

## **Making the transition from foundation to bachelor degrees: exploring the student experience in one regional further and higher education partnership (0168)**

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### **Research Domain: Student Experience**

#### **Abstract**

Some 100,000 students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are now studying for a foundation degree, with around three-quarters of this number being located in colleges of further education (HEFCE, 2010). On completion of the short-cycle foundation degree in a college, a significant proportion of students will transfer to a different provider of higher education to complete a final year of bachelor level study. The transitional processes and experiences for such students are often complex and divide into an array of component parts, including student expectations, social and academic integration and the framing of new identities. This paper presents the preliminary findings of a longitudinal study examining the student experience within one regional consortium of further and higher education providers as learners make the transition from undertaking a foundation degree in a college of further education to studying for the final year of a bachelor degree at a university.

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Around 100,000 students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are now studying for a foundation degree (HEFCE, 2010). Of these, some 75% are located within colleges of further education. On completion of these short-cycle awards, many foundation degree students will elect to transfer to complete an articulated bachelor programme at a university or other higher education institution. At a macro level, transition is a fundamental feature of twenty-first century life, where factors like the current economic challenge and globalisation are disturbing traditional patterns of transition and introducing new risks and uncertainties (Field, 2010; Webb and Warren, 2009; Ecclestone et al, 2010). On a more micro level, educational transitions have a significant impact on students and also on the staff who help to facilitate such transitions. The growth of short-cycle awards located in

colleges increases the importance of understanding the student experience of such embedded transitions.

Research on student transitions and transfer into and within HE has subsequently assumed greater importance as the increasingly diverse student intakes into increasingly diverse forms of higher education has grown, bringing with it concerns about retention and withdrawal within the changing context of higher education itself (Ertl et al, 2008; Vignoles, 2008; Fuller, 2007). This study draws on research in the international field of student transition and transfer and the literature surrounding 'the First-Year Experience' ('FYE'). However, while there have been a number of recent studies about foundation degrees (Yorke, 2009; Harvey, 2009), there presently still exists relatively little empirical research that examines the transitional experience of this group of students. This study aims to contribute to this growing canon.

This paper presents the preliminary work undertaken on a case study, with a nested longitudinal study. A mixed methods approach to the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data has been employed. By using the methods of electronic survey coupled with expert interviews, the study is engaging with the longitudinal tracking of one cohort of students, this cohort consisting of several strands.

Each strand has been drawn from a range of foundation degrees delivered in five colleges of further education, all linked to one higher education institution partner. The study has tracked the students through the latter stages of the foundation degree and will follow this cohort through to bachelor level study at the higher education institution. Student data was triangulated with data collected both from associated college programme leaders and university staff acting as link tutors for the colleges.

Data has been collected by means of electronic survey, relating to variety of transitional processes. Three surveys have been administered allowing for some triangulation of data, with data obtained from students being subsequently triangulated by collecting additional data from the staff most closely connected with the students, the programme leaders of the foundation degrees in the colleges and the Link Tutors for each programme at the higher education institution. Whereas the collected student data forms part of the longitudinal study, a simple disputative approach was taken for the two staff surveys, for describing the characteristics of the samples at one particular strategic point in the transitional process of

the student cohort. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis of the surveys has been undertaken. Sample expert interviews have also been undertaken alongside the electronic surveys, and these have been subjected to content analysis.

The data collected from the first three of the four planned surveys, enhanced by some expert interviews, has allowed for deeper understanding of the various interactions among the personal and contextual factors between the three main groups of actors, namely the students, the programme leaders in the colleges of further education and the link tutors in the higher education institution. The data has revealed disjunction between perceptions of identity of the students and also confirms some challenges in terms of the locating of higher education outside a main higher education campus. The study also highlights a number of possible linkages between the approach to transition between a foundation degree located in a college of further education and an articulated bachelor award undertaken at a university, and perhaps suggests the necessity for exploring innovative partnership approach to building a 'transition pedagogy'.

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