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## Foundation Learning National Evaluation

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### Introduction

In October 2010, ekosgen and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) were appointed by the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake a national evaluation of Foundation Learning (FL). The main elements of the evaluation took place over a five month period from November 2010, with final reporting completed in April 2011.

### Key Findings

- Completing a Foundation Learning (FL) programme has a positive effect on pre-16 learners with low levels of prior attainment at Key Stage 3, increasing their odds of achieving a qualification (of any sort) at the end of compulsory schooling. For some higher achieving pre-16 learners, FL appears to have a slightly negative effect on attainment, although this is explained to some extent by the credit values of FL qualifications being lower than for GCSEs, even at grades D-G;
- Participating in FL is not associated with increased odds of pre-16 learners continuing in education or training post-16. For post-16 learners, and after controlling for background characteristics such as prior achievement and learning difficulties and/ or disabilities (LDD), those on FL programmes were significantly more likely to continue in learning than similar non-FL learners;
- Learners and providers cite a range of wider benefits arising from FL, including the needs of learners below Level 2 being better highlighted and understood, a sense of reward and achievement through regular accreditation, comparatively high levels of enjoyment, and improved engagement, motivation and confidence. The main challenges reported through the evaluation concern certain aspects of the FL infrastructure, especially funding and funding formulae. There is also a widespread view amongst providers that most functional skills

qualifications are pitched at too high a level and that in some cases the formal assessments are leading to non-attendance.

## **Background and Study Objectives**

FL as a curriculum and a learning programme has been developed to help raise participation and attainment among 14-19 year olds (and 19-24 year olds with LDD) working predominantly below Level 2. It is intended to provide greater opportunities for progression through the development and delivery of personalised learning programmes that help learners to work towards intended destinations. Following trial and developmental delivery phases in 2007/08 and 2008/09, FL was piloted in 2009/10 in 22 local authorities (LA's) and with approximately 20,000 14-19 learners. Alongside this was a phased implementation process involving 180 post-16 providers nationally.

FL programmes are defined as having the following characteristics:

- Provision for 14-19 year olds (and/or 19-24 learners with LDD) working predominantly below Level 2;
- Combining subject/vocational learning, functional skills (maths, English and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)) and personal and social development (PSD). The weighting of these combinations is dependent on learner need;
- Featuring provision that is accredited wherever possible and qualifications (other than functional skills) that are mainly, but not necessarily exclusively, drawn from the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF);

Learners follow a personalised programme towards a specific intended destination (e.g. Further Education, employment with training or Apprenticeships) with ongoing reviews of progress.

The main objectives of the evaluation have been to review the delivery and implementation of FL to date and to assess its impact. Within these objectives, the evaluation was tasked with understanding how FL is being implemented locally, providing an assessment of views of FL amongst learners, practitioners and employers, and gathering evidence on the outcomes for learners.

## Methodology

The evaluation has been based upon a combination of primary and secondary research, including surveys, case studies and analysis of national educational datasets. The main activities have included:

- A telephone survey of FL leads in 149 of 152 LAs in England. The survey explored the scale of FL delivery together with the successes, impacts, barriers and challenges experienced to date. Only two local authorities declined the invitation to participate in the survey;
- Synthesis and review of international evidence from 2003 on the approaches adopted in other countries that have provision comparable with FL. The review sought evidence of innovative practice, critical success factors, and the impacts of the provision on learners and employers.
- Telephone and face-to-face consultations with stakeholders with a strategic relating to FL. The consultations focused on issues such as the suitability of FL for a wider roll-out and its success at raising the profile of provision for learners operating mainly below Level 2;
- An online survey of pre-16 and post-16 providers in 40 LAs. The LAs were selected on the basis of their responses to the telephone survey (above) to ensure national representation in terms of FL delivery. The providers were asked for their views on learner choice and personalisation, the composition of FL programmes, employer engagement, impact and future delivery plans. The survey generated 187 responses from pre-16 providers and 105 from post-16 providers<sup>1</sup>;
- Analysis of the characteristics, attainment and progression of learners on FL programmes, using the statistical techniques of propensity-score matching and multi-level modelling. The pre-16 analysis was based on a sample of 552 learners who, according to data collected from providers, started an FL programme in 2008/09 or in 2009/10, matched to the National Pupil Database. The post-16 analysis was based on a sample of 18,168 learners identified via the individual learner record (ILR);
- Fourteen LA - based case studies, usually involving one pre-16 and one post-16 provider visit. Interviews with managerial staff, tutors/teachers and learners. Ten employers and 15 parents were also consulted through the case studies to obtain their opinions of FL and its impacts. .

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<sup>1</sup> Response rates are unknown as the web link to the survey was sent to providers by FL leads within local authorities and not by the evaluation team.

## **Main findings**

### **International Evidence on Provision Equivalent to FL**

The international evidence review identified the following countries where it was possible to scope FL equivalent provision and compare it with England:

- Scotland, Republic of Ireland, Malta, Australia; New Zealand and South Africa.

Searches were conducted of the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Framework Archive and Eurydice networks and where appropriate key informants in the identified countries were contacted to clarify and validate the information collected. Literature searches were also conducted from a range of databases and internet subject gateways.

In the main, the review found limited evidence of equivalent provision as a core component of international education and training systems. While there is some provision equivalent to Level 1, there is less evidence of Entry Level equivalent qualifications, in particular at Entry Levels 1 and 2. Some European countries have rejected the need for qualifications at this level, although early school leaving is nonetheless a concern across Europe.

It is relatively rare in Europe for accredited provision to be made available for learners who leave compulsory schooling without achieving the necessary recognised standards linked to the final year of compulsory education. The practice of repeating whole academic years is more common, especially in Germany, Austria, Belgium and France.

Australia, New Zealand and (to a lesser extent) South Africa have provision at either the Entry Levels or Level 1 that is similar to FL, incorporating a vocational element and functional or basic skills components. Evidence on the impact of such provision reveals a mixed picture – whilst in New Zealand completion rates on FL-equivalent programmes are relatively low (below 50%), there is nonetheless a link between completion and positive outcomes, including further study or employment. State level activity in Australia appears to be having a positive effect on progression, although in South Africa there is less evidence of any such link.

### **Participation in Foundation Learning**

An estimated 84,000 pre-16 learners and 56,500 post-16 learners are participating in FL in 2010/11 (although these figures are based upon a considerable degree of approximation as they are calculated by applying the average learner numbers from the 86 local authorities who were able to provide them to the other 65 LAs who were not). Providers are largely targeting FL at learners who have a statement of special educational need or LDD, are recognised for school action or school

action plus, or who were previously not in education, employment or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming so.

A variety of approaches is used to identify potential learners, including achievement records, in-house diagnostics, referrals from Connexions (and other agencies) and staff knowledge and opinion of learner need.

FL provision is now considered by the majority of providers to be appropriate for its target learners. Private training providers are the least likely to report this, but their concerns are focused mainly on the issues of funding (and in particular the qualification based nature of FL funding) and assessment (where the appropriateness of the formal assessment of functional skills qualifications has been questioned) rather than on the specific content of QCF units and qualifications (see also 'Benefits of Foundation Learning' and 'Current Challenges'). The ability to build and tailor FL programmes using what is generally perceived to be an appropriate range of units and qualifications is encouraging many providers to widen their FL offer from previous years. Factors having a negative impact on provider, and therefore learner participation in FL, include the cessation of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and cuts to the Connexions service. Uncertainty over the policy implications of the Wolf Report is in some cases causing providers' expansion plans for 2011/12 to be put on hold.

### **Foundation Learning Delivery in 2010/11**

FL remains a strategic priority for the majority of LAs and providers. Most providers delivering FL are doing so through 'full' programmes comprising vocational, PSD and functional skills qualifications, using units and qualifications drawn largely from the QCF (this is a key development from the position 12 months ago).

Most learners have some choice over their vocational area but due to practicalities/logistics are generally not able to choose specific units and qualifications. It is however common for the levels of units and qualifications within groups to vary depending on learner ability, and for ongoing and personalised support to be offered to FL learners.

There has been an increase in collaborative activity between providers – more than two thirds of providers now report that they are delivering FL in partnership. One of the strongest messages emerging from the evaluation is that partnership working underpins many of the most important perceived benefits of FL, and especially those relating to pre-16 learner confidence and independence.

Employer involvement in FL is growing although in most cases is still reported to be limited. Providing work experience or tasters continues to be by far the most common form of employer

involvement. In some cases employers have also supported learners with specific qualifications or strands of work.

## **Benefits of Foundation Learning**

The provider survey and case studies suggest that FL is leading to the needs of learners below Level 2 being better highlighted and understood. In part this is due to the infrastructural developments associated with FL, e.g. the introduction and population of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), and in part to the renewed or increased focus being given to provision below Level 2 amongst provider senior management and through curriculum planning as a result of FL.

For most learners there is a sense of reward and achievement through regular accredited learning. Staff views were more varied, with many stating that the interpersonal and life skills gained through FL are far more important than the qualifications.

Learners reported enjoying FL more than they do (or did) mainstream education. There are many anecdotal reports of improved learner engagement, motivation, behaviour and confidence as a result of FL and evidence that the practical application of skills is promoting a greater sense of independence. Ten employers were consulted for the evaluation, and whilst their views cannot be considered representative of any larger cohort of employers, they are generally very positive about the attributes of FL learners and focused their feedback much more on their ability to perform tasks and interact with members of staff than on the value of their qualifications.

## **Current Challenges**

Whilst the visibility and profile of FL and its learners is growing, issues of perception and reputation remain, with staff in some providers unwilling to engage and parents reportedly expressing their preference for their child to do a full suite of GCSEs rather than FL, their view being that even lower grade GCSEs will have greater currency in the job market than FL qualifications.

Functional skills continues to be the most challenging element of FL to deliver due to a widespread view that the qualifications are pitched at too high a level and that in some post-16 providers the formal assessments are leading to non-attendance.

Many providers report ongoing difficulties in engaging employers in their FL programmes, with post-16 providers in particular concerned that there is no recognised funding for enabling young people to be placed on work experience with an employer unless they complete a qualification. Funding formulae for FL are also seen to be complex and lacking a mechanism for acknowledging partial achievement. This has led to the suggestion that providers might be inclined to select learners for

FL programmes most likely to achieve full qualifications, although no reliable evidence of this emerged through other strands of the research.

## **Measuring Attainment and Progression**

The evidence shows mixed results in terms of the impact of FL on attainment and progression. From a pre-16 perspective, however, it mainly covers learners that started in 2008/09, since when many providers have refined their FL offer and developed a better appreciation of what works. The findings should therefore be seen more as a baseline than as a conclusive assessment of the impact of FL. Note also that the data available to the evaluation does not allow non-learning outcomes, such as independent living or supported employment, to be tracked.

### *Pre-16*

The data suggests that completing an FL programme can have a negative effect on learners' chances of achieving a full Level 2 or full Level 1 qualification, and on their total GCSE point scores. This is most evident for more able learners and those with no special educational needs (and to some extent can be explained by credit values of FL qualifications being lower than for GCSEs, even at grades D-G).

However, completing an FL programme has a positive effect on learners with low levels of prior attainment at Key Stage 3 where participation increases their odds of achieving (any) qualification at the end of compulsory schooling.

The analysis found FL participation is not yet associated with increased odds of continuing in education or training post-16. However, no data was available on progression rates to other positive destinations, including supported employment and independent living, which would provide a more rounded and holistic picture.

### *Post-16*

Almost half of the post-16 FL learners in 2009/10 completed a full programme, while 79% partially completed. Not achieving one or more functional skills qualifications (or equivalent) was the main reason for not completing. However, FL learners were still more likely to attain functional skills (or equivalent) qualifications in English and maths than similar non-FL learners.

Seventy one percent of FL learners continued in learning at the end of 2009/10, while 7% moved onto some form of employment (without training). After controlling for learners' background characteristics, such as prior achievement and LDD, FL learners were significantly more likely to continue in learning than similar non-FL learners. This was particularly the case for those learners who had achieved a full FL programme.

## **Looking to the Future**

LAs report that the 2011/12 academic year should see a considerable increase in the number of pre-16 providers involved in FL. There will be more or different pre-16 and post-16 qualifications and occupational areas being included within the scope of FL, both pre-16 and post-16.

From a relatively strong starting point, LAs expect partnership working between providers to increase and become further embedded (mainly in terms of scale through school and college links, off-site delivery and an expansion in the vocational offer).

There is a strong desire within the sector for clarity on the future of FL and vocational education more widely following the Wolf Report (some providers are delaying expansion until this is better understood). Other factors influencing the future scale and type of FL delivery include funding, employer engagement and the cessation of the EMA.

## **Conclusions**

Estimates suggest that there have been significant increases in pre-16 and post-16 FL activity in 2010/11. Far more providers have become involved and the learner offer, in terms of the range of available vocational or subject areas, has become broader. Support for the principles of FL remains strong and it continues to have a high priority in the majority of local authorities. Whilst the Wolf Report has caused there be some uncertainty in the sector over FL, there is a large cohort of very willing providers and authorities who are committed to making it a success.

FL in itself is not a new philosophy and in many providers consulted during the evaluation the only significant difference in the delivery infrastructure is in the qualifications that are being undertaken. FL is however acting as an enabler of change for provision below Level 2 and now appears to be delivering on its pledge of allowing providers to deliver more flexible, engaging programmes. Whilst the full flexibilities of the QCF are not yet being exploited through FL, considerable progress is being made and the perceived adequacy of FL qualifications is now often encouraging and driving participation.

Learners and providers continue to cite a range of benefits arising from FL, including the needs of learners below Level 2 being better highlighted and understood, a sense of reward and achievement through regular accreditation, comparatively high levels of enjoyment, and improved engagement, motivation and confidence. However, FL should not be seen as transformational – whilst there is evidence of it making a difference to learners' lives, it is unrealistic to assume that it will consistently address the most deep-seated challenges (in relation to family background and social mobility, for example) faced by many within the target group.

Opinions obtained during the evaluation on the value of FL are mixed, although few have suggested that it lies solely within qualifications. In the view of many of the teachers, tutors and managers that



have been consulted, PSD-related skills and the attributes needed to progress to positive destinations are at least of equal importance, if not more important, than qualifications at the Entry Levels and Level 1.

Whilst the visibility and profile of FL and its learners is growing, significant challenges remain. A growing number of private providers are becoming increasingly unhappy about certain aspects of the FL infrastructure, especially funding and funding formulae, the emphasis on qualification achievement and – linked to both of these – the absence of recognised funding for enabling young people to be placed on work experience with an employer unless they complete a qualification. In addition, there is still a widespread view that most functional skills qualifications are pitched at too high a level and in some cases the formal assessments are leading to non-attendance.

From an attainment perspective, FL appears to be most suited to pre-16 learners with low levels of achievement at Key Stage 3 and those with a statement of special educational need. Higher achieving FL learners are less likely to see an attainment impact and in some cases FL appears to have a slightly negative effect on their chances of achieving a full Level 1 or full Level 2 qualification, and on their total GCSE point scores. However, this is explained to some extent by the fact that the credit values of FL qualifications are lower than for GCSEs, even at grades D-G.

Post-16 outcomes on FL do not appear to be influenced by learners' prior attainment, although there is evidence of a significant provider effect on learners' chances of completing a full programme. There is also evidence that FL learners are significantly more likely to continue in learning than similar non-FL learners, especially where they have completed a full FL programme.

These are, however, early findings, as the FL offer in many providers has been refined and improved since the learners under review completed their programme. The evaluation has also not been able to track non-learning outcomes, such as independent living or supported employment.

## **Recommendations**

At the time of writing the government's response to the Wolf Report had not been published. The recommendations below therefore cover both strategic and operational considerations, but deliberately stop short of proposing significant changes or infrastructural developments.

- 1. Policy position:** LAs and providers are seeking clarity on the future of FL, with some planning to delay further expansion until the policy position is better understood. The sector will appreciate a clear statement from the DfE as soon as it can be provided.
- 2. Funding:** post-16 providers are calling for a fundamental review of FL funding and it is an issue that in the short term looks set to become more rather than less significant. Arriving at a satisfactory resolution is likely to be directly linked to the ongoing reputation of FL in the sector, especially amongst post-16 training providers, and is therefore important that the

dialogue taking place between the DfE, training provider representative bodies and other relevant organisations be continued.

- 3. Longitudinal tracking:** to enable non-learning outcomes (independent living, supported employment etc.) to be tracked – and therefore for the impact of FL to be better understood – any further research or evaluation should include a longitudinal element to capture the experiences of a sample of learners who move into non-learning outcomes following FL. This will give a better and more holistic view of the extent to which FL is (as many providers claim) preparing learners for progression more effectively than equivalent provision in the past.
- 4. The non-deliverers' perspective:** whilst the evaluation has found that FL has a high degree of visibility and importance within providers, it has concentrated on those where delivery is already underway. As part of any subsequent FL related research or evaluation, it is recommended that a cohort of non-delivering providers be included to obtain a more rounded view on sector-wide attitudes to FL and to understand the reasons behind any delays or late starts.

### **Additional Information**

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>  
Further information about this research can be obtained from  
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.