

Full university membership or throwing them to the lions? Three narratives on the role of foundation years in working class inclusion

Class matters at university. A significant body of literature shows that it impacts on people's access to, experience of, and outcomes from higher education. People from working class backgrounds are less likely to attend university (and significantly less likely to gain admission to elite institutions); their continuation rates and results are lower than those of more privileged students, and they experience a range of disadvantages and discomforts, sometimes amounting to outright discrimination, while at university.

By no means all - not even most - foundation year students are working class, but foundation years are a significant and growing route into university for those who are. Existing research on working class students focuses on the students' own experiences, but these in turn will have been shaped by the beliefs and attitudes of those making admissions decisions, supporting students, and designing and delivering teaching. I therefore set out to explore what we as foundation year practitioners think that we are - and ought to be - doing to improve working class students' inclusion, experiences and outcomes.

The focus therefore was on foundation years that position themselves as 'widening participation' as opposed to international or subject conversion. I interviewed eight practitioners at four different institutions: a traditional, elite university; a redbrick institution (both members of the Russell Group); a 1960s 'plate glass' university, and an institution which had relatively recently gained university status.

There is space here for only the briefest taste of my research findings and conclusions, which I hope to present more fully as an article in the next volume of the *Journal of the Foundation Year Network*. Whilst there are many caveats around the size and representativeness of my sample, I've drawn some tentative conclusions about the ways in which we understand and approach the particular needs of working class students in the context of our foundation years. From the eight semi-structured interviews, I've identified three narratives around the role of foundation years in relation to working class inclusion.

A narrative of *assimilation* sees the role of the foundation year as equipping students to fit into an existing university (and wider educational) culture. A significant part of this is seen to be via the provision of cultural capital, in its commonly understood sense of access to 'high' culture - particularly theatres and art galleries - which working class students are seen as less likely to have experienced. In this narrative, formal undergraduate dinners - and by extension, the wider university culture which is, by default, a predominantly middle class culture - are viewed as something students will benefit from participating in by being 'a full university member regardless of [their] class'. This narrative places the onus to change largely on the student, and tends not to problematise the concept of social mobility through class assimilation, but to accept if not endorse it.

The narrative of *challenge*, in contrast, is explicitly critical of this concept of social mobility, and of the accepted culture of higher education more broadly. Emerging from the largely working class institution in my sample, it seeks to validate working class experience and to foreground and raise students' awareness of structural issues of class disadvantage and conflict. In this narrative, it is not the working class student who needs to change, but 'the hierarchy and ideas of the university [that are] the problem.'

The final narrative, that of *subversion*, shares the view that existing culture in higher education, and in elite institutions in particular, is problematic, but acknowledges that it is not possible to challenge it directly from within those institutions. There is a tension in this discourse - which was also felt by individual practitioners - between the view that working class students not only have the right to access elite institutions, but also, importantly, that their presence there is necessary in order for there to be any possibility of change, and concern for what those students will experience in an alien and even hostile environment. Part of the function of the foundation year in this narrative is to prepare students for the particular culture of the institution - 'because if we don't, then I feel like we're throwing them to the lions' - whilst not endorsing, and ultimately wishing to change, that culture.

I hope that this brief extract from a small research project will provoke discussion around what we as foundation year practitioners think we are doing, and should be doing, for actual and potential students from working class backgrounds. Class is neither a legally protected characteristic, nor an explicit criterion for widening participation, and thus is easily overlooked when thinking about promoting diversity. However, there is an argument to be made, in light of our increasing awareness of the intersectionality of disadvantage, that class is a common factor underlying and compounding many of its more visible and quantifiable forms.

Class matters. What are we doing about it?

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