

Inspiring By Degrees

Matthew Blades

With the launch last year of its Foundation Degree in Cultural Events Management, Bishop Grosseteste College (BGC), Lincoln, is leading the way in providing vocational, work-based training degrees for the cultural sector. Matthew Blades, Programme Leader, highlights the value of this approach.

Did you know that 17.7 million workers across the UK (63% of the working population) improved their skills last year and/or went on to gain a formal qualification from their learning and training? And evidence suggests the Foundation Degree framework (FdA) might well have featured as a very viable option with which the work force made the connection between vocational training and formal qualifications.

Almost a year on, what has been the impact on the UK cultural sector? Well news from the East Midlands, particularly across Lincolnshire, is positive. We are enjoying a vibrant cultural renaissance, across heritage, the arts, museums and through leisure tourism. This local revival, and indeed the renewed interest regionally, in what the local sector can achieve economically, artistically and socially, is

fuelling a demand for new knowledge and different skills. Vocational work-based training, and the ways in which knowledge and skills are acquired, and used, has taken on a new significance for practitioners throughout the sector.

This is good news indeed, particularly for a sector that tends to fall short in the area of providing targeted training opportunities and where many hold the view that formal education and on the job training are two distinct, uncomplementary routes. Well, let's be honest, education and qualifications have often distanced cultural sector workers from acquiring marketable new skills and extending their knowledge. You have to remember, the sector is made up of practitioners who have only themselves to rely on, to create, manage and extract value from their own work.

Bespoke response to particular needs

They often lack the means or the time to devote themselves to learning, in the traditional sense and the evidence suggests this affects their long term economic and career prospects. But, with the help of employers, sector

advocates and regional development agencies, BGC is turning this situation around, and the Foundation Degree framework provides a valuable route for engaging cultural sector practitioners in accessible, work-based learning programmes.

Described by the Department for Education and Skills as a "modern, vocational higher education qualification", Foundation Degree's can form a bespoke response to the very particular needs of both employers and employees and so really should reflect higher education's support for the strategic growth of practitioners and their organisations.

BGC's own programme is largely derived from training needs analysis research and aims to meet both current and future skills gaps, which emerged from that process. We have also come up with tools to help practitioners analyse their own preferred learning style for use at work.

An employer's advisory group has been enlisted to influence our thinking on course maintenance, business and professional development issues, as well as innovation, research and enterprise,



and we have a carefully crafted mentoring programme running alongside College based support. All features of the Foundation Degree ethos.

The workplace benefits are huge

For Clare Freeman, an arts development officer at one of Lincolnshire’s district authorities, and a participant on the BGC Foundation Degree, the result is a learning opportunity very different to the normal higher education experience: “The course has everything I want . . . it relates directly to the work I am doing at the Council.

It’s allowed me to study at work, with projects based on real workplace experiences. I can feel it’s giving me more confidence in my job and helping me to think in new ways about how I could move my career forward”.

By working closely with employers and senior managers, BGC has also witnessed how Foundation Degrees, through delivery, encourage management to champion the development of vocational, work-based training. Nicki Gardener, Senior Arts Development Officer and Clare’s line manager writes: “What we were not expecting was the

fast return. In a matter of weeks the BGC course had an impact, which continues . . . providing Clare, and the Council, with practical methodologies to overhaul our systems, to plan new work to better achieve key aims, or at the very least checking that current practice is effective and worthwhile . . .the workplace benefits are huge, tasks that would ordinarily be vital in principle, but all too easy to overlook, have become legitimate”. As Nicki implies, done right, Foundation Degrees are effective because of the focus on day-to-day work experiences and on the workplace environment.

At BGC we compliment these work-based experiences by offering time on campus to encourage the transfer of knowledge from one context to another, and to allow experimentation with different concepts. As a result, the relationship between workplace and problem-based learning becomes a catalyst for change and development, rewarding the organisation and the participant.

Although Foundation Degrees are employment-related we shouldn’t exclude from the debate the needs of freelance, contract and self-employed

workers, who make up a considerable part of our sector. Through work-placements and working alongside organisations as placement hosts, Foundation Degrees are able to equip practitioners who consider themselves and their work as a business with the skills needed by the employers.

We are now looking at the viability of establishing a bespoke centre for the creative & cultural industries, specifically to build partnerships between the local sector and regional sector support agencies and relationships between the sector and higher education. We envisage a centre that will not only raise the profile of the cultural industries through advocacy, but also provide infrastructural support services to underpin business growth and personal development, so that artist practitioners, cultural managers and cultural businesses across our region can move closer towards realising their full potential. ●

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