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# Foundation degree in sustainable communities: A review : Final report

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# **Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities: A review**

**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 the study

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. This study looks back over the period of time that the HCA has been involved with the FdSc.

## Aims and objectives

The aim of this study was to analyse and reflect on the FdSc programme and delivery between 2008-2011. There were a number of specific objectives:

- To explore the impact of the FdSc.
- To identify lessons that could be learned.
- To provide recommendations around the FdSc for the current HEIs delivering the FdSc, potential HEIs and the HCA.
- To explore and develop a sustainable preferred option for the continuation of the FdSc Network of HEIs (*available in a separate report*).

## Research approach

The approach to this study involved bringing together various sources as well as consultations with key stakeholders involved in the delivery of the FdSc. This research was produced in partnership with the FdSc Network who have assisted in data collation and commented on drafts of this report. The following approach was adopted:

- **The background and context.** This included reviewing documents produced by the Academy for Sustainable Communities and HCA Academy (now HCA).
- **Market research findings.** This included documents produced by a number of the HEIs outlining the perceived local need (including views from employers) for the FdSc.
- **Recruitment information.** This included information on the number of people enrolled on the programme in the respective HEIs.

- **Consultations with stakeholders.**<sup>1</sup> A number of consultations were held with key stakeholders involved in the development, delivery and receipt of the FdSc. This included:
  - Staff in all HEIs delivering the FdSc
  - 12 students currently enrolled on the FdSc
  - 1 employer with a student enrolled on the FdSc
  - Professional bodies including: the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and the Institute of Highway Engineers
  - The relevant Sector Skills Councils
  - The Homes and Communities Agency

### **Structure of the report**

The report is intended to provide the HCA, and the respective HEIs, with a review of the FdSc, the impact it has had and the potential options for the future for the FdSc. It sets out the background for the development of the FdSc and then addresses the key issues arising as a result of the research.

Chapter 2 sets out the context for the study by looking at the factors involved in leading up to the development of the FdSc and how the FdSc has been delivered.

Chapter 3 looks at the existing documents that have been produced around the FdSc since its delivery and examines the indicators for impact contained within these.

Chapter 4 reviews the information received from the HEIs about the current status of the FdSc being delivered.

Chapter 5 explores the views of the stakeholders who have taken part in this study.

Chapter 6 provides a summary of the findings along with some recommendations for the HCA, the HEIs currently delivering the FdSc and prospective HEIs interested in delivering the FdSc.

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<sup>1</sup> It proved difficult to engage with employers during this work due to either the lack of employers coming forward or the lack of engagement with employers in the FdSc

## 2. Context

This chapter sets the context for the development of the FdSc. It examines the antecedents for the development of the programme and explores the developmental process within the HEIs.

### **Sustainable Communities**

The Egan Review (2004) is the main starting point in order to understand the perceived need for and development of the Foundation Degree in Sustainable Communities. This review focused on analysing which built environment skills were necessary in order to deliver sustainable communities. The definition of sustainable communities used was:

*Sustainable communities meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contribute to a high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion and strengthen economic prosperity.*

The Review concluded that a range of technical skills for certain 'core occupations' (such as planners, architects, urban designers; staff from local, regional and central government, developers and investors; and staff from voluntary and community associations), as well as generic skills, were needed to ensure the best chance of success in implementing housing and regeneration projects. The Review asserted that there was a need to encourage people to enter such core occupations and 'upskill' in order to ensure the creation and maintenance of sustainable communities.

The Review led to the creation of the Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC) the role of which, after further permutations, has been embedded within the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).

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.

### **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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

### **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;

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

- 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.

It is hoped that this report will provide a guide for HEIs looking to deliver the FdSc as well as, more broadly, other partners looking to deliver similar courses in the future.

### 3. Indications of impact from existing sources

The FdSc has been subject to two reviews during its rollout since 2008 these were a report by Sheffield Hallam (2009) – ‘Year One Review’, and a report produced by Heist (2009) into the ‘Awareness, Status and Perceptions’ of the FdSc. This chapter looks at information that currently exists which indicates the impact the FdSc has had so far.

#### **Sheffield Hallam University – Year One Review**

After an initial year of delivery Sheffield Hallam produced a review document which aimed to reflect upon the delivery of the FdSc, acknowledge improvements that needed to be made and to report on potential changes. This report contained several interesting findings and comments which relate to the present research including the following:

- Students undertaking the FdSc did not always have access to financial support from their employer – largely due to the various employment backgrounds of the students. This meant that the continuation and performance of students on the FdSc was subject to a variety of personal and financial pressures.
- The marketing of the FdSc was perceived as challenging due to the ‘fragmented’ market of regeneration and those involved with the ‘sustainable communities’ agenda.
- Engagement with employers was seen as key in order to establish support for the students, a grounded identity of the programme and create a perception of value of the FdSc.
- Some changes to the delivery and content of the modules had taken place in order to better suit the needs and pressures of the students.

This report produced several key recommendations for post-2009 FdSc delivery for both the FdSc more widely and for Sheffield Hallam more specifically. In terms of the more general recommendations these included the following, the HCA resulting actions following these recommendations are shown in *italics* alongside:

- The HCA should commission research into Employment Sector demand for Foundation Degrees and maximise the partnerships with employers to promote the various education and training opportunities now available. *This resulted in the 2010 Heist report – see below.*
- The number of student bursaries available should be increased due to the financial importance this have for students. *Though HCA could not increase bursaries the Agency did agree a more flexible arrangement that allowed HEIs to allocate bursaries to meet individual needs.*
- A one day conference aimed at key sector employers should be held to raise the profile of the FdSc and engage around employer needs. *A conference took place at Sheffield Hallam University and attended by approximately 100 delegates. Sir Bob Kerslake was the key note speaker.*

- Employer engagement needs to be embedded into the discussions between FdSc Network members within the network. *This resulted in the development of an Employer Guide and Student Guide to support consistent dissemination of information about the FdSc to different audiences.*
- Joint HEI and HCA marketing arrangements should continue and should be consistent to ensure effectiveness. *The HCA worked with the Network to develop and produce core documentation and agree marketing messages to ensure that there was a consistent and useful pool of resources at hand. The HCA also produced a video to promote the FdSc.*

### **Awareness, Status and Perceptions – Heist, 2010**

This report aimed to achieve a greater understanding of the perception and awareness that the FdSc had amongst potential employers in order to inform future marketing activities. The report compiled interview data gathered with 52 respondents from a variety of levels (CEO to individuals) across the areas where the FdSc was being delivered by the HEIs. This report contained 16 recommendations for the FdSc Network to consider. Very crudely these recommendations covered the following broad issues:

1. More needs to be done to engage a range of stakeholders in the FdSc concept and articulate the value of the FdSc to each. Particular stakeholders noted included policy makers in particular areas (e.g. worklessness), community members and voluntary practitioners.
2. The FdSc needed to establish a clear target audience, a clear identity and a revised title for the course.
3. A credit based/modular or stand alone system of delivery should be considered for the delivery of the FdSc.
4. Local employers and professionals should be involved in course delivery possibly by providing work-based placements for students not in employment.
5. The FdSc needs local champions (graduates) that could help raise the profile of the FdSc.
6. Support should be provided by organisations, such as the HCA, in order to debate the need for a partnership based programme like the FdSc within the variety of organisations and sectors working in communities across the UK.

## 4. Current status of the FdSc within HEIs

This chapter looks at the current status of the FdSc in each of the HEIs with a programme that has been validated and is open for enrolment.

### Current status of the FdSc within HEIs

There is currently a mixed picture with regards to the delivery of the FdSc. Table 4.1 below outlines the current status of the programme within each HEI.

<b>Table 4.1: Status of FdSc by HEI</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Status as of January 2011</b>	<b>Students enrolled</b>
Sheffield Hallam University	Running programme with previously enrolled students. Not recruited sufficient numbers for 2010-2011	Yr 1 - None Yr 2 - None Yr 3 - 6
The University of Northumbria	Running programme	Year 1 – 6 Year 2 – 3 Year 3 – 7
The University of Salford	Running programme	Yr 1 – 13 Yr 2 – 8
London Metropolitan University	Running programme	Yr 1 = 14 Yr2 = 4
Staffordshire University/Stafford College	Running programme (1st year of delivery)	Yr 1 - 10
Birmingham City University	Not recruited sufficient numbers for 2010-2011	NA
De Montfort University	Not recruited sufficient numbers for 2010-2011	NA
The University of Northampton/University Centre Milton Keynes	Not recruited sufficient numbers for 2010-2011	NA

As Table 4.1 shows recruitment for the FdSc across the various HEIs is currently at low levels. Sheffield Hallam University, which was the first HEI to commence delivery of the FdSc in 2007-08 has not recruited for the last two years. Salford, Northumbria, London Metropolitan and the partnership between Staffordshire and Stafford are all currently running the programme with relatively small student cohorts. The remaining HEIs of Birmingham City, De Montfort and the partnership between Northampton and Milton Keynes have been unable to recruit sufficient numbers to commence the delivery of the programme within their respective institutions. In total, there are currently 71 students enrolled on the FdSc across the various HEIs.

Table 4.2 below explores the issues impacting on the current status of the FdSc by drawing upon the reflections provided by the staff leading the delivery of the programme.

<b>Table 4.2: Reflections from FdSc delivery staff within HEIs on the status quo and delivery of the FdSc</b>	
<b>Sheffield Hallam University</b>	<p>The year started with 10 students but for a number of reasons the students on the programme now total 6. Despite an assertive marketing campaign, via the website, trade press, open days, mail outs, employer engagement etc., the programme has been unable to recruit for the last 2 years. Over this period only one person could feasibly have been recruited. A couple of others were deemed to not be of a suitable standard.</p> <p>Due to the apparent lack of demand and a University-wide position on Foundation Degrees the programme is due to be closed. The majority of the course material will be embedded in the other related courses SHU deliver.</p>
<b>The University of Northumbria</b>	<p>Northumbria was the second HEI following SHU to commence delivery of the programme. There are currently 16 students enrolled on the FdSc over the 3 years. A number of students have left the course recently due to a range of factors such as: a lack of motivation, switching programmes and loss of employment. The bulk of the student intake has come from the public sector which reflects the local labour market dominance of the public sector. Most students have been junior staff in housing organisations beginning their career.</p>
<b>The University of Salford</b>	<p>There are currently 21 students enrolled on the programme over 2 years. There have been some recent problems with finance arrangements due to administration problems in the loans company of the part-time student grant this led to a number of students leaving the course – it was expected that some of these students would rejoin in February 2011. The University has subsequently improved its processes to provide better support for students applying for Part time fee and course grants.</p> <p>A number of students also left because they did not submit a final component of their course work. In addition, a number of students have withdrawn due to employer funding difficulties.</p> <p>The small number of students enrolled on the programme, relative to other courses, may mean that the FdSc is merged with the FD in Housing Practice so that there is a common level 4 with options at level 5. There is currently a pan-University review of the courses being delivered which may have implications for the future of the FdSc.</p>
<b>London Metropolitan University</b>	<p>The programme recruited poorly during the first year of delivery with an improved recruitment of students in the latest year. The programme currently has 18 students enrolled over 2 years. There is an amount of uncertainty about the chances for increased recruitment next year as there are no strong links with employers. As a result they are considering more grassroots methods of recruitment which includes meetings with employers – particularly RSLs – but which also entails actively engaging with community members.</p> <p>Due to the small numbers in order to provide some degree of security for the programme it is being delivered in partnership with another FD which has 29 students. Consideration is being given to delivering a combined first year with the other FD.</p>

<b>Staffordshire University/Stafford College</b>	<p>This programme is delivered jointly and has recently commenced with 10 students recruited. Most of the students are over 30 years old. There is a rich 'variety' of backgrounds which include: 3 housing/ regeneration; 1 driving instructor; 1 retired; 2 unemployed; 1 from Stafford College staff; 1 customer service; and, 1 plumber. A few students are seeking a career change but most are self-funders and are participating purely out of interest in topic and are very well motivated.</p> <p>The partnership will be engaging widely for the next student intake to promote the FdSc and encourage take-up of the programme in order to help insulate the programme against potential internal cuts.</p>
<b>Birmingham City University</b>	<p>The programme did not recruit this year. Part of the problem was attributed to identifying and engaging with a new and distinctive market for the course. Established networks in housing agencies tend to place employees on 'tried and tested' programmes such as Housing and Surveying.</p>
<b>De Montfort University</b>	<p>The programme did not recruit and there were very few enquiries about the course. However, the modules for Year 1 of the FdSc are being taught to students on the Housing programme, who have gained more knowledge of factors around Housing and Climate Change and overall sustainable development evaluation. They will also be taught skills relating to the changing demands of the sector- including project management and survey skills.</p>
<b>The University of Northampton / University Centre Milton Keynes</b>	<p>The full FdSc programme has not yet started due to low recruitment in September 2010 although there is an expectation that this will commence in September 2011. Regardless, three UCMK 'learners' are currently undertaking 'Understanding Place Making' module as a stand-alone and as confidence builder.</p>

## 5. Views from stakeholders

This chapter explores the views and issues raised by the stakeholders who contributed to this study. These findings are discussed under the following sections: recruitment issues; adaptation of the FdSc; support provided by the HCA; suitability of teaching staff and delivery; impact on addressing skills shortages; the impact of the FdSc upon individuals; unexpected outcomes from delivering the FdSc; and, the future of the FdSc.

### Recruitment issues

As Tables 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate recruitment onto the FdSc has been a real barrier for all HEIs. There are very few enquiries about the courses despite significant attempts by most if not all HEIs to market the programme as widely as possible.

This, to a large extent, is a result of the ‘perfect storm’ of factors involving: anxiety about HE funding, public sector funding cuts, the lack of regeneration activity and a move away a ‘sustainable communities’ political discourse. Those HEIs who have run the programme the longest are now either being forced to close the programme or merge with other programmes. Similarly, those staff within HEIs with the FdSc validated and ready to commence delivery are becoming under pressure to justify retaining the programme.

A number of HEIs see a resolution to recruitment as either engaging more effectively with public sector employers, particularly RSLs who are more and more involved in development initiatives, or a need to engage more widely and articulately with a broader base. This latter strategy is particularly favoured by London Metropolitan University and the Staffordshire University/Stafford College partnership. Here the current student cohort, on the respective FdSc, embodies either people seeking a career change or those who are studying the area due to personal interest. In terms of engaging more effectively with employers Salford has devised ‘work-based’ projects for students to complete in the workplace in order to demonstrate the relevance of the FdSc to employers. There has also been a suggestion that in order to ensure the content of the FdSc reaches as many people as possible the FdSc might be discontinued and the content embedded within more popular subjects such as Housing, Planning, Regeneration, etc. Alternatively, other HEIs have suggested that there needs to be a more concerted effort to more clearly articulate what the FdSc is and what the benefits of it are.

### Adaptation of the FdSc

The HEIs which are currently delivering the FdSc reported, as did the earlier SHU ‘Year One review’, that they had adapted the programme in certain respects:

- Sheffield Hallam University – had identified a gap around planning which was addressed. There was also some adaptation in order to achieve CIH accreditation.
- Salford University and London Metropolitan University– are moving to incorporate more content around low-carbon issues

- Staffordshire University and Stafford College – have adapted the course pre-delivery based on extensive consultation and are drawing upon local case studies and local field trips organised by local agencies/field workers

Adaptation however has not always been possible to the extent requested by some employers. For instance, Birmingham City found a limit to how far they could adapt the programme, to suit local requests and needs, as the programme also needed to be delivered to students on the Housing pathway – although it was reported that the programme was designed around work-based learning as far as possible. Similarly, De Montfort University found that employers wanted diverse content which was not always possible, to the extent requested by some, whilst still maintaining coherence within the FdSc.

### **Support provided by the HCA**

All HEIs were extremely complimentary about the nature and level of support provided to them by the Homes and Communities Agency. It was clear that this was originally entered into with a degree of uncertainty, on behalf of the HEIs, about what the support would yield but this has exceeded expectations in many cases:

*My experience of support from the HCA has been very positive. The whole experience has taught me a lot about developing this type of course (which was a new experience for me). The development programme with the HCA, and the development of the FdSc and FdSc network has been (and is) an interesting and positive experience*

There was though significant disappointment around the current withdrawal of HCA support particularly when HEIs are trying to develop and establish the programme:

*Huge sadness as result of loss of HCA expertise just at a time when we needed it most. Much of the FdSc work wouldn't have happened without the clear vision provided by HCA and their willingness to allow all of the HEIs to explore beyond the framework - when we needed support we got it - always happened efficiently and with a nurturing approach - people weren't phased by different models and changing economic climate - excelled at juggling different agendas.*

The CIH also saw the HCAs involvement as a positive element in the rollout of the FdSc:

*There have been advantages with the HCAs involvement – the priming of the HEIs with some funding have helped. Also getting people to share resources and to collaborate has been good – sharing resources and thinking has been an element of good practice.*

However, the CIH noted that there were also shortcomings in the way the HCA had operated:

*The HCA has raised expectations and now it's going to be cut short. Unfortunately now the money isn't there the HEIs have dropped it...It would have been useful if the HCA had engaged employers with HEIs and had more local groupings. The HCA*

*could have worked to stimulate local networks and communication between the HEIs and the employers to get some routes laid down to help embed the FdSc more securely.*

The HCAs response to this comment is as follows:

*When the HCA, then ASC, first embarked upon implementing its strategy for engaging with HEIs in 2007 it is fair to note that all organisations were operating in a very different economic climate. The Agency's role was very much as a broker/facilitator for HEIs to engage with a pre identified market. There was a lot of interest from HEIs, but not all interested individuals had the influence and mandate to begin the process of formally taking up the FdSc offer. This was due to a number of reasons such as changing job roles, reorganisation and shifting priorities. In some cases these led to the FdSc offer being taken up by HEIs when the funding was nearing its end which seemingly disadvantaged late joining HEIs.*

Aside from the practical aspects of course development and validation, other areas where support was appreciated included the marketing of the FdSc and the co-ordination of the FdSc Network of HEIs. It was thought that without the drive of the HCA the Network would not have been sustained. A key component of the success and positive action of the Network appears to be seen as the HCAs decision to limit the development of the FdSc to no more than one per Region. This has been seen to foster a sense of co-operation as opposed to competition over the market and resources.

#### **Suitability of teaching staff and delivery**

All programmes appear to have been delivered by people with experience, in practice or research, around sustainable communities. It was reported that due to the collaborative foundation of the course staff were able to be brought in from a variety of areas in order to fill any identified gaps. Most HEIs have a core set of teaching staff with additional specialists brought in when required. With the exception of students from one of the HEIs who commented on the poor teaching methods of one tutor (*see below*) – the teaching was viewed extremely positively.

Most of the programmes are delivered via a combination of class based, group work, self-directed, online, and work-based learning all of which is supported by individual tutorial support.

#### **Impact on addressing skills shortages**

The key reason for developing the FdSc was the intention to address the perceived skills shortages in the housing and regeneration sectors. Although the FdSc is arguably in its infancy, a number of HEIs felt they could not make any meaningful comment on the issue. However, there was some evidence gathered during the consultation with stakeholders as to ways in which such skills gaps are being addressed.

In the Milton Keynes and Northampton partnership it was perceived that the planning and development of the FdSc had helped to create a dialogue with, and between, a wide range of public/private/community sector players within the Milton Keynes/South Midlands area. The result of this dialogue was that the differing needs and expectations of the various local stakeholders were now more clearly understood. It was thought that

this probably would not have happened without the HCA and the FdSc acting as catalyst:

*FD has been landmark - HCA putting flag on lawn and defining the territory has been important in helping people to work out their own solutions.*

In this region Housing Associations and private sector builders are now seen to be taking a wider role and acting more as 'community builders' rather than simply as physical developers/providers of housing.

Salford University though talked about the challenge faced by delivering learning in sustainable communities skills. Here the experience was that students requested 'knowledge' about sustainable communities as opposed to the development of 'skills'. It was therefore difficult to know how the principles learned on the programme took shape 'on the ground' within the fabric of community settings. It was also thought that the concept of 'skills' was something that employee organizations struggled with too, but that some head-way had been made around issues such as 'collaborative' skills with some students.

Another HEI commented that although the FdSc tends to be designed for people who are in work in the related sectors already, a good number of their students were either unemployed or currently working outside of the sectors. Here it was thought that part of the role of the FdSc should be to develop the skills necessary to enter employment in the housing and regeneration sectors. As a result an employability element (i.e. interview protocols, application completion) was being built into this programme to help these students secure employment in the future.

One HEI was however skeptical about the potential for the FdSc to fill the gaps in skills. It was perceived that the programme entered an already crowded market where there was existing provision that met similar objectives e.g. community development, regeneration, planning and housing.

### **The impact of the FdSc upon individuals**

A total of 12 Students were consulted during the course of this study. This included: 7 students enrolled on the joint Staffordshire/Stafford programme (who engaged via an e-survey posted internally); 3 students from The University of Salford and 2 students from Sheffield Hallam University (who all took part via telephone interviews).

There was an even split between the students on the programme who saw the FdSc as a route to assisting them in their career or work, with those who saw the programme as a way of increasing their knowledge of sustainability and/or sustainable communities for personal development.

Similarly, students' expectations of the FdSc were varied which perhaps reflects the diversity of the sustainable communities area and the diversity offered by the FdSc programme. Some students talked about their expectations that the programme would help them in their work around community involvement, sustainability and environmental issues. Other students simply hoped the programme would provide them with more skills, knowledge and experience that would help them at some

unspecified point in the future. These latter statements were particularly common amongst students who had been away from formal education for a period of time. Their expectations were appearing to be met:

*The course and specifically the course leader has inspired me to challenge apathy. I am now enabling communities to help themselves, facilitating community led initiatives and promoting more holistic and joined up thinking. The course has more than met my expectations.*

For many students this was the preferred route to learning about sustainable communities and meeting their learning needs. A number of people had engaged in some prior reading around the general area - with one student reviewing the related material online via the HCA website - but who prefers the more traditional classroom learning environment instead.

All but one of the students saw the content of the programme as relevant to their needs:

*Neighbourhood issues taught me that there are clear relationships between different aspects of deprivation; this has meant that I promote more partnership working as I understand that tackling problems in isolation is not helpful in the long term.*

*The climate change module helped me to understand the facts rather than the media interpretation. It also made me think about how our company could make a difference and as a person I could make a difference and as a result have made recommendation to the company.*

Likewise all but one student expressed satisfaction at the course in terms of delivery and timing. However, in terms of comments on scheduling there were some interesting but conflicting points raised by two students from Salford. One student favoured the timing of the delivery where the course started at 2pm and finished at 6pm as they had a long train journey to get to University, while the other student would have preferred an earlier start time. This again highlights the impact of individual circumstances and the diversity of the student backgrounds. Similarly, two students from a different HEI were severely critical about the delivery of the course which was seen overall as positive but which had instances of 'lazy' delivery. These students went on to talk about how it was not uncommon for lectures to be swapped at the last minute and replaced with self-directed learning sessions. These had significant impacts on students with personal commitments and who travelled for significant distances to the University. This latter finding perhaps highlights the need for HEIs to better consider the standpoint of students, particularly non-traditional students who tend to be actively seeking new learning and skills, who have high expectations about course content and delivery. Although such issues are not new to HEIs, who are becoming more acclimatised to delivering a 'learning service', there is a need for greater professionalization of that service when placed in a market based HE economy where customers represent an array of different backgrounds and needs.

FdSc delivery staff however reported high levels of satisfaction with the course derived from student feedback and feedback from liaison with employers.

Views around access to tutors and online resources were mostly positive, with two students (from Staffordshire/Stafford) being dissatisfied with their access to online material. This appears to have arisen due to the difficulties encountered in delivering the *Environmental Issues* module as 'blended learning'. On the initial induction there were several technical failures which resulted in a lack of time to fully explain different aspects of *Blackboard* and *Moodle* etc. However, it has been seen that the root problem is that the use of distance/blended learning methods with a 'non-distance' group of learners creates unnecessary barriers. Students on the Staffordshire/Stafford programme have expressed a strong preference for 'face-to-face' teaching and seem to only want electronic contact as background support. As a result the team are trying to revamp future distance learning modules by introducing more face to face content. However, it was thought unlikely to gain full support from the University on a long term basis due to cost factors.

All students reported that they either may, or would, recommend the FdSc to others:

*I would recommend the course to others that are in a similar line of work to me or have similar interests in sustainability. As the course is up to date with current legislation and Government guidance it is relevant rather than a history lesson.*

*Yes – the FdSc is not only academic but is participatory for students as well. The FdSc is very interesting and covers a broad range of subjects as well as gaining a specialised formal qualification and also for anyone who is interested in working in a neighbourhood setting.*

### **Impact on their work**

For a number of the students consulted it was too early in the course to detail specific ways in which the course had impacted on their working lives. Some people talked about specific projects they were involved in and how the content of the course had helped them:

*I have applied both knowledge and practical skills learnt so far to my current job role. I have also been able to understand more in meetings with other agencies and colleagues. As previously stated because the course is up to date with the current Government's legislation and guidance it means I am able to bring this knowledge into work.*

*I am now facilitating communities to engage in their own planning and we use the knowledge gained through my course to help structure community plans. Including making sure that consideration is given to all factors of a Sustainable Community. I now assess projects for their environmental, economic and social impacts.*

However, the single most pervasive impact mentioned by students was the confidence gained through the course:

*I feel much more confident in my work and feel like I understand what I am talking about.*

*I am more confident to work in partnership with other organisations such as police, health, schools and councillors as I have a better understanding that a holistic approach is the only way.*

From the people who worked in the housing or regeneration sectors all thought they were either slightly or significantly better equipped as a result of the FdSc.

Although for the most part students were still new to the programme, which meant it was difficult for people to comment on the comprehensiveness of the FdSc content, one person commented on the need for greater content around environmental sustainability and community owned/generated energy.

If the FdSc had not been in place many students would have still enrolled on a course in an HEI. One student commented:

*I'd have registered for some sort of urban regeneration course as I'd made up my mind that year to start a University course. I didn't want to wait.*

With another commenting:

*I would probably have done the housing degree instead the following year.*

However, one student would not have engaged in education of any kind:

*Because this was the only course that was interesting to me I may not have engaged in further education.*

### **Wider impacts of the course**

Other than specific knowledge gained students noted that one of the main outcomes derived from the FdSc was the 'camaraderie' and networks built up with other students – particularly where students share similar job roles.

### **Unexpected outcomes from delivering the FdSc**

In order to provide a rounded evaluation of the last 3 years activity as well as exploring whether the FdSc was meeting its specific objectives - in terms of skills - it was also important to explore if there had been any unanticipated outcomes as a result of going through the process of development and delivery of the FdSc.

The clear unexpected outcome, which was resoundingly positive in the view of the HEI staff, was the establishment of the FdSc Network. As well as this being supportive in a practical sense, in terms of providing shared learning around validation and resources, it was clear that the Network members received a great deal of intellectual support from their colleagues. It was also expressed by one HEI that the Network could actually be a trailblazer in delivering new, and established, thinking around community development and localism:

*The FdSc network is ahead of the game and could be in the vanguard of making sure that teaching and learning around the 'localism' agenda is taken forward.*

*Saul Alinski model of 'community organising' may well be helpful in presenting FdSc work as a development tool to "map knowledge that was not previously on the map" and to help a range of sectors to create avenues to break down barriers on how to work with communities. But to do this it needs to be more widely based than housing/planning/regeneration groups within HEI's.*

An additional outcome had been how involvement in the FdSc had, quite directly, impacted on the content and delivery of other more traditional courses within the HEIs.

- For Birmingham City University this had led to a refocusing of their existing undergraduate Housing provision towards sustainability and neighbourhood.
- Salford University also saw the benefit of redesigning the FD in Housing at the same time as the development of the FdSc as it allowed students on both to be introduced to new fields of study especially around sustainability and low carbon agendas.
- For Sheffield Hallam University because they were required to consider the acquisition of skills on the FdSc, on an equal footing to knowledge, they have become much better about designing assessments that capture both aspects on a range of programmes.

For Milton Keynes and Northampton they had been pleasantly surprised by the wide range of private sector interest in the broad subject area of 'sustainability' and the focus they are now giving to creating working communities. They were currently engaging with the emerging Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to explore potential opportunities and links.

### **The future of the FdSc**

The picture painted by the staff delivering the FdSc of the future of the course was bleak. There appears to be a number of perceived challenges facing the FdSc: low student numbers, changing political rhetoric away from 'sustainable communities', reduction in public sector funding and a lack of support within higher education for Foundation Degrees. In addition, there was uncertainty around whether there would be the capacity, within training and staff development budgets of public sector employers, to fund students to undertake the FdSc. It was thought that the FdSc may be seen as a 'risky' option for employers who may instead prefer more established, familiar and 'tried and tested' subjects such as Housing, Planning, Regeneration and Surveying. As one HEI staff member commented:

*People will retreat back into their organisation's silos. The FdSc has always been a 'nice to have' rather than essential. The market for Housing degrees is actually quite small so in order for the FdSc to be successful there would have to have been a new market. This though didn't happen in practice as staff in organisations were given the option of either pursuing housing degree or FdSc but both of these options were paid for out of the same budget.*

One way to do this according to UCMK/Northampton would be for the FdSc to be linked more firmly to wider group of professional bodies and to their accreditation processes

e.g. CIH/RTPI/RIBA.<sup>3</sup> However, there was an alternative view expressed which held that employers, in future, to avoid risk and be assured of quality might prefer courses and training to be provided by an HEI as opposed to non-accredited opportunities:

*Some [organizations] are starting to look at how much they are spending on 'non-accredited' courses and starting to realise the a HE 'accredited' award offers very good value for money*

Where staff want to pursue this sort of 'non-traditional' programme of study – such as the FdSc - some HEIs predicted a move from the trend where employers fund students to more and more students funding themselves.

Most HEIs were either considering or were actively exploring how the FdSc could be merged with other programmes. For Sheffield Hallam and Birmingham City the FdSc will cease to be offered although both institutions commented that they would retain many of the principles of the programme and continue to embed these in other courses.

It was thought that HEIs see the FdSc as being problematic to market simply in relation to 'employability' with no clear career path and a narrow market made particularly difficult by 'recession' and public service cuts. These views were shared by the CIH:

*Perhaps it's not clear and doesn't present an immediate career pathway. Making this a risk for investment. Perhaps if it was repackaged into other programmes the content might have more of a life. One option might be to look at what the core of the FdSc is and how this maps onto the CIH requirements. However, the end qualification might not be a FdSc but the core elements of FdSc will be integrated and embedded across a number of programmes.*

Although a number of staff was concerned about the future of the FdSc within HE for FE (e.g. Stafford College) the future was seen as under less immediate threat.

In general, funding was seen as the major barrier for continuing with the FdSc. It was also noted that funding streams such as that for 'Life-long Learning', which had been used extensively by Staffordshire University to develop FD's (including the FdSc), had now be removed.

However, there were a number of potential opportunities identified that might help support the FdSc in the future. These included whether the FdSc could align itself with the goals of the Big Society and the potential income stream that may arise from this. Another option, which was being explored by a small number of HEIs, was the possibility that the FdSc could be delivered on a modular basis via Continuing Professional Development (CPD):

*De Montfort: Changes planned are the delivery of the course in units which can allow credit accumulation to the FD award, but may be attractive as stand alone*

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<sup>3</sup> Although some FdSc delivery HEIs opted for CIH recognition for their programme it should be noted that others did not.

*short courses or groups of modules. There will be a need to change timetabling to term-long delivery, and some taught on a more blended basis.*

*Salford: The future [of the FdSc] might be around discrete 'CPD' modules rather than whole courses or new courses where students can choose modules and make up degree awards on a 'pick and mix' approach*

The partnership between Milton Keynes and Northampton was perhaps the most optimistic of the HEI partners. They talked about the need to innovate and respond to the changing needs of the market. They did though highlight the importance of having a supportive senior management team in place in order to make this happen:

*[The] market for a simple FdSc is almost non-existent in Milton Keynes/South Midlands. HEI's need to 'grow markets' by offering much wider opportunities and support to learners by delivering 'pick and mix' awards i.e. varied CPD modules and assessments/weekends/evening delivery /'community based' locations/more varied field trips/site visits. HEI's need to allow time for this to happen [we are] lucky in having a new VC who is currently buying into and supporting this agenda. UCMK has no history to stop it developing in this creative manner.*

At least one of the HEIs thought that a reorientation with the current dominant social/political issues would help both the appeal and sustainability of the FdSc:

*The FdSc is very relevant on 'paper' but it is difficult to see how it will stand up to scrutiny in the present hostile climate. It will need to be marketed and badged very differently with strong emphasis on 'Low Carbon'- 'Big Society' and 'Fairness' agendas*

Similarly, for a number of HEIs the future of the FdSc meant a re-understanding of the target market. As the experience and recruitment of some institutions has shown 'non-traditional' students, and/or people from diverse pathways, have formed a core cohort of the student intake. UCMK and Northampton are currently exploring a range of options in order to make the FdSc increasingly attractive and viable for such groups:

*[we] have also tried hard to link the award to the needs of employers in different sectors including builders, health, social care and community development... but [we are] still working out the practicalities of delivery - changing to 'Friday once a fortnight' rather than 'weekend every month' and creating more CPD modules as originally planned might help with this. Both UCMK and Northampton are slowly moving toward taking these messages on board and are now working with the 'Sustainable Communities team' to repackage the award to appeal to mature learners and employers rather than more traditional full time 18 year old school leavers.*

The need for flexibility and responsiveness to employer needs was also a view shared by the CIH. Similarly the CIH shared the view that the market for the FdSc might not be housing/regeneration/planning professionals but the individuals living in the communities:

*There appears no obvious desire by Housing organisations to get people enrolled on the FdSc. In the current climate prospective students may want to see something more strongly aligned to a business focus rather than something with an explicit community focus. The FdSc however might best be aligned to residents who are being supported by RSLs to undertake it. If you are trying to empower residents who might be getting into community work the FdSc might fit quite well.*

### **Summary of key findings**

- The support provided by the HCA has been a welcome, vital and positive addition in the developmental process and delivery of the programme.
- It is not yet clear if the FdSc has contributed to addressing the skills shortages in the housing, planning and regeneration sectors.
- Students' experience of the FdSc has mostly been very positive. There has been a minority of negative experiences.
- The FdSc Network of HEIs has been a positive but unanticipated consequence of the FdSc.
- The existence of the FdSc has helped lever 'sustainability' issues into the broader curriculum of other programmes in a number of HEIs.
- The future of the FdSc as it currently stands is seen as bleak.
- The FdSc may have been too closely aligned to New Labour political discourse which did not have a clear narrative about what 'sustainable communities' was about to market it against.
- HEIs have been adapting the FdSc since its implementation but this adaptation is continuing particularly in terms of seeking new markets and looking at alternative models of delivery.

## 6. Summary and Recommendations

This report has provided an overview of the FdSc since its conception in 2008. It has drawn upon existing literature and primary research involving the staff who deliver the FdSc, students, employers and the CIH. It should be noted that this research and this report has been produced against the backdrop of a particular economic and political climate, at play between September 2010 and March 2011, which was punctuated by significant public sector and higher education funding concerns. The comments provided by all stakeholders have thus been provided against this canvas.

On an operational level the FdSc appears to have been successful. To a limited extent it has met many of the aims laid out by the initial earlier SHU report:

- It allows and encourages progression to further qualifications to allow specialisation
- It has extended and enhanced the generic skills of students undertaking the FdSc in a professional context
- It has introduced technical skills (with a view to further specialisation at higher levels) with an emphasis on cross-disciplinary working
- It has and continues to adapt to evolving issues
- It also provides for flexible learning approaches (although a number of students reportedly prefer more traditional modes of delivery).

There have been some negative issues that have occurred such as issues around the delivery of some teaching, communication around payment of fees as well as a number of ICT issues but these appear to be isolated incidents.

The unique features of the FdSc in particular the involvement and support of the HCA and the creation of the FdSc Network can be considered significant successes and have led to a number of positive unanticipated outcomes.

There remains a significant barrier in place in order for the overall aim of the FdSc to be the entry level award necessary in order to meet the skills needs in the field of Sustainable Communities. This barrier is a lack of apparent synergy between those who have a strategic overview and influence of the housing, regeneration and community development sectors, who recognize the need for a workforce who have generic skills and that is literate in cross-sectoral partnership working, and the actual organizations currently working in these sectors. Although there are a number of issues arising from this study that explains the lack of synergy it appears that there are three main reasons:

Firstly, the FdSc was developed and rolled out at an unfortunate time for the target sectors. The recent economic climate has meant that housing development stalled, a new government (with different approaches and priorities) was elected, regeneration programmes were mothballed, public sector budgets have been reduced meaning that

there is less job security and potentially less staff in post. This has affected the housing, regeneration and community development sectors more than most within the public sector.

Secondly, there remains a lack of awareness of the FdSc and its relevance for organisations. There does not appear to have been a successful narrative created around what Sustainable Communities means, what the FdSc offers, what it includes and what it offers individuals and organisations. Although these issues will arguably require time to resolve the current result is that the FdSc is entered into a niche market between more established and 'validated' courses of housing, regeneration, planning and community development.

Thirdly, there has been some potential miss-marketing of the FdSc which has, largely, sought students from the public sector who are already working within housing, regeneration and/or community development. These are areas where there exist reasonably clear pathways for qualifications and professional accreditation set by line and senior managers. The FdSc has not yet, for the most part, been strategically marketed at potential students not yet in these sectors.

A number of recommendations are provided below that endeavour to assist in formulating a strategy for ensuring the FdSc continues in some form. Many of these recommendations echo earlier issues and recommendations raised by reports produced by Sheffield Hallam University and Heist (see Chapter 3). It is acknowledged that it will be impossible to affect change in HEIs that have taken an overarching strategic decision to remove the FdSc or all Foundation Degrees from their portfolio. However, a number of these recommendations may still apply in these circumstances.

It is hoped that this report and its recommendations may be considered by providers who may wish to offer an FdSc in the future so that lessons can be learned and experience built upon.

## **Recommendations**

### ***For the Homes and Communities Agency***

1. The HCA should remain actively involved in developing the narrative around the need for the housing, regeneration and community development sectors to develop their expertise in cross-sectoral partnership working.

### ***For Higher Education Institutions***

2. In order to best meet the needs of employers the FdSc should be repackaged into an alternative format for delivery with established public sector professionals. The FdSc should be delivered as CPD to existing professionals who require high quality validated and accredited training in specific areas. These modules can fill gaps arising from existing 'silo based' courses in housing, regeneration, planning etc.

3. HEIs should work towards better engaging employers in the delivery of the FdSc through work-based learning. Greater buy-in for the FdSc will be achieved with key stakeholders if employers, or potential employers, can take an active part in the delivery of the FdSc and benefit in an immediate way from the knowledge generated by students. This in turn will assist in the transformative process of FdSc knowledge into FdSc skills.
4. Due to wider economic forces, the changing perception around Foundation Degrees in general and funding for higher education HEIs should pause the rollout of the FdSc. There is no evidence to suggest that there is a viable market for more FdSc programmes across within HE in England. It would be more effective to explore alternative options of reaching into areas not covered by the FdSc to deliver the programme via alternative means i.e. Blended approaches – as long as they are workable and appeal to the prospective students. There may be more scope to explore the delivery of the FdSc in FE institutions.
5. As it stands it appears that the FdSc Network of HEIs is more than just a group of staff who deliver a similar programme. The Network exists as a quasi-formal grouping of individuals passionate about embedding sustainability into further/higher education and public service. There have been a number of unanticipated benefits arising out of the existence of the Network. The Network should continue and the collaborative support this provides will be essential to ensure a broader legacy for the FdSc.

***For the Homes and Communities Agency and Higher Education Institutions***

6. The HCA and HEIs should not be precious about the FdSc as a programme but should allow for the natural integration throughout other programmes where this is necessary.
7. There is a need to look at rebranding the name and notion of ‘Sustainable Communities’. There has been an ongoing problem with the title of the programme. It has been perceived as too ambiguous as well as wedded to a New Labour political discourse. This may be a real barrier to achieving greater numbers of students as well as a potential barrier to achieving high level recognition and future funding. There is some evidence in the FdSc experience that developing a programme wedded to a political movement may achieve a degree of kudos and recognition in the initial stages but this may harm the sustainability of the programme in the long term.
8. There is a need to return to the broad audience that the original work by Egan intended for the area of ‘sustainable communities’. To date the primary target market for the FdSc has largely been local authorities and housing providers. It is suggested that all HEIs begin dialogue with the emerging Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) within their respective areas. The LEPs will have objectives around improving the sustainability of the local economy that clearly map onto the FdSc. HEIs should pursue potential partnerships and linkages where these exist. In addition, HEIs should continue to engage with public sector organizations but should also look to marketing the FdSc as a way to improve the

skills and workplace opportunities of community originated organizers/development workers. The audience for the FdSc would then move from established public sector professionals to future professionals.