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Embedding value: perspectives on a foundation level course in arts and humanities

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Abstract

The number of learners opting to study on a foundation level programme at universities in England has risen sharply over the last few years. Foundation level courses at university represent a vital opportunity for learners to progress to undergraduate courses, especially those learners from areas where participation in higher education has been traditionally very low. This paper offers a reflection on the foundation level course delivered at LJMU's School of Humanities and Social Science, which has featured on the institutional prospectus since 2017. The tutors reflect on the adjustments that have been made to both the organisation and delivery of teaching, underlined by the development of an inclusive and open learning community. Based on the authors' experiences, it is argued that foundation level courses at university are well calibrated to support the UK government's levelling up agenda and, ahead of the 2021 Spending Review, the paper is therefore a counterpoint to recommendations made on the foundation level programme in the Augar Review of post-18 education funding.

Keywords

foundation level; transition; widening participation; student engagement; teaching; Augar Review

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Embedding value

This paper offers reflections on our experiences of delivering the Arts and Humanities foundation year at LJMU since its inception in September 2017. It will highlight the adjustments that have been made over the first four years of the course, informed by feedback from students and critical reflection by staff. We argue that the foundation level course at university plays a vital role in closing the gap for students previously underrepresented in the sector and, consequently, we offer a counterpoint to the claim made by Philip Augar's (2019) review of post-18 education and funding that foundation level courses in universities in England represent 'poor value for money' (p. 104). In highlighting the successes of LJMU's Arts and Humanities foundation programme, both in terms of student progression and attainment, and as a way for socially disadvantaged groups to access higher education (HE), we argue that such courses are incredibly well calibrated to prepare learners for undergraduate study, which has been largely driven by specialised and dedicated support alongside the subject-specific knowledge provided by tutors.

As we write, the sector is still recovering from a global pandemic. Huge sums of money have been spent by the UK government to keep the economy going. As the autumn budget – and Spending Review (SR21) – loom into view, the HE sector is holding its breath. We argue that foundation level courses at university have a critical place in helping the UK 'build back better' and in 'levelling up' and that the courses – some of which are in relative infancy at several universities – should be viewed as a medium to long-term project, helping many disadvantaged young people to refocus their ambitions relative to further study.



The Augar Review

On 19 February 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May announced that there would be a "wide ranging review into post-18 education" led by Philip Augar. In rejecting a move back to a fully taxpayer funded system, the PM outlined that the review would examine how future students would contribute to the cost of their studies, including "the level, terms and duration of their contribution".

Following publication of the terms of reference, a call for evidence was made on 21 March 2018; the consultation ran for six weeks and closed on 2 May 2018. Submissions were received from a wide range of post-compulsory education bodies and mission groups, including: Universities UK; GuildHE; the Russell Group; Million+; University Alliance; the Institute for Fiscal Studies; the Association of Employers and Learning Providers; the University and Colleges Union; the Association of Colleges; and the National Union of Students.

The review was published on 30 May 2019. An interim conclusion of the review was released on 21 January 2021, as the government announced an intention to consult on further reforms to the HE system in spring 2021, before setting out a full response to the report and final conclusion of the review alongside SR21.

Foundation level

Foundation – Definition:

1. *The lowest load-bearing part of a building, typically below ground level.*
2. *An underlying basis or principle.*

For a variety of reasons, not every learner in compulsory education achieves the grades they wish for. Providing a broad introduction to a variety of subjects, foundation level (Level 3) courses offer a valuable bridge towards undergraduate (Level 4 [first year]) study, especially for those who need to strengthen their academic and study skills and, consequently, to rebuild their confidence and self-esteem.

Between 2012/13 and 2017/18 the number of students undertaking foundation level courses in universities almost tripled from 10,430 to 30,030 (Office for Students [OfS], 2019: 3). In this same timeframe, the number of students undertaking access to HE courses in further education (FE) colleges fell from 36,880 to 30,410 (OfS, 2019: 3). Although just a fraction of the intake of all students enrolling at university, the trajectory of growth of foundation level underlines the positive impact of recruitment strategies, especially in those communities where participation in HE is low (Braisby, 2019; McLellan et al., 2016; Nathani, 2019). In light of the lower number of 18 year olds in the period 2016/17 to 2018/19, the growth in numbers of foundation level students made business sense to universities, with some commentators even contending that the courses were a ‘cash cow’ for the sector (Kernohan, 2019).

Being and becoming

The senses of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ are important in education (Barnett, 2007) and, as we discovered from our students, ‘place’ was an important theme in their feedback.

The very idea of the Arts and Humanities foundation year being delivered *in university* and the benefits arising from *a university experience*, had a strong emotional hold for many, even amongst those who had considered the alternative of an access course delivered at an FE college. To help understand this, we discovered a strong attachment to the potential of ‘social learning’ and engagement with other Level 4 (and over) students on campus and in sports clubs and societies. Some learners were also attracted to particular opportunities, such as studying abroad or the chance of a university paid internship. We cite these insights ahead of our reflections on our own practice, as it helps but into perspective the reasons why many of our students have thrived on our course. Their personal goals are evident at the outset of their engagement with the programme and, as practitioners, it is important that we do not lose sight of these during their learning journey with us.

Mature learners

Most of our students on the foundation course come straight out of school. However, we have also accepted a few mature learners who, despite having the necessary grades for direct enrolment to an undergraduate course, have chosen instead to undertake foundation level study, especially if they are transitioning after a very long gap in education. Thus, foundation courses can address sectoral concerns on the marked decrease in 21 year old (and over) applicants to universities, especially to institutions outside London (UCAS, 2018).

LJMU Arts and Humanities Foundation Year

Since the inception of the programme we have come to understand the myriad reasons why the foundation year is important to

many. From mental health issues to a lack of support offered during students' compulsory education, we have become all too aware of the emotional issues encountered by our students' learning journeys before they come to LJMU. Empathy and support is a recurring theme as a vast proportion of our learners reside in areas of low participation in HE and, therefore, not had the quality of mentoring to equip them to achieve better. Our awareness and understanding of our students' needs has informed the nature of the support given. In fact, close engagement with our foundation students has helped to improve other forms of support to undergraduates, such as the personal tutoring schemes. We have acted on this intelligence and helped build a more intricate and informed perspective on the nature of support which, in turn, has been fed forward to LJMU's student progress and wellbeing teams.

When students have joined the course, their immediate concerns relate to the gaps they perceive relative to their Level 4 peers. Thus, we begin with focusing on developing students' sense of referencing (learning to critically evaluate the sources they are consulting), *appreciating* and understanding research, and learning to be confident in verbal and written reasoning. These 'pillars' of the learning experience are gradually developed over the course of the year rather than taught at the start and forgotten about.

The Arts and Humanities foundation course is part of a broader, cross faculty foundation year at LJMU. All staff who teach on this course also teach on the undergraduate programme linked to their own subject specialism. We have successfully created spaces for our foundation students to explore these subjects as they consider their options for Level 4 study: this enculturation

– getting to know a little about the teachers and their subject specialism – has served to demystify several aspects of the undergraduate experience.

How we encourage students to feel comfortable in themselves and in the content that they are engaging with has been at the heart of our success. Students have quickly adapted to the rhythm and elements of our teaching which, in feedback offered, have been found to be highly popular. For instance, we have taken special care to adapt what we teach and, to cite one prominent example, we have developed a series of scaffolded questioning techniques and activities that break down complex topics and concepts (cf. Meyer and Land [2012]). We therefore offer significantly more bite-sized and focused readings when compared with content reproduced for Level 4 students. Our intention here is to boost engagement for, as studies have shown, when content can be broken down in meaningful chunks, attitudes and outcomes can also be transformed (Mistry, 2011). The resulting impact has been revelatory. With the likelihood of students engaging with this content – short and targeted sections of key texts rather than whole articles - the seminars and workshops have been significantly more vibrant. (Attendance, which has been a thorny issue in the sector, has also been extremely good.) Allied to this, we also try to understand which aspects of the course students enjoy and try to inject this into course planning. Thus, in the development of the programme, we have ensured that lessons are weighted towards greater subject specific content. The key lesson here is, as Paul Ramsden (2003) counsels, we can improve our teaching if we ensure there is dialogue with learners. Our students have been effusive in writing up their reflections on aspects of the teaching they enjoy most, or do not warm to, on

Post-It notes which they attach to a board at the end of the seminars and workshops.

We want our learners to feel continuously connected and not feel overwhelmed at any point. Therefore, we plan all assessments very carefully. For instance, assignments are broken down into smaller components which focus on developing core skills. Over the course of the year assignments increase in both length and complexity to ensure students are continually challenged and fully prepared for the rigors of undergraduate study; the final assignment on two modules involve 1,500-word essays, using a minimum of four peer-reviewed secondary sources and, in word length, this is roughly equivalent to assignments completed by Level 4 students at the start of their programme.

An important marker for success is in how students engage with staff. Relationships have been relatively easy to build with a small cohort of students. Trust is an important factor and, as indicated earlier, students do not feel intimidated to apply their reasoning in class. This then extends to their written drafts and we regularly see students who seek informal feedback on their work however incomplete this may be. In a sense the formative and summative feedback that is offered becomes much more meaningful, as we have already derived an insight into students' critical reasoning skills, verbal and oral presentation and a sense of their progress and direction. It also means that we can highlight to the learner relevant resources and support to help iron out any weaknesses ahead of any future assignments.

Finally, and by no means least, as a team we meet regularly to reflect on the adjustments we have made in both our teaching methods and organisation of the course. We have a

shared understanding on the principles we wish to apply and, moreover, a shared sense of our development as practitioners and leaders.

Conclusion

How do we judge value? To whom, and for what purpose? There have been many proxy 'value for money' assessments, for instance in the debate that has been raging about number of contact hours in university (Quality Assurance Agency, 2011). Our foundation level students' sense of value is calibrated somewhat differently. As staff, we have seen healthy improvements in students' self-belief which has been reflected in the quality of their work. To take a programme perspective, year-on-year improvements in course evaluation data and student persistence (i.e. lower drop-out rates) is testament to the culture we have nurtured (namely how we interact with our students both in and out of class). It has come as little surprise to us to learn of individuals, from our earliest cohort in 2017/18, who are directing their aspirations to master's (Level 7) study.

The HE sector in England is highly transactional and this can obscure some of the intimate personal and social achievements. As we await the government's decisions in this autumn's budget and SR21, the Augar Review's recommendation to withdraw funding for foundation level courses in England remains, as Sheffield Hallam University's vice-chancellor describes, short sighted (Husbands, 2021). Of course, the review was undertaken when there was no pandemic or severe fracture in student learning. Thus, as Chris Husbands contends, now is not the time to consider jettisoning university-based foundation courses but to ensure that those Gen Z (or 'Gen COVID') learners, who have been

significantly impacted by the pandemic, continue to remain supported (Policy Perspectives Network, 2021). As our experiences underline, the Augar Review's narrow focus on the (monetary) cost of a foundation level course at a university versus one delivered at an FE college fails to appreciate how our learning community has flourished and thrived. It is *this foundation* that can help the nation's recovery to 'build back better' and help society 'level up'.

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