

Transforming lives on the foundation degree and beyond: exploring the complexities of post-graduate professional and career decisions. (0083)

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Context.

Foundation Degrees (FDs) were introduced in 2000 as part of the UK Government's drive to widen participation in higher education (HE) to groups that are (and continue to be) under-represented. Taking two years of full-time study, they were designed for those in employment and seeking career development, but who lacked traditional university entry qualifications. One common FD developed by many universities has been in 'educational support' and aimed primarily at teaching assistants in schools seeking to become teachers or other educational professionals. These students are of particular note as the majority are working-class mature female learners, many of whom have had fractured educational experiences themselves. The *Transforming Lives* project is capturing and exploring the life stories of 45 of these women who have graduated in the last ten years. We are interested in their experiences of higher education and what effect the FD has had on their careers. However, we are also investigating the impact that their learning has had on their own educational practices with disadvantaged children and how their knowledge, skills and experiences have cascaded into the working-class communities from which they were drawn and to which they generally return.

Theoretical approach.

Archer's (2003, 2007, 2008) concept of reflexivity has been used in a wide range of social fields to make sense of the ways individuals make choices in the context of constraining societal structures. In particular, it stresses an engagement in internal talk to shape social worlds, with four basic types of reflexive behaviour being identified: autonomous, communicative, fractured and meta-reflexives. Archer argues that these then guide decisions taken and sense made of social experiences.

Reflexivity has previously been used to explore how teaching assistants on a FD came to understand their positions as students and professionals.

Communicative (who remain connected to their social context and tend towards social immobility) and meta-reflexives (whose actions are often defined by social ideals and the views of others, showing lateral or volatile mobility) were identified as predominant (Bovill, 2012) as participants showed deep commitment to their communities and there was evidence that some chose to stay within their current

roles at the expense of promotion elsewhere because of self-limits to their professional horizons: “to move on but not necessarily ‘out’ of their social circumstances” (Bovill 2012: 687). This mirrors similar work by Woolhouse, Dunne and Goddard (2009: 763) who found:

That this group experienced a powerful conflict between fulfilling their professional aspirations and their responsibilities towards their families.

Archer (2003) also suggested three phases of how individuals identify what is desired and how to achieve it through: discernment of concerns; deliberation of importance of concerns; dedication to pursue concerns. The positioning of the self to engage with these phases is related to complex practices navigated through well-being, relationship to others, and cultural and structural constraints and enablements. It is also linked to reflexivities employed throughout. Archer (2008: 1) assesses that reflexivity is the bridge between structure and agency which moves theory away from talking about ‘what ‘most people do most of the time’ toward a better understanding of why people act differently in the same circumstances and is key to understanding how individuals can have: ‘some governance over their own lives’.

Methodology.

This paper will report findings from data collected across three teaching-focused universities in the southwest of England where FD programmes in ‘educational support’ or similar have been delivered. Data are being collected in two phases:

- Online questionnaires to collect demographic data and for recruitment purposes for interview selection. Sent out to existing alumni contacts across the universities in early 2016; 129 participants responded. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions was used to explore their motivations for taking an FD, their experiences in HE and their post-graduation professional and career development.
- Extended semi-structured Skype or telephone interviews with a sample of 45 participants who completed the questionnaire (15 from each university) are scheduled late summer 2016.

The paper will present the findings from the questionnaire (outlined below), as well as emerging findings from the interviews.

Outline results.

Data from questionnaires reveal a nuanced and complex relationship with HE. Respondents cited both career development/promotion and personal interest/ambition to be important in their choice to begin degree study. Some professional progression to teaching or to other educational roles can be identified in responses, however many answers indicate no professional progression to have

occurred. An occurrence across the data was the citing of increased confidence/self-belief/satisfaction/achievement/pride to have been a positive outcome of university study for some. Alongside this, students talked of increasing knowledge accumulation, improved professional practice and greater professional credibility.

This paper seeks to further understand some of these complexities by drawing on data which explores the extent to which participants have:

1. Progressed in their careers and demonstrate evidence of contextual continuity and social bonds – aligned with Archer’s communicative reflexives.
2. Progressed in their careers and demonstrate evidence of contextual discontinuity to pursue social ideals– aligned with Archer’s meta-reflexives.
3. Progressed in their careers and demonstrate evidence of contextual discontinuity to pursue economic gain– aligned with Archer’s autonomous reflexives (who tend to distance themselves from their social context in seeking social mobility).
4. Not progressed in their careers and demonstrate experiences in education that have contributed to further entrenchment of a fractured reflexivity (where heightened anxiety can lead to less rational courses of action).

Preliminary results indicate some participants identify economic gain as a ‘concern’ but attaining that can be difficult. Others, that professional development can be a delayed process that occurs some-time after they have graduated. Some participants appear to become ‘stuck’ or to stagnate in roles they wish to move on from but struggle to. This can be linked to negative occurrences either in education or in the professional or private realm. Others still flourish within their three years of study and move on to their version of professional development soon after leaving their studies. Whilst some participants move on and out of their professional contexts, others demonstrate a desire to cascade their learning into current communities.

References

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