Journal of the Foundation Year Network, Volume 5 (2022), pp. 61-78

'Money, Money, Money.' Uncovering What 'Value' Means to a Group of Foundation Year Learners in Higher Education using Focus Groups

MARIE CLIFFORD
University of South Wales

Value for money is a term that has been, and continues to be, applied to Higher Education in the UK. Universities are expected to justify the quality of their provision, and student attainment and outcomes in relation to the cost of the course. Foundation Year courses have been targeted by UK administrations in terms of the value they provide. The aim of this paper is to investigate how value is understood by students, focusing on those studying in foundation year programmes. Using focus groups with 17 foundation year students in various disciplines, what the students gained from their study was analysed thematically. This led to four key themes and one overarching theme being identified: 1) becoming a HE student, 2) supportive environment, 3) transitions to HE, and 4) financial benefits, with the overarching theme of finding a sense of self. The findings oppose the commonly held view that the financial cost of education is a negative concern for students. The implications of these findings include the need to design a measure of value for money that considers and includes the student experience rather than the presumptions of policymakers. They also raise a question about how the data can be utilised to provide more tailored support and information for non-traditional learners considering university.

Introduction

'Value for money' is the "reasonableness of cost of something in view of its perceived quality" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018). There is a proposed transaction with the quality of the product judged by the buyer. However, in the case of education, the 'product' may not be 'owned' by the 'customer' for some time and is dependent on their own contribution. The concept of value for money experienced by Higher Education (HE) students has become the standard; it is part of the legislation applied to HE providers (The Higher Education and Research Act; 2017; The Higher Education (Wales) Act, 2015) and is measured through a number of government initiatives surveying student experiences (Higher Education Policy

Institute, 2017; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2017). Most of these surveys, however, target final year undergraduates, so do not address the impact of initial study at university.

The idea that value is assessed in a purely transactional way, limits the scope with which the term is interpreted. This marketisation of Higher Education has been a growing trend (Furedi, 2012; O'Shae and Delahunty, 2018), but has been challenged. McKie (2018) cites Franz Berkhout of Kings College London, suggesting a 'fixation' on monetary value disregards other positives, including the advantages HE brings wider society, and this has 'narrowed and impoverished' the perception of HE. Furthermore, Apple (2001) posits that a focus on marketisation, rather than producing a more level playing field, increases inequalities within society across income, class, race and gender. Livingstone (2009) sees the link between university and employability being at odds with one another, which may incorrectly influence policy.

The focus of this research is foundation year (FY) students, a group targeted by various administrations in the UK as not obtaining 'value for money' (Welsh Government, 2016; Department for Education, 2019) from their course. Although moves to defund the qualification have been abandoned for the time being in Wales at least, the fact that FY students are disproportionately more likely to fit the category of a non-traditional learner means any plans to halt delivery will affect some of the least represented individuals in HE. In Wales, FY students are 8% more likely to be a mature learner and 6% more likely to be from an area of deprivation than other undergraduate students (Higher Education Funding Council Wales, 2016). Therefore, taking a purely instrumental view in terms of retention, outcomes and graduate earnings may not be the most appropriate measure when deciding how much value is gained from a foundation year course.

This paper aims to establish the value students themselves experience whilst studying at foundation year level and whether a financial understanding is the most likely interpretation of 'value' for these students.

Method

This qualitative research forms part of a larger doctoral thesis. It is the first research cycle in a participatory action research project (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005; McNiff, 2013).

Design

Using a constructivist standpoint meant individual examples provided by the participants were recognised but wider societal constructs were not discounted. A focus group was employed to gather qualitative data regarding the benefits the cohort felt they had gained from studying a FY programme of study. The conversation was free to flow and some concerns and shortcoming were also discussed, but the main focus was benefits of FY study.

Sample

A sample of 17 participants were recruited from a total population of 126 students studying FY programmes at a Welsh university during the 2018-19 academic year (13.5% of all students studying integrated foundation years within the Faculty of Business and Society). Subjects being studied by students included business, finance, history, criminology, law and psychology. A convenience sampling method was used with an initial email and briefing being presented to the whole cohort and volunteers were sought. A total of 17 participants contributed across three discussion groups. Their details are presented in Table 1 below. Of the 17 students, six participated in focus group one (FG1), nine in focus group two (FG2) and two in the final group (FG3). Participation in these groups was anonymous.

Characteristic	N	% of sample	% total cohort
Gender			
Female	13	72	64
Male	4	28	33
Age (Mean Years/Range)	26	27 (46-19)	M=24 R=36 (56-18)
Domicile			
Home	14	82	95
International	3	18	5
Additional Learning Needs Identified	5	29	17
Integrated foundation year			
Business	2	12	17*
Criminology	1	7	19
Health and Social Care	3	18	7
Law	5	28	7
Psychology	5	28	25
Youth Work	1	7	2

*The total for this section is less than 100% as not all integrated foundation year degree pathways were represented in focus groups.

Table 1: Characteristics of Focus Group Participants (Total N=17).

Data collection

The three focus groups were led by the author who has experience of working with FY students. The participants were given the choice to opt for a group with a time that was most suitable for them and a meeting room based at the University was used as the location. A questioning route was developed in consultation with other foundation year practitioners (see appendix 1) and this was presented to the participants by the researcher/moderator for discussion. The items for discussion related to the reasons for studying this course, the benefits to be gained by students but also the benefits to be gained from the students, with scope to also include any concerns. Each session lasted 90 minutes including a settling down period, briefing and debriefing. Each group recorded their discussions on flip chart paper and the focus groups were transcribed verbatim from the audio-record taken.

Data analysis

Inductive analysis was employed upon re-reading the transcripts. This method is appropriate for recognising and categorising shared experiential themes in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcripts and completed themes were distributed to the participants concerned for accuracy.

Ethical considerations

Approval was gained from the university Ethics Committee. All students were completing foundation year study but participation in this research was on a voluntary basis. Participants were presented with a briefing sheet and written informed consent was taken before the discussion took place (see appendix 2). No identifying details were presented with the data collected. Quotations were not allocated to individuals to maintain confidentiality.

Results

The thematic analysis resulted in four themes with one overarching theme (see figure 1). Some of these categories and subcategories had overlaps or impact on one another and this will be addressed throughout the analysis.

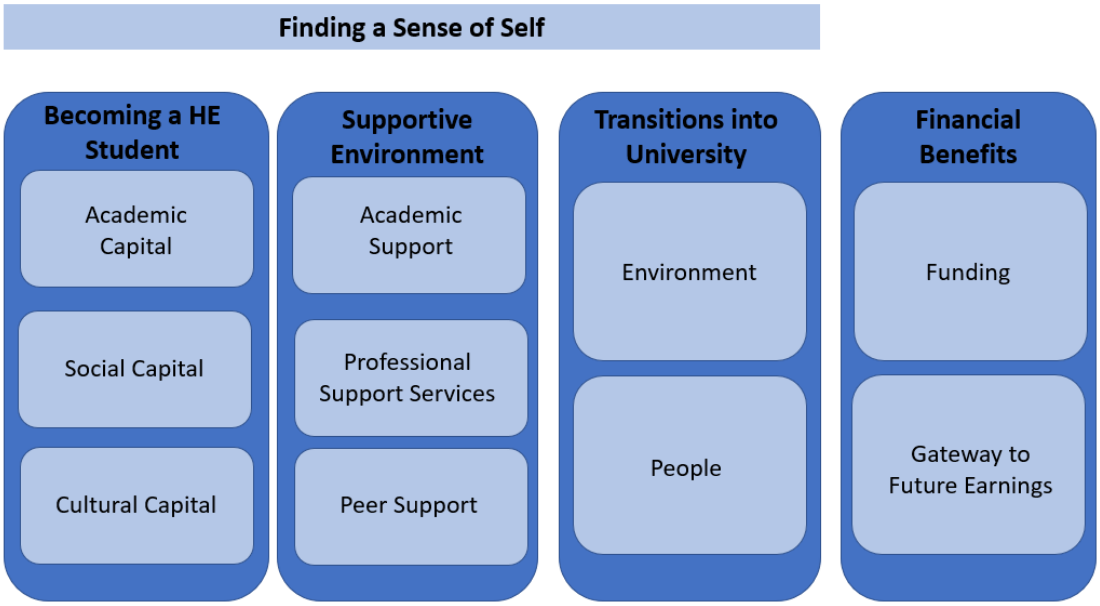

Figure 1: Themes Identified through thematic analysis of focus group data.

Theme 1: Becoming a HE Student

Academic Capital

One of the reasons individuals study a foundation year programme is a lack (or perceived lack) of academic and/or study skills. They may not meet the entry requirements of their chosen degree due to a lack of appropriate qualifications or the students may decide they lack the skills needed to study at this level. Christie *et al*. (2005) found in their study of non-traditional learners that insecurity around academic skills was common before starting a university programme. Pearce (2017) discovered that mature students frequently stated a lack of confidence (FG3 P2: "It [the FY] gives you confidence with …. academic skills … You can see yourself improving") and a fear of a lack of skills in areas such as time management or use of technology as issues, reinforced through statements made by participants in this study.

> FG1 P1: "I did have a career…. But I learnt a way of writing that was very descriptive."
> FG1 P5: "after being out of education for some time, it allows you to get back into that headset, to be more academic and your writing can be a lot more different because obviously when you've been out of education for a few years, you don't write much and work would be physical work. It's very hard to get back into that mindset so when you do actually go on to do your degree, you have more skills that are more relevant than people that just go straight onto a degree."

As seen in the two quotes above, this apprehension regarding academic skills is frequently rationalised by the lapse of time between leaving school and starting study in HE and the subsequent careers individuals held in the interim.

Are students correct in making the assumption that FY study increases their academic capital? McLellan, Pettigrew and Sperlinger (2016) observed that average marks increased by 9% from first assessed piece of work to last over the course of the FY. Marshall (2016) found foundation year students who had completed the course, plus their degrees to a high level of success, felt the FY gave them the preparation for degree standard study other qualifications had not. Subject content and study skills were also mentioned as being of benefit. Sanders and Daly (2014) state that an increase in skills is recognised as a positive by FY students. There is also evidence of qualitative gains made from FY study in Wales. International students' completion rates increase from 87% to 95% when they study a FY. There is no pronounced difference for home students, but it is worth noting that foundation year learners are starting with a lower entry tariff but still typically end up doing as well as other students. Finally, students following an extended degree programme are 34% more likely to achieve a 2.1 or higher than those on standard degree programmes (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

Social Capital

As those from non-traditional backgrounds are less likely to know someone who has attended university, this may affect their self-esteem and belief in their abilities to converse around certain topic areas (Bourdieu, 1986) as stated by this participant:

> FG3 P1: "It [FY] has given me the confidence to talk about certain subjects."

Saunders and Daly (2014) report that increased confidence is a common value mentioned by FY students. This confidence to discuss difficult topics, such as politics and wider societal issues also manifests in action. Bynner *et al*. (2003) state that possessing a higher education qualification means the individuals are more likely to vote and have less cynicism regarding politics.

Cultural Capital

Marshall (2016) highlights that 'traditional' learners are being recognised and rewarded for their cultural capital rather than ability (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), whereas students from non-traditional backgrounds must learn these skills in addition to academic ones and are subsequently having to work harder to achieve the same recognition.

There have been investigations examining the cultural and language differences that may exist for international students and how these disparities can be met (Marshall and Mathias, 2016). There are lessons to be learnt here that can be applied to all non-traditional learners. It would be accepted that language barriers can be a hurdle for some students (in Wales this can also happen for Home students where Welsh is their first language), but no one speaks in an academic discourse naturally; it is learnt. For non-traditional learners there can be a reticence in contributing to discussions for fear that they may speak incorrectly, and they are correct in having this trepidation. Using a diverse and articulate communication style is seen as being an indicator of intelligence both in and outside of academia (Bourdieu, 1986), whilst it also provides a framework for structuring and thinking about the world (Vygotsky, 1896-1934), meaning a dearth in vocabulary may impact on understanding (or be perceived to do so).

There can also be different cultural attitudes towards learning. Some areas that are observed as poor study skills, such as lack of time management or unoriginal thought, may actually be cultural misunderstandings and need to be explained clearly to students. A

participant in this study, who is an international student, recognised this in terms of time manage ment and the fact he was often late to lectures and meetings:

> FG2 P7: "there are now things I know about the UK that I did not know before"

Although this was a point raised by an international student, Home students also felt they benefited from the focus on acquiring cultural skills.

> FG2 P2: "I don't think that is a directly international student problem, either. I haven't been to school for a couple of years and we can just focus on the skills now."

Acquiring cultural capital will not only benefit the individuals concerned. Children with a parent who has attended university will also gain this capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition, learning about new cultures and acquiring tolerance to immigration, for example, is more likely in those with a university qualification (Borgonovi, 2012).

The opportunity to meet individuals from different backgrounds and widen cultural understanding is also highlighted by participants. This can be in terms of people from different social and generational backgrounds, as highlighted below, but also from different cultural backgrounds, getting to work with and understand people from all over the globe. Attendance at university has been found to increase acceptance and understanding of those with varied experiences, backgrounds and cultures (Borgonovi, 2012).

> FG1 P1: "the group that we are in we have such a wide range of ages [other participant 'it's diverse']. And we have people from like 18, 19 right up, you know. There's mums, there's married couples, there's single parents, there's young people, there's a grandmother. So it's such a wide variety of people it's a lot easier to fit in and talk to people than trying to hang out with a group of 18 year olds!" [laughter]

Intercultural competence, the 'skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to engage successfully across difference' (Quinlan and Deardorff, 2016), can be encouraged in a number of ways including as part of the curriculum and through informal learning by encouraging interaction with different cultures and groups, which both take place on the course the participants attended.

> FG1 P4: "it can also remind you how narrow minded you've become. You know, you can travel the world, I am sure there are lots of people who think they are a really switched on person then you come somewhere like this that is out of your comfort zone and you think 'oh my god I am actually quite judgemental and I am actually, I am opinionated and I've got a lot to say and … but so has everyone else. And that's a bit of a shock when you've been isolated for so long"

Theme 2: Supportive Environment

Academic Staff

This element of the focus group produced the largest amount of data in relation to the value students felt they gained from the course for all three focus groups. Many of the participants spoke at length about the support provided by the academic staff on the FY programme, including the level of feedback provided in assessments compared to previous educational experiences:

> FG1 P3: "Well eh I am more confident than last time [this was a repeating student]. I think like with me when it comes to assignments like really I usually think I knew what I am doing but I get a bit caught up with the grades and whatnot I think the lecturers have been really useful especially if you send them the work early they do give you very specific things like specifically what you can improve and how you can improve them. So that has helped a lot to know exactly what it is I need to do rather than just saying you have done it wrong, do it again, so that has been helpful"

Barnett (2007) talks of the 'inspiring lecturer' showing enthusiasm for their subject, but also care towards their students. In Newton's (2016) piece regarding the emotional aspect of studying for FY students, they mention several practices and considerations that could be made by lecturers to enable a less anxiety-provoking experience to those new to studying. Examples include pre-course preparation, demonstrating that anxiety is natural and providing strategies to deal with such anxiety – including the emotional elements of studying as well as subject content in the curricula, making sure particularly stress-inducing situations (presentations and examinations, for example) are carefully managed and that feedback is supportive and constructive. Participants in this research highlighted usable and encouraging feedback as being of benefit:

> FG1 P3: "helped a lot to know exactly what it is I need to do rather than just saying you have done it wrong."
> FG3 P2: "it wasn't like 'you're doing it wrong' it was 'this is how you should be doing it'"

One aspect a number of FY lecturers take on board is that submitting work to be assessed is a huge risk for many students where the fear of failure and rejection is very real. By thanking students for their submission, attempt or 'gift' as Barnett (2007) would have it, this acknowledges the effort and will it may have taken to get something done, particularly in anxiety-provoking situations like presentations and examinations.

There was also an acknowledgement that lecturers recognised the differing needs of non-traditional learners, being supportive but still challenging:

> FG2 P2: "I feel the lecturers have learnt about me and my needs … the lecturers know you … you are not just another number"
> FG1 P1: "I think there is an awareness our lives are different"
> FG2 P4: "although you are caring you have reminded us what the first year [of degree] may be like"

Lagrosen *et al.* (2004) reinforce this with the expertise of lecturers and the understanding of the specific needs of FY students seen as benefits in their research. Tierney and Scott (2005) agree that the difficulty of students balancing the outside pressures of their lives could mean university brought additional anxieties, but that support and guidance eased these demands.

Finally, the teaching methods and classroom environment were also singled out as being a positive:

> FG1 P2: "it [the university environment and lectures] is an atmosphere."
> FG3 P2: "I like that the lessons are interactive"

The positive experience of lectures links with student development of self (see later section) and gaining a sense of 'authenticity' (Barnett, 2007). Do students want to learn for learning's sake or are they purely goal-orientated? Making sure lectures use real life application and that the subject matter is engaging and is enjoyed by the lecturer will encourage students to find the joy in discovering new material.

Another important element of academic support comes from the personal tutorial or Personal Academic Coaching (PAC) sessions. McFarlane (2016) feels the personal tutor role is pivotal in enhancing the experiences of students, in particular in their first year of study. At the researcher's home institution, coaching is employed rather than a traditional pastoral role (although student wellbeing is still integral) with a focus on goal setting and progress. These meetings take place three times during an academic year with a designated tutor/coach and are a timetabled element of the FY. This area was not spontaneously mentioned, did not produce a large amount of information and had a mixed response from participants:

> FG2 P2: "The first one I thought 'what the hell?' The second time really helped and I thought it was really good"
> FG2 P8: "So important. My first essay I didn't really understand it but my personal tutor coached me to get better"

This suggests a clearer briefing regarding the sessions, the expectations of students and staff and the PAC sessions' purpose may help.

Professional Support Services

Support does not only come from academic staff, with other key figures in HE playing a vital role. One of the advantages FYs offer compared to other university courses is the level of support available for those with additional learning needs compared to school or college (Marshall, 2016), with older students also requiring assistance (Mallman and Lee, 2017). The participants recognised this, but also how the foundation year allowed any additional needs to be recognised and measures put in place in readiness for their degree:

> FG3 P1: "loads of support has been put in place for next year"
> FG2 P2: "I've managed to set up my support network for the next 4 years"

Mallman and Lee (2017) also recognise this support can come from other sources, such as the student's peer group both inside and outside of study.

Peer Support

The value of the peer support received from their fellow students generated the second largest amount of data (after academic support) with clear value being gained, demonstrated by the extremely positive words being employed:

> FG1 P1: "we've made such a strong group of friends"
> FG2 P2: "we are all not the standard situation, so we are all supportive of each other"
> FG2 P5: "whenever I've been stuck with anything we've all been in the group chat. I think that's the best thing we've had"

The additional relationships and responsibilities experienced by non-traditional learners outside of education is often acknowledged as potentially being detrimental (Pearce, 2017), although this may mean access to additional support that is not available to traditional students – for example a life partner or long-term friendships (Shannahan, 2000; Mallman and Lee, 2016; 2017) – that may not have the casual nature of more transient connections.

Theme 3: Transitions into HE

This was spontaneously mentioned in all focus groups and has key benefits for FY students, with approachable staff easing transition to HE (Simeoni, 2009) and the 'demystification' of HE being reported by FY students as one reason they chose to study at university (HEFCW, 2016). Transition fell under two main categories exemplified by the quotes provided.

Environment

Students recognised the improved facilities accessible in Higher Education (Universities Wales, 2016) and stress the importance of getting a feel for the physical space they will encounter (Chivers, 2020).

> FG3 P2: "knowing where everything is on site; the canteen, library"
> FG2 P2: "[as we know our way around] we can focus on work right from the start [of our degree]"

With the more recent and necessary move to online delivery imminent, this particularly needs to be addressed.

People

Tinto (1993) and Cole (2017) state that the academic and social elements of university study need to be considered in the integration of new students and this does not only include support and current lecturing staff.

> FG1 P6: "The ladies in the canteen know us!"
> FG3 P2: "It's good to know their [future degree course leaders and lecturers] face"

Other members of staff, such as the person who sells you your cup of tea, loans you a book in the library and will feature in your future learning also create a sense of belonging.

A key element of transition is the student acknowledging the role they also play by showing a willingness to learn and become integrated into university life (Cole, 2017) and that this a two-way process. An element of this will be the students' sense of belonging and self-confidence.

Overarching Theme: Finding a Sense of Self

A growing sense of self was brought up in all three focus groups. There are a number of facets raised in this section – personal change/growth, developing more self-awareness and an increase in confidence – but the intersections are so close that it is difficult to separate them out, so 'Finding a sense of self' is being used to convey all these areas. This was initially a theme in its own right, but it is so closely interlinked with the first three, that using it as an overarching theme better reflected its place. For example, growth in academic capital leads to a more positive view of the self, while higher self-esteem improves skills (Kahu, Ashley and Picton, 2022), so the two are intrinsically linked together. Sense of self was often linked with other issues, such as cultural and social capital and the confidence gained from study mentioned in previous sections. The extended extract below highlights this complexity with skills, belonging, lack of confidence and anxiety all being connected.

> FG1 P1: "I think mine is more skills and … worthiness (?) a bit actually? Like sometimes I feel like I still shouldn't be here? I had a moment sat there the other day …"
> P5: "like why I am doing this?"
> P1: "yeah like how am I doing this? Why am I here? It was just a fleeting thought. I was sat there looking at an assignment and I thought 'I can't do it … I'll just drop out' but the thing is I did reasonably well, so why? I've not had bad grades. There is nothing to make me think I can't do it, but I had that thought and I thought 'I'll just drop out'"
> P5: "I've had one or two times like that, then it's just gone past my head and I've thought I'm actually passing everything and actually better than I thought so what's the problem?"
> P1: "and that's just it. I get these thoughts, really intrusive thoughts about you shouldn't be doing this, but actually I'm doing well … I'm doing it!"
> P6: "you should be proud of yourself!"

Sanders and Daly (2014) found a sense of student identity developed through study, and Barnett (2007) discusses the 'will' to learn which involves committing yourself to becoming a 'student' both in terms of their beliefs about themselves and giving themselves time to study. This is more than mere motivation, which can ebb and flow, but is rather the acceptance that this is their new, acceptable persona.

> FG1 P5: "a lot of it is knowing you are better than you think you are. You are worth something and the excitement you get"
> FG3 P1: "Helped me grow as a person"

For some students, this can be at the level of easing mental health issues that may have been with them for some time:

> FG1 P5: "I think that's why I was feeling so bad, and like I was saying being on Job Seekers. Being accepted on the Foundation Year, even though it wasn't what I applied for, helped my recovery, started my recovery because it made me feel I was actually worth something. So I think if people are going onto foundation years even if it is not what they originally intended it means you are good enough to go onto university regardless of what other lower qualifications you've got I think that's a confidence booster in itself"

Participants in this research were also able to note how strongly held beliefs are challenged by study in HE which links with previous points raised in the 'Cultural Capital' section:

> FG1 P4: "can remind you how narrow minded you've become. It's a bit of shock when you've been isolated for so long"

One way in which Foundation Year practitioners can encourage this growth in confidence is by communicating the value the students themselves bring and allowing their voice to be heard (Pym and Kapp, 2013; Clifford, 2019). This encourages students to feel a sense of their own agency (Ellery and Baxen, 2015) and addresses the power imbalance often experienced by non-traditional learners. Apart from this change in self-esteem being an important element in the student's development, it also translates to positive changes in approaches to study and deeper levels of processing (Abouserie, 1995), with confidence, independent thinking skills and open-mindedness all being advantageously influenced (Millburn, 2009).

> FG1 P6: "I've had enough of being the way I am and I want to get my head down and do something"

An implication of this would be to include self-esteem programmes within courses to help students, but also to improve their outcomes.

There is a presumption that students from non-traditional backgrounds or those who may have had a negative experience of education have already decided on their identification and ability meaning this self-fulfilling prophecy may hold them back. Marshall and Case (2010) found this was not correct as can also be seen from the changes participants experienced in this research. Part of this change may be the development of authenticity, that ideas are owned through contemplation rather than mere replication or acceptance (Barnett, 2007) and again this can be seen in this study.

The idea of change was highlighted a number of times in all three focus groups.

> FG1 P2: "you can only change yourself. You can't change others"
> FG2 P6: "you don't realise how much the course changes you"

This has already been highlighted in terms of academic changes. Barnett (2007) refers to change on a personal level as 'becoming'. Resilience is an important aspect of this ability to become or change with a passion for the subject impacting on confidence and in turn on resilience (Abouserie, 1995). From Marshall's (2016) interviews of FY students, their study often ignited an already existing love for learning that had not been lit or nurtured. Shanahan (2000) investigated common features of mature students studying in Higher Education and suggested they were willing and open to change as part of their experience. This study confirms this, but also the knock-on effect this change can have on the wider world.

> FG3 P1: "I think definitely confidence outside and inside uni.
> Researcher: That's interesting…?"
> FG3 P1: "It's helped me in work and like so many situations and helped me grow as a person plus all the academic stuff as well"

> FG1 P2: "It's life changing, isn't it?"

> FG1 P6: "I want to change somebody's life"

Theme 4: Financial Benefits

Funding

Despite the idea posited by policymakers that value for money is of primary concern, this was barely mentioned by the participants, with one favourable comment and one negative comment. The fact that students can apply for a loan was seen as beneficial as it meant they could focus more fully on their study rather having to work:

> FG2 P5: "… with the Access you don't get any student funding then either so you'd have to work alongside it in the evenings"

This is supported by research carried out by Universities Wales (2016) where the loan available was seen as an attractive element of FY study compared to other provision. This contradicts the commonly-held view that students as a rule find the future debt off-putting, although students from non-traditional backgrounds have been found to be more debt-averse (Hinton-Smith, 2012). This may be caused by a lack of communication regarding the nature of future payment of the Student Loan, with potential students and their parents needing education on what it will really entail (Universities UK, 2018). This particular participant also mentioned the availability of HE grants to help contribute with childcare costs.

One statement was made regarding the additional cost of a FY:

> FG2 P9: "it's another year ... it's the money for the extra year"

This was the only negative comment regarding funding, which is actually surprising as a large proportion of students did not initially apply for the FY so were being asked to fund their studies for an extra year. This lack of concern also does not square with the assumptions made by policymakers regarding the economics of FY provision for students.

Gateway to Future Earnings

In addition to the initial funding providing financial support for students, the long-term earning potential is also highlighted.

> FG1 P6: "mine is not just about money, but I'm not going to lie, I want to be able to provide nicer things for my grandchildren, you know, and I want to have a bit more security because, you know along with … I've lost a house, I've been 1000s of pounds worth in debt, and I've worked for zero hour contracts and I'm not doing it anymore. I'm 46 now, I should be at a time of my life when things are easier"

As the FY offers an opportunity for those who would not traditionally be able to access undergraduate education and its associated increased future earnings (ONS, 2018; Walker and Zhu, 2013), this is a valid point.

Discussion

This study has demonstrated the variety of ways in which students interpret value and benefit from a higher education course, with financial aspects being the least mentioned element. This directly contradicts the view taken by policymakers where the additional financial burden placed on students by taking a FY are perceived as the key issue (Welsh Government, 2016; Department of Education, 2019). These findings correspond with the aim of this research and establish that monetary issues are not the primary concern for students with many other areas provoking more discussion, more strength of feeling and agreement across the sample. Practitioners anecdotally reported many of the themes found and these findings further cement this and raise a number of important implications for FY learners.

Implications

Many participants mentioned the change in themselves in terms of their self-confidence and resilience. The presumption that non-traditional learners may be less resilient is not backed up, with Marshall and Case (2010) finding those from a more disadvantaged background may in fact possess the skills needed to be successful in education. However, resilience is something that can be learned and encouraged, with the correct internal and external support. Resilience and resilience-building is well studied in schools and workplaces, but less so in Higher Education (Holdsworth, Turner and Scott-Young, 2018), and should be seen as a key part of the process of studying at university. Holdsworth, Turner and Scott-Young (2018) found all students, mature students in particular, when asked about the term 'resilience' understood it and also recognised how it can be increased – with self-reflection, good health and social support all being essential.

The emphasis of the focus groups was to establish the value and benefit derived from study and the participants raised very few negative points about studying on the FY. It is important to note that these positives experienced by students can also benefit institutions with high levels of support from staff being found to improve retention rates in FY students, for example (Simeoni, 2009). Therefore, factoring in this support may be more cost-effective for HE in the long-term.

The importance of fiscal issues stressed by policymakers as the indicator of value is not supported by the responses in this study. Kromydas (2017 p.2) talks of the instrumental (gaining a qualification and having a higher earning power) and the intrinsic (social, cultural and emancipatory aspects) value of Higher Education. There needs to be greater education on how both factors work together when defining value and he calls for a hybrid model to be employed with an increase in competence in only one not being enough for the changing social and economic landscape (Haigh and Clifford, 2011). An alternative focus could be 'capabilities' (Sen, 1985; 1993) gained, which covers both the intrinsic and instrumental aspects of education.

This is one example where the students' viewpoint could be crucial in any decisions being made at a policy level. It has become more accepted that co-production between policymakers and other interested parties allows for services to function most effectively. By co-commissioning or including public input into policymaking decisions, 'professionals and citizens [could be] making better use of each other's assets, resources and contributions to achieve better outcomes or improved efficiency' (Governance International, 2014). That is not

to say this co-production is an easy process and a number of factors can improve its chances of being effective.

Individual co-production, with input not relying on groups coming together is easier to organise and has the best response rates from participants. The demographics of individuals, such as being older, female and living in an urban environment, all increase likelihood of getting involved, as does a sense of self-efficacy. Political self-efficacy, "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process … the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" (Campbell and Miller, 1954: 187, quoted in Madsen 1987: 572), in particular would help individuals feel that they can have a greater impact. There is no denying that involving a wide range of individuals, or even identifying who those individuals may be, can be difficult (CFE and Edge Hill University, 2013), but that does not mean it should not be attempted.

Limitations of the Study

One inherent problem with the use of focus groups as a data collection strategy, is that discussion of personal issues may be stifled by the presence of the group (Krugar and Casey, 2014). It could also be argued that the group dynamics are a benefit of focus groups, with group processes provoking additional information that would not be uncovered if done as individual interviews (Williams and Katz, 2001).

The power differentials between researcher and participant need to be addressed (Kamberelis *et al*., 2018), particularly as the researcher was also the Course Leader and lecturer for many of the participants, which may have impacted their confidence in raising any potential issues. Measures were taken to ensure the environment was comfortable, safe and open, and, indeed, it could also be argued, that the pre-existing relationship allowed for a more freeing conversation to develop. Participants certainly did raise issues where they felt they existed. One of the main reasons focus groups were selected was to help rebalance the power relationships that often exist in research by establishing the participants as the experts on the subject matter (Williams and Katz, 2001; Kidd and Parshall, 2000).

Conclusion

When assumptions are made by policymakers regarding the experience of students, they are just that, assumptions. By enlisting the help and input of the individuals most affected, a range of benefits can be observed with financial issues not being seen as a real negative for the majority of participants. That is not to say that student funding should be disregarded, but it is not a major source of anxiety for students in this research. By opening up the consultation process to include all involved, a multi-faceted, pragmatic approach can be taken. This would allow the narrow definition of value of HE study being purely financial, to be broadened.

Acknowledgments

To Foundation Year students, who keep me on my toes and who I never fail to learn from.

References

Abouserie, R. (1995). Self-esteem and achievement motivation as determinants of students' approaches to studying. *Studies in Higher Education*, 20(1): 19–26.

Apple, M. (2001). Comparing neo-liberal projects and inequality in education. *Comp Educ* 37(4): 409–423.

Barnett, R. (2007). *A will to learn: being a student in an age of uncertainty.* Maidenhead. Open University Press/Society for research into Higher Education. McGraw-Hill Education.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). 'The forms of capital.' In Richardson, J (ED*). Handbook of theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* New York: Greenwood pp. 241-258.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.-C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2nd ed.). London, Sage.

Borgonovi, F. (2012). The relationship between education and levels of trust and tolerance in Europe. *The British Journal of Sociology,* 63(1): 146–167.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3(2): 77-101.

Bynner, J. Dolton, P., Feinstein, L., Makepeace, G., Malmberg, L. and Woods, L. (2003). Revisiting the benefits of higher education. Available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5167/1/rd05_03.pdf. Accessed on 19 July 2018.

CFE and Edge Hill University (2013). The uses and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation. HEFCE, Bristol. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/usesandimpactofwpfunding/The%20uses%20and%20impact%20of%20HEFCE%20funding%20for%20widening%20participation.pdf.

Chivers, E. (2019). The Trials and Tribulations of Transitions into Foundation Year Study. *The Journal of the Foundation Year Network*, 2: 69-78.

Christie, H., (2008). 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': Learning to be a university student. *Studies in higher education*, 33(5): 567.

Clifford, M. (2019). Whose benefit is it anyway? Dispelling the deficit model of non-traditional learners in higher education using focus groups. *Educational Futures* 1(1).

Cole, J. (2017). Concluding Comments about Student Transition to Higher Education. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 73:539-551.

Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2005). *Doing Action Research in your own organisation* (2nd ed). London: Sage.

Department for Education (2019). A report from the independent panel to the review of post-18 education and funding. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report. Accessed on 18th June 2020.

Ellery, K. and Baxen, J. (2015). 'I Always Knew I Would go to University': A Social Realist Account of Student Agency. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 29(1):91–107.

Furedi, F. (2012). 'Introduction to the marketization of Higher Education and the student as consumer' in Molesworth, M. Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (ed) *The Marketisation of Higher Education*. London: Routledge, pp 1-9.

Governance International (2014). Co-Production and Community Governance. Available at: http://www.govint.org/good-practice/publications/co-production/. Accessed on 31 May 2020.

Haigh, M. and Clifford, V.A. (2011). Integral vision: A multi-perspective approach to the recognition of graduate attributes. *High Educ Res Dev* 30(5):573–584.

Higher Education and Research Act. (2017). Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted/data.htm. Accessed on 15 July 2018.

Higher Education Funding Council of Wales (2016). *Support for Foundation Years: Consultation Response Form*[Online]. Available at: https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/hefcw_responses_to_consultations/HEFCW7 %20response%20to%20WG%20Consultation%20support%20for%20Foundation%20years%20May2016.pdf. Accessed on 7 January 2017.

Higher Education Policy Institute (2017*). Student Experience Survey*. Available at: http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/06/07/2017-student-academic-experience-survey/. Accessed on 4 July 2018.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (2017). *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education in the United Kingdom for the academic year 2015/16. A*vailable at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/29-06-2017/sfr245-destinations-of-leavers. Accessed on 16 July 2018.

Higher Education (Wales) Act (2015). Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/1/contents/enacted. Accessed on 15 July 2018.

Hinton-Smith, (2012).'Casting the Net Wide' in Hinton-Smith. T.(ed.) *Widening Participation in Higher Education.* Palgrave-MacMillan: Hampshire.

Holdsworth, S., Turner, M., and Scott-Young, C. (2018). … Not Drowning, Waving. Resilience and University: A Student Perspective. *Studies in Higher Education* 43(11): 1837-1853.

Kamberelis, G., Dimitridis, G and Welker, A. (2018). 'Focus Group Research and/in Figured Worlds' in Denzin, N.K and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* 5th Ed. California: Sage Publishing, pp 692-716.

Kidd, P. S. and Parshall, M. B. (2000). Getting the Focus and the Group: Enhancing Analytical Rigor in Focus Group Research. *Qualitative Health Research* 10(3): 293–308.

Kromydas, T. (2017). Rethinking higher education and its relationship with social inequalities: past knowledge, present state and future potential. *Palgrave Commun* 3(1). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0001-8.

Krueger, R.A. and Casey. M.A. (2014). *Focus groups. A practical guide for applied Research (4th Edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lagrosen, S., Seyyed-Hashemi, R. and Leitner, M. (2004). 'Examination of the dimensions of quality in higher education'. *Quality Assurance in Education* 12(2): 61–69.

Livingstone (2009). *Education and jobs: Exploring the gaps*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Madsen, D. (1987). Political Self Efficacy Tested. *American Political Science Review* 81(2): 571-582. https://doi.org/10.2307/1961970.

Mallman, M. and Lee, H. (2016). Stigmatised learners: mature-age students negotiating university culture. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37(5)*:* 684-70.

Mallman, M. and Lee, H. (2017). Isolated learners: young mature-age students, university culture, and desire for academic sociality. *International Journal of Lifelong Education.*

Marshall, C.A. (2016). 'Barriers to Accessing Higher Education.' in Marshall, C.A., Nolan, S.J. and Newton, D.P. (eds.) *Widening Participation, Higher Education and Non-Traditional Students: Supporting Transitions through Foundation Programmes*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Marshall, C.A and Mathias, J. P. (2016). 'Culture Shock: Applying the Lessons from International Student Acculturation to Non-Traditional Students' in Marshall, C.A., Nolan, S.J. and Newton, D.P. (eds.) *Widening Participation, Higher Education and Non-Traditional Students: Supporting Transitions through Foundation Programmes.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 133-149.

Marshall, D., and Case, J. (2010). Rethinking 'disadvantage' in higher education: A paradigmatic case study using narrative analysis. *Studies in Higher Education* 35(5): 491-504.

Mcfarlane, K.J. (2016). Tutoring the tutors: Supporting effective personal tutoring. *Active Learning in Higher Education* 17(1): 77– 88.

McKie, A. (2018). 'King's dean: English universities should consider going private.' *Times Higher Education*. 27 June [Online]. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/kings-dean-english-universities-should-consider-going-private. Accessed on 2 July 2018.

McLellan, J., Pettigrew, R. and Sperlinger, T. (2016). Remaking the elite university: An experiment in widening participation in the UK. *Power and Education* 8(1): 54–72.

McNiff, J. (2013). *Action research principles and practice* (3rd ed.). London; New York: Routledge.

Millburn, A. (2009). Unleashing aspiration [Online]. Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=QcASN2TnkmsC&printsec=frontcover&dq=unleashing+aspiration:+the+final+report&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwio3MCUkMLaAhUoCMAKHZ03BIIQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=unleashing%20aspiration%3A%20the%20final%20report&f=false. Accessed on 5 May 2018.

Newton, D.P. (2016). 'Students' Academic Emotions, Their Effects and Some Suggestions for Teaching Practices' in Marshall, C.A., Nolan, S.J. and Newton, D.P. (eds) *Widening Participation, Higher Education and Non-Traditional Students: Supporting Transitions through Foundation Programmes.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 165-178.

O'Shea, S. and Delahunty, J. (2018). Getting through the day and still having a smile on my face! How do students define success in the university learning environment? *Higher Education Research and Development,* 37(5): 1062-1075.

Oxford English Dictionary (2018). Available at: http://www.oed.com/. Accessed on 13 July 2018.

Pearce, N. (2017). Exploring the learning experiences of older mature undergraduate students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*: 19(1): 59-76.

Pym, J. and Kapp, R. (2013). Harnessing Agency: Towards a Learning Model for Undergraduate Students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(2):272–284.

Qunilan, O. and Deardorff, D.K. (2016). How universities can teach their students to respect different cultures. Available at: https://theconversation.com/how-universities-can-teach-their-students-to-respect-different-cultures-56857. Accessed on 15 July 2022.

Sanders, L. and Daly, A. (2013). Building a successful foundation?: The role of Foundation Year courses in preparing students for their degree. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 15: 42-56.

Sen A. (1985). *Commodities and capabilities*. Oxford University Press, Amsterdam, North Holland, reprinted by Delhi.

Sen A. (1993). 'Capability and well-being', in Nussbaum M. and Sen A. (eds) *The Quality of Life*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp 30–53.

Shanahan, M. (2000). Being that bit older: Mature students' experience of university and healthcare education. *Occupational Therapy International,* 7(3): 153–162.

Simeoni, R. J. (2009). *Student retention trends within a health foundation year and implications for orientation, engagement and retention strategies.* Paper presented at the 12th Pacific Rim First Year in higher Education Conference. Townsville, Australia.

Tierney, S. and Scott, K. (2005). Learning Journeys; The Experience of Students Working Towards a Foundation Degree. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training.* 57(3): 375-388.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Universities Wales (2016). *Support for Foundation Years*. Available at: http://www.uniswales.ac.uk/wp/media/Unis-Wales-Foundation-Yr-Consultationresponse.pdf. Accessed on 4 July 2018.

Universities UK (2018). Students Need Better information About Tuition Fees and Student Loans. Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/pages/students-need-better-information-about-tuition-fees-and-student-loans-.aspx. Accessed on 5 July 2018.

Wales. Welsh Government (2016). *Support for foundation years* [Online]. Available at: https://consultations.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultation-documents/160303-fy-consultation-doc-en.pdf. Accessed on 7 January 2017.

Williams, A., and Katz, L. (2001). The Use of Focus Group Methodology in Education: Some Theoretical and Practical Considerations. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 5.

About the Author

Marie Clifford has taught on foundation year programmes for 10 years and worked with non-traditional learners for 13 years prior to this. This article is an extract from a working doctoral thesis with a completion date of 2023. If you wish to contact the author, please email marie.clifford2@southwales.ac.uk.