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## Degrees of Freedom: Factors affecting Foundation degree students' course choices

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## **Degrees of Freedom: Factors affecting Foundation degree students' course choices**

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Higher Education (HE) expansion took place from 1988 (NCIHE, 1997) when collaborative arrangements between HE Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education colleges (FECs) provided necessary extra capacity (Parry, 2003). This increased the range and local availability of HE provision, both within the colleges and the collaborating HEIs. The Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) stressed further expansion would be necessary and sought an increase in HE participation amongst groups hitherto under-represented in HE. Traditional HE offers a 3-year degree programme which Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) suggested may not appeal to all. Stanton (2009) similarly questions whether this provision meets the needs of learners within a changing educational environment and evolving employment contexts.

Foundation degrees (Fds) were introduced to assist the government's agendas for widening participation and address a perceived graduate level skill shortage (HEFCE, 2000; Parry, 2003; Stevenson & Bell, 2009). It was anticipated that these new degrees would largely be taught in FE colleges working in collaboration with HEIs (Foskett, 2005); the HEI providing a progression route for third year honours degree study (Parry, 2003).

Similar to the existing Higher National Diplomas (HND), Fds are a two year, usually vocationally based, HE qualification. These associate degrees represent a terminal qualification in their own right, but also offer a named progression route to a full degree. Students have the option to exit after two years, or continue with further study (2+1 mode), which allows choice of course and location. This study aimed to explore FEC students' views on their mode of study and course choice.

### **Methodology**

Questionnaires were completed electronically by 2<sup>nd</sup> year (Level 5) (N=43) and 3<sup>rd</sup> year (Level 6) (N=22) students studying at a southwest FEC. Open questions asked what they considered the most important factor when choosing their L6 top-up and their feelings about studying a 2+1 mode. They also used a 7-point scale to rate the importance of ten specified factors on their choice of top-up.

### **Results**

There was overwhelming support for the 2+1 mode of study based on its flexibility, allowing students to deviate from their initial path, specialise in associated areas, or even take a study break between levels 5 and 6. Substantially fewer students were in favour of having opted for a full three-year degree. Unfortunately 20% of student reported periods of concern when having to go through the decision making process during the second year.

Table 3. Students' views regarding the associative-top-up degree model

<b>Preference for the 2+1 model</b>	Positive expression about their decision	17
	Appreciation of the flexibility of study choices	23
<b>Preferences for full 3-year degree</b>	Would have preferred a single degree	5
	Does not like decision making	1
<b>Concerns</b>	Fd/HND too restrictive without a top-up	1
	Worried by lack of top-up options	4
	Unaware of 3 <sup>rd</sup> year option	2
	Relief at finding a top-up	1

There were significant differences in the importance of the ten factors ( $F_{(9,549)}=19.39$ ,  $p<.0005$ ). Figure 1 shows that the most important factors in the decision making process were the *course type* and *content* followed by *local commitments* and *distance from home*, between which there were no significant differences. This was supported by their responses to the open question where the emerging themes mirrored these factors (Table 2).

Fig 1. The importance of factors when deciding on a top-up year

Table 2. Themes emerging from qualitative questions

<b>Postgraduate potential</b>	<b>Familiarity</b>	<b>Educational interest</b>
Gaining a full degree	Location	Discipline
Career prospects	Continuity of educational	Range of topics
Earning potential	experience	Flexibility

The associate degrees that the level 5 students were currently studying were grouped into three categories based on the range of level 6 options open to them.

- ◆ Single external – where no internal top-up course is available
- ◆ Single varied – where one internal and one external top-up course is available
- ◆ Multiple – where there are many internal and external top-up options available

There were significant difference in the option open to students and their destination choice ( $\chi^2=14.6$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.006$ ). As can be seen in figure 2, when there was no local

option all students progressed to the university whereas when they have a binary choice between one internal or one external route 72% chose to remain and similarly when multiple internal and external routes were available 77% chose to remain.

*Fig 2. Student decisions based on options available*

## **Discussion**

What is evident from this case study is that the 2+1 mode of study is very much appreciated by the students, who relish the flexibility it offers them. It allows mature and non-traditional learners to dip a metaphorical toe in the water of higher education in order to establish whether they are capable of success. It affords students the chance to make a decision with an inbuilt opportunity to change direction at a specified point, an opportunity not so easily managed once committed to a three-year programme of study.

It is also evident that two main factors affect their choice; the potential the course has in opening up career opportunities, and how this course will fit in with their financial and domestic arrangements. The aspects of least importance were the more outward facing marketing component of reputation. As the average age of the students was 29 years old, situated in a somewhat geographically isolated area with respect to educational opportunities, it may be that this sample approaches their studies in a functional way. The choices of courses available at FECs are often more vocational in nature and lend themselves to more obvious long-term career opportunities, which in the current economic climate may be the students' driving factor in their choice of course.

The study is limited in respect to the fact that it is a case study of a quite singular institution and the students who choose college-based HE may be motivated by quite different drives than those who choose a typical three-year university degree, but with the changing landscape of HE; through massification, marketization and a more diverse range of students, partnerships may need to reconsider how they view their future roles and provision.

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