

## **FYNAC 2011 – Small group discussion notes**

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The aim of the small group discussion activity was to identify the key challenges to Foundation Year provision post-2012. Initial comments made were about problems with centralised admissions, where foundation programmes were treated the same as all other undergraduate programmes, with little or no control over the finer details of the admissions process. In one case, Foundation Year numbers increased dramatically as the programme team lost control of the admissions process and at other institutions there has been a struggle to maintain cohort diversity.

The need to maintain diversity in the student cohort, to meet requirements in terms of age profile, educational background, gender and home/overseas numbers, was seen to be very important, the foundation programme at each of the represented institutions in the discussion having a very different student cohort and cohort size. The specific need of targeting mature students for a foundation programme was highlighted, the potential risk of mature students on low income and able to waive fees deciding to apply for a foundation programme, reducing diversity in the cohort.

Ensuring direct involvement in the admissions process by staff coordinating foundation programmes, or a standalone admissions process run by the Foundation Year team, were seen as good ways to try and maintain cohort diversity. One university represented in the discussion actually had ring fencing in place to ensure a sufficient number of mature students were enrolled on their Foundation Year programme. Other members of the group were keen to try and get a similar system in place for their particular Foundation Year needs.

Having mentioned the impending fees increase in 2012, further fee related challenges were put forward. It is not really understood how the increase in fees will affect Foundation Year application numbers and with many foundation programmes having quite a high drop-out rate, there will be a big financial hit to a university if large numbers of students do not progress onto undergraduate courses. One institution has fixed the Foundation Year fee level for 2012 entry, at a large financial loss to the university, but showing commitment to the teaching of students on Foundation Year programmes and bolstering the university's access agreement submitted to OFFA.

Other points discussed included the perceived problems in secondary school teaching and recruitment being decided by ever wider diversity targets, rather than by considering the best students for a particular foundation programme. Both these points result in more failures at the end of Foundation Year courses, leading to large financial losses universities, and with the impending increase in fees, the possibility of increased student numbers being dissatisfied with their studies and going through the appeals process.

With discussion time drawing to a close, some final comments were made about the potential negative impact on university league table rankings if failure rates do go up and if formerly standalone foundation year courses are bolted on to undergraduate degree programmes and marketed as 4 or 5 year courses with lower entry tariffs.

In conclusion, there are a wealth of challenges facing Foundation Year provision post-2012, many of which are directly linked to the impending increase in fees. The three key challenges put forward by the discussion group were:

- Maintaining diversity;
- Maintaining progression rates;
- Impact on league tables.