



A case study of a new Foundation Degree in Cultural Services

Conference themes selected

- The role of museums in supporting HE student learning
- Museums and university partnerships - opportunities and barriers

Keywords

Cultural Sector, Work Based Learning, Foundation Degree, Workforce Development, Lifelong Learning

The context

This is a case study of a new foundation degree in Cultural Services (FDCS) that was developed by Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) with museums, libraries and archives in the Eastern Region. The partnership project responded to workforce development needs identified by senior staff in cultural sector organisations in the eastern region. They wished to attract a more diverse range of people to work within their sector and to provide a coherent and award-bearing framework of continuing professional development (CPD). It built on a national imperative recognised by MLA (Museums Libraries and Archive Council) in 2007:

Unless museums, libraries and archives can attract and develop high quality, flexible and multi-skilled staff the need for continuous service improvement, ever-closer community engagement and real impact on wider social and economic agendas will be held back. The skill sets we need get ever more complex with an increasing requirement for staff to work with a range of disciplines, take frontline roles with the public, and possess a wide range of skills such as interpretation, education and learning, entertainment, marketing, integration of collections with media and ICT (MLA 2007)

Following this conclusion, MLA in the East of England issued a tender to create a new foundation degree for the sector, for which the Faculty of Education at ARU bid successfully.

The evolution of the degree was developed in partnership, between ARU and MLA, through the operation of a steering committee. The steering committee members represented all three employment domains (museums, libraries and archives) as well as the pathway leader and the head of the Department of Education at Anglia Ruskin University. There were also representatives from professional sector bodies such as the Lifelong Learning Network for the East of England (MOVE), Foundation Degree Forward (Fdf), and Cambridgeshire County Council. As a result the committee shaped the emerging vision of the curriculum structure, the details of its constituent elements and its intended delivery.

It was employer input that influenced the move away from the original concept of a face-to face mode of delivery, towards a blended learning model with on-line provision at its centre. In practice this means that the initial induction meetings and the offer of seminars each semester are underpinned by web based learning. All materials are posted on a virtual learning environment (VLE) and students interact with each other and their lecturers using an online discussion forum. Thus students who are geographically dispersed can access learning materials, professional expertise and peer support at home, or in the workplace, at times convenient to them.

The learner for the Foundation degree

During the development of the degree it was crucial to identify the learner market. MLA's workforce development strategy (Demos 2003) identified potential learners in cultural workplaces engaged in a range of frontline or outreach customer facing roles, mainly in associate professional roles as museum, library or archive assistants. Three key drivers were identified which suggested a need for such workers to have the opportunity of gaining vocationally based and job related higher-level skills and professional development.



- 1 Increasing service demands, accountability and expectations as the sector meets changing customer and stakeholder needs, which is leading to the emergence of different roles.
- 2 The need for diversification of the workforce so that it is representative of the communities served, especially regarding ethnicity, gender, age and physical disability needs as well as migrant communities.
- 3 The changing profile of the workforce especially in libraries, where the recruitment bulge of the 1960's and 1970's, will in the next five years incur a significant retirement outflow of managerial and experienced staff needing to be filled by existing workers with the right skill levels (MLA 2008).

Students in the first cohort of the Foundation Degree in Cultural Services (FDCS) have been drawn from a range of groups who are benefitting from a flexible and work based approach. These include:

- Museum, library and archive assistants without degrees
- Museum, library and archive assistants with a previous degree unrelated to their work place, mid-career, with personal enthusiasm and planning their next career moves
- Volunteers, including new graduate interns, and staff managing volunteers, who are often being asked to undertake more demanding roles including project and team management.

For all students, the FDCS could enable progression to professional qualifications and advanced specialism, possibly at masters or doctorate levels.

There is currently interest from:

- Wider cultural sector staff and volunteers from heritage, the arts, tourism and education who have roles and functions equivalent to those within museums, libraries and archives
- Returners to work, who wish to update their knowledge and understanding of a rapidly changing sector, as well as adding to their skills
- Groups within cultural organisations who wish to access individual modules and adapt them to their particular needs
- New entrants, including academic graduate entrants with no formal job related training in museums, libraries and archives who plan to benefit and utilise the Foundation Degree as part of a structured initial 'traineeship' towards first promotion.

Curriculum design

At the heart of the curriculum is the expectation that any foundation degree should be explicitly vocational, actively seek employment involvement in all aspects of design, delivery, assessment and management; and that Work-Based Learning (WBL) and Work-Related Learning (WRL) are prominent features of the curriculum (HFCE 2000). During the three years part time study, the students move from an emphasis at level one of examining their current working practices and developing their academic and cognitive skills, before moving to level two. This level encourages them to apply the skills they have gained more rigorously, as they move towards the development of more effective practice. It is anticipated that they will be equipped to be agents of change in their organisation.

The key features of the curriculum are understanding users as learners and clients, client orientation, work related learning and student specialist skills development. These four strands form the basis of four modules each year, currently taught through two twelve week semesters. The strands are summarised below:



The challenges and opportunities for the FDCS, the university and the sector



- A **Understanding users as learners**, and as clients, in relation to current learning theories, research and practice leading to a focus on audience diversity at level two.
- B **Understanding the Public Interface** between cultural organizations, current, and potential, audiences. Level two examines the context for collecting in the 21st century and provides an opportunity for a special research project
- C **Understanding the Work Sector** focuses on an analysis of the cultural sector, in its broadest sense. This includes an examination of policy and practice at organisation, local and national levels
- D **The Developing Practitioner** gives the students an opportunity to reflect on their personal role and review their aspirations in the light of their current skill base.

Until now these strands have been taught as part of the integrated degree but in the future, ARU are considering offering core modules working in partnership with cultural employers to support their CPD programmes.

Three significant challenges can be identified. Firstly the economic situation: who will fund future students and further development of the course? Secondly the employment context: how will the FDCS increase its credibility and recruit more students? And finally how will it integrate with existing organisational structures and attitudes?

The experience from the first two years of delivery suggests that as these challenges face both universities and cultural organisations, possible solutions may be found in examining how the degree supports partners' specific needs.

The FDCS provides an opportunity for the cultural sector to collaborate between and across organisations. At the end of the first semester this was confirmed by student feedback when they commented, 'we did not realise how much we have in common'. This has particular relevance to cultural organisations who wish to build a diverse workforce transcending traditional organisational boundaries, especially colleagues in Local Authorities who are called upon to deliver joined up cultural policies (ERS 2010). It is also pertinent for those in organisations whose collections, workforce and practice span museums, archives and libraries. However a cross sector approach does raise further questions: to what extent will employers see the FDCS as an opportunity to invest in change and, particularly, how will sector professional organizations recognize or value the qualifications in relation to their existing qualification frameworks?

The FDCS supports universities strong commitment to work based learning and can deliver their current priorities. The degree can be seen as an opportunity for universities to link to their core purpose and together with libraries, archives and museums, be at the heart of lifelong learning and develop a workforce that has appropriate generic and sector specific skills and knowledge (Leitch 2006). This, in turn, could enable development opportunities for faculties beyond the Faculty of Education, where colleagues could share expertise and help maximise the potential of cultural organisations. A key to the success in the foundation degree will lie in effective marketing and prioritising time to liaise with employers, as well as high quality teaching.

During the last two years, delivery of the FDCS has proved effective and economic for the university, its' cultural partners and for the students. Blended learning, especially ARU's expertise in on-line learning, has proved an important instrument to ensuring the degree's efficiency and success. Students can make best use



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of their time. The university draws upon existing expertise and resources to attract new audiences and for cultural organisations; it confirms their commitment to digital technology and learning in the 21st century as well as proving themselves to be adaptable organisations.

In a changing world, where both education and culture are under increasing pressure, we have found that the FDCS provides a model for equipping the workforce in museums, libraries and archives for future challenges.

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