Foundation Year Network Annual Conference – July 2010

Building foundations:

Perceptions of foundation year students

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Overview:

- Background
- Method
  - Structure of focus groups
  - Analysis
- Results
  - Initial proto-themes
- Possible implications



Background

- Almost 10% of students leave during their first year (National Audit Office)
- Students accrue debts of over £5,500 in first year (Bolton, 2009).
- Key factors identified in research as predictors of drop-out include:
  - Preparedness for university
  - Confidence in choice
  - Knowledge of course/institution
  - Gender
  - Entry qualifications
  - Route of entry
  - Social support

(Cook, 2004; Davies and Ellias, 2003; Woodfield et al., 2006; Wilcox et al., 2008)

What impact does a foundation course have on student expectations and engagement?

Sample

- From a **Foundation in Social Sciences** course in a South Wales University
  - Direct progression paths to
    - Psychology (BSc)
    - Health and Social Care (HND or BSc)
    - Youth and Community Education (BA)
  - Other routes negotiable
  - Full time (one year) or part time (two years) route
- Spring term 2010 – reflective perceptions
- Pilot stage of larger study

Method

- Three planned focus groups:
  - Young female group
  - Young male group
  - Mixed mature group
- Five in each group
- Lunch provided as incentive
- Separate rooms and facilitators
- Auditory digital recordings made and transcribed

Young males (YM)	Young females (YF)	Mixed mature (MM)
Ages 20–24	Ages 22–27	Ages 43–55
n=4	n=2	n=5



Structure of focus groups

- Current experience of university
- Areas of concern
- Perceived support
- Reasons for persisting/staying
- Reasons for coming to university
- Prior expectations of university
- Possible reasons for giving up the course
- Looking ahead to next year

"If someone said they were thinking of doing a foundation course, what would you say?"

Analysis

Inductive Thematic analysis (ITA)

- Exploratory approach
- Inter-rater reliability
- Looking for main initial proto-themes in each transcript and then across all transcripts
- Time-consuming and requires immersion in data



Initial proto-themes

1. Time management
2. Support
3. Communication
4. Identity
5. Internal attributes
6. Academic confidence
7. Adjustments



1. Time management

- Getting time
- Managing time
- Juggling roles
- Having to be organised

My biggest thing was the time to do it. I work full time. It's just getting the time to do it all. (MM 8)

1. Time management

- Getting time
- Managing time
- Juggling roles
- Having to be organised

I think the time management skills are more important for the mature students than the young people who seem to be able to do things at the last minute. But us mature students have got lots of other commitments – we have to manage the time. (MM 28)

1. Time management

- Getting time
- Managing time
- Juggling roles
- Having to be organised

Well, I did not know what the key skills were 'til I came here. A lot of the key skills, I've got some of them but time management for me, finding out about them was like someone switching a light on – without it you're stuffed! (MM 27)

2. Support (formal)

- Teaching
- Staff
  - Course director
  - Personal tutors
- Student Services
  - Finance
  - Childcare
  - Special needs
  - Transport links

The teaching, for the most part, is going well.

Generally the teaching, power points and everything are good.

For revision, they really prepare us, let us know what to focus on for the paper and the exams.

So many people on such different levels – they cater for everyone.
(YM 3-7)

2. Support (formal)

- Teaching
- Staff
  - Course director
  - Personal tutors
- Student Services
  - Finance
  - Childcare
  - Special needs
  - Transport links

Also, I think being assigned personal tutors, you felt you had someone to go to if you needed. (MM86)

Yeah, I just think maybe a few more sort of structured meetings, where they have questions that they ask you… 'cause then you will think of things and bounce off each other instead of trying to think of a reason to go and see them. (YF92)

2. Support (formal)

- Teaching
- Staff
  - Course director
  - Personal tutors
- Student Services
  - Finance
  - Childcare
  - Special needs
  - Transport links

Some lecturers have been really supportive, not just in class, but also in our other roles like for me, help with being student rep, they help a lot in meetings (YM 37)

I do think, umm, I do think, there is enough support in the university but I, like… it's knowing how to access it, I suppose, and when you need to access it, which I personally haven't needed to yet. (YF 99)

2. Support (formal)

- Teaching
- Staff
  - Course director
  - Personal tutors
- Student Services
  - Finance
  - Childcare
  - Special needs
  - Transport links

No. The Finance department was nice. All social [student?] services are nice, but the Financial Contingency Fund make you feel like you're trying to scrounge for something and that you don't deserve it. And then, even when they admit they'll give you money, they didn't even give it to me anyway. (YF63)

The one thing that would make a huge difference for me is if there was some sort of childcare or crèche at uni 'cause that's my biggest problem. (YF112)

2. Support (informal)

- Each other
  - In person
  - Discussion bo
- Previous stud
- Outside univer
  - Children
  - Parents
  - Partner
  - Other friends at university
  - Work

Exactly, Yes (*laughs)* young people. They were really nice actually, most of the young people were really nice…er, they seem to appreciate us. We help them too.. the lecturers did their utmost to help us, I couldn't believe it that we would have so much help. (MM 17)

Oh! I am going to miss this group so much! It's been such a good group. It's going to be a shame because people… their opinions have bounced off each other really well and people have been really open minded and next year they might not be like that. (YF252)

2. Support (informal)

- Each other
  - In person
  - Discussion boards
- Previous students
- Outside university
  - Children
  - Parents
  - Partner
  - Other friends at university
  - Work

If we had been able to talk to last year's students for a bit longer, actually have a focus group with people who have been through it, if someone had said, "You are going to need to do this"… I would have been up and running from the start. (MM61)

And we have spoken to some of the, uh, some of the other students on the degree courses that did the Foundation last year and they have said that they are finding their degrees a lot easier because they've done this. (YF165)

2. Support (informal)

- Each other
  - In person
  - Discussion boards
- Previous students
- Outside university
  - Children
  - Parents
  - Partner
  - Other friends at university
  - Work

Just by understanding about deadlines and taking me out when I am stressed, chatting to me… that kind of thing. Nobody else understands. My mum doesn't understand. My boyfriend doesn't understand, because they are all not in uni. They all can't give me time or money or any of the things I stress over, so… (YF108)

3. Communication

- Lack of clarity
  - Deadlines
  - Requirements
  - Blackboard announcements
- Feedback
- Student reps
- Freedom to communicate

At the beginning of the year they were telling us to get on with your independent study, do your reflection report- it wasn't until week 12 that we started to understand what we were being asked to do, but we did not have the tools to do it , the bulk of the group struggled with this. (MM55)

…

In relation to what was required, but we were not really understanding. (MM59)

3. Communication

- Lack of clarity
  - Deadlines
  - Requirements
  - Blackboard announcement
- Feedback
- Student reps
- Freedom to communicate

Yes, we've had a lot of feedback off work handed in, which is good because it's confidence building, gets you on target and gets you to focus. (YM36)

Nothing back for a good while. *Are you anxious waiting for feedback?*
Not anxious, but I would like to have some results. I need to know that I'm not going to get a D or a fail. (MM75-77)

3. Communication

- Lack of clarity
  - Deadlines
  - Requirements
  - Blackboard announcements
- Feedback
- Student reps
- Freedom to communicate

And the STARS thing is quite good as well 'cause I think that that helps us with, as far as support is concerned, because throughout the year we've had different intervals where, umm, the teachers, the lecturers will leave and then the STARS people are there and we all sort of like just go on a rampage about like, what's not good and what we want changed and we even mention a couple of things that are good but that's quite good because if we've got problems, we'll say there and then. And then it goes straight back to, umm, to the module leaders straight away. (YF51)

3. Communication

- Lack of clarity
  - Deadlines
  - Requirements
  - Blackboard announcements
- Feedback
- Student reps
- Freedom to communicate

They let us give a lot of feedback… If any of us don't understand, we are allowed to express our views on the situation. They don't put you down. They will help you. (YM6)

4. Identity and belonging

- Age
- Location
- Feeling like a student
- Friendship

I feel like a uni student now, already. I feel like I am, like, more at an academic level and we haven't technically started our degree yet. (YF274)

Saying I'm doing a degree. Like, now I'm on a foundation course, but next year, I'll be able to say I'm doing Psychology, not just saying you're doing foundation. (YM133)

4. Identity and belonging

- Age
- Loca

Before we started this we went to this WOW event, welcome thing at [another campus]- and I went to that aged 49 surrounded by a couple of thousand of 18 year olds and I thought "OK, I'll do it, give it a month." It was *so* good seeing people my age on the course. We've done a lot of support of them though, the young people- they come to us like we're the mums and dads of the group.

WOW event said everything from 18 year old point of view.

Not even a mature student stall ...it was like we really don't belong here.

All focused on where to get wrecked and very little on the academic side of things. You would think with a third of the university students are mature students there would be more aimed at us really. (MM34-37)

4. Identity and belonging

- Age
- Location
- Feeling like a student
- Friendship

I'd be disappointed if they said this course was elsewhere, even on a different campus.

This is my second home!

I can't wait to get here on the Thursdays and Fridays!

We're in during the holidays when we can, because we want to be there. (MM111-114)

4. Identity and belonging

- Age
- Location
- Feeling like a student
- Friendship

I thought I would be quite alone as well. I thought I'd be alone with my studies and, umm, that I would be more interested in studying and that I wouldn't make that many friends or whatever. But it hasn't been like that at all. It's sort of like been the opposite.. Which has been a good thing. (YF197)

5. Internal attributes

- Self doubt
- Self-determination
- Commitment
- Focus
- Goal orientation
- Motivation

Did anybody play a key part in helping you to stay?
Just yourself, really. (YM123)

Those who stay
I thought it was going to be really hard and, umm, I don't even know whether I thought I would finish this year, like, when I wanted to do it. I think the want drives you… like, drives you quite far. (YF195)

I think everybody at one stage or another has thought, "I can't do this" for one reason or another. (MM13)

Dedication, willingness to do it – that's about it. (YM53)

Having a goal in mind. Determination (YM72-73)

5. Internal attributes

- Self doubt
- Self-determination
- Commitment
- Focus
- Goal orientation
- Motivation

Those who leave

'Cause they don't know what they're letting themselves in for, either 'cause they don't understand, like, the expectations that the university has with regards to assignments and stuff like that, or because they don't know what the course is about. Like, I don't know what they think, like, they think that they're going to come here and have a picnic but instead they're not, they're in a psychology lecture. Like, people who dropped out… they just didn't seem to understand what they were doing. (YF204)

6. Academic confidence

- Skills
  - Academic
  - IT
- Specific subject knowledge
- Sense of achievement
- Increasing
  - Social comparison
- Lacking / anxieties
- Less risk

Confidence, I mean I've been out of study for a long time, 25 years now, and academic writing was something alien to me and research, going into libraries to look for books, so if it wasn't for this foundation course, I don't think I could cope. (MM20)

Just becoming academic is a challenge within itself. (YF78)

6. Academic confidence

- Skills
  - Academic
  - IT
- Specific subject knowledge
- Sense of achievement
- Increasing
  - Social comparison
- Lacking / anxieties
- Less risk

Just the amount of things we're learning and the skills we are picking up that can carry on for next year, like in our degrees.

Umm, everything really. Like research, how to research, how to structure essays…

Using the University websites and the emails and learning how to reference and plagiarism and all that kind of stuff . YF3-6)

6. Academic confidence

- Skills
  - Academic
  - IT
- Specific subject knowledge
- Sense of achievement
- Increasing
  - Social comparison
- Lacking / anxieties
- Less risk

I am quite different now. I've gained confidence, When I first started I planned and worked in my office and I didn't show and share my work . Now as ---- says , **now**, I show my work. (MM71)

The foundation course is a confidence builder that's what it's done for me anyway, This course has built my confidence up. (YM25)

6. Academic confidence

- Skills
  - Academic
  - IT
- Specific subject knowledge
- Sense of achievement
- Increasing
  - Social comparison
- Lacking / anxieties
- Less risk

Things being too hard and not being able to understand concepts, or being too stupid to understand it and that always worried me before I came to university as well. But even though I've been in uni for nearly a year, it still worries me that I'll come across things which are hard to understand and that I'll be sort of backed into a corner, not being able to… like not have any help. (YF22)

6. Academic confidence

- Skills
  - Academic
  - IT
- Specific subject knowledge
- Sense of achievement
- Increasing
  - Social comparis
- Lacking / ar ties
- Less risk

Yeah I think it's… you probably are a little bit less anxious when you start on a Foundation as opposed to a degree 'cause even though you are still starting university, which seems like a big thing, it's not like a degree so you sort of like don't worry as much about the assignments and stuff because you think it'll be a bit easier than the degree. And then you sort of like learn everything and you go onto the degree so hopefully we'll… we'll be fine. (YF169)

7. Adjustments

- Social
- Accommodation
- Job
- Child care
- Finances
- Mindset
- Making time
- Preparation / expectation

Quitting my job, nearly splitting up with my partner because our order within, like, the house and house maintenance has all gone out of the window and my social life has completely changed, how much I see my family has completely changed, how I organise my time has changed, what times I stay up until in the nights has changed. I now have, like, a lack of responsibility whereas before I was really, really organised and that's because I have just sort of learned to go with the flow a lot more. It's just being in uni has completely turned my life around. *(Laughs).* It's really crazy, like how much it's just changed every aspect… (YF85)

7. Adjustments

- Social
- Accommodation
- Job
- Child care
- Finances
- Mindset
- Making time
- Preparation / expectation

> For myself, I'd practically changed my life anyway, because for the first time in my life I was living alone. I was able to give up full-time work. Literally, it was the perfect time for me. I changed my life to become a full-time student. because everything had already changed for me… My confidence was low though. (MM66)

7. Adjustments

- Social
- Accommodation
- Job
- Child care
- Finances
- Mindset
- Making time
- Preparation / expectation

Just showed up! (YM93)

I emailed the HOD and asked if I could come in for a chat. I wanted to do the foundation. They thought I could start on the degree course, but I wanted to do 'baby steps'. I asked for a reading list and I started reading in the summer.

I never thought of that ,.. I just kept having panic attacks in the summer! (*laughs*)

I bought a book and a pen. (*laughs)* (MM121-123)

What would you say?

Suitable for?

I would recommend this route in to anybody, especially mature students. (MM21)

But I recommend it not only for us, but it is good for all ages…(MM152)

Skills /subjects

Yes but, Mat5 is right you get a taste of the subjects. Some people started thinking that they were definitely going to do Psychology, but now have changed and might be doing Health and Social Care instead; they've changed pathway. (MM154)

Bridge/link

It is like a bridge I would say, this course acts as a bridge, I can say… (MM22)

If it's something you need to do, to get on the course they want to do. (YM147)

What would you say?

Less risk
There's the opportunity to drop out, you know, find out what it's like and if you don't want it you haven't wasted your first year of the actual degree course. (M152)

Prepare for it
Don't get stressed out, but let yourself know what you're getting in for. Like, I'd like to say to them, like, prepare yourself. You are going to university. This is university level, but don't feel like you can't do it. You know, like…(YF260)

Attend!
I'd say to be organised and try and attend, you know… (YF261)

Feels like you miss parliament, if you miss lectures! (YM57)

What would you say?

Definitely do it! Yeah! (YF257)

Very beneficial. (YM149)

Do it! (YM145)

Go for it – definitely! (MM148)

Run at it! Grab it with both hands! (MM149)

Very good experience! (YM146)

I've been talking to all my friends about it (MM151)

Brings you up to speed. (YM148)

I've recommended it to my niece. (MM150)

If you're not very confident, it definitely helps you get up to speed. (YM151)

Implications

Pre-enrolment

- Recruitment
  - Take care to ascertain that students are applying for the course that is right for them.

- Preparation
  - Practical and academic advice for preparation in joining information.

Implications

Induction

- Mature students
  - Some induction activity directed specifically at mature students at course level and institution level

- Student Services
  - Continue to include Student Services' presence in induction programme

Implications

Early days and beyond

- Support
  - Engage ex-Foundation students in a mentoring role.
  - Review communication to ensure that students are more aware of available support.
  - Consider provision of more opportunities in induction and in class for the development of social cohesion
  - Ensure personal tutors and staff have an awareness of how life-changing coming to university is for some.

Implications

Early days and beyond (contd.)

- Communication
  - Consider clarity of information conveyed especially in the early days – don't assume academic understanding
- Feedback
  - Improve turn-around time for feedback to enhance sense of achievement and academic confidence

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