

A Wellspring for New Pedagogical Approaches: The Importance of Foundation Years for Universities

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In the context of increasing hostility towards the value of foundation years in universities, this article seeks to emphasise their value in helping develop new pedagogical approaches which can be replicated at all levels of undergraduate study. Owing to the diverse nature of foundation years, practitioners who work on these courses develop a range of innovations to promote engagement, attendance, attainment and retention. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational experience of many young people, combined with the implementation of stringent performance indicators by the Office for Students makes these strategies more important than ever in supporting students at all levels of undergraduate study.

Introduction

In recent years foundation routes into university have come under fire from a diverse range of critics. Philip Augar's (2019) review of post-18 education and funding concluded that foundation level courses in universities in England represent 'poor value for money' and should have their funding withdrawn. Similarly, in 2018 the University and College Union passed a motion at its annual conference describing foundation year fees as a 'poverty tax' (Hale, 2022). These criticisms coincided with a significant increase in the number of universities and courses providing a foundation year entry route which was viewed in some quarters as a cynical attempt by university management to alleviate any potential ramifications of the demographic downturn in the number of 18-years olds in the United Kingdom at the time (Kernohan, 2019; Griffiths *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, there had been significant growth in this 'market' prior to this; between 2012-13 and 2017-18 the number of students undertaking foundation level courses in universities almost tripled from 10,430 to 30,030 (Finlayson, 2019; Office for Students [OfS], 2019: 3).

While Augur's recommendation of withdrawing funding for foundation was not adopted by the Government, the subsequent implementation of institutional performance measures brought in by the Office for Students poses another threat (William, 2022). These indicators

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could potentially see courses penalised if they do not hit certain targets in terms of retention, progression, and graduate employment within six months of graduation. The immediate threat, however, is that university bosses appear to be pre-empting negative results by withdrawing courses which are considered to be a retention risk. This disproportionately affects foundation year entry routes which are, due to the more diverse and less traditional background of their cohorts, perceived to have greater retention issues.

The University itself has a high number of students from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in higher education (HE) institutions, with 22% of students coming from low participation neighbourhoods. This compares very favourably to the HE sector as whole; in the period 2015-16 to 2019-20 only 11.8% of students attending an HE course were from low participation neighbourhoods (HESA, 2021). According to internal institutional data the percentage of Arts and Humanities Foundation Year students who come from low participation neighbourhoods is slightly higher than the institutional figure (26.5%). This highlights that even at an institution that thrives in widening access to HE, foundation years are still one of the most accessible routes into university for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

While there is little doubt that foundation years play an important role in widening access to HE for those from previously underrepresented backgrounds (Braisby, 2019; McLellan *et al.*, 2016; Nathwani, 2019) this argument does not appear to be enough to halt the attacks and limit the threat of course closures. However, during a panel discussion at the Foundation Year Network Annual conference in 2022, Steve Leech, a member of the Foundation Year Network's Executive Committee, contended that the key to the continuation of foundation years is to emphasise their usefulness in developing new pedagogical and pastoral approaches which can be adopted at all levels within universities (Leech, 2022). By emphasising the importance of foundation years as a wellspring of new ideas which will benefit all undergraduate students, foundation year practitioners can demonstrate to university management the importance of these courses in developing thriving academic communities while simultaneously widening participation.

This article takes heed to Leech's call and will, using a survey, focus groups, and staff reflections, demonstrate the pedagogical and pastoral innovations that emanated from the Arts and Humanities Foundation Year the authors teach on. We argue that these innovations can (and should) be replicated on undergraduate course as a means of helping students make the difficult transition from school or college, or those who have been out of education for a number of years, into university. This is particularly pertinent owing to the ramifications of the disruption to many students' education that was caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is clear that many students are starting university far less prepared than in previous years (Havergal, 2021). This, in turn, is having significant ramifications on attendance, attainment, and progression. By utilising the approaches used on foundation year courses, universities can guard against any adverse effects and ensure students are supported on their learning journeys.

Methods

This article emanates from a broader project examining the experiences of Arts and Humanities Foundation Year students at a post-92 university in the North West of England. After obtaining internal ethical approval, we launched an online questionnaire. This was distributed to students who had undertaken the course between 2018-2022. 47 respondents completed the questionnaire which contained questions concerning students' experiences of undertaking a foundation year. Second, we carried out four focus groups with students (n=12, see Table 1) in order to acquire a more in-depth qualitative understanding of foundation year students' perceptions. In

total, three focus groups took place in-person, and one via Zoom (in March and April 2022) subject to interviewees' preferences. These focus groups were led by a research team member and audio-recorded for the purpose of transcription. All participants consented to participation in our study and are anonymised. The data from the questionnaire and the focus groups were supplemented by secondary sources including policy documents, white papers and media sources.

Upon analysing the focus group data, we employed a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in order to identify codes and categories that informed empirically-driven themes through open, axial and selective coding stages. This article focuses on one dominant and surfacing theme, that pedagogical approaches adopted on foundation years can play a vital role in supporting the transition into university and should, therefore, be replicated at different levels of undergraduate study. The findings relating to this theme are unpacked next.

| Focus Group # | Composition |
|---------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 women, 2 men |
| 2 | 2 women, 1 man |
| 3 | 2 women |
| 4 | 2 women, 1 man |

Table 1: Composition of focus groups.

Findings

One of the main roles of a foundation year is to ensure the students are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform successfully on their undergraduate programme. It is therefore essential that skills development is an integral part of the curriculum. This is something we contend has been highly successful on the foundation year, where it is done in two ways: firstly, through a dedicated academic skills module which students take in semester one and focusses explicitly on developing the necessary academic and study skills needed for undergraduate study, and, secondly, by integrating skills development implicitly into modules that have more subject-specific content. However, our focus group data also reveals that the foundation year prepared students for undergraduate study in a less obvious way, by giving them social skills and experiences that are harder to teach explicitly, such as how to participate in seminar discussions and how teaching and assessments in university differ from what they may have previously experienced in school or college. For several of the students who participated in our focus groups, these implicit or "soft" academic skills, were central to improving their overall educational and personal confidence and made an important difference to their progression and success at undergraduate study.

The most successful and explicit innovation in terms of skills building is the assessment used on the module "Preparing for Success: Academic Skills for Practice". This is taught via a one-hour lecture focussing on a particular academic skill, such as referencing, identifying relevant peer-reviewed secondary literature, or essay-writing. Lectures are followed by a two-hour workshop in an IT suite where the students are asked to evidence the skill through an online workbook. This allows the tutor time to check over students' work and ensure that they have mastered that particular skill. There are ten skills in total that need to be completed over the

course of the first semester, all of which have to be signed off by the tutor for students to pass the module.

In the 2019 and 2020 exam board the external examiner singled out this module for particular praise and stated that they were hoping to establish a similar module at their institution. Indeed, this module has proved very successful in developing students' core academic skills prior to starting their first year and staff who teach on these programmes often comment how advanced foundation students referencing and writing skills are for this stage in their academic careers. This module, and the assessment format in particular, is also something that students have commented on as key for developing the skills they needed for undergraduate study. Student 1B, for instance, commented that because a new task had to be undertaken each week 'you've gotta be organised' and that it helped 'foster that skill [...] that you need for your first year and your second year'. Student 2D also stated that they found the skills module 'really useful' as 'we weren't just been [sic] told how to do it' the tutor was 'actually there with us so we could ask her questions'. This comment supports the long-established belief that 'learning by doing' can have particularly strong results as opposed to simply being told how to do something (Huber, *et al.* 2021). We contend that, owing to the difficulties many students are reported to be having with the transition to university, a module of this nature could be replicated on undergraduate course to promote skills development.

In particular, students stated how much this module helped them develop their referencing, which is 'something that you wouldn't do at A-level' (Student 1C). Indeed, this student went on to explain that many of their Level 4 cohort were challenged by the need to reference in their assignments but those who had undertaken the foundation year had a good grasp of this as they had been taught 'step by step' how to do it so did not feel as overwhelmed. Another student explained that they felt the foundation course even gave them a more advanced understanding of referencing compared to those students who were introduced to referencing at level 4, because 'if you're doing a foundation year, like, you at least know one referencing style if not two' (Student 2D). This comment alludes to the fact that students were grouped together with different subjects in their skills workshops, sometimes using different referencing styles (Harvard, Chicago, etc.), giving them exposure to the complexities of academic referencing even though they were always assessed on the referencing system they would use as standard on their undergraduate programme. This resulted in a more nuanced understanding of referencing and its importance in university study.

Another area that the academic skills module helped develop was students' writing skills. Student 1D, for instance, commented that:

the skills that I use, like, how I write my essay, everything like that, I got from the foundation year. I mean I've built on them over the, like, last couple of years but, like, it comes from the foundation year so everything I use now comes from doing that.

Some students also mentioned that the module helped them develop the necessary IT and organisational skills that are expected for undergraduate study. Student 2C, for instance, stated that: 'I know how to use Canvas' [the university's Virtual Learning Environment], while Student 1B stated that the foundation year taught them 'how the e-mail worked'. Knowing how to use online systems and to format emails correctly is vitally important for university study and 'within the wide range of working environments that graduates operate in throughout their lives' (Rajaram, 2023:270). However, these soft skills are rarely taught on undergraduate courses as staff assume their students already possess them. One of the first tasks on the skills module requires students to evidence they can access Canvas, send a Canvas message, and send an email, and upload evidence of this to their online workbook in the form of screenshots. Students commented that this taught them 'when modules were going to appear on Canvas' and the

importance of checking it ‘as early as possible so that I know what we’re gonna be doing in future weeks’ (Student 2D). This also helped instil in them the importance of ‘working independently’ (Student 1C). Starting the course with basic IT skills, such as sending an email, also ensures that all students are confident using and accessing essential IT systems at university, which is especially important as digital exclusion is increasingly recognised as an aspect of structural inequality that could have ‘educational implications’ (Office for National Statistics, 2019).

In addition to these practical (though vitally important) skills, the foundation year also aims to equip students with subject specific skills and knowledge to do well on their chosen undergraduate programme. These are developed through the two interdisciplinary modules taught in semester one and two respectively: “War: Conflict in the Arts and Humanities” and “Peace: The Pursuit of Harmony in the Arts and Humanities” and through single-discipline or subject specific module. The interdisciplinary modules “War” and “Peace” are team-taught modules comprised of lectures given by “guest” speakers, lecturers from across the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), and seminars where students are split in two groups by subject: History and International Relations, and English, Media, Culture and Communications, and History of Art and Museum Studies. Although these modules are usually scored highly in terms of student satisfaction on module evaluations, some students found the interdisciplinary nature of these modules challenging and often questioned why they were taught World War One poetry as a media student, for example. Student 3D, an English student, recalls ‘sitting in the Friday lecture [for “War”] thinking, like, “why am I learning this?”’ and she felt ‘panicked by the, like, the mixture of subjects’. However, having progressed through to undergraduate study she now has a different perspective on these modules:

now after, like, what, 2 years I’m glad I did that cos, like, it, it didn’t keep me in, like, a tunnel vision of, like, ‘this is all I’m doing’, like, it kind of gave me, maybe I’m just being, like, pretentious, I don’t know but it gave me, like, a wider, like, [understanding of] what other people are doing in the course and, like, it’s not just me doing this, it’s, and, like, how it can influence, other subjects can influence my subject if that makes sense? (Student 3D)

The ability to compare and make connections between different disciplines when studying a given topic demonstrates an advanced level of learning and knowledge, which students would not usually encounter until later in their studies. Although for some students this was slightly confusing at first, most commented that they enjoyed this element of the course once they gained confidence in the format. This interdisciplinary approach is something which should be drawn upon more on undergraduate course as a means of challenging perception and pushing students to think more broadly about their subject and its relationship with different academic fields.

While lectures for these modules were often subject specific, focusing for instance, on World War One poetry (“War”, semester one), or post-war consumer culture (“Peace”, semester two), the seminars were dedicated to applying the weeks’ topic to their own discipline. Students were often split into even smaller groups by subject, and asked to focus on a specific task or primary material (pictures of artworks for History of Arts students, advertisement posters for Media students, etc.) to ensure they developed subject-specific skills and knowledge. Indeed, as Chanock *et al.* argue, there is a ‘growing consensus’ amongst educators that ‘embedding is best practice’ when it comes to developing students’ academic skills’ (2012:3).

This small group teaching has also proved vital for ensuring students meet the required learning outcomes and develop the necessary skills for Level 4. As Walton argues, small group teaching can create a better environment for learning to take place due to the peer support it facilitates (Walton, 1997). Student 1B specifically stated that the small seminar groups helped

them 'feel comfortable to say things and it gives you confidence' while Student 4B said it meant that 'everyone was a lot closer' and that the smaller groups allowed the tutor to give everyone 'a lot more attention' to ensure that 'you get back up to the standard where you need to be in first year'.

Furthermore, seminar participation is a vitally important skill to develop, particularly for Arts and Humanities students, where most teaching will involve some form of whole-group discussion. Helping foundation students feel confident contributing to seminar discussion also has a wider benefit for their studies, as active participation in discussion tends to lead to them learning more than when they are merely listening (Braxton, 2005). Students' contributions in class also act as a formative assessment by allowing tutors to assess whether or not the learning outcomes have been met or if further explanation is needed. The development of confidence to participate in class discussion was no doubt helped by the smaller group teaching we have been able to embed into the foundation year and is something which should be utilised far more on all undergraduate courses.

Our approach to assignments has also attempted to balance several important factors: the need to develop and assess students' core academic skills as well as their subject specific skills and knowledge. This means assignments should be challenging and intellectually stimulating. Nonetheless, we also do not want to overwhelm students, particularly early on in their studies. This is especially important as many foundation year students have not had a good previous experience of education and/or may have had a gap of many years since finishing their formal studies.

For this reason, we start the course with assignments with low word counts (500 words), building up to 1500-word essays at the end of the year. This helped build (or in some cases re-built) students' confidence in their ability to do academic work. Student 3B commented that:

A Levels and GCSEs is all exam based, time based and, like, I don't think I have any learning difficulties but I could never get, like, get my answers within the time and then as soon as I've got all of my grades based on, er, coursework and essays, like, I was the same, I think the first ever assignment that I had was just a 500 word analysis and I got a first so, like, going from getting Ds and Cs to getting a first I was, like, 'wait a minute, like, this makes sense now that, like, this is a proper, this is how you should have your work analysed or looked at rather than, like, a 2 hour pressurised, erm, exam.

Additionally, students are also given the opportunity to submit drafts of their earlier assignments for feedback prior to their final submission. This extra feedback gives students additional support to ensure their work is up to the standard required in their earliest assignments.

Conclusion

From the survey and focus group data it is clear that foundation years have much to offer as a wellspring of ideas for promoting skills development and confidence which can be utilised at all levels of study. With so many students starting university in a more disadvantaged position than previous cohorts due to the legacies of the Covid-19 pandemic, staff on all undergraduate courses should consider deploying these approaches. We contend that the course journal assessment which was adopted on 'Preparing for Success', and praised by the majority of students in surveys and focus groups, could be

an integral part of this by helping students ensure they have the core writing, referencing, and IT skills needed for undergraduate study.

Similarly, small group teaching utilising shorter readings/texts could prove another means by which to build students' confidence and develop the ability to (pro-)actively participate in seminar discussions. Finally, by breaking assignments down into smaller components, and offering students the opportunity to submit drafts, they can take more time to ensure that their work is up to an adequate standard in terms of the quality of writing and analysis. Once these skills have been mastered, students will be far better placed to replicate high quality submissions in longer assignments which will seem much less daunting having developed their skills in the shorter assignments undertaken earlier on in the course.

These ideas have been tried and tested on this particular foundation year course since 2018. Retention rates on the course have improved year on-on-year and between 2019 and 2022 were consistently above 90%. This shows that the developmental approaches that have been adopted can prove highly beneficial in terms of retention – a key metric of performance by the OfS. Similarly, students interviewed felt they were far better prepared for starting Level 4 than their course colleagues who entered university at this stage. Overall, this demonstrates that the approaches adopted on this course could be considered as good practice and a means by which to prepare all students for the demands of undergraduate study. This emphasises the importance of foundation years in promoting pedagogical development throughout HE more broadly. Whilst our empirically informed arguments may have implication for practice, and possess portability to other HE contexts, we also contend that this article contributes towards recent policy (Augar, 2019) and academic debates (e.g., Leech, 2022) surrounding the role of foundation years.

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