

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

The Transition from
Foundation Degree (Level 5) to Honours Degree
(Level 6): The Perspectives of Students and Staff

Draft - Please do not cite without authors permission

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results of a small-scale study undertaken in 2009 into student progression from a foundation degree (level 5) to the third year of a BA Honours degree (level 6). The students involved in the study were primarily non-traditional higher education students. Staff and Direct Entry third year students in the Faculty of Education at a Post 1992 British University and 2nd Year Foundation Degree students and staff on the corresponding foundation degree at three Dual Sector Further Education Partner Colleges took part in the study and completed an on-line questionnaire about their experiences (N=77). A sample of students and staff (N=13) were subsequently interviewed about themes which arose from the questionnaires. Three main themes emerged: 1) the difference perceived between studying at foundation degree level and at honours degree level. This included the increased workload, the expectation of independent study and differences in terms of study skills required. 2) Student emotions about progression and issues around personal identity. Students spoke about ‘not being good enough’, ‘feeling guilty’ ‘failing’ and ‘trying to balance it all’. 3) The importance of quality up-to-date information about progression being available. Finally, some areas of the progression process were identified by both students and staff as needing improvement. This included the building of relationships and meeting university staff before progressing, establishing shared understandings between the University and Partner colleges of what study at Level 6 is like, increased tutorial support whilst at university and more information about the progression process being made available.

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

INTRODUCTION

The British government introduced Foundation Degrees in 2000 (DFEE 2000) as a qualification which balanced intermediate academic skills with vocational skills (QAA 2004). There are a number of defining characteristics of foundation degrees (QAA 2004) and they are:

- Employer involvement in the design, delivery, monitoring and assessment of the course (QAA 2004).
- Accessibility – foundation degrees are expected to widen participation and allow students to ‘earn and learn’ (QAA 2004). Current statistics suggest that between 15% to 24% of students¹ on foundation degrees are from low participation neighbourhoods (HEFCE 2010).
- Foundation degrees are expected to offer a progression route onto an honours degree or onto alternative qualifications (QAA 2004).
- Flexibility – flexible delivery modes (for example, part-time, work based, web-based) (QAA 2004).
- Partnership – between employers, Higher Education Institutes, Further Education Institutes and Sector Skills Councils (QAA 2004).
- Knowledge, understanding and skills – integrate academic learning with practice in the workplace (QAA 2004).
- Foundation Degrees are more likely to be provided in dual sector institutions² which tend to be Further Education colleges which have a Higher Education centre or suite incorporated (HE in FEI) (Lloyd & Griffiths 2008).

Although Foundation Degrees are seen as providing ‘self-standing qualifications of specific value’ (QAA 2004) there is also the requirement, as discussed above, that all students who pass their foundation degree have the opportunity to progress onto the third year of an honours degree (QAA 2004). The current figures (2008-2009) for progression show that 59% of full-time

¹ Percentage dependent on whether student part-time, full-time, young student or mature student.

² Dual sector institutions tend to offer both Further Education and Higher Education.

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

foundation degree students and 42% of part-time foundation degree students progressed onto study at honours degree level (HEFCE 2010).

Progression from Foundation Degree to Honours Degree

The progression from a foundation degree in a dual-sector Further Education Institute (FEI) to a honours degree at a single sector Higher Education Institute (HEI) can be a difficult transition period for some students (Greenbank 2007; Winter & Dismore 2010) which has been likened to the transition experiences of first year students who are also new to studying at University level (Winter & Dismore 2010). Although progressing foundation degree students have studied at Higher Education level for their first two years in a Higher Education (HE) environment within a FEI, their first (and only) year at a university may be at level 6. Progressing foundation degree students, therefore, may not only need to overcome a physical transition from a FEI to a HEI and have to become accustomed (very quickly) to new lecturers, the campus, bigger classes, the library, the social life including new people and how the university works (Winter & Dismore 2010; Penketh & Goddard 2008; Greenbank 2007; 2010) but also may have to get used to a transition in terms of differences between academic culture and expectations which may exist between dual-sector FEI's and single-sector HEI's (Greenbank 2007; Hussey & Smith 2010). This may include differences in academic approaches with the latter being more likely to focus on criticality, analytical thinking, in-depth reading and independent or autonomous learning (QAA 2005; Greenbank 2007; 2010; Hussey & Smith 2010). There may also be differences in the nature of the two qualifications in that foundation degrees may be more orientated to work-based vocational learning whilst honours degree study may have greater theoretical emphasis (Greenbank 2007). Some foundation degree students may therefore find the progression to level 6 more challenging than their fellow continuing students who have spent the previous two years at the university and may be more likely to have become initiated into what is expected of them at honours degree level (Hussey & Smith 2010).

Additionally, many progressing foundation degree students, particularly non-traditional students, may find the transition 'an intensely emotional process' (Christie 2009:125) in which fears,

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

worries and doubts including doubts about self worth surface (Gallacher et al. 2002; Christie et al. 2008). Studies which have focused on the transition experiences of non-traditional students suggest that going to university may be seen as a time of risk including financial risk, risk to identity and self concept, risk to family life/children and the risk of failure as well as feelings of not being able to cope or make friends (Christie 2009; Read et al 2003). The emotional factors associated with educational transitions may be exacerbated by a reduction in the level of support offered to students at HEI's in comparison to dual-sector FEI's (Cook & Leckey 1999) and a paucity of information about the progression process (QAA 2005).

There is potential, therefore, for students who are progressing from foundation degrees at FEI's to honours degree study at a University to experience the transition process as both problematic and stressful (Greenbank 2007). This may in turn have an effect on the numbers of students progressing from foundation degree to honours degree, as well as retention figures, drop-out figures and student performance. It is important, therefore, to understand the progression experiences of foundation degree students in order to enhance and strengthen the support offered before, during and after transition so that foundation degree students are integrated into their first and final year at University as quickly, sensitively and effectively as possible. The progression experiences of foundation degree students have up until the last couple of years been an under-researched area; the research described in this paper will contribute, therefore, to a growing body of knowledge about student progression from foundation degree to honours degree.

METHODOLOGY

The study used on-line questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to collect data from students and staff in the Faculty of Education at a Post 1992 British University and three of its Partner Colleges during the period January 2009 to July 2009. The semi-structured interviews explored issues and themes which arose from the questionnaire in more depth and were used as an opportunity to gain feedback from some of the participants on the results of the study.

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

Sample

The sample was as follows:

1. All 2nd year foundation degree students at three partner colleges in the United Kingdom (N=70). The students were studying for an education related foundation degree. Out of the 70 students who were in the 2nd year of the foundation degree at the nominated Partner Colleges, 25 students completed the on-line questionnaire. This was a return rate of 17.5%. Out of the students who completed the questionnaire 2 students volunteered to take part in the semi-structured interviews and were subsequently interviewed.
2. All 3rd year Direct Entry Students in the Faculty of Education at a British University (n=65). Thirty five students completed the on-line questionnaire (return rate of 54%) and 7 students volunteered to take part in the semi-structured interviews. All seven students were interviewed.
3. All staff who taught on the education related foundation degree and honours degree at the three partner colleges (n=15; 7 members of staff returned questionnaires - return rate of 47%) and the University (n=10 – 100% return rate). Four semi-structured interviews were carried out with the Programme Leaders at both the University and the Partner Colleges.

Student Demographics

All of the students who took part in this study were women. Of the sample of students who completed the questionnaire 71% had children, 67% were working whilst studying and 64% were mature students (age over 25 at start of Level 6). The sample were predominately from traditionally low participation groups and 82% of the sample stated that neither their parents/carers nor their grandparents had studied at Higher Education level.

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

RESULTS

Three main themes emerged from the findings; these were the perceived differences between studying at foundation degree level and honours degree level; student emotions around progression; and the importance of up-to-date information about progression being available. Although the majority of students spoke favourably about their experiences of studying for a foundation degree and their progression to honours degree this was not the case for all students and some students spoke of being ill-prepared, unsupported and ill-informed about their progression.

Studying at Foundation Degree Level and Honours Degree Level

Students identified a number of ways in which studying at foundation degree level was different to honours degree level. The most commonly cited difference was around study skills and academic expectations. There was consensus amongst both students and staff that there was more of a focus at honours degree level on criticality, an expectation that students would read more widely and more deeply, an emphasis on referencing, that assignments would be longer and of a higher standard and a requirement for independent learning.

‘The honours degree requires more in depth reading and study into your areas of interest. The written work has to be of higher accuracy, it has to be more critical; referencing has to be more accurate. The essays are longer and on more intense, controversial subjects than in the first two years’ (Student).

Referencing was also identified as a major difference and some students and staff felt that the referencing systems used were not comparable in partner colleges and at the University.

‘There does seem to be a difference in referencing styles from students from different colleges’ (University Staff).

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

‘I was told that my referencing was wrong but that was how we were taught to do it. We spent so long focusing on referencing at our college and we were told that it was really important and that we would be picked up on it so I thought I had cracked it but my feedback from my first essay was that I was doing it not right’.

Other students highlighted the difference in marking criteria and that their marks were often very much lower at level 6 than what they had previously encountered in their foundation degree. This was often attributed to a difference in marking criteria between FEI and HEI colleges as opposed to a natural progression from level 5 to level 6 that all students would encounter including continuing university students.

‘Very much harder level of academic skills are needed. The marking criteria are higher in the university so my marks are 10% lower than what I got on my foundation degree. This was a huge shock to me – I didn’t expect this –it was very demoralising - I think that the marking should be the same’.

Both students and staff emphasised independent learning as being key at level 6 and whilst some students commented favourably on this including discussing how they liked choosing their own title for an essay; others found it more difficult and spoke about being unsure of what the tutors wanted in their essay.

‘You have more choice and freedom in what you are writing about. I found this really difficult. With some assignments that means that you are uncertain of what they want in the essay, one part of the feedback mentioned that I should of spoken more about so and so but how did I know that when we were not given guidance on what we should put in the essay’.

‘You are expected to be much more independent in your work. The [university] course requires students to become proactive straight away which left me feeling really very

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

uncomfortable and to be truthful quite scared However I managed it and it was something that I began to enjoy’.

On the whole students felt that their foundation degree had prepared them well for study at level 6. However, there were also a sizeable minority of students who felt the opposite.

‘For me, all of the study skills that I needed were already being put into place throughout the foundation degree’.

‘However, I do feel that the lecturers from my particular college prepared us for stage three very well’.

‘I felt that the whole outlook and teaching at the college was of a very poor standard compared to the teaching at the university. I feel that the tutors at the college need to raise their standards to those of the tutors at the university’

‘I did not feel well prepared for university study.’

Many of the factors outlined above have been identified in other research (Greenbank 2007; Penketh & Goddard 2008; Tierney & Slack 2005; Winter & Dismore 2010) and it has been suggested that the culture of foundation degrees may be more conducive to promoting particular ways of learning which puts emphasis on class-room based activities, surface learning as opposed to deep learning as well as have more of a focus on student support (Greenbank 2007; Rowley 2005; Young 2002). However, although this may or may not be the case it is evident that progressing foundation degree students, many of whom are non-traditional students, do encounter challenges which their continuing campus-based university counterparts may be less likely to encounter and this is summed up in the words of two students who stated that:

‘I think I would have been more advantaged in the third year had I done my first two years at the university as it takes a while to adjust and get used to the ways of thinking,

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

the campus and the other students; I think it would have been better to experience this kind of upheaval in the first year when the work load is less intense’.

‘It is taken for granted by the university lecturers that we all know what you are talking about – that we have been here for the previous two years too’.

Emotions and Personal Identity

Christie (2009: 131) citing Reay (2005) suggests that non-traditional students are more likely than traditional students to construct their identity as a student as one of ‘emotional disorder and insecurity’. This was apparent in the narratives of some of the progressing students in this study and these students tended to construct themselves and their progression in terms of potential failure and not being good enough.

‘I thought that the step up to the next level would be huge and I would fail. I had made huge sacrifices to attend uni and I felt that I would not be ‘good enough’ to be there, letting myself and my family down. I did not want to be a failure’.

‘I remember meeting tutors at an open day in one of the theatres. At the time, it seemed very daunting and I felt that I didn’t belong – that I shouldn’t be there - I wanted to go home but I forced myself to stay’.

‘I thought I would not be able to cope with the amount of work and that the assignments would be too difficult for me. University was never something I thought I would be doing – I always thought I wouldn’t be bright enough to go and even though I am here now I still worry about this’.

Other areas that were the cause of emotional stress for progressing students were the many demands on their time from work, study and family responsibilities which resulted in feelings of

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

guilt in some of the students. Penketh and Goddard (2008: 322) identified this in their study of progression and termed this narrative ‘beset by trails’ to illustrate how many mature women students balance competing demands on their time and emotions.

‘It is not easy coming to university as it is so far away from where I live. I often think what if I am here and my children need me and I can’t get home quickly enough to be with them – what if they are ill or have an accident and I am here sat in a lecture’.

‘Trying to balance it all is very difficult – it causes me stress and I feel guilty that I am not doing what I should be doing – my children, my husband, my work and my study – it can all get to much and if I am honest my study comes last, not necessarily because I want it to but because it has to’.

Information about Progression

The majority of students who took part in this study were satisfied with the information and support provided around progression.

‘X was fantastic she gave us lots of support and advice about progressing. She also organised a trip down to the University so that we could see the campus and this was just really helpful – we got lots of information’.

‘It was something that I had never thought of doing when I first returned to education, yet, the progression was made easy. It seemed like the natural next step and we were encouraged by our tutor to think about progression’.

However, this was not the case for all students and although information was given out by the university to partner colleges about progression and open days were publicised and held in the university, a significant amount of students were not aware of this or found out about it too late.

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

Furthermore, it appeared that the amount of information available or the amount of contact between the university and the partner college differed according to which college the students attended.

‘I do not feel that we were given the appropriate information about the transition, we were not made fully aware of all our options and when we were finally told (which was by luck more than judgment) it was the day before we had to hand in our progression forms and I feel it should have been sorted months ago. The whole experience and the transition has been incredibly stressful.’

‘From my own personal experience we had no information from the partner college on our options for the third year; we did not get to meet any staff from the university. Only by going to an induction day at the University and speaking to X, did I get the information about what we could do in our third year, and what assignments were available. I then relayed this information back to the rest of the students. I only found out about this induction day through another student and not from the partner college. We were also told that a man called X from the university would be visiting us at our partner college and telling us all about our options for the third year but this did not happen and we did not know why.’

‘I received limited contact from the university other than form filling. We had an open day to give us a flavour of the course content; however, burning questions I had about the timetable and what days we need to attend were not available. I found the whole thing pointless and irritating’.

Enhancing the progression experience of foundation degree students.

Students and staff identified a number of ways in which the progression process could be improved (see Table 1 below for more detail). The first main area for improvement was around

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

the development of relationships and support. This included students being able to meet university staff before progressing, increased tutorial support whilst at university and improved inductions. As well as highlighting the importance of relationship building with students, the study also showed that contact and relationships between university and partner college staff could be improved and a shared understanding developed of what study at level 6 is like. The second main area identified for improvement was the quality of information provided about progression, financial issues, timetabling and postgraduate courses. However, although the quality of the information is important, what was also evident was that in some cases students did not receive the information or received it so late that they had to make rushed decisions. The third main area highlighted, by both students and staff, as needing more input was in the development of academic writing and study skills from foundation degree level to honours degree level.

Table 1: Support identified to improve the experiences of progressing students

Extra support that Partner College 2nd year students would like included the following:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More input from lecturers whilst at FE College to answer questions about progression.• Visit day to University at beginning of second year to meet lecturers/students.• To have more information on what the option modules are at University.• Condense more lectures into day at University so that we do not have to travel so much.• Financial help needed.• Information on post-graduate courses is needed – Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE). It is not enough to just focus on progression.• Email contact between the student/personal University tutor before the student comes to University would be helpful.
Extra support that direct entry 3rd year students identified was:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More information about the course and how to develop writing from Foundation Degree (level 5) to Honours degree level (level 6).• To see some evidence of the work expected and the workload at the University.• Better induction at University – some students found the induction too much of a whirlwind whilst others said it needed to be shorter.• Several visits during the 2nd year to get used to the library, lecturers and the campus.• Advanced warning of what the timetable is.• Warn us how much harder the work is in the third year.
Extra support that Partner Colleges identified:

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

- Tailored sessions from HE professionals about the culture of HE study, more information given on the choices available.
- Clear and up to date information on funding.
- Taster sessions with partner universities.
- More support needed on helping with UCAS applications and providing next step choices.
- Better facilities in FE would introduce students to HE earlier.
- Short task submitted to University prior to starting 3rd year which would get immediate feedback and areas identified to develop.
- Exemplar extracts shared and critically analysed by students prior to starting their third year studies.
- Workshops at beginning of third year with samples of work.

Extra support that University Staff identified:

- More information about what was expected at honours level needed to be given to students in their second year.
- Better liaison with HE in FE providers.
- Improved induction for Direct Entry students.
- More developed personal tutee system at University and more time allocated in order to do this.
- Student ‘parent’ system with direct entry students from each college available to answer questions from students about to join stage 3 from that college.
- Academic writing workshops.
- More social activities for students to get to know each other.
- More visits to the university during their second year – careers fairs, and lectures.
- Work-book for the students to complete in their second year about what is expected at third year. These could potentially be completed over the summer.
- Bridging module needed

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper explored the experiences of foundation degree students who had progressed or were in the process of progressing to honours degree level 6. The students who took part in this research were overwhelmingly from low participation groups. The results of this study point to the need for improved partnership working and liaison between the lecturers on the foundation degree and the lecturers at the university. What was evident from the student replies was that the amount of information received and contact with the university depended on the college they attended. Some partner colleges provided excellent information and there was lots of contact between the

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

lecturers at the college and the lecturers at the university whilst for other colleges the contact and information available was poor and this may have led to a more stressful progression for these students. Increasing partnership working between lecturers at the university and the partner colleges may go some way to ensuring that information is passed on to students, that contact between the university and foundation degree students is maintained and that Partner Colleges and the University work more effectively to establish a shared understanding of what is expected at the end of Level 5 and the beginning of level 6.

Lastly, this study showed that for many of the students, progression was a relatively smooth process whilst for others the experience was stressful, daunting, isolating and problematic. Students and staff identified a number of ways in which the progression experience could be improved, however, although areas were identified that needed improvement, staff at both the partner colleges and the university spoke about not having enough time to implement these improvements or raised the question of who was going to do it. It would seem, therefore, that if we are to improve the experience of progressing foundation degree students, many of whom are from low participation groups and whose first year of university may be at level 6, more time needs to be allocated, at both university and partner college level, to supporting this group of students before, during and after their progression.

Word count: 4, 299 including abstract.

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

References

- Christie, H., (2010). Emotional Journeys: Young people and transitions in university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30, no 2: 123-136
- Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E., Hounsell, J., & McCune, V., (2008). A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions: Learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no 5: 567-81
- Cook A., & Leckey, J., (1999). Do expectations meet reality? A survey of changes in first-year student opinion. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 23 no 2: 157-71
- Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). (2000). *Foundation degrees: A consultation paper*. London: DfEE.
- Department for Education and Skills (DFES) (2003). ‘21st century skills: realising our potential – individuals, employers, nations’. London: HMSO
- Gallacher, J., Crossan, B., Field, J., & Merrill, B., (2002). Learning careers and the social space: Exploring the fragile identities of adult returners in the new further education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 6, no 1: 493-509
- Greenbank, P., (2010). Foundation Degrees. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 14, no 2: 56-61
- Greenbank, P. (2007). From foundation to honours degree: The student experience. *Education and Training*, 49, no. 2: 91–102.
- HEFCE (2010). Foundation Degree Key Statistics 2001/2-2009/10. Bristol: HEFCE. Available at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2010/10_12/10_12.pdf
- HEFCE (2008). *Foundation Degree Key Statistics 2001/2-2007/8*. Bristol: HEFCE. Available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_16/
- HEFCE. (2000). *Foundation degree prospectus*. Bristol: HEFCE.
- Hussey, T. & Smith, P., (2010). Transitions in Higher Education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47, no 2: 155-164
- Lloyd, M, G., & Griffiths, C., (2008). A review of the methods of delivering HE programmes in an FE college and an evaluation of the impact this will have on learning outcomes and student progression. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32, no 1: 15-25

Draft – Please do not cite without authors permission

- Nelson, A. (2006). Provision and participation: using quantitative research to explore foundation degree provision. In *Researching Foundation Degrees*, ed. P. Beaney. London: Foundation Degree Forward.
- Penketh, C & Goddard, G., (2008). Students in transition: mature women students moving from Foundation Degree to Honours level 6. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13, no. 3: 315–327
- QAA (2005). Learning from reviews of Foundation Degrees in England carried out in 2004–05. Gloucester: QAA
- QAA. (2004). *Foundation degree qualification benchmark*. Gloucester: QAA.
- Ramsden, P., (2003). Learning to teach in higher education. London: RoutledgeFalmer
- Read, B., Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of ‘belonging’ and ‘isolation’ at a post-1992 university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28, no 3: 261-77
- Rowley, J., (2005). Foundation degrees a risky business. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 13, no 1: 6-16
- Tierney, S & Slack, K., (2005). Learning journeys: the experiences of students working towards a Foundation Degree. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 57, no 3: 375-88
- Winter, J. & Dismore, H., (2010). Investigating the experiences of foundation degree students progressing to an honours degree: an integrated approach. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 34, 2: 253-270.
- York Consulting Ltd (2004). *Evaluation of Foundation Degrees: Final report for the Department of Education and Skills*. Available at: www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RW23.pdf
- Young, P., (2002). Scholarship is the word that dare not speak its name: Lecturers experiences of teaching on a higher education programme in a further education centre. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 26, no 3: 273-86