

FYNAC 2011, University of Sheffield
Summary of group discussion on 'Effects of changing diversity on progression rates'
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Given the short time available for discussion, it is not surprising that our group has only managed to scratch the surface of this topic. The reader should therefore not expect this summary to present a highly coherent view, or reach any definite conclusions on the progression rates of the diverse student bodies that Foundation Year programmes serve. However, it is hoped that our ideas will stimulate readers' thoughts and provide a useful point of departure for fruitful future discussions.

We started by trying to clarify what progression rates mean to different institutions, how they are measured and what is at stake for FY programmes. We were not able to get very far, because we were not able to come up with a common definition of 'progression rate'. This seemed to be at least partly due to the fact that FY programmes at different universities sit in different positions within university structures, and it can therefore be hard to make comparisons across FY programmes. Different institutions also look at the issue of progression in different ways, and there is no agreed measure or standard method in the sector for reporting FY progression data. The matter is further compounded by the fact that institutions are not always transparent in the way they report their progression figures, so even where some data are available, it can be difficult to establish if they are comparable with data from other sections within the same institution or across the sector.

While the limited evidence base on FY progression rates presents us with a challenge, it can also be seen as an opportunity for a forum such as the Foundation Year Network to make a positive contribution to the sector. There was agreement that if we could come up with a relevant and measurable set of indicators for 'success' in FY programmes, this could be a useful tool. For example, it could help us to identify and promote good practice and enhance our teaching, and it could inform decision-making at programme and institutional levels.

We also spent some time considering the changing diversity of FY students. One prominent sub-group comprises international students, who can present quite varied profiles. Low-level language skills and difficulties in acculturation and social integration were identified as common challenges for this sub-group. Several strategies were suggested to help them cope with HE study in the UK. These included developing e-glossaries and taking advantage of pre- and in-session language and study skills support. It was suggested that linking English language progress to FY progression may also be effective.

Willy Kitchen's comments at the start of the conference highlighted the richness and complexity of the sector where we work, which provides education for students from a range of backgrounds including home and international, young and mature, level-3-ready and level-4-ready students, amongst others. More time needs to be devoted to understanding specific groups' needs and then deciding what constitutes 'success' in our very diverse student body. When we have reliable measures of success, it should be easier to understand the effects of changing diversity on progression rates and on the value of our programmes more generally.

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