Challenging the Use of a Deficit Model: Reflections on Taking an Asset Model Approach with Mature Foundation Archaeology Students

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Traditional discussions about mature students in Higher Education stress their alleged needs rather than the potential benefits they can bring. It is this stance that feeds the continual use of a deficit model when approaching mature students. Mature students may have many valuable assets and characteristics, such as passion and personal experiences, which can be used as a resource to support their learning and the learning of others. Deficit models fail to acknowledge that these traits are valuable and should be embraced, especially in terms of subject-specific skills. This article will address and challenge this deficit model perspective, which is often applied to foundation students, using examples of mature students studying Archaeology at Durham University. The primary thesis is that the focus on deficits needs to be challenged and, instead, assets should be at the forefront of any model, with an appreciation that there are areas for development to be tackled as part of the approach.

Introduction

"Higher Education has the power to transform lives" (Lydon cited in UCAS 2018: 2). This statement highlights the positive outcomes of university, yet, for foundation year students, the deficit model often means that an element of negativity surrounds their entry to university with terminology such as 'barriers' being employed. This is particularly true of mature students as certain assumptions are made, often based on stereotypes, and are difficult to remove, even when students progress to year one of undergraduate study. This article will address and challenge the deficit model that is often associated with foundation students, using reflections upon teaching mature students studying Archaeology at Durham University.

Students from non-traditional backgrounds bring personal habitus to university, including their knowledge, dispositions and interpretative perspectives (Meuleman et al. 2015). Mature students may have many valuable characteristics, such as passion and personal experiences, which can be used as a resource to support their learning and the learning of others. They often

have more integrative knowledge, particularly in terms of Archaeology where theory is combined with practical skills and research techniques, and may arrive with considerable subject knowledge and experience. The deficit model fails to acknowledge that these traits are often valuable and should be embraced, especially in terms of subject-specific skills.

Drawing on existing literature and experiences of mature Archaeology students on the Foundation Programme at Durham University, this paper will challenge deficit pedagogy. It will do this by demonstrating how the traditional deficit model does not embrace the strengths and resources mature students bring to the learning environment, and how, as teaching staff, we can capitalise on these assets. Examples of good practice employed at Durham University, such as peer support, mentoring (former foundation year students mentoring the current cohort), volunteering, and working with students as partners through our Foundation Forum will be noted. However, it is acknowledged that many mature foundation students do have gaps in their knowledge and academic skills, as it is rare for a student to present as the 'complete package'. Mature students therefore do require some form of 'deficit pedagogy', but this should not be labelled as 'remedial' or 'catch-up' or overshadow the benefits of having mature students in the classroom. It is noted that whilst it may not be appropriate for all disciplines, within some areas of foundation teaching including Archaeology and subjects requiring a high level of practical skill development, we should focus on an asset model rather than a deficit model. We can then support students' areas for development by utilising their existing knowledge and experiences, ensuring a collaborative, embedded approach. The primary thesis is that the focus on deficits needs to be challenged and, instead, assets should be placed at the forefront of any model, with an appreciation that there are areas for development to be tackled as part of the model.

What is a Deficit Model?

Many foundation students are considered 'non-traditional'. The term 'non-traditional student' is used to describe different groups of students that are in some way underrepresented in Higher Education (HE). This category includes, but is not limited to, disabled, mature, female (in some subject areas), Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), and first-generation HE students, as well as those from low socio-economic backgrounds or low participation neighbourhoods (Fragoso et al. 2013). It is also important to note that many students fall into multiple categories, so it is often difficult to disaggregate whether 'disadvantage' is due to sex, class, gender or ethnicity (Marshall et al. 2016). Disadvantaged students are more likely to enter HE as mature students. The focus of this paper is mature Archaeology students at Durham University, many of whom cross into more than one category.

One challenge these students can face, which many have suggested themselves in interviews and focus groups, is an unfamiliarity with HE as they are often first generation undergraduates. This can lead to a perception in themselves that they are at a disadvantage, which can, in turn, perpetuate a deficit model. In addition, "There is… a tendency for non-traditional students to be perceived by teachers from a 'deficit' perspective, for which compensatory approaches have been offered" (Gorard and Smith 2006: 56). Often students are grouped together or perceived in a certain way based on past experiences or outdated stereotypes; this is most common with non-traditional, particularly mature, students. These views typically manifest themselves in a negative way, or through a deficit-based approach (Hockings 2010). While this may not always be the case in foundation year provision, it is frequently how such students are viewed by the wider university community.

Studies of adult learners have demonstrated that there are personal, social and economic benefits when adults return to learning (Knightley 2006 cited in Marshall et al. 2016). Those who

subscribe to the deficit view often believe that 'non-traditional' or 'widening participation' students lack the study skills and cultural capital to succeed at university (Hockings 2010). In addition, they are also believed to require additional resources and are seen as more problematic than their 'traditional' peers (Hockings 2010). Traditionally, there has been a focus on raising the aspirations of the learners rather than changing the cultures inherent in the educational establishments, which often results in the creation of a deficit model. This is not useful to the learners themselves and can create a dynamic that is unhelpful within individual institutions, resulting in a need to break down barriers to learning and inclusion. However, one challenge to this deficit model is that HE benefits from mature student participation and this concept will be explored in this paper.

It is common practice for people to focus their attention on what is broken, or to make things that are perfectly serviceable appear 'broken' and then consider how to fix them. While some sectors (e.g. retail) may thrive with this kind of deficit model, education is not one of them. When institutions (schools, colleges and universities) focus solely on at-risk behaviours exhibited by students, they tend to work reactively rather than proactively. In education, where the goal is student learning and development, this method can be unsuccessful. Instead, educators should focus on identifying and building up students' assets to create positive development. This "positive development emphasises strengths over weaknesses, resilience over risk, and assets over deficits" (Rose 2006: 236). According to Rose (2006), a deficit model is one that focuses on what students cannot do, looking at their weaknesses rather than their strengths. If a student is underachieving, those that work from a deficit model believe the failure is because the student is not trying hard enough (Lombardi 2016). I do not subscribe to the latter claim, as foundation students, particularly mature ones, may well try very hard and often treat their university education like a job, putting in more than the required number of hours per week. To quote one recent mature student at Durham, 'I know I've worked really hard for this … you know me, I will put maximum effort into it as I always do.' This encapsulates the attitude many mature foundation students have and to suggest failure is due to a lack of effort is unfair, and a generalisation based on previous isolated experiences or stereotypes.

When working from a deficit perspective, the practices and assumptions that emerge tend to cover up the abilities of students and teachers (Weiner 2006). Conversely, an asset model, sometimes called an abundance model, focuses on what a student can do: their strengths, skills, talents, interests, and competencies (Alber 2013; Rose 2006). It is important that we, as foundation year practitioners, challenge the deficit model, breaking the existing paradigm, and recognise the untapped strengths of our students. The varied experiences non-traditional students bring to university is well-established, but we do not always harness the aforementioned skills and knowledge. Though we often accept the differences in our students, their uniqueness, we do not always utilise these assets early on, or at all. This suggests a deficit in our own practices, which perhaps require an overhaul.

This article provides an alternative approach to the deficit model which acknowledges that there may be 'deficits' to address in foundation provision, but these should be tackled from a positive angle. In challenging traditional deficit pedagogies, I propose that as deficits, or areas for development, do exist, we should acknowledge and address these within a model that focuses instead on assets. I advocate that 'the deficit model' as an overarching approach focusing on student weaknesses rather than student strengths should be abandoned. However, the recognition of the existence of deficits (either subject-specific or skills based) remains part of the nature of foundation level provision. Consequently, I propose that as deficits, or areas for development, do exist, we should acknowledge and address these within an 'asset model'. Focusing on assets rather than deficits provides a positive pedagogy which reinforces the aspirations often seen in foundation provision.

To help focus my argument, I will offer some clarification on how I interpret an 'asset model'. The term 'asset(s)' can be understood to include: (i) the things that students bring to learning (their own and their peers); (ii) the (mature) students themselves; and (iii) the students' metacognition and self-awareness of their learning. All of these are valid approaches, but I consider the 'assets' within the model presented here to be primarily in line with (i), i.e. the skills, knowledge and attributes that mature students bring to the programme.

Research Context

While the overarching theme of this paper is to challenge the deficit model, a particular focus is to demonstrate how mature students studying Archaeology can provide evidence for a good counter argument to the deficit model – the asset model. The study sample was drawn from students studying on the Foundation Programme at Durham University, UK. The foundation year at Durham is a full-time 'year zero'[1] element of an undergraduate degree programme that is designed to enable learners who have not had the opportunity to enter the University with the typical required qualifications (A-Levels, IB or equivalents), to have a route of entry into year one of an undergraduate degree programme. Before the 2017-2018 academic year, the Foundation Programme accepted applications from international and home/EU students; subsequently, only the latter group were able to apply. The sample represents so-called 'non-traditional' students who come from diverse backgrounds, including mature students returning to education after a break, those who want to change direction, or those who have had previous unsuccessful educational experiences.

This study involves only students studying on the BSc and BA Archaeology with Foundation programmes. The data collected relates to those students who began their studies between 2013 and 2018. In addition to age-related data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students to ascertain prior experience and knowledge of the sector; this formed part of a larger longitudinal study which relates to the formation of the Foundation Forum and is still in progress.[2]

Capitalising on Student Strengths: Examples of Mature Foundation Archaeology Students

Why use Archaeology as a case study? The response is two-fold. First, in recent history, the student cohort of those registered on Archaeology with Foundation at Durham University has been predominately mature (aged 21 years or over on entry). Secondly, as noted with reference to an asset-based approach, mature students have valuable characteristics and often have more integrative knowledge, particularly in terms of Archaeology where theory is combined with

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[1] 'Year zero' refers to the initial (foundation) year of an integrated undergraduate degree programme. Foundation Programme courses at Durham are fully integrated elements of undergraduate degree programmes; students apply for a four-year programme, e.g. BSc Archaeology with Foundation. Students who successfully reach the progression standard by the end of the foundation year automatically gain entry to year one of their registered programme without further action or application.

[2] The Foundation Forum involves the development of a programme of events to create a network of support for students who have progressed from the Foundation Programme. It involves working with colleagues from Foundation and the wider University, and former students returning to share their experiences and to mentor current students.

practical skills and research techniques, and may arrive in foundation with considerable subject knowledge and experience (see Figure 1).

It is claimed that in a field like Archaeology there is a tendency for people to enter the subject later in life than in other fields (*Archaeological Dialogues* 2002: 70). For those studying Archaeology with Foundation at Durham, this is often the case. Over the past six years the overwhelming majority (87%) of students (n=39) on the course were classed as 'mature', being over 21 years old on entry to the University. Furthermore, 36% of the cohort were aged over 30. Of those students over 30, seven were in their forties and four in their fifties. In addition, previous cohorts have also included several students in their thirties and forties who successfully completed the foundation year and subsequently graduated with a degree in Archaeology. The data from the Durham Foundation Programme supports the claim that many people do enter the field later in life.[3] Foundation students often apply for Archaeology courses after volunteering within the sector or participating in local digs. These students aim to consolidate their practical skills and lay interest, but also bring with them a wealth of life experiences.

It is this breadth of experience and habitus that can help to challenge the deficit model, in that, as educators, we are not starting from a perspective of 'something is broken, we must fix it,' but should rather begin with an approach which recognises the assets students bring to the course. Indeed, as *Archaeological Dialogues* states, 'We are convinced that these mature students, coming from the outside, can often bring to the discipline refreshing experiences and ideas gathered elsewhere' (2002: 70). This comment reinforces a commonly held belief amongst foundation practitioners, based on anecdotal evidence, that mature students are an asset in class and 'bring something extra'. Mature students have wider 'life experiences' which, as our experiences with peer mentoring and knowledge exchange at Durham demonstrate, can be very useful. Indeed, 'there is evidence that HE may benefit from mature student participation' (Marshall 2016: 4): older students can provide inspiration to younger students and 'Younger students frequently say that their learning is enriched by the contributions in the classroom from older students with considerable life, and work, experience' (Latchman 2013).
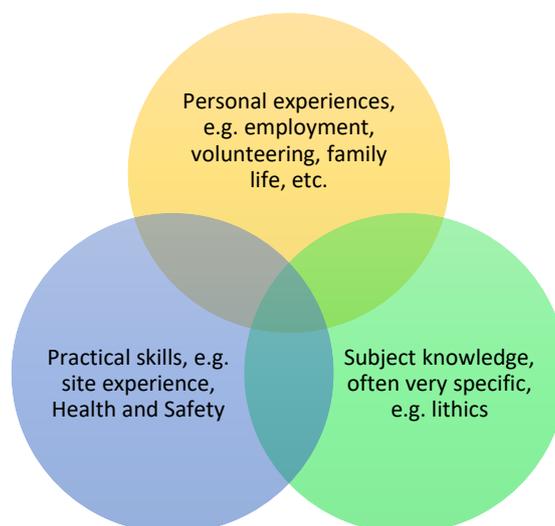

Figure 1: The integrative skills and knowledge mature Archaeology students frequently bring to year zero.

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[3] See Appendix for data from years 2013-2018. Historically, the Foundation Programme (formerly Centre) has specialised in helping mature learners return to education, supporting students changing academic fields, and (until 2017-18) preparing international students for direct entry to UK degree programmes.

Figure 1 identifies the integrative skills and knowledge that mature Archaeology students frequently bring to year zero. Integrated knowledge connects, relates and unifies concepts in various situations. Students integrate their knowledge and experiences to help support their own learning and, as we have seen at Durham via formal and informal peer mentoring, the learning of others. Figure 1 demonstrates the linkages between the experiences, skills and knowledge students often have on entry. For example, a student's passion for the subject might lead them to volunteer on an archaeological dig, gaining practical skills and subject knowledge, thus combining and integrating all three areas. Looking at the skills and knowledge, we can relate them (and others related to the discipline) to skills HE students need to develop, including time management, presentations, research, group work, and communication.

As the Council for British Archaeology (2009) has noted, many people choose Archaeology as a degree because they are interested in the subject; they enter the profession because they have a passion for it. Their subject knowledge, especially of specific areas (such as flint arrowheads, a favourite of one of our former students), can far outweigh their ability to write about it (an area for development). This skills gap can be addressed by tutors — from a deficit perspective — through the development of academic writing. However, by using the student's own knowledge base for contextualization, the knowledge, or asset, a student brings to the course supports their own learning by making it relevant, which can improve engagement and a successful outcome. In addition, students can pass on their specific subject knowledge to each other, often informally via friendship, mentoring or the Foundation Forum. This informal 'teaching' can help students to structure their work, research an area more formally, and help to draw out or reinforce their developing academic skills.

Where a basic deficit model might focus on what students *cannot do*, foundation students intending to study Archaeology often arrive with specific skills and knowledge related to the subject. This specific knowledge — e.g. an understanding of lithics, sherd analysis, or recording finds — is not something we teach in year zero, but should not be ignored, as it is often transferrable and can be applied elsewhere. Thus, we need to consider what students *can do* and what they *know*, and how this can be used productively. Being able to use their wider subject knowledge, experience or skills in their academic work can help to bolster (mature) students who may be unsure of their ability and increase their confidence. As one Archaeology student commented, "I have worked [volunteered] on many digs, been in charge of a team, can give instructions, talk to people… I should be able to give a presentation… It was different, but I'm just talking, no I'm not worried about it." Another former foundation student and Archaeology graduate, now working as an aerial archaeologist, explained, "My mechanical knowledge helped me with my [foundation year] Ancient History research project [on the Antikythera mechanism]," and, "My technical background shaped my dissertation and proves you can utilise your own background and skill set as part of your studies (I built a self-flying remotely triggered, multispectral survey drone before drones were a big thing)."

So, how do we harness these assets to the benefit of both students and staff? I advocate that teaching mature students is as much about learning for the teacher, as it is for the student. As an Academic Advisor to Archaeology with Foundation students I have learned a great deal about the discipline, participated in archaeological digs managed by our former students (such as the Eston Hills Project), and now better understand their existing integrative skills (Figure 1). These skills and wider knowledge are assets that many mature Archaeology students bring to university, and as such can be utilised to help support other students. This support might not be tutor-led, but come from former foundation students via peer support, formal and informal peer mentoring, and opportunities to volunteer in the sector. In this respect, mature students provide

competent, relatable models that help to support vicarious learning.[4] Indeed, it follows that at Durham we have had several mature foundation students join us after seeing their friends and relatives succeed on the programme. In this respect, mature students are not only valuable for the integrative skills and knowledge they bring, but also in terms of mentoring and marketing; our former students are our greatest asset.

Should We Abandon a Deficit Model?

Richardson (1994 and 1995) questioned the common perception that mature students are deficient in the basic skills needed for effective study in HE. He concluded (1994) that the existing research literature on the academic performance of mature students contained "no good evidence that mature students perform any less well than younger students on courses of study in Higher Education" (1994: 373). However, this was over twenty years ago and university courses have changed in the intervening period. Thus, although I concur with Richardson that many mature students have the "basic skills needed", my experience suggests that they do not always have the depth and breadth of academic skills (e.g. in terms of academic writing or mathematics) for successful study in HE, irrespective of their past life experiences, and so are beginning their studies at a 'deficit'. More broadly, I have found that foundation year students can often be too reliant on 'surface learning' – simply scraping the surface of a subject culminating in the short-term memorisation of facts and knowledge, with the aim of passing an assessment – rather than engaging fully with the deep learning (examining new facts and ideas critically and making links between ideas) required in HE. This is often the case with subjects they either do not understand reasonably well or are uninterested in, so is something we need to address in the classroom. However, for a subject they are passionate about (e.g. in this case, Archaeology) or a related discipline (e.g. Anthropology or History), they may well exhibit these linkages and process knowledge more deeply. Though enthusiasm may lead to a deficit if students fail to progress from surface to deep learning because they think they do not need to develop their understanding of a topic, I suggest that several of the characteristics required for deep learning – including looking for meaning, distinguishing between argument and evidence, relating new and previous knowledge, and linking course content to real life (Houghton 2004) – are often evident in mature Archaeology students on entry to the foundation year. The skills and attributes required for an amateur career in archaeology – including researching an area of interest, participating in a dig, or being a volunteer on a historical project – are transferable to the classroom and can help to draw out criticality in an academic sense, from past practical experience, for example, in drawing conclusions on the presence of a henge based on archaeological evidence they encountered on a dig.

Traditional discussions about mature students in HE, especially prior to the twenty-first century, "stress their alleged needs rather than the potential benefits they can bring" (Marshall and Nicholson 1991 cited in Richardson 1994: 373). It is this kind of stance, which effectively uses 'needs' as a synonym for 'deficit', that feeds the continual use of the deficit model when approaching mature students. Long-held beliefs by educators and the lay community are difficult to overcome, so it is necessary to break out from this negative paradigm and move forward, promoting the asset mode. I agree that mature students might be "out of practice in the art of learning" (Roberts and Higgins 1992: 166 cited in Richardson 1994: 373) in that many have not studied in a classroom situation for many years, but, and this is particularly pertinent

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[4] E.g. Plaskett et al. 2018: 49, "social learning theory posits that vicarious learning ('if s/he can do it, so can I') can promote an individual's self-efficacy when facing novel contexts". An effective strategy is to learn from competent, relatable models, people who can draw on their own experiences.

to our mature Archaeology students, they often have relevant, recent, experience within the heritage sector. This experience can be quite varied across a cohort and, reflecting the nature of mature students, is individual and accompanied by enthusiasm.

The asset-based approach advocated here highlights the way in which mature students who enter HE through non-traditional pathways, such as foundation years, may bring with them valuable skills, experiences and personal attributes that can, and do, enrich the learning environment (Murray and Klinger 2012: 117). However, there is also a flipside which requires attention: these attributes can also present challenges for both students and educators and this is where the deficit model can support mature students in HE by way of developing study skills and good academic practice that enthusiasm, subject knowledge and practical skills alone cannot. An Australian case study (Murray and Klinger 2012) reported the challenge of transforming students' existing procedural knowledge through prior experience into the corresponding propositional form required in academic contexts (2012: 117). In this respect, a lack of study skills can be a deficit and transforming students' procedural knowledge (knowledge how) into the more complex propositional knowledge (knowledge that) is a challenge for foundation year practitioners. However, it is not insurmountable and can be addressed effectively via academic practice and study skills modules, and integration with more subject-specific modules.

Therefore, though I consider that we should approach teaching via an asset model, rather than a deficit model, I acknowledge that deficits do exist, and it is important to address them during the foundation year, for example with the teaching of study skills or mathematics. Several years ago, some Archaeology students asked for additional guidance with their mathematics as they recognised their need in this area and wanted to improve their own learning. A short programme, 'Statistics for Archaeologists', was developed in response to student requests. Although the basis of the programme did play to the deficit model associated with targeted learning support intervention (Hallett 2013), it was more about a move towards a model of learning which encourages students to take ownership of, and become autonomous in, their learning habits, which should improve their resilience and confidence as they progress through their degree (Donovan and Erskine-Shaw 2019). Though tackling a deficit, this approach is rooted in the students' metacognition and self-awareness in relation to their learning, which are important assets in HE. Flexible learning and teaching strategies — such as this statistics programme — that allow students to apply what they are learning to their own interests are likely to engage a wider range of students through employ existing assets in response to areas of deficit (Hockings 2010: 31; Hockings et al. 2010; Zepke and Leach 2007).

Conclusion

As Marshall and Nicholson (1991) acknowledged, traditional discussions about mature students in HE highlight their alleged needs rather than the potential benefits they can bring, supporting a deficit model. Though many mature students will not have completed any academic study for several years and may have a deficit in relation to study skills, this is countered by assets such as specific subject knowledge, practical skills relevant to their discipline, and enthusiasm. The success we have seen with mature Archaeology students at Durham is consistent with the findings of other research literature in that mature students bring a high level of integrative — in addition to subject-specific — skills and knowledge, and make good mentors (formally or informally) for their peers. Practitioners should develop asset models that focus on what a student can do: their strengths, skills, talents, interests, and competencies. Among other things, this will help to build confidence in the university context where this might be lacking among

foundation year students. Reference to *the* deficit model has unavoidably negative connotations; if we are to continue to apply some form of *a* deficit model to foundation year teaching perhaps we need to ensure this is within the context of an 'asset model', as suggested here, or as part of a broader 'developmental model'.

Appendix

Year of entry					
2013	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**
25	22	19	18	26	23
33	21	43	31	22	59
24	19	41	23	27	49
39	25	54	23	24	
58	24	42	19	48	
27	52		26	45	
	47		29		
			24		
			29		
			19		

Table 1: Student age on entry to BSc and BA Archaeology with Foundation at Durham University, 2013-2018. NB: 2016 was an anomaly as it was a large cohort for the degree progression route, and was also our last year recruiting international students for the direct progression programmes. As a result, the student group contained several younger international students alongside older (21 plus) home and EU students.

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Rescue archaeology project run by a former student: https://estonhillsproject.wordpress.com.

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