

# *The Class Politics of Foundation Years*

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*Social class remains a hidden (dis)advantage in access to, experiences of, and outcomes from higher education. Being working class is neither a legally protected characteristic nor an explicit widening participation criterion. However, as numerous studies and memoirs show, the impact of class identity is experienced viscerally by students, and is significant for their educational outcomes. Foundation years are a significant and growing route into HE for students from working class backgrounds. How these students and the institutions they are entering are perceived, understood, and represented by the practitioners who design and deliver foundation year provision is therefore significant, but published research largely focuses on the experiences of students. This article explores foundation year practitioners' perceptions of barriers to working class inclusion and success, and the ways in which they see foundation years mitigating or ameliorating these. It identifies three broad 'discourses' or models of working class inclusion promoted by foundation years, and goes on to suggest some potential perverse (in terms of equality and social mobility) outcomes arising from the role of foundation years as a mechanism for working class inclusion in higher education.*

## **Introduction: Class Matters at University**

People's social class affects their access to, experience of, and outcomes from higher education, in a number of ways and through a range of mechanisms. People from working class backgrounds are less likely to go to university, and significantly less likely to attend an 'elite' institution; they are less likely to complete a degree, and when they do, their degree classifications are lower than for comparable graduates from middle class backgrounds (Thompson and Simmons 2013:745; HESA 2015). When a working class student does get a 'good' degree from a prestigious institution, they are nonetheless less likely to get a high status job than a middle class graduate with a 'worse' degree (Friedman and Laurison 2019:38).

Social class is not a legally protected characteristic; nor is it an explicit criterion for widening participation. HESA stopped collecting data on students' social class in 2014-15. It is therefore an invisible (dis)advantage which, while it intersects powerfully with characteristics and criteria including race and ethnicity, family history of higher education, and living in a

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deprived or low participation neighbourhood, is not subsumed within these, but arguably compounds them.

Being working class affects students economically, socially, and culturally, in ways which overlap and often intersect to intensify their impact. The economic impact is perhaps the most obvious: students from less affluent backgrounds are more likely to need to undertake paid employment, and for more hours, while studying. Because they have less choice (and fewer contacts) they are more likely to be in low paid, minimum wage or zero hours jobs than their middle class peers, who are able to select employment opportunities that will enhance their CVs and social networks (Hordósy et al. 2018:360-2). Mature working class students – who are a significant cohort on some foundation years – may also be able to afford less childcare, and those living at home are likely to have less dedicated study space, IT equipment, and funds for purchasing books or other materials. The sudden switch to remote teaching in the spring of 2020 both highlighted and exacerbated these issues.

The need to undertake paid work eats into the time available for academic work, but also for social and extra-curricular activities; in fact, as Redmond (2010, cited in Bathmaker et al. 2013:726) finds, students from working class backgrounds are likely to undervalue the importance of the latter, and focus their available time on their studies, to a far greater extent than middle class students, who also have more time available in the first place. This, then, is another area in which working class students lose out, because social and extra-curricular activities both build social capital in the form of developing networks of contacts, and add experiences to their CVs and HEARs which are valued by employers (Hordósy and Clark 2018:429). Lehmann (2009:641) found that working class students often framed their lack of resources as a positive in that it forced them to focus on their studies, while middle class students are not only more keenly aware of the benefits of cultivating a wider social circle, but have less compunction about exploiting it (Bathmaker et al. 2013:741).

Whilst lack of economic capital is one factor constraining students' involvement in the social life of university, another, perhaps more significant, is the sense of being in an alien environment; of not 'fitting in' (Reay et al. 2010) with the culture of the university, which, with the exception of a few institutions, is largely – and largely unquestioned – a middle class one. A number of authors (e.g. Jackson and Marsden 1966, cited in Reay 2017:103; Hanley 2016; Reay 2017) from the 1960s to the present day describe the dislocating effect of being a working class student in a middle class environment. Much of this is described in terms of 'cultural capital', a concept coined by Bourdieu but widely used and arguably diluted in this context. On one level, cultural capital denotes access to and experience of aspects of 'high culture' like books, art, museums, and theatre. This is important because it gives people shared reference points, as well as because some prior knowledge of art and literature (for example) is often assumed in university teaching.

However, there is more to cultural capital than these obvious manifestations. Friedman and Laurison (2019:187) point out the importance of Bourdieu's concept of *embodied* cultural capital: tastes and dispositions, and ways of speaking, behaving and presenting oneself, which are inculcated from such an early age that they appear to be an intrinsic part of a person's character. These are very difficult – if not impossible – to develop later in life (and being seen to try can elicit derision and rejection), but their lack marks people out as not belonging; not knowing how to behave; not being the right sort of person (Friedman and Laurison 2019:202; Exley 2019).

In some university contexts this disparity is manifested in overt hostility to working class students (Rowell 2018; Savage 2015:237), with, for example, 'chav'-themed social events being seen as merely controversial rather than outright unacceptable (Kennedy 2017; BBC 2018). Furthermore, these apparent character traits are valued – largely implicitly, but highly – both by employers (Thompson and Simmons 2013:757; Brown 2013:688) and within universities. Even

when working class students are not explicitly rejected by their peers, the lack of this kind of cultural capital is a further barrier to forming and maintaining social networks.

The academic literature thus demonstrates that being from a working class background presents students – even once they have gained access to university – with multiple, intersecting and mutually reinforcing obstacles. Foundation years are a growing means by which working class students enter higher education, and unlike other routes in, take place within the very university setting which is seen to be problematic. How these obstacles, and the role of the foundation year in overcoming or removing them, are understood by foundation year practitioners is, therefore, significant.

### **Research Aims and Design**

Although there is a large and growing body of literature on social class and higher education, nearly all of it focuses either on statistical analyses (of access and outcomes) or on the experience of students. Whilst both of these are absolutely crucial, they in turn – particularly students' experiences – will have been shaped by the beliefs and attitudes of those making admissions decisions, supporting students, and designing and delivering teaching, yet there is little published research on these perspectives. There is – outside of this journal – also very little literature on foundation years, and what there is largely has a pedagogical focus.

The aim of this research was to explore foundation year practitioners' attitudes and beliefs about the impact of class on students' experiences, and what foundation years can and should do in relation to this. The focus therefore was on foundation years that position themselves as 'widening participation' as opposed to international or subject conversion, although this (self-) description still covers a wide range of provision with very diverse entry requirements.

I interviewed two practitioners at each of 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. All eight interviewees were involved in programme and module design and/or leadership as well as teaching delivery and pastoral roles. I used semi-structured interviews which were recorded, transcribed, and manually coded for emergent themes.

The sample is clearly very small, and not ideally representative. There is no 'post-92' university, for example, and of the half-dozen or so institutions in England that still hold formal undergraduate dinners, two found their way into the (largely convenience-based) sample. I have therefore not attempted to draw any conclusions based on type of institution or of foundation year but have identified some cross-cutting 'narratives'. None of these is uniquely associated with any particular institution, and different aspects of individual practitioners' responses feed into more than one narrative; the aim was to create a typology based on themes emerging from the interviews which can help frame future research into and discussions about the role of foundation years in working class access and inclusion, as well as providing insights into how foundation year practitioners understand their work in relation to class disadvantage.

### **The Role of Foundation Years**

All respondents, across all types of institution, recognised that students from working class backgrounds face significant disadvantage in higher education. Differences emerged in their beliefs about what foundation years can, and should, be doing to mitigate this, grounded in

different understandings of the nature, causes, and severity of that disadvantage. I initially identified three narratives about the *aims* of foundation years – narratives of *assimilation*, of *challenge* and of *subversion* – which, while they have elements of overlap, are each distinct. A fourth narrative about the *outcomes* of foundation years – a narrative of *advantage* – extended across all responses.

### ***'You are a full university member regardless of class' – A Narrative of Assimilation***

For many practitioners, one of the most significant functions of the foundation year for working class students is to help them fit in – with the institutional culture and with their fellow students. A large part of this – what they are perceived as most lacking in – is 'cultural capital' understood in the sense of access to and experience of 'high culture'.

Field trips are seen as a way of addressing this:

For a good number of them ... they have never been to the theatre before, let alone to see a Shakespeare play .... many of them won't have been to an art gallery, let alone an art gallery like the Tate Modern.

A further aim is for students to become comfortable with the culture – social as well as academic – of the institution:

we very deliberately had our interview meal as a formal meal ... in the poshest room ... what I was saying was, 'you have access to this' and giving them experience of it in a safe environment.

In contrast to the next narrative, on this view, the pre-existing culture of the university is seen as relatively unproblematic:

I don't think I would take the other route and say we should just get rid of [formal dinners] so as to level the playing field ... I'd rather say 'this is yours as much as anything else, you are a full university member regardless of class, regardless of being on the foundation year, whatever, this is there for you to participate in'.

And the onus is on the student to change in order to fit in:

I take the perspective that all our students have the potential to do equally well, and it's not about seeing their class as a problem, it's about seeing it as causing barriers that we have to help them remove so that they can achieve their potential.

Whilst no respondents denied that there were structural issues at play, the prominence given to them varied, and this narrative sits most comfortably with the concept of social mobility through class assimilation, and the view that working class students both can and should transcend the obstacles of class – and even class itself – with the foundation year playing an important role in that process.

### ***'The hierarchy and ideas of the university are the problem' – A Narrative of Challenge***

The second narrative was most clearly associated with the newest university in the sample, which had an almost exclusively working class and local student body. Here it was possible for practitioners far more openly to address issues of class and disadvantage, and indeed, it was seen as important to raise students' awareness of structural injustice as a counter to the

prevailing meritocratic belief that failure they had previously encountered was in some way their own 'fault'. On this view,

for the majority of them, the education system has let them down, not catered for their needs, or ignored them .... the big thing the foundation year gives them is a belief that they have a right to be at university ... that they're not thick, and that the reason they haven't done well so far is ... often for reasons outside of their control.

Whilst many foundation years offered field trips, the primary function of them was usually seen as expanding students' access to 'high' culture and increasing their stock of cultural capital to help them fit in. For practitioners operating from a perspective of challenging the system, the purpose was different:

we take them on a trip to Oxford – that's not a kind of *Brideshead Revisited*, 'this could be you as well', it's actually looking at the contrast of, who are these people that go to Oxford? Do you go to Oxford? Why not? So a lot of the stuff we do before the trip and afterwards is how is higher education stratified .... And it's really interesting because for some of the students, I think there is an awakening of class consciousness.

Whilst unusual in being openly critical of the higher education system to which its students aspire, this narrative is also distinctive for its overt recognition that HE is not a panacea for social mobility, and concern about the implications of this for working class students:

what they will also know is that just because they get a degree, does not mean that they will get a good job .... one of the students ... said 'how can you, you kind of give us this sense of "we can achieve", and then you show that actually the structural forces are still against us and are going to deny us that'.

In this narrative also there is a significant element of transformation for the student, but from the perspective of undoing the effects of their previous negative experiences of education, which, coupled with having internalised a dominant discourse of individual responsibility, manifest as low confidence, low self-esteem, and imposter syndrome, which again, the foundation year is seen as having a significant role in addressing. It is made clear on this view, however, that this is not about changing or compensating for the students' class:

So I think I'd probably want to think about that differently and actually not think about the class of the students being the problem but actually the hierarchy and ideas of the university being the problem.

This then offers a contrast to the first narrative in that it unequivocally states the primacy of structural factors and, further, locates barriers faced by students squarely within the higher education system.

### ***Tunnelling into the Ivory Tower: A Narrative of Subversion***

The third narrative in contrast emerged largely from within the most 'elite' institution in the sample. It shares the view that existing culture in higher education, and in elite institutions, is problematic, but acknowledges that it is not possible to challenge it directly from within those institutions. On this view, getting more students from less privileged backgrounds into elite institutions is a prerequisite for necessary and desirable change. Underlying this position is a belief that working class students have the right to be at elite universities, but this is in conflict,

even within individual practitioners, with the knowledge that their experience in such institutions is likely to be uncomfortable and alienating, if not downright damaging.

As one noted, students at an elite institution

have to be able to survive here, and that's about things like, can you exist in a world where there is a kind of bizarre competition, can you exist in a world where people are judging you on certain characteristics that you never even knew existed, because that can become incredibly oppressive, if in your general day to day life you can't navigate the social element, then how on earth can you go on to concentrate and do the work element?

Practitioners in this position tend to foreground the importance of the foundation year in preparing students to cope with university culture, whilst still being critical of it and seeking, ultimately, to change it,

because if we don't prepare them, then I feel like we're throwing them in to the lions.

Here, induction into the culture of formal dinners is framed in terms of:

a significant number of our students have never been in a formal dining situation and certainly not one where people are wearing capes and banging silver cutlery on the tables.

and even:

they've never had those experiences ... and learnt how to handle all the forks and knives and all the other rubbish.

In this narrative, university culture is not seen as valuable in itself, but as an obstacle – possibly even a deliberate one – to be negotiated by working class students in order to access high status institutions that are, as one practitioner described, 'not just elite ... but elitist'.

The role of the foundation year, then, is to get students into the institution who would not otherwise have access, as well as to equip them to survive, socially and culturally as much as, if not more than, academically, once they are there. For one respondent it was

about social mobility, fair access, and it's about providing opportunities for people who would otherwise not – and I mean this in the kind of access to social justice sense – be able to get themselves into an institution that otherwise would exclude them.

At institutions where an elite (or elitist) culture is entrenched, and access is largely limited to people who already share that culture, the foundation year is seen as an important means of promoting a social justice agenda, by providing an entry route for less privileged applicants in the face of institutional indifference or even unspoken opposition; as one practitioner put it:

[this institution] builds its ivory walls very high, and my job is to dig tunnels underneath them.

Although grounded in a political ideal, in terms of what the foundation year provides to working class students this narrative can be seen as more pragmatic than either of the previous ones;

here the aim is not to transform students, but to enable them to survive as they exercise their right to be at an elite institution.

### ***'Leaps and Bounds Ahead': Foundation Years as Conferring Advantage***

Finally, there was widespread agreement that students who had done a foundation year had not only caught up with, but gained an advantage over their direct entry peers at the start of Level 1 (the first year of the undergraduate degree programme). There were three key areas in which this was observed by the practitioners in my sample.

Firstly, it was noted that whereas conventional students often felt ashamed to seek help when they were experiencing difficulties, there were no such reservations on the foundation year, and habits formed then were carried through to subsequent years, meaning that students who had done a foundation year were more likely to access support throughout their degree. Secondly, practitioners at a range of institutions found that students who became involved with extra-curricular activities and university societies in their foundation year had a distinct head start, even in one case going on to become president of the association in their 'first' year. Finally, across the board it was noted that foundation year students were advantaged at the start of Level 1 by 'understand[ing] how everything works', including finding their way around campus, understanding university systems, and accessing help.

All these perceived advantages arise from the fact of the foundation year being situated within the university. Additionally, specific academic skills taught on the foundation year – such as oral presentation skills – were seen to prepare students better for Level 1 than A Levels. A number of practitioners at contrasting institutions noted that foundation year students went on to outperform Level 1 entrants academically, with one saying:

they do tend to go on to do better than our direct entry students and we quite explicitly tell them that's what we expect to see.

Whilst this would appear on the face of it to be unequivocally positive, it may actually present problematic implications for working class students' access and equity.

### **Conclusion: The Class Politics of Foundation Years**

The narratives outlined above reflect a range of beliefs about what foundation years 'are for' in relation to working class students, which are in turn based on perceptions of the barriers and obstacles such students face, and the skills, knowledge and experience they are seen to lack. These reflect different attitudes towards the culture of higher education in general, and of particular institutions. These insights in turn highlight broader issues around the class politics of foundation years.

All practitioners agreed that students from working class backgrounds face disadvantage, and that foundation years could mitigate that disadvantage to a greater or lesser extent. Economic disadvantage was not foregrounded, probably because addressing it was not seen to be within the scope of the foundation year. Practitioners did note that some foundation year students gained a head start in social and extra-curricular activities; however, it should not be assumed that these were necessarily working class students, as such students are a minority on many foundation years, including at least half of my sample. Indeed, this head start may reflect an additional advantage for middle class students, as all the factors that Hordósy and Clark

(2018) note as militating against working class students' involvement still apply at foundation level.

The most prominent factor was framed in terms of culture – both the culture of the institution, particularly in elite institutions, and access to 'cultural capital' in a broader sense. This was generally understood as firstly, familiarising students with, and preparing them for, the formal culture of the institution, and secondly, providing opportunities to engage with cultural activities that they had previously not had access to, including (particular kinds of) theatre and art galleries. In both the narratives of assimilation and of subversion – albeit from different motivations – this was framed very much in terms of enabling students to 'fit in' (Reay et al. 2010). However, it did not attempt to address the less tangible issue of the embodied cultural capital that enables middle class students to be automatically accepted as belonging in high status institutions, with one practitioner explicitly acknowledging this:

[a student] said, 'I almost think the [foundation year] should provide elocution lessons and lessons in manners,' ... I don't think we can do that explicitly, because it's really offensive, isn't it.

The greatest advantage of a foundation year, however, was seen to accrue from the simple fact of having had a year at the particular institution, becoming familiar with its systems, accessing support, and getting a head start in various aspects of university life. There is general agreement then that a foundation year benefits the students who take it. This does not, however, tell us whether it particularly helps close the gap between working class students and their middle class peers.

There is no escaping the conclusion that the extent to which these benefits mitigate rather than reinforce disadvantage for working class students depends very largely on the class background of the students who are on a particular foundation year, which in turn is influenced by the type of institution and its entry criteria.

Where a foundation year offers access to a high status institution with a lower A Level tariff than for direct entry to Level 1, and with no explicit widening participation criteria, it opens up the possibility that more savvy middle class applicants, who can afford an extra year out of employment and are not deterred by an additional year's fees, will be the ones getting 'leaps and bounds ahead' – including getting ahead of working class students with higher A Level grades entering the same institution at Level 1. Conversely, a less well-advised, more debt-averse applicant with similar grades may enter Level 1 at a less prestigious institution, with concomitant disadvantage to their future employment prospects.

Furthermore, it can be argued that even when working class people do access higher education, and elite institutions, the positional good (Brown 2013:682) this yields them is relative to their working class peers, not their middle class fellow students and graduates, as Friedman and Laurison (2019) document. Within a hierarchical and nominally meritocratic system, any intervention that supports disadvantaged people is providing a positional advantage for those individuals over others who are even more disadvantaged.

However, individuals' success, and achievement, and even social mobility, for all its imperfections and the problems that can accompany it, cannot be discounted. Seeing the difference that doing a foundation year, and completing a degree, made to and for students was the most significant factor by far cited by respondents as their motivation for working in foundation years, with one summing it up as:

the rewards are huge ... you see someone, you know they've got three kids, they're a single mum, they've been crying in your office because their ex-partner's a bastard ...

and then you see them getting their degree, and they're there with their kids, and, oh my god, I'm such a mess I can hardly go to graduation.

As more than one noted, the fact that opportunities may not yield the rewards that people hope for, or that are claimed for them, is not a reason to deny people those opportunities, although it may be a reason for approaching them honestly and critically.

Every respondent evinced a genuine commitment to, and belief in, foundation year provision. They believed in the power of foundation years to make a difference – to individual students and, for some, to institutions. That this was not without its costs, and contradictions, was widely recognised. As a means of enabling access to, and success within, higher education for working class students, foundation years remain ineluctably political. But for individual practitioners and students they are personal too.

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