

**Working on Transition: stories from the sidelines (0135)**

Outline: ***Working on Transition: stories from the sidelines***

Research domain: student experience

This paper considers the findings of a longitudinal, qualitative research project *Working on Transition* (March 2010-May 2010). The project investigated the student experience of transition from Foundation degree (Fd) at a Further Education College (FEC) to an Honours year at the validating university. The research placed the work-connected nature of Fds and Fd learners at the heart of its investigation and considered not only how the process of transition impacted upon students' experience of higher education but also on their identities as work-connected learners. Four case studies foreground student narratives to explore and compare experiences in the context of transition from Fd to Honours. This use of narrative 'concerns itself with the small, the local, the fragmented' (Bathmaker and Hartnett, 2010:5) but 'grounds these stories of personal experience in their wider social and historical context and pays attention to social relations of power' (ibid).

Introduced in 2001, Fds are two-year, higher education qualifications aiming to 'give people the intermediate technical and professional skills...in demand from employers' (HEFCE 2010). While all Fds must be validated by a higher education institution (HEI), 67% of full-time entrants in 2006-7 were taught wholly or partly at a FEC. As a condition of validation, Fd programmes must offer an articulated progression route into the Honours year of a Bachelors degree delivered by the validating university. This route was the destination for 59% of full-time and 42% of part-time Fd qualifiers in 2007-8 (HEFCE, 2010). A significant proportion of Fd graduates therefore, make the physical, academic and social transition to a new institution to study for their Honours year. Introducing Fds, HEFCE stated: 'it is hoped that they will...provide alternative routes into higher education for those who are not the traditional A-level school leaver' (ibid). HEFCE's own statistics 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 (ibid). These attributes qualify them as non-traditional within higher education and correspond with Bathmaker and Thomas's observation that:

HE in FE tends to attract certain sorts 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, 2009:122

Pike and Harrison (2011) note that 'the body of literature relating to foundation degrees generally focuses on the experience and completion of foundation degree programme'. The published literature includes aspects of the student experience (Bainbridge, 2005; Greenbank, 2009; Thomas, 2008; Tierney & Slack, 2005); their work-related characteristics (Burke et al, 2009; Doyle, 2003; Dunne et al, 2008; Edmond, 2010; Reeve et al, 2007; Thurgate & MacGregor, 2009; Webb et al 2006) and institutional policy and practice including the wider field of higher education in further education (Bathmaker et al, 2008 and

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Positive Futures for higher education: connections, communities and criticality

Foskett, 2005). A small subset of the literature considers the transition from Fd to Honours year. Greenbank (2007) and Penketh and Goddard (2008) examine how cohorts of students cope academically and psychologically; Winter & Dismore (2010) the need to consider and address similarities with transition issues for first year students, while Pike & Harrison (2011) review infrastructure for transition in the light of findings from a small qualitative study.

Field writes: 'for some people, experiences of transition are emancipatory, while for others the transition brings anxiety and risk' (Field, 2010:xix). It is not an institution's responsibility, nor within its institutional capacity to guarantee an 'easy' transition from Fd to Honours year for every student; indeed Greenbank suggests: 'inherent differences between the foundation degree and the honours degree...mean the transition for many students will inevitably be difficult' (Greenbank, 2010:100). The positioning of Fds as vocationally-oriented and an opportunity for 'local' higher education differentiates the qualification from university-based programmes, even those at the same qualification level. This means that Fd/Honours transition represents much more than 'discernible events, experienced in a linear sequence of progression' (Ecclestone, 2010:197). Ecclestone instead suggests 'transition depicts change and shifts in identity and agency as people progress through the education system' (Ecclestone, 2009:22) and that 'transitions become problematic only if a viable identity in one context does not transfer to another' (Ecclestone, 2009:25).

This research was situated in a large post-92 university which has formed strategic alliances with regional FECs and validates over 25 Fds, most of which are delivered at these partner colleges. The longitudinal research approach aimed to capture the nature of transition as an extended process, involving decision-making, anticipation, preparation and adaptation as well as the continued development of the learner identity. A combination of primarily qualitative methods including group and individual interviews, paper and online questionnaires was used to capture individual and collective narratives and perspectives at different points of transition. Data collection was structured in three phases: Phase 1, pre-transition to an Honours year; Phase 2, two months after that transition and Phase 3, two months before the end of the Honours year.

Four case studies based on student narratives will present trajectories of transition and trace threads of work-connectedness, agency and belonging across diverse experiences and different disciplines. These are stories of individual expectations, preparation, experiences of academic and social integration and the development of learner and professional identities over the period of one academic year. While concerning itself with 'the rich accounts of the complexities of real life and an emphasis on the particular' (Bathmaker, 2010:3) this approach aims to foreground the relationship between the individual and wider structures (Bathmaker, 2010:4).

Finally, the paper will highlight implications for the role of the institution in supporting transition and open up for discussion, the recommendations arising from the research.

942 words

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