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Foundation degree sustainable communities options appraisal : Final report

Brown, P

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Authors	Brown, P
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Foundation Degree Sustainable Communities Options Appraisal

Final Report

March 2011



About SHUSU

The Salford Housing and Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford is a leading multi-disciplinary research and consultancy unit in the field of housing, regeneration and urban and community policy in the UK. Staff within SHUSU have expertise in an array of community and national issues covering: energy, sustainability, vulnerability, migration and equality and diversity.

Authorship and acknowledgements

This report was primarily authored by Philip Brown (Research Fellow, SHUSU) but this report would not have been possible without the contributions of Glen Gidley and Helen Sharman (University of Salford) and the entire Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities Network which includes: Daniela Hawryliuk, Anna Hawkins, Paul Grainger, Seema Patel, Julie Savory, Veronica Coatham, Andrew Dixon, Anne Hill, Dave Moreman, Helen Littlewood, Cathy Webb, Helen Hay, Tim Brown, Christopher Durkin, Keith Straughan, Kate Stephens and Patrick Mulrenan.

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1. Introduction

Scope of this document

Since 2008 a number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have worked in partnership with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), and the HCAs predecessors, to develop and deliver a Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities (FdSc). The FdSc was developed in response to the observation that a significant number of people were working in and around the field of 'sustainable communities'. This is against a backdrop of a lack of suitably skilled and qualified professionals in this field. It was thought that this skills shortage was likely to affect public sector industries particularly those organizations working in: planning, landscape architecture, urban design, sustainable development, regeneration and economic development. The FdSc has been delivered by 10 different HEIs across a number of the English regions. As of March 2011 the HCA is coming to the end of its HE strategy and the Agency's focus as a whole is shifting in response to Government policy and funding.

Since 2007 there have been significant changes to public services, as a result of economic pressures, with more significant changes on the horizon from April 2011 onwards as a result of a re-orientation of the public sector – in line with the Big Society, localism and low-carbon agendas – as well as significant reduction in public sector funding. It is against the background of this context that this document has been prepared. This document aims to detail the process by which the FdSc Network of HEIs have arrived at a preferred option for the continuation of the Network itself.

Purpose of this document

The purpose of this document is to set out:

1. The adopted approach to developing an Options Appraisal for the Foundation Degree Sustainable Communities Network (FdScN) post March 2011.
2. The vision for the future of the FdSc and the Network.
3. Agreed criteria and scoring systems that have been used to inform the choice of the preferred option.
4. The options that have been assessed.
5. The approach to taking the preferred option forward.

It was agreed that the outcome of this document would be an option which the majority of the Network will agree and implement.

Approach to developing the Options Appraisal

The following section details the approach that has been taken in the production of this Options Appraisal document as well as the key milestones achieved. Network members, as well as representatives of the HCA, have contributed to the development of this document.

The approach to developing the Options Appraisal is based on a simplified version of the approach developed by Whitfield for the European Services Strategy Unit (ESSU).¹ However it should be noted that, due to time constraints, some stages of the process (such as thinking about options) have had to be initiated before other key stages (such as agreeing the criteria by which options are to be appraised) have been completed. Whilst this is not ideal, previous versions of this document have been widely circulated amongst FdSc Network members in order to ensure that all key stakeholders can fully participate in the process and that it is transparent. Time constraints have also led to the Options Appraisal process starting before the evaluation of the impact of the FdSc was complete. A flexible approach has been taken to the production of the Options Appraisal in order to adapt the content to potential amendments should the evaluation work suggest it would be necessary.

Table 1 below summarises the proposed subsequent key stages and dates

Table 1 : Key stages and dates for developing the options appraisal	
Ref	Stage and notes
1.	Draft the preliminary proposals for the options appraisal
2.	Preliminary proposals for options appraisal to be shared with FdScN members for comment and feedback.
3.	Evaluation and impact work commences (involves discussions with HEIs, analysis of information; discussions with students, employers and the CIH)
4.	FdScN network members meet to review findings of investigation of options and initial scoring. Any early findings from the evaluation exercise to be taken into consideration.
5.	Draft report (this document) to be circulated in order for FdScN members to contribute to its development, in particular: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The drafting and finalisation of the vision • The precise wording of the options • The development of a persuasive Business Case for HEIs adoption of the FdScN
6.	Document detailing collaborative views of FdScN to be produced
7.	Final report produced and issued for comment and 'sign off'.
8.	Network and end of study meeting

The work upon which this report is based consists of a collaborative approach – with members of the FdSc Network - to exploring and reporting on options to ensure a sustainable forward strategy of the FdSc Network and programme post-HCA support. This report has been prepared in tandem with an evaluation report which has involved ascertaining the lessons learned from the development delivery of the FdSc. This is available as a separate report.

¹WHITFIELD, D. (2007) *Options Appraisal Criteria Matrix. ESSU Research Report 2.*[Accessed online from <http://www.european-services-strategy.org.uk/publications/essu-research-reports/>], 1 Nov 2010

2. Context

This chapter briefly outlines the context for the FdSc Network of HEIs. It examines the development and objectives of the FdSc and the current status of the FdSc within the HEIs. This document should be read alongside the report *'Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities: A review'*.

The Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities

Following the Egan Review a report by the HCA Academy in 2007, *'Mind the Skills Gap: The skills we need for sustainable communities'*, forecast a shortfall in supply in suitably qualified professionals. In taking steps to address the identified skills gaps it was decided, following market testing and a gap analysis, that a Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities (FdSc) should be designed. Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) was commissioned to support the HCA in designing and developing the FdSc who subsequently became the first HEI to commence delivery of the FdSc in January 2008.

The report produced by Sheffield Hallam, that followed the development of the FdSc, observed that there was:

- A clear and growing need for an entry level qualification in *Sustainable Communities*. The research highlighted growing skills gaps and difficulties with recruitment across the sector.

The report recommended that the FdSc should:

- allow and encourage progression to further qualifications to allow specialisation;
- extend and enhance generic skills in a professional context;
- introduce technical skills (with a view to further specialisation at higher levels) with an emphasis on cross-disciplinary working;
- adapt to evolving issues e.g. climate change; quality of life (including health); green issues; and,
- provide for flexible learning approaches.

In addition, the research highlighted a number of issues worthy of further consideration such as:

- concern over the terminology of `sustainable communities` which was thought to be possibly ambiguous, confusing and fragmented. More definition was recommended;
- the funding available for students and employers was seen as limited. A sliding scale and bursaries were suggested as strategies to overcome barriers posed by finite individual or public sector capacity to fund enrolment on the programme; and,
- the need for close partnership working in order to attract non-traditional students.

The FdSc that was subsequently developed aimed to:

- engage students in a challenging, critical and interdisciplinary education in sustainable communities' policy and practice;
- stimulate the students' awareness of the links and tensions between theory, policy and practice and to support the development of their professional community management skills through activities that have strong links with practice;
- enable students to develop their academic and professional key skills and competencies in an interdisciplinary and inter-professional educational environment;
- enable students to develop the qualities of reflective, professional and empathetic sustainable communities practitioners;
- offer 'pathways' that will enable students to meet the requirements of a range of 'core' sustainable communities' professional bodies, for professional accreditation by including assessment of work and voluntary experience thus providing a route to professional membership; and
- provide students with transferable, as well as specific vocational skills, which can be used to provide a foundation to enable and empower students to make choices in work, training and education throughout their life.

Upon launching the FdSc within Sheffield Hallam University the then Academy for Sustainable Communities, now HCA, embarked on a three year Higher Education Strategy.² A core component of this strategy involved the rollout of the FdSc across England with the aim of identifying Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in each of the English regions which had the reputation, capacity and capabilities to deliver the degree. The Strategy outlined a number of characteristics that the ASC expected of the FdSc namely:

- the focus upon generic skills;
- multi-disciplinary learning;
- knowledge and understanding of sustainable communities policy and practice;
- pathways to further study; and,
- pathways to progression into sustainable communities professions e.g. housing, planning and environmental studies.

At the same time there was an expectation that the HEIs delivering the FdSc would adapt the content and add modules as is relevant to their local/regional and employer needs.

² Academy for Sustainable Communities (2008) Higher Education Strategy: Delivering Sustainable Communities Skills and Knowledge, October.

The rollout of the Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities

The rollout of the FdSc was supported to a significant extent by the Academy for Sustainable Communities. This support included:

- provision of a one-year bursary of £500 for 10 students at each HEI to assist in meeting tuition costs for their first year of study;
- specialist consultancy support to aid the development of the FdSc within HEIs to support such activity such as employer engagement and validation;
- marketing and publicity support;
- the secretariat of a Network of HEIs involved in the delivery of the programme; and,
- the development of a resource pool to be accessed by all HEIs involved in the delivery of the programme.

Within the HE Strategy it was perceived that the successful rollout of the FdSc relied, to a significant extent, on the regional distribution of HEIs providing the FdSc. As of the beginning of 2011 the FdSc has not achieved total coverage across regions of England. The FdSc is currently validated and being marketed in the following regions:

- **North East:** Northumbria University.
- **North West:** The University of Salford.
- **Yorkshire and the Humber:** Sheffield Hallam University.
- **West Midlands:** Staffordshire University with Stafford College (delivered jointly) and Birmingham City University.
- **East Midlands:** De Montfort University; : University of Northampton with University Centre Milton Keynes (delivered jointly).
- **London:** London Metropolitan University.

Two of the programmes are currently delivered jointly:

- University of Northampton with University Centre Milton Keynes; and
- Staffordshire University with Stafford College – there are also arrangements in place for additional input between Birmingham City University

The current regional ‘gaps’ in the distribution of providers compared to that originally envisaged are:

- East of England;
- South West; and,
- South East.

Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities Network of HEIs

Crucial to the delivery of the FdSc has been the establishment and organisation of a knowledge sharing Network of HEIs. The original concept for the Network was the (then) Academy of

Sustainable Communities (ASC) to provide the mechanism and support to develop a network for those HEIs that offer the FdSc. The formation of the Network was to revolve around the provision of:

- a virtual discussion area and resource repository on the ASC learning portal; and
- an annual one day event at ASC bringing together all HEIs to share best practice, learn about the latest developments and take part in Masterclasses from some of the leaders in the sector

As of March 2011 the HCA is coming to the end of its HE strategy and the Agency's focus as a whole is shifting in response to Government policy and funding. The HCA is moving towards becoming a smaller enabling, investment and regulation agency: the overall purpose of which remains to work with partners to develop homes that people can afford in places and communities in which they want to live. The HCAs investment will be used to help meet Government's ambition for up to 150,000 new affordable homes, as well as refurbishing an estimated 150,000 further homes under Decent Homes along with our enabling expertise to add value to our investment, for example by making the most of public land and other assets, or by helping councils to attract private finance.

3. SWOT analysis

The Options Appraisal has been carried out in the context of the Network members having an agreed understanding of potential future role of the Network and the Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities. An initial “SWOT” analysis of the FdScN and the Foundation Degree Sustainable Communities is shown in Table 2 below. Note that the comments in the table are not in any particular order of priority.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student satisfaction with the course derived from case study interviews conducted by HCA and review and evaluations conducted by HEIs • Employer satisfaction with the course derived from case study interviews conducted by HCA and review and evaluations conducted by HEIs • FdScN member institutions are rarely in direct competition for students for the course. This creates an environment conducive to collaboration in order to achieve mutually positive outcomes. • Some well established contacts between the group and good track record of joint working – particularly where programmes are delivered on a joint basis. • HCA “Expectations” document has helped ensure that although there may be slight differences in the details of the courses there is a shared understanding of the core product. Ability to shape the degree according to regional differences. • CIH supports the course and provision of a route to professional accreditation. • Marketing activities supported by HCA, including endorsement by previous HCA CEO at Sheffield Hallam Conference, production of joint employer and employee guides and DVD. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor and erratic recruitment to courses across England. • Intake mainly from public and third sector recently impacted by spending cuts and forthcoming comprehensive spending allocations (reductions) • Although joint marketing has taken place it seems to have had a disappointing and limited impact. • HCA change of focus. • Lack of funding within HE for activity such as the FdSc Network • Wide geographic spread and lack of take up of collaborative tools makes networking difficult. • Relies on individual advocates within HEIs • Key advocates and champions leaving HEIs.

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Coalition Government’s focus on “Big Society”, “Localism” and “Low-carbon Communities”. • Linked to 1 above - with some minor changes could gear the FdSc towards people wanting to “take” more direct control of public services. • Advances in technology - especially “free” applications such as Google Apps make it cheaper and easier to organise and operate groups such as the FdScN. • Loans for part- time study may attract more part-time students into HE. • Better promotion of grants for part-time students from low income households may encourage more students to study. • Some Housing Associations may grow and expand as a result of proposed funding and legislation changes. If this happens they may need to expand the skills and knowledge of their staff. • The unique approach and organisation as result of the Network and HCA involvement makes it arguably well placed to respond to changing agendas on an England wide level. • There may be scope to offer course as collaboration between HEIs and commercial providers • New delivery methods which exploit a culture change in academic delivery e.g. short programme modules delivered online or on the job. • There may be potential to combine elements of the programme with other relevant programmes such as social work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The term “Sustainable Communities” has a lack of resonance with the current government. • Possible low levels of understanding of the role of Foundation Degrees amongst some employers. • Financial constraints leading employers to cut back on funding HE in preference for short non-accredited training. • HE funding changes (fee rises) may make it difficult to recruit and/or HE institutions to run courses with low numbers of students. • The so called “Bonfire of the Quangos” has arguably reduced the options for links with other organisations (E.g Foundation Degree Foward ceasing to exist October 2011). • Public sector market shrinking.

4. Vision and Objectives

At a meeting of Network members held on the 13th January 2011 a collaborative vision of the FdSc and Network was developed which would provide a cornerstone for going forward. This vision is:

To embed, within the FdSc or successor programmes, learning with the facets of creating and maintaining communities that are sustainable and low-carbon. This should be delivered at a broad audience including: professionals in the public sector, the private sector as well as members of communities who are interested in their communities. The vision for the Network of HEIs is to provide a forum in order to create an authoritative, collaborative and responsive voice to the diverse issues of concern to these programmes.

Within this vision there are several aims:

1. To integrate and embed the core issues of low-carbon communities and sustainability into a range of more popular programs of study.
2. To provide opportunities for professional linkages in order to influence the translation of research based knowledge into practice and vice versa
3. To facilitate the development of the personal and professional skills and trans disciplinary knowledge required to work in and with communities and agencies involved in supporting the development of sustainable communities

The Network of HEIs are central to the realization of this vision and achievement of these objectives. As such the Network should:

1. Be formed on the basis of a clear and open constitution
2. Be based on the principle of non-competitiveness and collaboration
3. Work towards improving the quality of higher education learning around sustainability issues
4. Be viable in terms of working practice
5. Capitalize on joint marketing opportunities
6. Provide mutual practical support.
7. Share best practice in identifying markets and recruiting students.

5. Criteria for assessing options

Table 3 sets out the criteria for assessing the options employed by the Network. Some of these criteria have been taken from the ESSU Options Appraisal Guidance mentioned earlier. It is acknowledged that a degree of overlap exists between the different sections of the criteria. Network members took the position that this criteria should be regarded as a framework for members to arrive at a well thought out and considered position as opposed to a methodology to achieve the quantifiable 'best' option. As such overlaps, ambiguity and contention was discussed during the scoring process.

Table 3: Criteria for assessing option and scoring system			
Ref	Criteria	Scoring	Notes and weighting
1	<p>Design and scope: To what extent does the option meet:</p> <p>a) The broad vision and objectives of the FdScN?</p> <p>b) The need to create/extend the market for the subject?</p>	<p>For a) and b) Exceeds requirements = 1* Fully meets requirements = 1 Partially meets requirements = 0 Does not meet requirements = -1</p>	Multiply total result by 3
2	<p>Accountability, governance and participation: To what extent:</p> <p>a) Is the option likely to create a democratic and accountable successor "organisation" which is likely to be able to involve employers and students in planning and provision of courses?</p> <p>b) Does this option provide personal satisfaction to Network members?</p>	<p>For a) Likely = 1 Neither likely nor unlikely = 0 Unlikely = -1</p> <p>For b) Likely = 1 Neither likely nor unlikely = 0 Unlikely = -1</p>	
3	<p>Financial and risk assessment:</p> <p>a) To what extent is the option financially affordable?</p> <p>b) What is the level of risk re funding the option and implementing the option generally (includes assessment of any issues with timescales)?</p> <p>c) What is the level of risk if the option is not pursued?</p>	<p>For a) Option is affordable = 1 Option may be affordable = 0 Option is not very affordable = -1</p> <p>For b) Low risk = 1 Medium risk = 0 High risk = -1</p>	Multiply total result by 3

		For c) Low risk = 1 Medium risk = 0 High risk = -1	
4	Quality of service: To what extent is the option likely to improve performance in terms of: a) The recruitment, retention and results of students? b) The ability of providers to innovate and respond to threats and opportunities?	For a) and b) Option is likely to improve performance = 1 Option is not likely to change performance = 0 Option is likely to reduce performance = -1	Multiply total result by 2
5	Capability, management and intellectual knowledge: To what extent is the option likely to: a) Ensure that skills and intellectual knowledge that have been developed within the FdScN are retained and enhanced? b) Enable change to be well managed?	For a) and b) Likely = 1 Neither likely nor unlikely = 0 Unlikely = -1	
6	Added value: To what extent does the option provide some added value over and above core requirements considered in other sections above?	Option provides considerable amount of added value = 1* Option provides some added value = 1 Option does not provide added value = 0	
7	Sustainability: To what extent does the option provide sustainability of the Network over the longer-term	Option is sustainable = 1 Option may be sustainable = 0 Option is not very sustainable = -1	Multiply total result by 3

6. Options to be appraised

The ESSU guidelines emphasise the importance of ensuring that all options are, amongst other things, “realistic, likely to have political support and be sustainable”. A total of 8 initial suggestions for options were circulated for consultation prior to an Options Appraisal meeting held on the 13th January 2011. As a result of the discussions held at this meeting some options were discounted and others were merged. Table 4 below sets out the final selection of options that were appraised.

Table 4: Options to be appraised	
Ref	Option
Option A	<p>One HE provider to “offer” to coordinate and manage the FdScN on a permanent basis. The FdScN is supported by a virtual portal that offers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a public facing area for potential students and employers • a “private” area for students • a “private” area for HE providers <p>The remit of the group is expanded to include a wider range of low carbon/sustainable development and sustainability related programmes that meet the core elements of a simplified and updated “Expectations” type document. Small subscription/minimum exchange of materials etc to join.</p>
Option B	<p>One HE provider offers to co-ordinate and manage the FdScN with this revolving between Network members. The FdScN is supported by a virtual portal that offers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a public facing area for potential students and employers • a “private” area for students • a “private” area for HE providers <p>The remit of the group is expanded to include a wider range of low carbon/sustainable development and sustainability related programmes that meet the core elements of a simplified and updated “Expectations” type document. Small subscription/minimum exchange of materials etc to join.</p>
Option C	Become part of something else for example the Higher Education Academy Education for Sustainable Development Project or its successor or the National Association of Neighbourhood Management.
Option D	Do not continue with Network in any form.
Option E	Form a social enterprise

Result of options appraisal

These options were then scored as a group using the previously agreed criteria. The result indicated the following (Table 5):

Table 5: Scoring of options								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
A	3*/0	1/1	0/0/3	2/2	1/1	1	3	18*
B	3*/0	1/1	0/3/3	2/2	1/1	1	3	21*
C	0/3	0/1	0/0/0	0/2	0/0	1	3	10
D	-3/-3	0/-1	3/3/-3	-2/-2	-1/-1	0	-3	-11

Note: It was decided that Option E was unfeasible and was not scored at this point.

7. Preferred option and next steps

Preferred Option

As a result of the Options Appraisal it was decided that the FdSc Network would be looking to explore the New Option B in the first instance.

One HE provider offers to co-ordinate and manage the FdScN with this revolving between Network members. The FdScN is supported by a virtual portal that offers:

- *a public facing area for potential students and employers*
- *a “private” area for students*
- *a “private” area for HE providers*

The remit of the group is expanded to include a wider range of low carbon/sustainable development and sustainability related programmes that meet the core elements of a simplified and updated “Expectations” type document. Small subscription/minimum exchange of materials etc to join.

Next steps

It was observed by the Network that in order for Option B to be realised at least one HEI would need to support, in principle and actual, the FdSc and the Network. The Network is aware of the economic backdrop within HEIs and the challenges associated with achieving financial support for initiatives. It was decided that a convincing business case would need to be developed in order provide this to senior management teams within HEIs in to explore whether support would be forthcoming. This business case has been drafted in the form of a spreadsheet which is available alongside this document.