

Network and Sector Matters: Developing a National Voice – a facilitated discussion

Each institution at the conference was invited to send along a representative to this meeting to discuss some of the issues that managers of Foundation Programmes face in their different institutions. The discussion was facilitated by Nikki Hughes of Manchester Metropolitan University.

Essentially the main topics of discussion were:

Benchmarking and the use of Contextual Data in the Foundation Sector
Developing a National Voice and Raising the Profile of Foundation Years
Formalisation of the Foundation Year Network

Benchmarking and the use of Contextual Data in the Foundation Sector

The first discussion was on the use of contextual data and benchmarking. The University of Durham had commissioned some market research which had collated all the publicly available data on Foundation Years run by UK HEIs. This data gives a starting point for analysing the very different formats of Foundation Programmes around the country. What it does not provide is the type of data that is generally used for benchmarking such as retention rates and success rates. There was a great deal of discussion about what type of data could be collected – and how this might be comparable. For example whether retention rates would be based on initial registration figures or the Dec 1st HESA data. A more major problem with data collection was considered to be the issue of comparing very different programmes; some programmes expect a minimum A level attainment, whereas other programmes actively discourage recent A level students. The point was made that the most important benchmarking was internal i.e. how well the Foundation students performed against other students at year 1 and beyond who had entered the university by more standard means. A further point was made that we need to collect the information about how different all the programmes are so that if some are pushed towards benchmarking there is clear evidence for the issues of comparability.

Developing a National Voice and Raising the Profile of Foundation Years

There was fairly general agreement that it would be very helpful to have a united voice, even though each programme might be different. Quite a few contributors were of the opinion that one way to really push the profile raising was to get greater visibility of the scholarship and research being undertaken in the area of Foundation teaching. This could be done by developing a National Foundation Year Website.

Formalisation of the Foundation Year Network

There was less agreement on the formalisation of the Foundation Year Network. The issue of money was discussed; that a formal structure would need a certain amount of money, there would need to be a way of managing that money, and whether funds could be raised by subscription or with a more expensive conference fee. A further point was made that a formal structure might be excluding. It was felt

that an officially recognised national body would carry weight with government reviews and within University Senates etc.

Conclusion

It was agreed that

- An effort would be made to purchase the web address “FoundationYear.ac.uk”
- The 2012 conference proceedings would be published electronically and in hard copy
- The possibility of starting an electronic journal on the new website would be explored and that papers for the first edition could focus on the ideas around benchmarking and contextual data
- Further discussions of the formalisation of the network could be continued at conference planning meetings throughout the year.