

Where do we go from here? The experience of Teaching Assistants after completing a Foundation degree.

McKenzie Liz, Plymouth University, UK

Traditionally Higher Education (HE) has been provided in universities, with students entering directly from school or college and typically following a three-year programme of full-time study in a specific subject area (Harvey, 2009). This pattern of study was questioned by the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) which identified a need for further expansion of HE, both to increase participation amongst groups previously under-represented in HE and to enable mature learners to extend their skills and knowledge. Following the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) Foundation degrees (Fds) were introduced (HEFCE, 2000) with the dual purpose of providing vocationally based HE and further the government's widening participation agenda (DfES, 2001; Edmond et al, 2007; Stanton, 2009)

Foundation degrees were designed as a two year HE qualification, based around vocational, technical and professional subjects. Employers were seen as integral to the development of Fds and those already in work and seeking to upgrade their skills were seen as an important component of their target market (Tierney and Slack, 2003). Fds were thus part of a 'vocational ladder of opportunity', which progressed from school based work experience and vocational qualifications to higher education and employment (DfEE, 2001:6). Although Fds offered a terminal qualification in their own right, they were also designed to offer a progression route to a full degree, through partnerships between Further Education Colleges (FEC)s and HE institutions (HEIs) (HEFCE, 2000; Parry, 2003; Foskett, 2005). FECs were ideally positioned to develop this innovative HE provision, with their existing links with employers and experience of meeting the needs of non-traditional HE students (Scott, 2009; Stanton, 2009).

Following their introduction in 2001-2 enrolments to Fds showed a rapid rise, with a corresponding decline in enrolments to other sub-degree provision, although there are distinct differences between Fd students and those on other forms of HE provision (Harvey, 2009). A higher percentage of Fd students are aged over 21 and engaged in part-time study, representing greater diversity in modes of HE study (IPPR, 2013) and addressing the espoused aims of widening participation and lifelong learning (NCIHE, 1997; Fryer, 1997). However Harvey (2009) identifies two separate clusters of Fd students, one of which, males under 25, enrolled full-time with qualifications from previous study, parallels traditional HE intake. The other cluster, females over 25 studying part-time, were more likely to enter from employment, without academic or vocational qualifications. Teaching assistants, the focus of this study, typify this second cluster.

Fds played a substantial role in addressing policy demands for remodelling the workforce in education and children's services (Edmond et al, 2007; Harvey, 2009). The government placed teaching assistants (TAs) 'at the heart' of their proposals for Workforce Reforms (DfES, 2003:3), with structured training for all support staff, leading on from the introduction of national induction training. Previously denigrated as 'classroom helpers' and assigned menial jobs such as washing paint-pots, Fds offered TAs an opportunity to enhance their professional development and raise the status of the role (Dunne et al, 2008). Although often undertaken for career-based reasons, many Fd students, including TAs, report greater

self-confidence as a result of their studies (Tierney and Slack, 2003), TAs also reporting greater professionalism (Dunne et al, 2008). Dunne et al found that although two thirds had gained greater responsibility or promotion, this was not solely attributable to the qualification and, as also noted by Harvey (2009) and Ooms et al (2012), some felt disillusioned that their achievements had not been recognised by their employers. Despite difficulties associated with undertaking study alongside their work and family responsibilities (Reay et al, 2003; Tierney and Slack, 2003) half of the TAs studied by Dunne et al (2008) were continuing on to further study to complete an honours degree, slightly lower than general Fd progression figures (Harvey, 2009; HEFCE, 2010). Furthermore a third of these were undertaking further study to gain a teaching qualification. So for many TAs completing the Fd was not the end of their participation in HE, or their personal and professional development. This study therefore aims to explore the longer term effects of Fd study on a group of teaching assistants.

This study represents a case study of teaching assistants who completed a Fd in Education for Teaching Assistants within a University partnership within the south west of England. The student group comprised mature women students, who entered part-time Fd study from employment. The study used an initial questionnaire to obtain general information about students' level of study and general experience. The questionnaire responses were used to select three groups for individual semi-structured interviews:

- a) completion of the Fd,
- b) completion of an Honours degree,
- c) completion of a teaching qualification.

Findings suggest that the Fd was taken for personal interest as well as career development, in line with reasons reported by Tierney and Slack (2003). Most began their Fd study very tentatively, as mature entrants to HE they were unsure if they could complete the Fd, let alone an Honours degree (REF?). While some had deliberately chosen the Fd with the longer term aim of qualifying to teach, for others this only became a possibility as they gained HE qualifications and their confidence in their abilities grew. Then they began to consider where else their study might take them. All the participants had experienced changes to their role and responsibilities, though as with Dunne et al (2008) it wasn't always possible to attribute this to their study. All participants however, regardless of the level of qualification attained, reported changes to their practice and the ways in which they carried out their role, in line with evidence from Harvey (2009) of students becoming more analytic, critical and reflective in their practice and able to make informed judgements. What is most striking through all their narratives is the transformative effect of study, Fd and beyond, to their personal and professional lives. The study explores the learning journeys of a group of mature women students within a rural setting and offers valuable case study examples for current students.

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