

An Exploration of Important Factors in the Decision Making Process Undertaken by Foundation Degree Students with Respect to Level 6 Progression

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Deciding what degree to study, and where, are very important decisions to make for a range of practical and economic reasons, and much research has been undertaken in this area. What has not been considered previously is the decision making processes of students who have completed an associate degree, such as a Higher National Diploma or Foundation Degree, and are now considering where to complete their Bachelor education. Associate degrees are often provided by further education colleges (FEC) in partnership with universities, and the choices available to college-based higher education students are whether to continue at the college or move to university. A mixed methods approach was adopted comprising of an online questionnaire and subsequent focus groups of students studying at HE at a southwest FEC. The findings showed that there is equal importance placed on the practical issues of proximity and familiarity as there is on course suitability, with the only differences between those remaining at college and those moving to university being financially based.

College-based higher education, higher education in further education, foundation degree, progression, decision-making, top-up degree

Introduction

Choosing the right course of higher education (HE) study can have a great impact on career potential (Skatova and Ferguson 2014), but for students enrolling on UK *associate degrees*, such as Foundation degrees (Fd) and Higher National Diplomas (HND), it is a process that they need to engage in twice throughout their higher education. Prior to commencement, and again on completion of the associate degree, the choice being whether to top-up to a Bachelors degree and if so, which one.

UK universities have traditionally provided higher education through three year full-time undergraduate degrees or four-year sandwich courses including a one year placement. However there is a long history of HE provision in other institutions (Parry and Thompson, 2002) through courses such as Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND). Collaborative arrangements between HE institutions and Further Education Colleges (FEC) facilitated HE expansion between 1988 and 1993 and the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) encouraged further expansion through college based higher education (CBHE).

Foundation degrees were developed in 2000 as a response to the Labour government's drive to widen higher education participation and to meet the increasing needs for an educated workforce in order to be competitive globally (DfES 2004). These new qualifications were typically 2-years, meeting Level 4 and Level 5

standards, and most frequently taught at FECs having been validated by HEIs (Foskett, 2005).

Fds were intended to engage employers with education providers in redesigning the undergraduate curriculum, and although this was a condition of validation (QAA 2010) trying to sustain that level of employer engagement through the delivery of the qualification has not always been easy (Greenwood and Little 2008). As well as links to professions and workplaces, Fds form both an independent qualification in their own right and a progression route to a full Bachelor's degree through a named pathway (Parry, 2003). Such CBHE has not been without its critics. Creasy (2012) argues that HE is more than a qualification, and the HE ethos is missing from FECs due to the lack of research culture, however QAA reviews confirm that they were confident in the academic standards and quality of learning experiences offered (HEFCE 2006).

Following Dearing's recommendations Fd provision grew rapidly (Scott, 2009), with an associated decline in student enrolments on HNDs and HNCs (Harvey, 2009). Fds attract those progressing from post-compulsory education, those who want to develop skills related to their current employment and those who are taking a change in career (Greenwood and Little 2008). In sixteen years provision of foundation degrees has grown to 1986 fulltime courses being offered through a range of universities, colleges and private providers (UCAS 2016). More recently FECs have been validating their own top-up courses with partner universities, allowing students the choice to remain at the FEC or transfer to university for the final year of study. Of the current 132 top-up providers 53% are FECs offering 43% of top-up provision (UCAS 2016).

Although there is a building body of literature that investigates the student experience of having progressed on to a university top-up (Penketh and Goddard 2008, Winter and Dismore 2010, Pike and Harrison 2011, Morgan 2013), little is offered with respect to the decisions that lead up to this point. It is the purpose of this paper to examine previously unexplored territory as to what factors are important to college-based higher education students when faced with choices of continuation of their education at college or moving to a university.

One might assume that choosing a higher education course of study, which will form the basis of your daily life for three years, and may ultimately dictate your career trajectory, would lead one to make a rational, logical and informed choice. However, there are many ways of making decisions and many factors that may impinge on our ability to choose, thus suggesting that such a choice will not always be rational or informed. When consideration is made of who typically applies for college-based higher education they tend to be non-traditional learners, who may be the first in their family to enter into higher education (Higgins, Artess, and Johnstone 2010), or are mature students who are looking for career progression (Scott 2009, Stanton 2009, Winter and Dismore 2010). Such backgrounds may have an influence on their decision-making ability when choosing what course to apply for. With respect to the

former, Greenbank (2009) found a *satisficing* approach was taken where the students may have some basic criteria for their choice and undertook a search until they found the first match. Greenbank explained this behaviour due to the lack of 'hot' information sources, referring to individuals that the students could consult personally. Where more traditional learners may converse with family members, this cohort had to rely on current teachers for their information. This approach also led to rather late decision making which panicked the students into making less considered decisions.

Issues affecting mature students' choices are more practical in nature. Mature students may already be established in a geographic area, restricting travel options. Furthermore, having a family that also needs supporting whilst studying may further limit their portability (Penketh and Goddard 2008). The complexity of mature student life was exemplified by Lowe and Gayle (2007) who examined the work-life balance of college-based higher education students. They found that forty per cent of full time students worked, forty per cent also lived with their spouse and children and forty per cent put their job before their education. Their findings emphasise that the label of *student* is only one facet of their lives, therefore decision-making is a far more complex process.

It is for some of these reasons that students may choose an associate degree at a local college rather than aim initially for a full degree at a university. One of the primary factors for choosing an associate degree may not necessarily be due to the qualification type, but to the accessibility of the institution itself. Proximity of the institution has shown to be a vital factor in the initial decision-making process (Greenbank 2009, Harvey 2009, Simm, Marvell, Schaaf and Winlow 2012, Greenwood and Little 2008), where Burton, Lloyd, and Griffiths (2011) found that forty per cent of their respondents lived less than five miles from the college, two thirds living within ten miles, allowing forty-five per cent to continue living at home (Higgins, Artess, and Johnstone 2010). This is not just an issue in time spent travelling or its associated cost implications, Burton, Lloyd, and Griffiths (2011) found that proximity relieved the worry about being late for lectures and allowed the students to access other learning facilities more readily outside of class time. This is a vital factor for students who have busy family lives and may find it difficult establishing quiet places to think in the home.

Associated with proximity is familiarity. Having studied up to Level 3 at a local college may increase the desire to continue at the same institution. The familiarity may be with the physical surroundings as the vast campus environment of some universities has been shown to be daunting for some students (Simm et al. 2012). In addition, the familiarity with the support structures and teaching methods that students had encountered at the college setting and was an important decision-making factor (Barron and D'Annunzio-Green 2009). An area of concern was their assumption that universities do not encourage such an open door policy (Simm et al. 2012) and whether there would still be opportunities for formative assessment

(Christie et al. 2006). The smaller class sizes were highlighted as important as they allowed for social familiarity through more interaction between a small group of learners (Greenwood and Little 2008). Additionally it allows for more personal interaction and familiarity with the way their tutors work (Greenbank 2009). The institutional and administrative processes were also a cause for concern, and being familiar with these inherent structures allowed for concentration on the business of learning (Winter and Dismore 2010). These elements of familiarity create a safety blanket that allows them to concentrate on their studies. The final element that may appeal is the flexibility of approach that colleges tend to take. This maybe in terms of mode of study (Simm et al. 2012) as to how well the course fits with their domestic life allowing them to manage their competing priorities, such as academic, employment and family commitments. This may be through a timetable that is designed to allow for part time employment or targeted childcare (Greenwood and Little 2008), or approaches like distance or blended learning, through to evening or blocked delivery (Ooms et al. 2011).

The design of associate degrees means that they are a qualification in their own right, although nearly sixty per cent of full time students choose to top-up to a full degree (HEFCE 2010). The reasons given for this were that they want to develop specialist skills, to enhance their career and because they are interested in the subject (Dismore, Hicks, and Lintern 2010). Previous research has examined the transition from the associate degree to the university. Most commonly cited worries of transitioning students were the anticipation of the culture shock (Cree et al. 2009) due to the vastness of the campus, libraries and lecture halls (Morgan 2013, Simm et al. 2012). Having progressed their concerns were based on human interaction rather than the scale of the geography. Firstly the difference in access to, and support from, academic staff compared to the accessibility of staff experienced at colleges (Simm et al. 2012, Winter and Dismore 2010, Pike and Harrison 2011, Christie et al. 2006). The second issue was that of assimilation, identity and isolation. Starting a course two thirds through makes it difficult to initiate friendships where friendship groups have already been long established (Morgan 2013, Hils 2006, Simm et al. 2012, Winter and Dismore 2010). The third component was that of confidence, where students felt confident with the support they had received and the progress they had made at the college (Ooms et al. 2011, Penketh and Goddard 2008, Cree et al. 2009, Christie et al. 2006) but often felt less confident having embarked on to the top-up (Pike and Harrison 2011). This feeling may have been based on the issues of culture shock and social isolation (Simm et al. 2012), but may also be due to lack of information regarding the expectations of life at university (Morgan 2013, Hils 2006), the feeling that students encounter whenever they move to the next level of study. Whatever the cultural differences between college and university, ultimately progressing students do as well as their three-year counterparts (Cree et al. 2009).

This study aims to identify what are the most important factors to students completing their associate degrees when deciding on their next course of study, and whether the importance has an impact on their ultimate choice.

Methodology

Design

The study was a case study undertaken at a singular institution in order to better understand what impact the range of top-up options had on the students' decision-making. The benefit of focusing on a sole institution allowed the researchers to better understand the students' behaviour without competing factors of examining multiple institutions in the first instance.

The research was conducted in a FEC in the southwest of England where the nearest non-specialist university is over fifty miles away. The institution has been offering CBHE for over twenty years through a mixture of HNDs and Fds, and an increasing range of top-ups have been validated with the partner HEI. Around 45 associate degrees are offered; from health and sport, humanities and social sciences, web and computer sciences, arts and media, and business and hospitality. The majority of the associate degrees have top-up routes either through the partner HEI, and more recently through a suite of ten generic top-up courses offered at the FEC. In addition to this the FEC has a long tradition of offering Masters level study in Education.

Two similar questionnaires were designed for completion by Level 5 and 6 students. Level 5 students are those in their second and final year of study on an associate degree and are therefore pre-transitional. Level 6 students have made the decision as to whether to, and where to transfer to, and are undertaking their final year of Bachelor study.

In the case of the Level 6 students the questionnaires were designed to elicit what factors had been important when choosing their current top-up degree. With respect to the Level 5 students the questionnaire asked about the decisions they were currently making with respect to whether to enrol for a top-up year, and what factors were affecting their decision of where to progress to. To further explore the findings two subsequent focus groups were conducted with a range of Level 5 students enrolled on HNDs and Foundation Degrees with respect to their decision-making processes.

Materials

The questionnaires used a range of open and scaled questions. The first section dealt with demographic information such as age, gender and current/previous course of study.

Level 5 students were then asked to indicate what they intended to do in the next academic year, followed by open questions asking what the most important factor was when making this decision, as well as what other options they felt were open to them at this time. Whereas the Level 6 students were asked to reflect on what had been the most important factor when they had made their decision.

The final section offered ten factors, linked to lifestyle, course focus or externally facing factors, as can be seen in Table 1. These factors were to be rated on a seven-point scale indicating the level of importance each factor had played in the decision making process, where 1 = not at all important and 7 = extremely important.

Table 1. Factors included in the questionnaire

Lifestyle	Course focus	Externally facing
Travelling or living expenses	Knowing the teaching staff	Course reputation
Fees	Course modules	Research reputation
Distance from home	Course or qualification	Teaching reputation
Local or personal commitments		

The focus groups sought to establish what factors led to the initial choice of provider type and choice of Fd or HND, and what factors led to the subsequent choice of top-up degree.

Participants

The survey sample comprised of Level 5 and 6 students, who were emailed by their tutor asking them if they wished to take part in the study, including the link to the questionnaire. The sample was made up of 43 Level 5 students (11 males and 32 females) from 10 associate degrees (Foundation Degrees and HNDs) with an average age of 28.5 (range 19-59), and 22 Level 6 students (8 males and 14 females) from 5 top-up degrees with an average age of 29 (range 20-48). The focus groups were comprised of an additional thirteen Level 5 students, three mature students and ten who had progressed directly from Level 3 study into HE.

Procedure

The questionnaires were delivered through an electronic platform linked to an email request for participants from the students' tutor. This approach was utilised as it has been shown to be time and cost effective with respect to data collection and analysis (Wright 2005), and although some claim that lower response rates are achieved through electronic surveys (Nulty 2008), the number of students accessible through electronic means balanced this factor.

Students' participation in the focus groups was voluntary; they were asked if they wished to take part by the programme lead. The focus groups were undertaken in the participants' college environment and took place during one of the course taught sessions. The focus groups were run by one of the researchers.

Results

Initial choice of college rather than university based HE

The students' reasons for choosing an associate degree at a FEC, as established from the focus groups, were strongly rooted in proximity issues. Family ties were a predominant factor in their discussion, preventing a move to another town, or even issues of the daily commute impacting on family life, as this student indicates 'I'd never be able to drop the kids and get there in time, it would just not even be a possibility.' A second driving factor was based on the recommendation by others who had benefitted from this type educational experience:

I was recommended that the staff were so lovely here that it would be the right place for me, that there would be the support, that support for me. I have found it fantastic, I wouldn't have been able to do it, because I hadn't studied for such a long time either, so that was really important.

Important factors in progression decision

There were significant differences in the importance of the ten factors ($F_{(9,549)} = 19.39$, $p < .0005$). Figure 1 indicates that the factors most important in the decision making process, were the *course subject* and its *content*, followed by *local commitments* and *distance from home*, between which there were no significant differences. These factors were supported by the responses from the focus groups where decisions were made based on a combination of finding the right course with a need to study locally, as claimed by this student 'I wouldn't be up to it [moving], not with my family commitments, but if there was something similar here, then yes, that would be ideal for me.' The factors of least importance to the students were the *research reputation of the institution* or *knowing the teaching staff*.

There were no significant differences in the importance of each factor based on the students' level of study although there were gender differences; where females rated *course modules* ($t = -2.9$, $df = 63$, $p = .004$) and *local or personal commitments* ($T = -3.13$, $df = 62$, $p = .003$) as more important than male students.

Table 2 shows that there were very few factors that differed in importance between those choosing to remain at the FEC and those choosing to move away to university. There were no significant differences in the *externally facing* factors relating to reputation. Those remaining at the FEC felt that *knowledge of the teaching staff* was significantly more important than those progressing, although this was the least important factor of the ten. Issues of familiarity were also reflected in the focus group findings, but not just the familiarity of the teaching staff, but more a feeling of being settled, 'its everything, like the teachers, and the way they do things, and like its home,' whereas for others it was the familiarity of the academic experience, 'I know what's expected of me, I know the standards. Why would I want to go somewhere else and start over trying to work out what's required?'

Participants in the focus groups who were intending to move to university highlighted different factors for their choices. They were more driven by the fresh start, as this HND student reflects ‘I don’t think I would be happy with myself if I didn’t take this challenge. If I didn’t go to actual university I think I would always regret it’ and a Fd students noted that ‘I think for those of us with families and things, we are limited, our choice is limited to location, but those of us who aren’t, I guess we could go anywhere,’ although it must be noted that these students were younger and were not tied to the area by family commitments.

With respect to *lifestyle issues* those remaining at college felt that the *fees* charged and the *commitments to the local area* were more important than those who were intending to move.

Table 2. Importance of factors of those remaining at the college and those moving to university

		Progression	M	SD	t	p
Lifestyle	Travelling or living expenses	College	5.5	1.6	.8	.39
		University	5.0	2.1		
	Fees	College	5.4	1.4	2.5	.01
		University	3.9	2.2		
	Distance from home	College	6.2	.9	1.3	.19
		University	5.7	1.3		
Local or personal commitments	College	6.4	.7	2.2	.02	
	University	5.7	1.2			
Course focused	Knowing the teaching staff	College	4.7	2.1	2.8	.00
		University	2.9	1.6		
	Course modules	College	6.3	.5	.7	.46
		University	6.1	.7		
	Course or qualification	College	6.2	.8	-1.1	.24
		University	6.5	.6		
Externally facing	Course reputation	College	5.5	1.6	.3	.76
		University	5.3	1.5		
	Research reputation	College	4.3	1.6	.7	.47
		University	3.9	1.7		
	Teaching reputation	College	5.3	1.6	.4	.67
		University	5.1	1.2		

(Scale: 1 = not at all important and 7 = extremely important)

Pearson’s Product Moment tests (shown in Table 3) indicate that the relationships between these factors form clusters; one relating to prestige through *academic reputation* of course and institution, and a second cluster based on the more *practical* issue of costing, based around location, travelling expenses and fees. Age was only significantly correlated to the *reputational* factors with no significant relationships to any *practical* components. When the calculations were made by gender only the females generated the significant associations with the *practical* cluster, where both males and females showed significant associations with the *reputational* cluster.

Table 3. Correlation matrix of affecting factors

	Teaching reputation	Research reputation	Qualification	Course reputation	Local commitment	Distance	Fees	Expenses
Age	.31	.31	.26	.14	.25	.14	.15	.12
Teaching reputation	-	.71	.44	.77	.25	-.01	.09	-.01
Research reputation		-	.36	.62	.12	-.09	.20	-.01
Qualification			-	.43	.20	-.07	.01	-.06
Course reputation				-	.18	.09	.03	.04
Local commitment					-	.61	.31	.33
Distance						-	.40	.45
Fees							-	.66

Bold indicates significant relationships ($p < .05$)

Rationale for top-up choice

Three main themes that emerged in response to an open question as to what was the most important factor in their decision making process; these being *postgraduate potential*, *familiarity* and *educational interest*.

Table 4. Themes emerging from qualitative questions

Themes	N	
Postgraduate potential	Gaining a full degree	13
	Career prospects	19
	Earning potential	2
Familiarity	Locality	15

	Continuity of educational experience	8
	Facilities	2
Educational interests	Interest in the subject	7
	Range of options	7
	Flexibility of delivery	2

The Level 6 students were most concerned about career prospects and their interest in the subject being studied when reflecting on their decision-making process. They were also very focused on the locality and continuity of educational experience although it must be highlighted that these were all respondents who had made the decision to remain at the FEC for their top-up year. The Level 5 students were equally concerned about their postgraduate potential but were also very vocal regarding the importance of a full degree qualification. Of the Level 5 students moving to university there was more focus on the career prospects and the prestige that a full degree would afford them, whereas those students remaining in the college, whilst also interested in their postgraduate prospects, were also interested in the continuity of the learning experience and the range of modules available to them.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand what the important factors are for students on associate degrees when deciding on their top-up route. Of the Level 5 sample, eighty-six per cent were intending to progress on to a full degree, with seven per cent taking a gap year and another seven per cent progressing on to employment.

Overall, it appears that course type and content were most important factor when making the decision about where to progress. This was strongly evident in the quantitative data where students were asked explicitly to rate these factors. This was also an area of importance that came out of the qualitative questioning for the Level 6 students where they referred to the courses being ‘interesting’, ‘appealing’ and ‘relevant’ often referring to the ‘diversity’ of the modules being offered.

An area that was not included in the specified factors was that pertaining to postgraduate outcomes, but this was evidently an area of importance as was shown in the open responses. The Level 5 students were focusing more on where the next step could take them, so referred to the currency of the full degree and enhancing their career prospects, but always in generic statements, such as ‘to have the best chance at getting a job in the future’. By comparison, fewer of the Level 6 students referred to the longer-term prospects but when they did they referred specifically to the career they had chosen, such as one respondent indicating that they ‘have always had a desire to be an archaeologist’ whereas another indicated how the course would ‘ease

transition into Primary school teacher training'. As the Level 6 students had a clear idea of where their course would take them they could focus more on the academic issues of achieving the degree, whereas for the Level 5 students their postgraduate potential appeared to be more of a preoccupation, possibly because they had not arrived at a final decision thus far.

Similar to the findings of Greenwood and Little (2008) and Harvey (2009) the Level 6 students' responses to the open question focused on location and continuity of their educational experience. This study found that these were primary factors in their choice of top-up, many claiming that continuing at the college would allow them to 'live close to home'. Having experienced the college environment throughout their associate degree meant the college campus, processes and staff were familiar to the students, as expressed by the Level 6 student, 'I Love [college name], courses, lecturers'. These issues were also noted Greenbank (2009) and Winter and Dismore (2010) from their student participants that had progressed to university. Not unsurprisingly this also featured in the responses of the Level 5 students who had chosen to remain at the FEC. Even though a scaled question was asked with respect to the importance of the continuity of the teaching staff it was not rated very highly so it appears there may be a more holistic experience; a familiarity not just of people, but of colleagues, place and process which is important to them.

The clusters that emerged through correlation of the important factors grouped around issues of *academic reputation* or *practicality*. These clusters did not link with the level of study, but it was thought that the practical issues may link to age, and as the average age of respondents was 29 years old it was possible that the high level of importance on personal commitment to the local area and distance from home could be explained by mature students having to balance family life with education, therefore being tied to the area. When age was analysed with respect to these clusters it appears that there were no significant relationships between age and the *practical* issues, suggesting that the older students did not seem any more tied to the area than younger students. There was instead a significant positive relationship between age and the more *reputation-based* factors, maybe suggesting that the older students are expecting value for money. It was noted that there were gender differences in the commitments to the local area where this was a significantly more important factor for female respondents indicating that they may be the students that are more affected by family ties than males.

Comparison of the importance of those staying at the FEC and those moving away to university showed very few differences, although the two most prominent differences were practical in nature. Firstly, that the fees were cheaper at the college, and secondly that there were significantly more commitments to the local area for those remaining. This echoes the work of Burton, Lloyd, and Griffiths (2011) as the role of mature students is often beyond that of purely *student*, a role which needs to accommodate many other more complex interactions and relationships.

This study offers an insight into a new area of research, but as always with the benefit of hindsight improvements could be made. The sample surveyed is of one FEC with links to one university in a very particular geographic location with its own challenges. These findings may not be generalizable to other FECs in more metropolitan areas, with more effective transport links to a range of HEIs. Further research would extend the questionnaire through a range of institutions in order to get a more complete picture of trends and diversity. To some degree it might be argued that there is a limited amount of information that can be gleaned from Level 6 students who have made the progression, and are reflecting back on the process. In order to have a more balanced view it would be of benefit to survey those who made the transition to the universities as well as those students who remained in order to get a view of how satisfied they are with their decision, and whether there was in fact information that they were unaware of at the time of applying, but wished they had known in retrospect.

As this study appears to be the first considering what factors are important to an expanding body of students when making the decision on where to progress to, much use could be made of the findings. An understanding of what the important factors are when making this decision could help careers advisors and those whose remit it is within the colleges and universities to aid the transition process by supplying the relevant information. Consideration of which factors to promote may help in the marketing of potential courses as an understanding is developed of the customer base.

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