

## Principles and Guidance for the Design of Foundation Degrees

### 1 Introduction

1.1 The [Taught Courses Regulatory Framework \(TCRF\)](#) defines the regulations and requirements for all awards at the University of Worcester. It is consistent with The Office for Students [Sector-Recognised Standards](#) (OfS, 2022) which specify the level of study required for specific types of awards and the [Higher education credit framework for England Advice on Academic Credit arrangements](#) (QAA, 2021) which sets out the minimum credit requirements for HE qualifications.

1.2 All University approved Foundation Degrees are subject to the Taught Courses Regulatory Framework (TCRF) and the relevant generic principles and requirements that apply when designing any undergraduate course governed by the TCRF (in accordance with the [Principles and Guidance for Design of Undergraduate Courses Updated October 2023](#)). In addition, there are specific requirements and guidance for the design of Foundation Degrees set out below. These reflect the specific [Sector-Recognised Standards](#) (OfS, 2022) for Foundation Degrees and the [QAA Characteristic Statement: Foundation Degree \(QAA, 2020\)](#) and apply to all University of Worcester approved Foundation Degrees, whether designed solely for delivery at the University or in partnership with Further Education Colleges or other organisations with whom we have formal academic partnerships.

### 2 General Requirements for Foundation Degrees

2.1 Foundation Degrees are **Level 5 qualifications** within The Office for Students [Sector-Recognised Standards](#) (OfS, 2022) (see an extract at Annexe 1 of this guidance for the Descriptor for a higher education qualification at Level 5: Foundation degree). Foundation Degrees have a number of **distinctive features** as outlined in the [QAA Characteristic Statement: Foundation Degree \(QAA, 2020\)](#). This Characteristic Statement differentiates the Foundation Degree award from other Level 5 qualifications including Diplomas of Higher Education and HNDs<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, the work-based learning experience of students on Foundation Degrees should be informed by the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education Advice and Guidance: Work-based Learning](#) (QAA, 2018).

2.2 Foundation Degrees<sup>2</sup> are intended to **integrate academic and work-based learning** through close collaboration between employers and higher education providers. They are vocational higher education qualifications designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge relevant to employment and reflect the needs of employees and employers, with a view to meeting regional and/or sector skills or professional body requirements. Hence significant emphasis is placed on employer involvement and work-based learning integrated throughout the course/curriculum.

2.3 Foundation Degrees should also promote inclusion, widening participation and lifelong learning and provide a route into higher education for those that have not considered higher education previously or prefer a more applied curriculum and the opportunity to 'earn and learn'.

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<sup>1</sup> HNDs are normally work-related in knowledge and skills but not work-based. Whereas FDs have a requirement for the integration of WBL, either through relevant employment or sustained work experience, which may be through voluntary work or placements to enable learning through reflection in and on work.

<sup>2</sup> This definition is informed by the [QAA Characteristic Statement: Foundation Degree \(QAA, 2020\)](#)

2.4 Foundation Degrees are self-standing higher education qualifications, but also provide opportunities for further study through progression to:

- Level 6 of an Honours degree
- Professional body qualifications or higher level National Vocational Qualifications.

2.5 Foundation Degrees have a range of distinctive characteristics not necessarily present in other qualifications at Level 5 or found in the initial parts of a programme leading directly to an Honours Degree (see Section 3). Foundation Degrees may also be offered as part of a Higher Apprenticeship (subject to approval, see [Apprenticeship Approval Process, 2022](#)) or linked to a Higher Technical Qualification.

2.6 Foundation Degree programmes must be designed to enable learners to benefit from the interpretation of ideas and the experience of practice within the wider context of employment and the workplace and encourage lifelong learning. Learners must be given sufficient opportunity for self-directed learning and reflection and be encouraged to use reflective learning tools, e.g., personal development plans.

2.7 Foundation Degrees should be designed to enable graduates to develop the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making. They should be able to undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences.

2.8 There is no single model for the modular structure of a Foundation Degree. However, **all programmes have a total credit value of 240 credits** (120 credits at Level 4 and 120 credits at Level 5) and lead to an award of either FdA or FdSc with an exit award of Cert HE (see TCRF).

2.9 The number of mandatory modules is discretionary within the confines of the credit requirements for each level of the award. However, as with other undergraduate awards, core knowledge and skills are located in mandatory modules that must be taken and passed. **Typically, Foundation Degrees have a more defined programme of modules**, with few or no optional modules.

2.10 Each course must have an **Award Map** which lists all modules which are mandatory and optional for the course and any specific requirements for each award. This forms part of the Programme Specification (see the current template for [FD Programme Specifications](#) which includes the template for the Award Map).

2.11 Where appropriate, course teams are encouraged to consider a 'framework' approach if developing more than one related Foundation Degree, with the opportunity for the sharing of common 'core' modules and specifying 'pathway' specific modules for individual awards. In this case, each programme of modules must be sufficiently distinct to justify a discrete award title, with **a minimum differentiation of 30 credits at Level 5** (in addition to any 30 credit WBL/placement module).

2.12 UW Foundation Degrees must normally be designed to ensure that **at least half of the student's programme of studies at each level is composed of 30 credit modules** delivered over the academic year. However, a case can be made during planning and course approval to deviate from this expectation where there is a clear employer need or professional requirement that requires an alternative structure.

2.13 The Foundation Degree curriculum must ensure that students are prepared for progression to Level 6 Honours degree study (or other professional qualification). Thus, the Foundation Degree **must be designed with at least one identified Level 6 Honours/Top-Up degree progression route in mind** during course approval. Consideration should be given to

the appropriate alignment of subject content, academic and work-related skills, modes of study, approaches to learning and teaching, types of assessment and professional expectations. In cases where progression will be to Level 6 of an existing Honours degree (rather than a bespoke Top-Up degree), it may be necessary to include a bridging programme (which need not be credit bearing depending on the volume of study required).

### **3 Key Characteristics of University of Worcester Approved Foundation Degrees**

3.1 The distinctiveness of Foundation Degrees depends upon the clear and planned integration of the following **key characteristics**, underpinned by work-based learning, as set out in the [QAA Characteristic Statement: Foundation Degree \(QAA, 2020\)](#): **employer involvement; accessibility; articulation and progression; flexibility; and partnership**. The University expectations related to each are identified below.

#### **Employer Involvement**

3.2 Foundation Degrees should be developed to meet the **employment needs of a particular sector** and should equip students with the combination of academic knowledge, understanding and vocational and transferable skills and competences. Thus, employer involvement is fundamental to ensure that courses deliver an appropriate mix of academic, generic, work-based, and technical or sector-specific skills for the relevant sector, workforce or niche market.

3.3 Course Teams should involve employers, local organisations, service users or stakeholders (where appropriate), relevant professional bodies and/or sector skills councils during the development and approval of the course. Consultation should be used to establish the demand for the course and to shape the curriculum and delivery of the award. Employers should, where possible, be involved in the delivery and assessment of the course, in monitoring student performance in the workplace and in on-going development and review of the award.

3.4 Course approval documentation must make clear the ways in which employers have been involved in the design of the Foundation Degree and the arrangements for their continued involvement through the delivery and review of the course.

#### **Work-Based Learning (WBL)**

3.5 The University draws on the definition of work-based learning (WBL) provided in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education Advice and Guidance: Work-based Learning](#) (QAA, 2018) (see also the [UW Policy on the Management of Placement and Work-based Learning](#) and associated documentation for further explanation and a definition of placement learning):

**Work-based learning** is learning that is integral to a higher education programme, and which is based in the workplace and assessed and credited as part of the University programme. It is achieved and demonstrated through engagement with a workplace environment, and normally includes the assessment of reflective practice and of professional competencies and skills associated with employability.

3.6 Foundation Degrees are designed to enable learners to benefit from the interpretation of ideas and the experience of practice within the context of work, underpinned by both technical and academic understanding. Thus, **authentic work-based learning (WBL)** must be integral to the Foundation Degree course design and delivery and uses the work environment as a vehicle for the achievement of learning. The work-based elements of the course must be defined in the aims and learning outcomes of the course and be aligned to module learning outcomes which are assessed.

3.7 **WBL** should be appropriate to the specific needs of an employment sector or type of employer and courses should provide opportunities for learners to develop and demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and behaviours both in the workplace and through reflection in and on the real world of work and to gain credit for doing so. In contrast, **work-related learning** uses work as a focus for learning, but this is removed from the physical location of the workplace and may employ a range of college or university-based activities such as practical or technical skills development, case studies, scenario or problem-based learning, simulation and guest speakers from industry.

3.8 University Foundation Degrees have a requirement for the **integration of WBL** throughout the curriculum, achieved either through **relevant employment or sustained work experience**, which may be through voluntary work or placements. This may include the use of 'real work' environments within the teaching institution (e.g., travel agency, salon). WBL can be supplemented (but not replaced) by a variety of work-related activities, including work-based projects and simulation.

3.9 **Work-based learning outcomes** may be delivered both through discrete work-based learning/placement modules or integrated throughout a number of modules. Typically, specific practice or WBL/placement modules take the form of 30 credit modules delivered across an academic year and are undertaken primarily in the workplace. It is expected that **a minimum of 30 credits at both Level 4 and Level 5 will be work-based**. Additional simulated, work-related, and learning for work activities must be over and above these 30 credit modules. UW Foundation Degrees normally aim for a minimum of 200 hours (at least one day a week) in placement at each Level (unless there is a professional/PSRB set requirement of hours). **The requirements to be in relevant employment or to undertake placements must be made clear in information for prospective students.**

3.10 Approaches to WBL, placements, supporting students in their WBL, related WBL assessment, and relative roles and responsibilities of the University, partners, students, mentors, and employers are normally outlined in a course specific **WBL Handbook** or specific section of the course handbook (see the [UW Policy on the Management of Placement and Work-based Learning](#) and associated documentation for the risk assessment and approval of placements).

3.11 The completion of a **WBL/Placement audit record** is required for each Foundation Degree and assists in the design and development of the programme (see the [Appendix 4a Placement and Work-based Learning - Audit Record](#) and the [Appendix 4b Placement and Work-based Learning - Audit Record v2](#) – for courses where the student's workplace is the work-based learning setting). These Audit Records will be considered as part of course approval and periodic review. It is recommended that the team considers the placement approval and risk assessment tool before completing the WBL audit record.

## **Accessibility**

3.12 Foundation Degrees are intended to attract a range of learners from different starting points, to encourage **widening participation and access** into higher education and to provide learners with the opportunity to 'earn, learn and study'.

3.13 Given the nature and intention of Foundation Degrees, applicants may come from diverse backgrounds and with varying qualifications and experience. Admissions procedures must be designed to allow students to demonstrate their capacity to benefit from the Foundation Degree while also providing information, advice and guidance for students who may need further preparation. For further guidance see the University's [Admissions Policy](#).

3.14 Recognition should be given to the knowledge, skills and understanding an applicant may already have developed by learning through work. Programme Specifications should provide clear details of the admissions policy and procedures, entry criteria and admissions

criteria for the Foundation Degree and how the University's policy and principles for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL and RPEL) will be implemented.

3.15 Consideration must be given to providing an **equitable student experience** and to meeting the challenges in curriculum design and programme management, especially **in achieving the WBL**. This is particularly relevant when students may be either already in appropriate employment when they enter the Foundation Degree or who progress directly from Level 3 study and require assistance in establishing appropriate placements/work experience for the duration of the Foundation Degree.

## Progression

3.16 Clear routes for **successful progression from Foundation Degrees to another qualification are a key feature and should be established when the Foundation Degree is approved**.

3.17 Progression to **at least one linked bachelor's degree with honours or bespoke Top-Up Degree** is normally guaranteed, with the time required for completion of the Honours degree being comparable to that of the typical full Honours Degree.

3.18 Progression from a Foundation Degree to another qualification may require a bridging programme to ensure adequate preparation.

3.19 All such arrangements should be established at approval of the Foundation Degree to ensure that learners progressing onto the next programme are adequately prepared and informed. The key **arrangements to support transition** to the linked Honours Degree/Top-Up route(s) and any bridging programme necessary for progression must also be identified.

3.20 **Information for students about progression arrangements** must be available in the programme specifications, course handbooks and prospectuses.

3.21 The **Linked Honours Degree progression route/s** must be identified in Section 6 of the Programme Specification. The **admission arrangements**, procedures for application and any approved specific requirements for progression from the Foundation Degree to each identified Honours Top-Up/Level 6 Honours Degree must be clearly outlined in Section 20 of the Foundation Degree Programme Specification (see the Programme Specification template for [Foundation Degree - Level 4 & 5](#)).

3.22 **Prospectus entries and web-based course pages** for Foundation Degrees must identify the approved linked Honours progression route(s) and their associated entry criteria/admissions arrangements for progression to the Top-Up degree and/or direct entry to L6 of an Honours degree.

3.23 The **arrangements to support the transition of students** to the linked Honours/Top-Up degree must be set out in the Course Handbook (see [Course Handbook guidance](#)). This could include, planned study skills development, visits from staff and/or students from the Honours degree, preparation and advice for choice of progression route and subsequent module choices, Independent Study (Dissertation from 2020) preparation, specific induction arrangements for the Honours/Top-Up degree. This should be scrutinised through the approval process.

3.24 Foundation Degrees should enable students to be versatile and adaptable in progressing to and within work. **Employability and careers guidance** is therefore a key feature to equip learners to enhance their employment opportunities or prepare for a career change.

## Flexibility

3.25 Foundation Degrees should provide **flexibility in the student experience**, and may include:

- flexible delivery modes and study patterns, including full time, part-time, distance, work-based, and web-based learning
- flexible admissions requirement
- flexible progression routes, including links with other professional awards and with at least one identified honours degree programmes.

3.26 Where **blended, online and distance learning approaches** are employed, particular attention must be paid to the provision of student information and guidance and the planning of support arrangements (see the University [Blended, Online and Distance Learning – Guidance for Course Design, Course Approval and Definitions](#)).

## Partnerships

3.27 Partnerships, both formal and informal, are central to the successful development and delivery of Foundation Degrees and may include the University, Further Education Colleges, students, employers and employers' organisations, Sector Skills Councils and/or professional bodies. Partnerships of this kind are vital in providing programmes which are relevant, valid and responsive to the needs of learners and employers and include the appropriate mix of academic and vocational outcomes.

3.28 Within these 'partnerships', **the University as the degree awarding body has primary responsibility for the academic standards and quality of any awards** granted in its name and for the quality of learning opportunities delivered wherever these take place and whoever provides them, including those associated with WBL/placements. Foundation Degrees are subject to the University's academic regulations and quality processes. Where the Foundation Degree is to be delivered in whole or in part by a partner organisation (typically but not exclusively a further education college) the relative roles and responsibilities will be outlined in the **formal partnership agreements**.

3.29 Course approval documentation should evidence the ways in which partners have been involved in the design of the programme and the collaborative arrangements for the on-going delivery and operational management of the course. Additional information will be required where a course is approved for delivery by more than one partner, for example, the arrangements to support consistency in the student experience, for the standardisation of assessment practice and for external examining.

3.30 For further guidance on working in partnership see [UK Quality Code, Advice And Guidance: Partnerships Nov 2018](#).

## 4 Associated documents

[Assessment Policy](#)

[Curriculum Design Policy](#)

[Module Specification Template including guidance](#)

[Principles and Guidance for Design of Undergraduate Courses Updated October 2023](#)

[Principles for course design: Guide to writing learning outcomes and developing assessment criteria](#)

[Programme specification template](#)

[Taught Courses Regulatory Framework](#)

**Annexe 1 – Extract from The Office for Students [Sector-Recognised Standards](#) (OfS, 2022) :**

**A.3.2 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at Level 5: Foundation degree**

18. The descriptor provided for this level is for any foundation degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at Level 5, including Diplomas of Higher Education and Higher National Diplomas.

19. Foundation degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed
- ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context
- knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study
- an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.

20. Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis
- effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively
- undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations.

21. And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

22. The foundation degree is an example of a qualification that meets, in full, the expectations of the qualification descriptor.

23. Holders of qualifications at this level will have developed a sound understanding of the principles in their field of study and will have learned to apply those principles more widely. Through this, they will have learned to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems. Their studies may well have had a vocational orientation, for example HNDs, enabling them to perform effectively in their chosen field. Holders of qualifications at this level will have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

## Approval/Review Table

Item	Notes
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## Revision History

Committee	Date	Change
ASQEC	November 2023	Amendments to include reference to the Office for Students