

Between a rock and a hard place: the role of HE and Foundation Degrees in workforce development

Purpose

This paper explores how HE institutions are responding to the workforce remodelling agenda of public services and the emergence of 'para-professions' within traditionally low paid / low status employment.

Methodology/Approach

With reference to recent research, the authors review their experience of Foundation Degrees in Education and explore tensions in managing the competing needs of the varying stakeholders.

Findings

A model of work-based learning which includes consideration of the following key areas:

- Employer engagement
- CPD and Professional Bodies – external validation and professional recognition
- Progression into HE through the workforce
- Pedagogy of WBL

Research Implications

This article identifies a need for the systematic examination of the issues raised by the implementation of FDs as CPD for employed staff. The assumption that FD provision for employees results in more effective work-based learning is challenged. The importance of FDs in accreditation for a range of occupations in the Children's Workforce also suggests a need for research into the 'professionalisation' of these occupations.

Practical Implications

The issue of employer engagement is fundamental and we would argue that HE has a crucial role to play but that ensuring employer engagement requires responsiveness on the part of university structures, as well as the capacity to stimulate employer engagement and/or sanction lack of employer engagement at the level of individual programmes.

Originality/Value

This paper provides information about the new phenomenon of implementation of Foundation Degrees to support workforce development.

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Introduction

Foundation degrees (FDs), a 'new two year qualifications with a focus on supplying the skills employers need' were introduced by the UK's Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE 2000) and devised as the solution to the problem of an insufficient number of skilled people to operate at a 'technician level'. The DfES outline specific growth in terms of almost 800,000 new jobs in 'associate professional and higher technician' occupations by 2010 (DfES 2003), putting this employment category amongst the biggest and fastest growth sectors in the UK.

FDs are clearly aimed at attracting 'new' participants into higher education (HE) and although the target group is presented as including school leavers and those seeking full time study, as well as labour market returners and the unemployed, the emphasis is very much on those in employment.

we anticipate that a high proportion of applicants will be employees seeking to open up new career horizons by enhancing their education and skills' and wanting 'provision that enables them to both 'earn and learn'.

(HEFCE, 2000, p5)

In addition, foundation degrees are intended to be explicitly both 'vocational' and 'academic', combining "specialist technical knowledge" and "skills underpinned by rigorous and broad-based academic learning" such that "Although the foundation degree is a qualification in its own right, there should be clear transition arrangements for those wishing to progress within their profession or onto an honours degree". (HEFCE 2000)

HE has been encouraged to take up this new type of award and create associated work-based programmes (helped by the fact that FDs have been the only growth area in HEFCE numbers

since their inception) and has risen to the challenge with creation of 2,879 foundation degrees since 2001 (Foundation Degree Forward 2006).

This paper seeks to provide a perspective on the role of HE in the development and delivery of foundation degree programmes, focussing on the role of FDs in workforce development in the public sector and the children and young people's workforce in particular. The authors draw on research into foundation degrees conducted at City University as well as the reflective analysis of four course leaders involved in the development and provision of children and young people's workforce-related FDs at the University of Brighton, to highlight the issues and tensions raised for HE in the implementation of FDs. Designing and delivering a Foundation degree can indeed feel like operating "between a rock and hard place" and this paper argues for greater clarity about the distinctive role and contribution of HE in such programmes.

Foundation Degrees: Some dilemmas and challenges

Foundation Degrees were designed to meet a need articulated by government for an intermediate level qualification. However, the introduction of FDs 'was not born out of a carefully considered appraisal of the need for such an award by the academic community' (Smith and Betts, 2003). Indeed precursors to FDs existed in a number of institutions in the form of part-time work-based BAs, Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE) and NVQs at level 4. The existence of these awards at intermediate level suggest that the creation of Foundation Degrees was not just about filling a gap in *level* of award but creating a new kind of HE programme at this intermediate level. As the Foundation Degree Prospectus stated,

Foundation degrees will build upon the best of the existing two-year HE programmes, and it is expected that over time the foundation degree will become the dominant qualification at this level. It is the Government's intention that the bulk of any further growth in HE be achieved through foundation degrees. In addition we anticipate that many institutions will wish to re-develop existing programmes to conform with the foundation degree framework.

(HEFCE 2000 p.6).

Foundation Degrees as work-based qualifications are expected to help meet the UK government's objective of expanding higher education, as well as addressing the skills shortages in the workforce. As with other provision in the higher education sector, there are 'benchmarks' against which FDs can be aligned, developed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). One of the key requirements of this benchmark in establishing FDs as a 'new kind' of HE programme, and distinguishing them from pre-existing level 2 awards, is that employers should be involved in every part of the programme, including development, monitoring and delivery and that this involvement could, for example, include development of course materials and work-based modules and assessment of learning outcomes, as well as the provision of a supportive learning environment (QAA, 2002).

A very significant aspect of FDs is that they are intended to function as either pre-entry to employment or as continuing professional development programmes for those in employment. In fact there are two kinds of FDs: full time for students prior to entry into employment and part-time for students already employed. FD students can also be characterised as falling within one of two types; one is primarily male, under 25 years of age, predominantly studying full-time and entering programmes through traditional routes and with standard entry qualifications. The second group, is predominantly female, mature, studying part-time, employed and with much more diverse and less standard entry qualifications (QAA, 2005, para 16). FD in education students nationally fall almost exclusively within this second group. It can be argued that it is in the context of these part-time Foundation Degrees for employed students that the widening participation and work-based learning aims of FDs are most comprehensively expressed. It is also the case that these Foundation Degrees challenge the somewhat simplistic picture of employer involvement outlined by HEFCE above.

Workforce development in the public sector

The public sector is important both as a role model for employer engagement but also as a

context in which the need for associate professional and higher technician skills has grown (and continues to grow) markedly as the result of the government's 'modernisation agenda'. Within the fields of health, social care and education, and public services more generally, the rising quality of the labour force is used as justification for a reappraisal of roles and responsibilities. Within health and education in particular, this is leading to a weakening of the traditional job boundaries which have previously defined the work of support staff. This redefinition of jobs is rapidly becoming the cornerstone of the modernisation and remodelling of the workforce (Butt and Lance, 2005) leading to the 'professionalisation' (Brennan and Gosling, 2004, p3) of many roles in education and children and young people's services, previously seen as low skilled and requiring no or low levels of qualification. This notion of 'professionalisation' is key to understanding the role of foundation degrees and HE in workforce development. The notion of 'graduateness' is explicitly called upon in the 'rationale' for Foundation Degrees, for example "The foundation degree is intended to help education providers supply the labour market with the high-quality graduates needed to address the shortage of intermediate level skills" (HEFCE, 2000, p3)

In 2002, the government made explicit its commitment to remodelling the workforce and the development of the role of school support staff (DfES, 2002) and the concern to raise standards in the children and young people's workforce through professional development is also apparent in the Children Act (HMSO, 2004). A key aspect of this policy is workforce reform and associated professional development for the children and young people's workforce more generally. This modernisation and remodelling of the education and children and young people's workforce is targeted at existing post holders and is relying on their continuing professional development to access appropriate levels of qualification and progress to new 'enhanced' roles. FDs, as intermediate level qualifications and part-time, work-based programmes for employees, provide an ideal vehicle for the accreditation of CPD of this workforce as well as supporting claims for 'associate professional' or 'professional status' for many of the new roles created..

The linking of emerging associate professional roles to National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels of qualification is essential to their credibility and status and this link is increasingly being made explicit. For example, the Children's Workforce Development Council has suggested that roles in early years care and education should range from 'Assistant Early Years Practitioner', requiring level 2 qualifications (the standard associated with the end of compulsory schooling though sometimes achieved through vocational qualifications thereafter) through to Leader/Manager requiring level 7 (Master's level). This range includes 'Assistant Early Years Professional' requiring NQF level 5, equivalent to Foundation Degree (CWDC, 2006).

Foundation Degrees provide qualifications for roles for which there were no existing qualifications previously. For example the Foundation Degree 'Working with Young People and Young People's Services' is both a generic professional development programme for a range of emerging and developing paraprofessionals (e.g. learning mentors, educational welfare officers etc) and is one of a range of required professional development programmes from which Connexions service providers may choose to ensure Personal Advisers have 'qualified professional' status.

The modernising of the education and children's workforce has therefore created demand for FDs in that sector. There are 361 Foundation Degrees in Education registered with Foundation Degree Forward, more than in any other subject area (see table I). These courses have the largest number of FD students enrolled in England (QAA, 2005, para 23). A factor in this increase has been specific government drivers such as the introduction by the DfES of the Early Years Sector Endorsed Programme (QAA, 2005, para 23). These sector skills endorsed programmes benefited from significant additional funding from SureStart (a government funding stream) to contribute to fees and provide additional support to students.

Employer engagement

It has been argued that 'work-based learning is still an idea in search of a practice, a pedagogy that is undergoing development as it accommodates itself to the exigencies of the workplace and the university' (Boud and Symes, 2000, p3). Its relationship to more traditional models of knowledge transmission remains unclear and its interpretation by institutions lacking in consensus. The 2002 review of Foundation Degrees found that there was a wide range of approaches to integrated work and learning and a range of definitions of WBL in operation across the sector (FD Support Team, 2002, p35).

There are challenges in adopting a work-based learning model to achieve the workforce development goals of government for the public sector. Keep (2003) observes that whilst it is relatively easy to launch government sponsored interventions in the training market in the shape of subsidised training of one form or another, using this lever to promote lasting change is extremely problematic. The crucial yet persistent issue is how to persuade the vast majority of employers to get engaged in the process (Keep, 2003, p3). Evaluation of one of the prototype foundation degrees in Public Service Management (Hillier and Rawnsley, 2006) identified a number of such challenges and tensions in the implementation of FDs, the role of HE and employers in vocational education. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Variability of student experience

The different types and levels of support for work-based learning offered by employers to students translated into different experiences of learning for different students on the 'same' programme. Some students enjoyed opportunities to undertake tasks which provided them with the experience they needed to support their learning within their work role while others found themselves struggling to integrate such learning opportunities within their work (Hillier and Rawnsley 2006 p.12).

2. Extent of employer involvement

Hillier and Rawnsley (2006) also advise caution in assuming that employers can fully participate in the design, delivery and assessment of any new work-based learning programme. Although the Foundation Degree Review recommended that employers be 'involved in the summative assessment of students' work-related skills (QAA, 2003, p11), their research indicated that this is not easily achieved and that employer involvement requires careful nurturing. Furthermore, employer requirements are often filtered through the public sector bodies that represent them. That employer involvement is problematic across foundation degrees is supported by recent QAA reviews of Foundation Degrees in which employer involvement is cited as good practice in only 25% of cases (QAA, 2005, para 33).

3. Nature of the relationship between stakeholders

Despite policy initiatives and funding geared at increasing employer involvement, employers continue to resist engagement in education. It can be argued that their main activity, particularly in the private sector, is to run a successful business which makes a profit. In the public sector, thought by Government to be an important role model for employer engagement, the organizational aims still take precedent over workforce development. As Gleeson and Keep forcefully argue:

Many of the changes in the English system of VET that have taken place over the last 20 years have been a form of displacement activity that skirts around the central problem that employers have not acted as hoped and intended. ...at least in part, expansion of the education system has been a substitute for action by employers, as instanced by the growth of FE and HE

(Gleeson and Keep, 2004, p57)

4. Stakeholder perspectives on learning aims

Consistent with the arguments of Gleeson and Keep (2004), Hillier and Rawnsley found that employers want learning which is specific and non-transferable to avoid 'poaching' of trained staff whereas employees have different, not to say opposite aims (Hillier & Rawnsley 2006 p13) The involvement of employers in vocational education is problematic because of the incompatibility of the aims of these two stakeholders. For example, apparent consensus over

terminology used to express such 'soft skills' as critical reflection, analysis, problem solving, management, social skills, in aims of programmes may hide real differences in interpretation of these aims by the different stakeholders. Keep's analysis is that there

is a gradual but profound shift in the nature of the skill sets that many employers are seeking...from manual skills (dexterity and tool usage) and hard technical knowledge, towards a growing prioritisation of 'softer' social skills and personal attributes...As one employer put it 'we recruit attitude'

(Keep, 2004)

The experience of Foundation Degrees in the School of Education at Brighton

How do the findings of Hillier and Rawnsley relating to a Foundation Degree in Public Sector Management relate to FDs elsewhere and in other areas of the public sector? The five Foundation Degrees in the School of Education at Brighton are also part-time programmes designed to provide accredited CPD for those in employment. According to the QAA (2005, para 40) "WBL appears to be most effective when integrated fully into the programme, *with students who are in employment in the relevant sector pursuing their studies on a part-time basis because of higher levels of employer involvement and explicit workplace learning agreements*" (HEFCE 2000 p3, our emphasis).

We would argue that this is an over-simplification of work-based learning in such programmes and that the status of students as employees and the relationship between HE and employers in managing learning opportunities is far more problematic than the above would suggest. Below we reflect on the issues and tensions identified by Hillier and Rawnsley (2006) as they relate to our experience of Foundation Degrees at Brighton.

Variability of student experience in workbased learning

The experience at Brighton is that the status of student as employees presents real challenges. The variability of student experience identified by Hillier and Rawnsley 2006 study is clearly

apparent within the five Foundation Degrees offered by the School of Education at Brighton ¹. A common tension expressed by students in these FDs, is that which exists between their role as employee and their role as student and is felt particularly acutely in the workplace when opportunities for participating in learning activities at work may be constrained by the demands of work (Edmond, 2003). It is significant that different work cultures are more or less supportive of learning in work. Course leaders commonly find that students have more or less facility with undertaking work-based learning activities at work notwithstanding that all participating employers sign up to work-based learning agreements. Some students will be supported and have safeguards around their time to undertake work-based learning activities while others will routinely find that they are called to undertake other work activities instead of the designated work-based learning tasks.

The different workplace cultures are also a challenge, both across and within occupational areas. Course leaders find themselves concerned with issues of parity of student experience where they have little control over the learning environment for a large part of the course. As outlined above, a common experience of course leaders on the FDs at Brighton is that the individual student's 'learner' and 'worker' identities are often in tension if not in conflict. This 'role conflict' can also be a feature of the 'workplace mentor' role where for example, line management and learning support priorities may be in conflict. An important aspect of course development has therefore been the development of explicit learning contracts and agreements including the role of workplace mentors with partner employers. The difficulty is that in practice such agreements are somewhat rhetorical in nature with little in the way of sanctions for transgressions and it is difficult to enforce the agreements in the interest of the student and their

¹ FdA Early Years Care and Education, FdA Playwork, FdA Professional Studies in Primary Education, FdA Working with Young People and Young People's Services, FdA Youth Work

learning when the employer does not abide by the agreement or the mentor is less than supportive.

The engagement of the employer in the pedagogy of the programme can include not just the creation and support of learning opportunities in the work context but also the assessment of performance in the work context. In the Foundation Degrees at Brighton, the use of the workplace as a site of assessment is managed differently across different FDs, depending on a number of factors, including what might be termed the workplace culture in relation to assessment of performance, the resource implications of assessment through observation by workplace staff, and the availability of staff appropriately qualified to undertake such assessments. Given these challenges, it is perhaps understandable that assessment was identified in the QAA review of FDs, as an area of good practice or innovation in only a few cases (QAA, 2005, para 67). It is certainly the case that in a number of Foundation Degrees the capacity of employers to be involved in the assessment is constrained by existing work place assessment regimes. Where work-place staff have both the training and the time to undertake assessment as part of their management role (in youth work and associated contexts for example), such assessment can be incorporated into the FD assessment regime. Where they do not exist or do not exist uniformly across a sector (such as in the Early Years Sector), then the cost of enabling such assessment, within the budget of the FD, can become prohibitive.

Extent of employer involvement and the nature of relationships between stakeholders

There is a distinction to be made when talking about employer engagement in programmes between employer engagement in terms of course design and management and employer engagement in terms of course delivery. Across the five FDs, the key partners in course design and management have been professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and local authorities but such bodies or employer representatives have varied in their engagement in the

design of the course, from active participation in the design process to relatively passive membership of a consultative group. Course delivery has required the engagement of the individual employers and here too, engagement has varied ranging from active hands-on structuring of work to support learning and assessment to much more 'laissez-faire' arrangements where student learning is more ad-hoc.

The key factors which the team of FD course leaders have identified as contributing to this mixed picture are the presence of effective employer organisations (as it tends not to be individual employers who get involved in course design), linked with what might be termed an 'organisational learning culture' which is more or less supportive of training partnerships and learning in the workplace. In addition, individual personalities and relationships have proved critical in the development of effective partnerships. Establishing good practice with regard to employer engagement is not just a question of course design but ultimately employer readiness and willingness to engage in supporting learning. Course leaders have therefore found that a critical dimension of their role in the new FDs is the development of workplace learning support through often time consuming direct relationships with individual employers.

Stakeholder perspectives on learning aims

The development of FDs in education has been closely linked to Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies endorsement and in turn, recognition of associate professional tiers has been explicitly linked to HE. This close link between HE award and professional accreditation is one which has dominated professional recognition in what Bines (1992, p14) has termed the 'technocratic model' and some FDs in education conform to this model. However, FDs in education also provide examples of what Bines (1992, p 15) has called the "post-technocratic model" which includes an emphasis on the acquisition of professional competences primarily developed through experience of practice and assessed separately from HE (as is the case with

Qualified Teacher Status). Thus the higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) status is assessed independently of any training programme (including FDs) and does not require any 'higher education' and the new 'Early Years Professional Status' whilst including graduate status is assessed separately (see table II).

The picture which emerges is one of Foundation Degrees in which knowledge is contested terrain and priorities in terms of knowledge are different for different stakeholders. The difference in, not to say incompatibility of, aims of the different stakeholders referred to by Hiller and Rawnsley (2006) is apparent in the Foundation Degrees at the University of Brighton. In our experience, employer organisations and PSRBs have been primarily concerned with establishing and maintaining professional standards and status across the occupation whilst individual employers have been concerned with performance and occupational competence in particular posts. For students the priorities are both relevance to existing job roles but also satisfying the requirements of gatekeepers to progression opportunities. For us as a group of HE staff, the primary concern has been to sustain the educational remit alongside the vocational to develop 'graduateness' and potential for progression within HE alongside occupational competence and to create and manage 'pedagogical partnerships' with employers .

An additional area of tension is in terms of delivery models for FDs. The widening participation remit of FDs according to which Foundation Degrees are seen as contributing to making HE 'more affordable, accessible and appealing to a wider range of students – thereby widening participation in HE and stimulating lifelong learning primarily through selection and recruitment of employees onto relevant professional development programmes' and 'providing a route into HE for groups that are currently under-represented' (HEFCE, 2000, p5) makes quite specific demands on HE. Employer engagement in programmes for staff has required flexible and responsive models of delivery of provision. Courses are part-time and delivered flexibly to include daytime, evening and Saturday provision extending beyond the university semesters. However, while course delivery may be flexible, accommodating such flexibility within

established university systems can also be challenging. 'Extended hours' can mean it is difficult for students to access student services, library and computer pool rooms, teaching rooms and catering facilities and students can feel marginalised from the mainstream, full time 'academic community'.

Conclusion

Based on experience at City University and the University of Brighton, our analysis is that the role of FD in workforce development in the public sector generally and in education in particular is fraught with difficulty/challenge. Fundamental questions remain unresolved such as; how is the award to be used to support/enable 'professionalisation' of roles within the sector; how should employers be expected to be involved and how can their engagement be guaranteed and how should the different interests of stakeholders be managed at the level of individual Foundation Degrees to ensure the quality of learning for individuals?

Foundation Degrees are a major area of development and challenge for Higher Education in the UK. They are the focus of tension and conflict between vocational and educational aspirations and different stakeholders' interests. We would argue that HE has a key role in supporting the raising of standards and 'professionalisation' in the children's workforce but this will require a clarifying and defending of HE's educational remit and examination of the nature of vocational HE to ensure that workforce development opportunities also offer opportunities for the development of the critical faculties currently associated with 'graduateness' and Higher Education. In addition, the notions of 'employer engagement' and 'work-based learning' remain problematic and under-theorised. Between the rock of 'employer engagement' and the hard place of student learning, HE institutions and HE staff need to develop better articulated pedagogical models which recognise a move away from 'teaching' and towards 'managing learning opportunities' and the complexities of employer engagement and how this may be incentivised and/or enforced.

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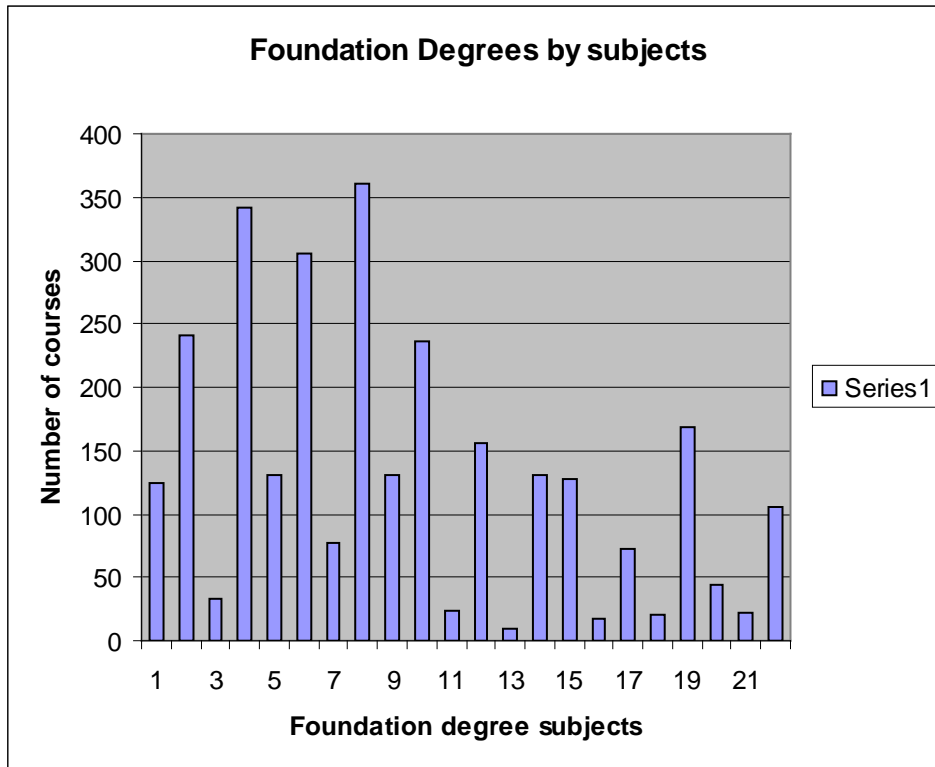
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Table I



KEY

1. Agriculture and Land based Studies
2. Art and Design
3. Biological Sciences
4. Business
5. Community and Social Studies
6. Computing
7. Construction
8. Education
9. Engineering
10. Health and Care
11. History, Archaeology, Theology and Geography
12. Hospitality and Tourism
13. Law
14. Media
15. Performing Arts and Music
16. Physical Sciences
17. Public Service
18. Retail
19. Sport
20. Technology

21. Transport

22. Veterinary Nursing and Animal Studies

(source: <http://www.fdf.ac.uk/courses/>)

Table II

Foundation degree	Relationship to professional status	Relationship to pay	Funding for course
Professional Studies Primary Education	Indirect HLTA must be separately assessed	Indirect – individual must apply for post at higher level of pay where/when one becomes available	Paid by individual – HLTA training route funding to be available in 2006-2007
Early Years Care and Education	Direct the FD includes the “senior practitioner” status	Indirect – individual must apply for post at higher level of pay where/when one becomes available	Funded by SureStart in 2004-2005 but not 2005-2006 when paid by individual.
Working with young people and young people’s services	Direct; the FD includes professional qualification status for Connexions Personal Advisers	Direct; Connexions PAs usually have access to enhanced salary points when qualified	Via Connexions Partnerships (based on LSC funding areas) to employers
Youth Work	Direct; the FD includes professional qualification status for youth workers	Direct; youth workers usually have access to enhanced salary points when qualified	Students can fund themselves completely, receive bursaries from employers or in some cases have all course fees met directly by employers
Playwork	None presently but there is pressure from the sector skills council, SkillsActive, and the field for SSC endorsed HE programmes such as FDs to be acknowledged in providing professional status and this to then be reflected in pay and conditions of service		Some funding available via local authority Early Years Development Childcare Partnership bursaries to individual students