publications
Research reports

The full reports of CHERI/LSN and Foundation Direct studies can be accessed via the fdf website at www.fdf.ac.uk.

The findings of the Sheffield University review of Foundation degree literature have been catalogued to form a purposely-designed database, the aim of which is to enable all those with an interest in the subject to elicit the latest evidence and understanding.

The database of Foundation degree literature is available at:
www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/foundation_degree_literature
fdf
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