

Working on Transition: Foundation degree to Honours year (0101)

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Research domain: student experience

Thematic area: learning - the changing student experience of higher education and evolving identities of students.

This paper reports findings from an ongoing, longitudinal, qualitative research project *Working on Transition* (March 2010-May 2011). The project investigates how the process of transition from Foundation degree (Fd) at an Further Education College (FEC) to an Honours year at the validating university impacts upon Fd students' experience of higher education and upon their identities as work-connected learners. Research methods include group and individual interviews with Fd students/graduates, focus groups, observational data and an online blog or feedback tool. Data collection is structured into three phases: Phase 1 prior to transition to an Honours year, Phases 2 and 3 during the Honours year.

Fd/Honours transition is a relatively new area of study although there is published research on the experiences of mature female students making the transition (Penketh and Goddard (2008); academic and psychological aspects of transition (Greenbank, 2007); the influence of cultural capital and habitus on students' transition (Leese, 2010) and on the need to interrelate social and emotional components of learning with practical issues and physical surroundings (Winter and Dismore, 2010). In an attempt to place the work-connectedness of the Foundation degree at the heart of this investigation, this research also draws on studies of work-based learning within Fds and on gendered analysis of Fds (Webb, Brine and Jackson, 2006).

In the study, the validating university is a post-1992 institution with strategic partnerships with regional FECs including validation of Fds. Fds were introduced in 2001; two-year higher education qualifications which aimed to 'give people the intermediate technical and professional skills...in demand from employers' (HEFCE 2008). According to HEFCE statistics, 67% of full-time Fd entrants in 2006-07 were taught wholly or partly at an FEC. (HEFCE, 2010). HEFCE statistics also demonstrate that Fd students are more likely to be older, come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and to have vocational lower-achieving or interrupted histories of participation in education in comparison with students enrolled on three or four year Honours degrees.

The stratified culture of UK higher education adds complexity to the research topic. The categorisation of the validating university in this study as 'new' or 'post-1992' differentiates it from Russell Group and 1994 group institutions. One university guide (2010) positions not only the type of HE to be found in 'older' and 'newer' universities, but the type of applicant such universities will attract:

Generally older universities will do more research, recruit a higher proportion of school leavers and offer more academic courses. Newer universities will

be more locally and vocationally oriented and recruit more mature and part-time students.

The Complete University Guide, 2010

In turn, the depiction by the validating university of the Fd programmes as 'local higher education' differentiates them from its campus-based programmes at an equivalent qualification level. Bathmaker and Thomas observe:

HE in FE tends to attract certain sort of students – those who have...less of the necessary cultural, social and economic capital to consider the elite part of the higher education system.

Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009, p122

Transition from a Fd at an FE College to Honours year at the validating university represents therefore, much more than 'discernible events, experienced in a linear sequence of progression' (Ecclestone, 2009, p27). Ecclestone suggests 'transition depicts change and shifts in identity and agency as people progress through the education system (ibid, p22) and that 'transitions become problematic only if a viable identity in one context does not transfer to another' (ibid, p25). For example, does the way Fds are positioned in relation to the validating university extend a deficit positional identity to Fd graduates and make it challenging for them to negotiate a sense of belonging with in the university culture? The interlinking of identity and agency within transition in this way locates the individual student in the social world and opens up a rich framework with which to analyse the changing student experience of higher education.

Several key themes emerged from Phase 1. Firstly, students' perceptions of the validating university: certainly as a substantially different learning environment, offering wider, different opportunities for their learning, but also as somewhere mysterious, intimidating, even dangerous. Secondly, preparatory activities for transition, with the majority of participants expressing strong views in support of a structured, organised, early 'experience' of the university prior to transition. Where these opportunities were made available to them, most reported satisfaction and positive anticipation of future study. Thirdly, the extent to which participants' feel and/or represent themselves as work-connected through their Fd and employment profile and how this relates to their motivation for transition. Some participants perceived clear progression routes through to professional qualifications, while for others, completion of an Honours year represented an attempt to increase their competitiveness in a crowded job market. There were also those for whom transition to Honours year had become a matter of 'finishing what they'd started'.

Phase 2 of the data collection (September-December 2010) will revisit these themes with Fd graduates who have begun Honours year study. At this point they will be moving between and into new communities of practice, navigating new forms of membership and renegotiating new identities. This will be occurring alongside a continual negotiation of multiple memberships and multiple identities in other areas of their lives such as work and family, described by Wenger as a 'nexus of

multimembership' (Wenger, 1998, p112). Phase 2 then, will endeavour to explore more deeply the extent to which the Fd graduates' work-connectedness is being valued, reinforced or disrupted throughout this process and how this impacts upon the 'viability' of their existing identity as higher education students. By December 2010 it should be possible to explore not only the nature of students' changing experience of higher education, but also the ways in the move is impacting on identities created and viable prior to transition. The conference session will highlight additional themes emerging from Phase 2 and look ahead to the final Phase of the research.

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