Widening Access to Higher Education: An evaluative case study of a foundation year alternative to Access

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Universities are encouraged to widen access to a broad range of applicants, including mature students taking Access qualifications. Admissions tutors can find it difficult to compare and choose between Access and A-level applications, and Access applicants for popular courses may be disadvantaged relative to students with good A-levels. In this evaluative case study a foundation year designed to avoid Access selection problems and widen participation in psychology, biology, optometry and pharmacy is reviewed. Progression and success rates are compared to national averages for Access courses and issues in Foundation Year management considered. The Foundation Year is rejected as unsatisfactory and it is concluded that widening participation for mature students can be achieved through Access courses. Difficulties in achieving this for high-demand courses in leading universities are discussed.

Universities are encouraged to widen participation in Higher Education and recruit more students from under-represented groups. According to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) access to Higher Education Development Report (2004), mature students are generally more likely than other students to fall into widening participation categories. Mature students are disproportionately found in the post-1992 teaching-led university sector, although this is entangled with the distribution of students from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds.

Ball et al. (2002) point out that status differentiation in UK universities and subtle constraints on student choice tend to reproduce the class and status distinctions evident in wider society. There are compelling reasons for universities of all kinds to take mature students even into over-subscribed disciplines. Firstly, in order to select the best candidates from as large and diverse a pool as possible. Secondly, because diversity enriches learning and helps improve the preparation of all students for graduate and professional life. Thirdly, as part of a commitment to widen participation and address social exclusion. Schwartz (2004) confirms the legitimacy of seeking to recruit the best possible students regardless of background. However, there are difficulties in identifying the best students when selecting mature applicants for an over-subscribed course. More specifically, admissions practice needs a rational basis to justify the exclusion of competent, A-level qualified, 18- to 21-year-olds in favour of mature alternatives.

Access courses are the established route for mature students into Higher Education and are one-year full-time or equivalent programmes. They are offered in most Further Education Colleges in England and are probably the most widely taken route into Higher Education for mature students. Access courses offer a certificate based on combinations of credits at two levels, equivalent to GCSE and A-level, and are aimed at students who did not initially enter or succeed in post-compulsory education and who may not necessarily have recent experience of study. In 2002–2003 there were over 40,000 students registered on Access programmes in the UK with expected end dates before July, 2003 (QAA 2004), a substantial increase in eight years on the ‘at least 30,000’ (HEQC 1994, cited in Hayes et al., 1997, p.20)

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enrolled on Access courses in 1994. In 2003, 62 per cent completed access and 46 per cent achieved the full Access certificate. 18,215 (45 per cent) applied to HE through UCAS and 12,856 were accepted, 71 per cent of those applying. Twenty-two per cent of first degree HE entrants in the UK in 2001 were mature and 14 per cent of them came from low participation neighbourhoods and had no previous HE qualification (HEFCE 2003). Ross et al. (2002) suggest that students from Black ethnic groups are more likely to be mature than students from other ethnic groups. In comparison with younger students, mature students may have more social roles and be more likely to be involved in caring for others (Thacker & Novak, 1991; Bowl, 2003). Ross et al. (2002) suggest that mature women in particular may face domestic and child care problems when attending university. However, Trueman and Hartley (1996) found women students to be better at time-management than men students, and that mature students aged over 25 were significantly better at time-management than younger students (although this did not strongly predict academic performance). In a review, Richardson (1994) contradicted the commonly held view that mature students were deficient in study skills and found mature students to be more likely to take a deep approach to study. Richardson supported Harper and Kember's (1986) explanation of a deeper approach in mature students being due to greater intrinsic motivation, prior life experience, and not having recently attended the final years of secondary education. It was presumed that during this time, students acquired a surface approach to learning. Richardson and Woodley (2003) showed that under-21-yearolds did have the highest chance of getting a 'good' (First or Upper Second class) degree

(62.7 per cent), but that the percentage of students in different age brackets getting a good degree did not really decrease substantially

until the 51 to 60 years (52.2 per cent) and 60 years and over (42.9 per cent) age bracket. Mature students may, therefore, be strongly committed to learning, have a clear sense of direction and have developed adult life skills including the generic criteria linked to success by the Fair Enough (2003) report; self-organisation, motivation to learn, interest in the subject area, and an ability to work well independently.

QAA (2004) breaks down Access students entering HE in 2002–2003 into MOSAIC lifestyle categories and compares them with other entrants. Access students are underrepresented in the 'high-income families', 'suburban semis' and 'country dwellers' categories, and over-represented in the 'low-rise council', 'council flats' and 'Victorian low status' categories. Thus Access courses are well established and expanding and attract students who will widen participation if recruited into higher education. Recruitment from Access courses is, therefore, hard to avoid in order widen participation.

Notwithstanding these widening participation credentials students with Access qualifications may have difficulty in gaining entry to popular and over-subscribed courses. This is perhaps because the qualification is different to and hard to compare directly with A-levels in terms of content and assessment practices. A-level is the traditional gold standard at 18+ and is the yardstick that an admission tutor is likely to use in viewing an alternative qualification. Access courses are different in a number of ways. They are less predictable in depth and coverage, since tutors in each college have considerable control over syllabus content so courses may vary from year to year and from college to college. They are shorter than A-level and take a different approach. Woodrow (1986) suggests that they are student rather than content or syllabus based, meaning that the focus is on learning as a process. This may mean that Access students are particularly well prepared for university study in some respects; in study skills, approach to

learning, core literacy, core science and mathematics, but it may also mean that they have not studied similar content or to a similar depth. This may be important in

science and medically-related degrees where science subjects at A-level are regarded as pre-requisites. Access courses are also broadly open to all and students may have a wide range of ability, as indeed is the case with the Open University.

From an A-level standpoint, Access assessment appears to be less rigorous. Assessments are set and marked internally by the tutor and moderated externally. Unseen examinations may comprise a smaller proportion of total assessment than the 80 per cent that is typical at A-level and may be very much less. Access students are not awarded graded passes, but rather credits at two levels if their work reaches the appropriate threshold. It is, therefore, difficult for admissions tutors to discriminate between Access candidates, because most can be expected to achieve a similar pattern of credits. Thus, an Access certificate is not necessarily a good guide to the ability and potential of an applicant as it indicates only that a minimum threshold has been reached. By comparison A-level applicants usually study three or more subjects at A2 (full A-level) and one or more at AS (part A-level). The resulting patterns of pass grades from A to E (plus fail grades N and U) for each subject allows for discrimination either by setting a threshold in grades (e.g. three A2 passes at grade B) or by using the UCAS points system to translate grades numerically (e.g. 350 points).

A-level grades and Access credits are, therefore, not easily comparable. It is difficult to discriminate stronger from weaker Access applicants unless this is made clear by the tutor in a reference, or it is detected by other selection procedure. This difficulty is compounded by the tradition of making university applications 10 months in advance making it difficult for Access tutors to provide a detailed reference in support of a candidate they scarcely know and who has

completed little academic work at the time of writing. Many, however, offer a second reference later in the year. A-level students, and those studying many other qualifications

such as the International Baccalaureate, are offered conditional places requiring them to achieve specified grades or points. For Access the lack of grades at other than the two levels of credit makes this much more difficult. Asking for more credits at the higher level asks students to do more rather than to do better and risks overloading students who may already have many demands on their time. Inability to discriminate between applicants may be acceptable where student numbers match or fall below the places available, but it puts admissions tutors in an impossible position when facing strong competition for a limited number of places. The net result may be that Access applicants are not offered places at all.

Admissions tutors in leading universities are competitive-entry gatekeepers. Their work assumes that discrimination between large numbers of applicants based on actual or predicted achievement is appropriate and fair, or at least less unfair and less open to legal challenge than alternatives. They compete with other universities to recruit the best applicants and thereby to maximise achievement and retention, indices on which their programme and their university will be judged in newspaper league tables and elsewhere. Leading universities are selective by necessity. Since they face large numbers of applicants (the UCAS admission system allows students to apply to six courses at once and a popular course taking 150 students per year can face 1500 or more applications) they tend to use broad-brush algorithms to choose who to offer places to.

It can be seen that the structure of the Access qualification does not easily fit the competitive entry situation described above. These problems with Access have led admissions tutors in some cases to reject all Access applicants, in others to take a quota of applicants

on an opportunity sample basis. The
wish to provide a route for mature students
into oversubscribed courses in a School of
Life and Health Sciences led a UK University
to introduce a foundation programme in life
and health science subjects in 1992,

franchised to a partner College of Further Education. Ten years on, this widening participation funded action research was undertaken to determine the value and effectiveness of the foundation programme and to guide further development.

The foundation programme sought to blend the benefits of Access and A-level in a one-year direct-entry portfolio of courses devised to offer an entry route for mature students into Psychology, Biology, Optometry and Pharmacy. Its target was over21-year-olds with employment, training or other experience suggesting that they had the potential to succeed at degree level. Younger applicants with special circumstances were also admitted, including those with non-science A-levels wishing to change career direction and overseas students whose qualifications were not appropriate for Year 1 entry. The programme was, therefore, a useful catch-all enabling admissions tutors to respond flexibly to diverse applicants. As a franchised university course it allowed the university considerable control of curriculum and assessment and for students it offered progression to Year 1 without further competitive application. In the first semester, there was a 60 per cent to 40 per cent coursework-examination assessment split and a core of numeracy, literacy, study and ICT skills was taught as well as introductory science. In the second semester the coursework-examination split was 20 per cent to 80 per cent and more advanced and specific science modules were taught.

Here, both quantitative and qualitative evaluations of its utility are reported, using an action research approach and philosophy after Zuber-Skerritt (1992). The research aimed first to investigate institutional satisfaction with the Foundation Year, focussing on quantitative measures of retention, progression and achievement relative to Access courses and Year 1 entry. Secondly a

qualitative judgement of student satisfaction was sought.

Method

The research had four strands:

i.
The mining of records to identify the retention, progression and achievement of all students entering the programme since it began in September, 1993, for 11 years. Tracking all of the students involved, including those who withdrew, restarted, failed, changed degree, took leave of absence or simply disappeared proved difficult, time consuming and revealed many problems in the entering and retrieval of student data. It is unfortunate that the research took place after the implementation of the Data Protection Act but before freedom of information legislation took effect. The records of 284 students were identified and located.
ii.
Current and former foundation programme students were interviewed individually using the semi-structured protocol developed for the focus groups.
iii. Focus
groups were conducted with current and former students.
iv.
A questionnaire was sent to former students.
Other stakeholders including admissions tutors, course managers and Access tutors for several programmes and courses at a number of universities and colleges were also interviewed informally.

Results

Student Records

Entry levels: Data were collected on admission to the Foundation Year programme over the years 1993–2003 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that entry has varied from

13 to 28, with a median of 19 except for 1997

(46) and 1998 (61) when the programme was extended by offering places to younger A-level applicants at UCAS clearing who had missed their conditional offer of a place on a Combined Honours programme. This was not continued with and the programme continued as before from 1999. This is, therefore, a small programme and only marginally viable.

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Figure 1: Foundation Year annual entry 1993–2003.

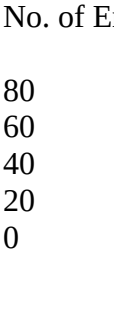

Figure 2: Foundation Year students by programme and status .

	Pharmacy	Psychology	Optometry	Biology	Totals	%
Graduated	18	10	9	6	43	35
On programme	4	1	0	0	5	4
Left (all reasons)	20	24	6	17	67	54
Unaccounted for	0	0	9	0	9	7
Totals	42	35	24	23	124	

Progression/Attrition: Data were collected on those known to: (i) have graduated; (ii) be on programme; (iii) have left; or (iv) be unaccounted for in respect of the four Life and Health Sciences programmes involved in the Foundation Year (see Figure 1). Data were not analysed for all 284 students. Entrants from 1999 onwards, who may not have graduated by summer, 2003, and under21-year-old combined honours entrants from the expansion in 1997 and 1998, were excluded leaving data from mature entrants in the six cohorts between 1993 and 1998. Records of all mature students (with the exception of some studying Optometry) from 1993 to 1998 were traced and outcomes recorded. This produced a research cohort of 124 students out of a total 1993 to 1998 entry of 180. The totals in Figure 2 show the spread of students between the four subjects and their status.

The low percentage of graduates (35 per cent) is striking, as is the large percentage (54 per cent) of students who have left the

programme. These figures are very low, especially when set against the 93 per cent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) graduation rate cited for the university overall. However, they are not directly comparable with the HESA figure. The 'left (all reasons)' category include a variety of students: (i) those leaving during the Foundation Year or failing to reach the necessary grade to progress to Year 1 (equivalent to A-level or Access applicants not achieving their conditional offers and not being admitted); (ii) those entering university Year 1 and not completing; and (iii) those not fully enrolling or withdrawing before the census date (thus appearing in our figures but who would not have been counted in the HESA statistics). The data are not precise

enough about when a student left to allow this last group to be quantified. However, by including all students, the data can be thought of as worst-case figures in that they may over-represent non-completion. However, all students have been tracked through their complete undergraduate programme including repeat assessments, periods of leave-of-absence and so on, so these figures certainly do not under-represent success.

In order to compare appropriately with national figures for Access courses, it is important to ascertain the point at which students left the programme (i.e. during the Foundation Year or subsequently). Figure 3 shows the 76 students who have withdrawn, failed, left or are missing by subject and when they left. It can be seen that three-quarters of students who left did so during the Foundation Year. These figures may bring the programme more into line with Access.

Thus, of the 124 strong mature student sample entering the Foundation Year that we are concerned with, 58 (47 per cent) did not progress into Year 1. Of the 66 (53 per cent) that did join the first year of their degree, 48, or 73 per cent, have graduated or are on track to graduate. This is a more impressive figure and, although still very much behind the overall university graduation rate, is within range of national figures for mature students. Interpretation of this figure also requires reflection on the nature of the courses involved, both Optometry and Pharmacy are demanding science degrees not often open to mature students and involve competing with A-level entrants with high science grades.

It is also possible to compare with other programmes to benchmark relative success or failure. An engineering foundation programme at the same university is similar in conception and 2002–2003 data on

progression from Year 0 to Year 1, and Year 1 to Year 2 in both programmes is shown below.

Patterns of outcome are similar across both schools of study with Foundation Year students less likely to proceed and more likely to withdraw or fail than Year 1 students and Engineering and Applied Science (EAS) students doing generally less well in both Foundation Year and Year 1 than Life and Health Sciences (LHS) students. These differences are in line with the subject group variations in non-continuation rates reported by QAA (QAA 2002). The LHS Foundation Year proceed figure of 57 per cent is quite similar to the 53 per cent progression figure for the 124 strong Foundation Year research cohort and is somewhat better than the EAS figure of 40 per cent.

Comparison with Access: Completion. A key comparison is with Access programmes. (Figure 6). As already mentioned, in 2002–2003 there were a little over 40,000 students registered on Access programmes nationally with expected end dates before July, 2003. (QAA, 2004). QAA report completion data as well as full and partial credit achievement data, and as these categories overlap comparisons with the Foundation Year are not straightforward. It is possible to achieve partial accreditation and not complete, and seven per cent of students completed their Access programme but did

Figure 3: Withdrawn/failed/left/students by subject and point of departure.

Pharmacy	Psychology	Optometry	Biology	Totals	%
Left Foundation Year					
10	21	13	14	58	76
Left since joining Aston					
10	3	2	3	18	24

Figure 4: LHS/Engineering Foundation Year to Year 1 progression 2002–2003.

LHS LHS

Figure 5: Year 1 to Year 2 progression 2002–2003.

LHS LHS

25
20
15
10
5
0
Year 0 to Year 1 Year 0 to Year 1
No. of Students
Proceed
Withdraw
Fail
450
400
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
Year 1 to Year 2 Year 1 to Year 2
No. of Students
Proceed
Withdraw
Fail
Figure 6: Foundation Year and national Access achievement and progression.

Achievement
(full certificate or pass) %
Progression to HE %
Foundation year 53 53
Access nationally 46 32

not receive any accreditation. A total of 62 per cent of students completed the Access programme and 46 per cent achieved the full Access certificate. The 46 per cent full certificate success rate is below the 53 per cent pass rate for the Foundation Year research cohort in a more selective but probably more demanding programme. The Foundation Year pass rate is also the HE progression rate – all of those who pass generally enter the university. While 18,215 Access students (45 per cent) applied to university through UCAS, only 12,856 were accepted, 71 per cent of those applying. Nationally, the progression to HE rate for Access students may, therefore, only be 32 per cent.

Comparison with Access: Retention in HE. The figures above put the performance of Foundation Year students at that stage into context, but how do they fare in comparison with Access students and with mature entrants generally when at university? QAA (2002) give details of Access students not continuing beyond their first year of university study. The overall non-continuation figure is 16.5 per cent, but there are subject variations with engineering and technology losing 24.4 per cent, subjects allied to medicine only 13.1 per cent, and biological and physical sciences 17.8 per cent. Foundation Year figures are for non-completion overall, rather than non-continuation after Year 1, but it seems reasonable to suggest that the bulk of students who reach Year 2 go on to graduate so that most Foundation Year

students who do not complete did not continue beyond Year 1. This being so, the Foundation Year figures are not impressive. As shown in Figure 7, 73 per cent of Foundation Year students entering Year 1 have graduated or are on track to do so. However, 83.5 per cent of Access students nationally in 2002 continued from Year 1 and remained on track to graduate. Similarly, HEFCE

(2003) data on non-continuation following year of entry for full-time first degree mature entrants in 2000 shows 83 per cent average continuation for all English HE institutions but only 78 per cent continuing at this university. This is one of the lowest figures tabled, with only 12 English institutions having poorer figures, although only one percentage point outside the adjusted benchmark (percentage not in HE 16 per cent, benchmark 15 per cent). This figure fits with the 73 per cent graduating/on track in the Foundation Year, given that the HEFCE figure is for progression from Year 1 rather than graduation.

Taken together, the QAA and HEFCE data shows that once they join Year 1 of their degree, Foundation Year students are not performing better than UK mature students as a whole or Access students as a whole.

Qualitative results

This aspect of the research was concerned with student satisfaction with the foundation programme and their views on its value and effectiveness. In planning the research, it was intended to use focus groups with both current and former students. The outcomes

Figure 7: Foundation Year graduation and national continuation to Year 2.

Continuation following year of entry, FT first degree mature entrants, all UK institutions 2000/2001 (Hefce, 2003).
83%
Access continuation to Year 2 nationally for all subjects (QAA, 2002). 83.5%
Continuation following year of entry, FT first degree mature entrants at target university 2000/2001 (Hefce, 2003).
78%
Foundation Year graduation/on track. 73%

of three focus groups are reported below. In practice, however, focus groups did not provide all the data sought. They represented current and recent Foundation Year students but the views of former students and those who had failed or withdrawn were largely absent. Furthermore the focus groups did not develop into the free-flowing discussion that had been anticipated and remained at a somewhat superficial and blandly positive level.

In response to these problems, individual interviews were conducted and a questionnaire sent to all former students who could be contacted. However, only one former student who had left without graduating was interviewed, leaving the study over-reliant on those visible, available and willing to speak; current students and successful former students. The anonymous questionnaire avoided the blandness of the focus groups and respondents had interesting and critical things to say, but it was lengthy and this may have reduced the response rate. Only 15 completed questionnaires were received. Thus, 24 current and former students participated in focus groups, three former students were interviewed and 15 former students completed questionnaires. In total, of 284 students, 42 (15 per cent) contributed to this part of the research and with a bias towards current students and successful former students.

Below is a summary of responses from focus group transcripts and the free response sections of the questionnaire organised to correspond with the focus group themes.

Why students chose the Foundation Year rather than alternatives such as A level or access.

The most frequently mentioned reason was that students had sought a change in direction or career and their existing qualifications were either absent or inappropriate. The Foundation Year offered a ‘quick’ way to

address this. For example:

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‘I’ve done A-levels in Germany before but to be able to study psychology in England I had to get the qualifications and it did not make much sense try to do any A levels again.’

‘I did A-levels but realised half-way though that I wanted to study pharmacy and I had chosen the wrong A-levels. The Foundation Year was, therefore, a good option open to me.’

‘The Foundation Year prepared me more specifically in terms of what I could expect in the degree course workload wise, as a mature student one year was more attractive than two years.’

Other reasons mentioned were; the Foundation Year was faster than the two years needed for a full set of science A-levels, it offered a foundation specific to the chosen degree course, an opportunity to learn or improve academic English, and a timetabled free day.

‘It was shorter, i.e. one year compared with two for A-levels.’

‘The Foundation Year was conducted over four days – this allowed me to stay in employment for one day per week. I was also able to negotiate with my employer the ability to return to full-time employment should I fail the course. As a mature student this gave me peace of mind and the confidence to attempt the course without loss to my current career’.

One graduate said that they were attracted to the Foundation Year because it entitled them to a mandatory student grant. Grants were originally a key feature of the Foundation Year as they offered support to mature students making a career change that was not available for alternatives such as A-levels. The loss of mandatory financial support removed a key benefit.

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Advantages and disadvantages of taking the Foundation Year.

The main advantage mentioned was that it gave students the grounding in science that they lacked.

‘I chose to take… (the Foundation Year)… because, although I had the grades to go to (the university), I didn’t have the correct subjects for what I wanted to study.’

‘…it offered me an opportunity to study chemistry for the one year and then enter the pharmacy degree rather than having to do A-level chemistry (after already doing biology, physics and maths).’

Being taught undergraduate skills, having access to university facilities including residences, and the mentoring available were also mentioned. Having to take subjects not relevant to the degree was mentioned consistently as a disadvantage:

‘I do not think that psychology students need any chemistry.’

‘The chemistry we learned was not enough or not specific enough for the pharmacy course… Physics, though good to have a basic knowledge, really wasn’t needed…’

The preparation for Aston and the welcome experienced.

The Foundation Year was thought to prepare students well for university study and the support of being a member of a group of mature students was often mentioned.

‘Our class members and teachers were very nice, I could approach teachers easily and ask for assistance. Made really good friends.’

Respondents also felt welcomed at the university.

Best features of the Foundation Year..

Students made supportive friendships with each other that lasted throughout their time at the university. It was also thought to be an easy start to undergraduate study and it was

well structured and friendly. The support offered by academic staff at the college was also valued.

‘There was plenty of support – most of the tutors were approachable and very helpful.’

Worst features of the Foundation Year.

The breadth and depth of A-level was lacking. The college was seen as an occasionally alarming place to study and its location away from the university was not popular.

‘(the college) – (I) had possibly one of the worst experiences of my life at that place! The academic side was good but the college wasn’t!’

The workload was seen as unbalanced with too much at the end of semesters, especially the second semester.

How the Foundation Year could be improved.

The impending move of the college to the university campus was welcomed. Other suggestions included matching the subject mix to the degree, an early work placement to help students decide if they had chosen the right course, raising entry requirements, and following university rather than college term dates.

Level of work and course content.

There was a range of contradictory views about the level of work and recognition of the varying needs of a wide range of entrants. Some thought that work in semester one was too easy but more appropriate in semester two. There was hostility to chemistry generally from non-pharmacy students and mixed views on the amount

and suitability of the mathematics offered, some students wanted more while others found it already very challenging. In general, students wanted more content and depth in subjects related to their degree and less in subjects that were not.

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Delivery and tutorial support.

College tutorial support was thought to be excellent. Some university-style lectures and a greater emphasis on independent study were suggested. A substantial number of focus group participants did not have English as a first language and would have liked support in English. More on the culture of being a university student was requested.

Workload and assessment.

Assessments were thought to be very good and the speed and quality of feedback was thought to be excellent. The failure to enforce coursework deadlines at college was criticised as trivialising the Foundation Year and preparing students badly for university where deadlines were enforced.

Discussion

The results of this study point in two directions. The quantitative progression and achievement data show disappointingly high numbers of students failing to graduate. However, progression from Year 1 is comparable to, although lower than, national figures. The qualitative student satisfaction data, drawn largely from current students, shows the Foundation Year working well with a high level of satisfaction with the programme and what it offers; preparation to take up a guaranteed place on a sought-after degree and entrance to high status, high reward and strongly competed for careers such as in Pharmacy and Optometry. However, the qualitative sample was small and unrepresentative as it did not include those who had failed or left the programme. Less enthusiasm may have been shown if the focus groups had taken place in a neutral venue with a moderator who was not so closely identified with the university, and had included students who had failed or left. However, whereas the quantitative data came from the first five years of the programme,

the qualitative data largely represents the views of current and recent students. It is possible that the discrepancy between high

recent satisfaction and low progression and achievement earlier may also reflect improvement and development of the course, including a mentoring scheme, rather than a skewed sample. However, the retention and achievement of recent students – not reported here – has not improved and remains in line with the poor figures reported above. A parsimonious explanation of the discrepancy must attribute it to the unsatisfactory qualitative sample.

Overall it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Foundation Year has fundamentally failed. It does not attract large numbers of mature students, many do not complete the Foundation Year, and of those who do, more than expected do not graduate. Furthermore, the programme is difficult to manage. As a university programme it is subject to university procedures and regulations. These are more onerous for the college than the demands of preparing students for an externally awarded qualification such as an Access certificate or an A-level. On the university side, staff spend time on examination boards, reviews, liaison meetings and so on, none of which would be required if the students were studying for an Access certificate. Perhaps more crucially for the university, the poor progression and achievement figures in the Foundation Year count against the university rather than the college. HEFCE and QAA data show that mature students generally have lower completion rates than younger students, although widening participation funding is designed to compensate for this.

The absence of grants and the requirement to pay fees makes the Foundation Year programme less attractive to students. Additionally, some key advantages – a guaranteed place on Year 1 and a specific preparation

for a particular degree – are nullified in practice by the poor progression rate. Once enrolled to study for the specific degree Foundation Year, students have less flexibility in switching between programmes than they would have in switching subjects or intended direction on an A-level or Access course.

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Further, if they do not reach the threshold grade to progress to Year 1, they are left with debt and without a qualification of any sort. By contrast a student not admitted with A-levels or an Access certificate would still have a national qualification, lower grade A-level passes, for example, to present to an employer or to other universities for admission to other subjects.

In terms of raising applicant numbers it should be noted that Pharmacy and Optometry attract many Foundation Year applicants but Psychology and Biology do not. In the 2003–2004 application cycle, there were 105 and 64 applications respectively for Pharmacy and Optometry, but only 17 and 19 for Psychology and Biology. However, most of the pharmacy and optometry applicants fall outside of the scope of the Foundation Year, being young A-level students whose grades are below those required for admission to Year 1. Psychology and biology applicant numbers may be lower because these subjects lack the clear routes to professional status enjoyed by subjects allied to medicine. Connor et al. (2003) note that it is vocational and professional courses that are most attractive to widening participation and mature applicants. In 2002, 50 per cent of the 7650 former access students entering HE were studying subjects allied to medicine (QAA, 2004). Many of these subjects, including optometry and pharmacy, have professional employment, high status and a good income available on graduation. This is not the case in Psychology and Biology.

Do access courses prepare students well for university study? Hayes, King and Richardson (1997) used the Approaches to Studying Inventory with a large opportunity sample of Access students and found that Access was associated with an educational culture that was not consistent with that of the majority of students in higher education. In seeking to explain this they cite Brennan

(1989) who suggests that Access courses draw on an alternative and radical social and educational ideology that rejects the conventional assumptions on which university

admission decisions are based. One senior Access tutor interviewed during the course of this research argued that any adult would be able to complete a degree and that qualification based admissions decisions tended to reflect socio-economic status and culture, and acted to legitimise and reproduce them. Seen in this light, Access courses can be thought of as a way to cross the old Grammar and Secondary Modern binary divide and permit those lower in socio-economic status and weaker in social capital to reach the life chances denied them in secondary education. While no longer formally evident in schools, the binary divide lives on in post-compulsory education with a clear distinction between university and further education sectors. It perhaps also persists in mass higher education in the status differences in UK universities (Ball et al., 2002), where medicine is largely in research-intensive universities and nursing in teaching-intensive universities.

It is as hard to deny this sociologically informed view in its entirety as it is to reject the more psychologically informed focus on individual differences in ability. However, it is on the latter that admission is based. The differences in educational ideology have powerful consequences. Colleges may see that they give opportunities to adults who were denied them, and universities that they guide the able (also generally the privileged) through to graduate status. A key difference is in success rate. In 2003, 62 per cent of access students completed their programme and 46 per cent achieved the full access certificate (QAA, 2004). Open opportunities in further education, therefore, co-exist with a substantial non-completion rate. By contrast leading universities have graduation rates in excess of 90 per cent. Non-completion in Higher Education is unacceptable for several reasons, including course duration

and the increasing burden of expense borne by students. With the exception of specialist institutions such as the Open University, leading universities seem set to continue to select almost entirely on ability.

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Widening Access to Higher Education

The specific problem that this research intended to address, therefore, remains; how is it possible to recruit and select mature students into oversubscribed courses in a leading UK University? To break this Gordian knot it is necessary to: (i) Use grades, other metrics or selection procedures to choose between Access students; (ii) Raise the credibility of Access with admissions tutors in high-demand course at leading universities; (iii) Influence Access in the direction of the pre-requisite curriculum requirements of science-based medically-related courses; (iv) Build bridges across educational cultures through HE – FE collaborations to enable points (i) to (iii) above to come about. At present a mature college returnee may find all universities and careers open to them if they do well at A-level. If they take an Access course, however, their choices are likely to be constrained no matter how well they do. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs, for some the promise of access remains an illusion.

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