Experiences of foundation year students integrating into first year

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Abstract Foundation year courses tend to attract an elevated proportion of students from widening participation backgrounds. Previously, O'Sullivan et al. (2019) showed that sense of belonging and academic confidence increase during the foundation year. The research reported here took the next step, by investigating the experiences of foundation year students as they transitioned into a first year cohort. Students (n= 18) participated in either a focus group or interview. Three themes were identified. The foundation year was viewed as 1) a valuable ‘stepping stone’ into higher education. Students felt that they had been given a ‘second chance’ and were more prepared for the first year. The second theme related to 2) identity development as a university student. Challenges were highlighted, including a perceived ‘stigma’ of a foundation year. The third theme related to 3) integration with other students. Students formed close support networks with each other. None had integrated with others on the wider programme or at the university, attributing this to the perceived inability or lack of opportunity to meet others, or a feeling that this was unnecessary. This study provides new insights into the strengths and challenges of the foundation cohort experience as they progress through their programme, with implications for practice.

Key words Academic confidence; foundation year; social support; transition

Introduction

Internationally, students from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in higher education (HE) at a lower rate than their more advantaged peers (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018). In the UK, the proportion of students attending HE from low participation neighbourhood areas increased by 2% between 2018/19 and 2019/20. However, these students still represent just under one in eight students attending university (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021). Not only are disadvantaged students less likely to participate, but they are less likely to apply to or attend the most prestigious universities (Marshall, 2016; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). One widening participation strategy, adopted by many HE institutions in parts of the UK, is to offer foundation year degree courses where
students receive tuition for a preparatory year. If passed, this gives them a guarantee of entering a degree course the next year. Different models exist for foundation year courses as elaborated further below. Previous research involving foundation year students has considered their academic progress on their course, and their wider social experience and sense of belonging as university students. Beyond the pragmatic function of accessing HE via a foundation year, it is plausible to suggest that such an opportunity may provide wider benefits for orientation to university life. The aim of this current study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of students after they have completed their foundation year, and have recently transitioned into the first year of their degree programme.

Background

Strategies to widen participation in HE

One way that universities attempt to address inequalities is through a contextualised admissions process, where indicators that an applicant has faced considerable challenge or disadvantage leads to a degree of leniency, perhaps through lower conditions on their offer, or being prioritised for interview (Mountford-Zimdars, Moore and Graham, 2016; O’Sullivan et al., 2019). An example of such indicators might be that the student has experience of being in care, or has received free school meals (Boliver et al. 2017). Universities may also offer scholarships or bursaries to students from widening participation backgrounds and engage in outreach work in targeted communities (Leech, Marshall and Wren, 2016).

These strategies are typically targeted at school leavers, but another important way that universities widen participation is through access to university courses. These are more typically studied by mature students (defined as older than 21 in the UK) who have left school with General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications (Office for Students, 2019). Access courses are often run through further education colleges and do not typically confer an automatic place at a particular university. Rather they provide a qualification at the level necessary for entry and typically provide more flexibility about where university will be attended (Office for Students, 2019).
In contrast, another widening participation strategy adopted by universities is the offer of access through an integrated foundation year. With foundation year courses, a university degree place is typically guaranteed on successful completion, something which has been reported as being a motivating factor by students (Sanders and Daly, 2012/13). Foundation years typically attract students younger than 21, who have some A-level qualifications (Office for Students, 2019). However, it is important to note that different providers have different models for foundation year courses. In some cases, the students complete a general foundation year before choosing which subject to study at degree level within the same institution. In other cases, students register on a particular four-year degree course that includes a foundation year (Sanders and Daly, 2012/13). To add to the complexity, foundation years differ from foundation degrees, which are often two-year programmes developed in collaboration between HE Institutions and employers, with a focus on academic and work-based learning, albeit with a parallel purpose of widening participation (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2024). Foundation years also differ from International Foundation Year courses, which are a type of international pathway specifically targeted at, and designed for, international students who are arriving to study in the UK for the first time (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2024). In the next section we elaborate further on the nature of foundation years in the UK and the demographics of the student cohort they tend to attract.

Foundation years in the UK

The HE context in the UK is complex, with different educational structures and funding models in place across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A search on the UK University and College Admissions Service website in August 2023 found over 4800 courses from 123 providers in England and Wales with a foundation year entry point (target award of Bachelor’s degree). This is a significant increase from the figure of 727 available courses reported by Sanders and Daly in 2013. No such courses were offered in Northern Ireland or Scotland in this search. In Scotland, students typically spend four years at university. Therefore, integrated foundation years (that would extend a degree course to five years) have not become popular. However,
Scottish universities offer a variety of ‘bridging’ initiatives, and students may be able to enter directly into the second or third year of a degree directly from college (Universities Scotland, 2017).

Our study took place at an English university, where under the current funding model students can access loans for both tuition fees and living costs during foundation year study at university. However, for Access courses, while the tuition fees are likely to be lower, students are rarely able to access additional support for living costs (Office for Students, 2019). Therefore, despite the additional debt incurred, there is evidence that foundation year courses attract school-leavers who disproportionately come from households with lower socio-economic status or other types of disadvantage (Clifford, 2018; Leech, Marshall and Wren, 2016; Office for Students, 2019; O’Sullivan et al., 2019). The Office for Students report showed that both foundation and Access students were more likely than the general student population to come from the lowest areas on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. However, most foundation year students were younger than 21, while most Access students were older than 21 and therefore considered to be mature students. In the O’Sullivan et al. study, the students on two case-study foundation year courses were compared with a group of students entering university through contextualised admissions. The foundation year students were more likely to have parents who were out of work, with lower levels of prior educational attainment. Therefore, there is some evidence to support the position often taken by universities that foundation year courses are a successful initiative to widen access to Higher Education by disadvantaged groups (O’Sullivan et al., 2019; Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016).

In terms of advantages to the institution, Sanders and Daly (2012/13) note that foundation year courses may reduce the risk of students leaving their courses early, thereby reducing the risk to the university’s retention figures, while also allowing them widen participation. More cynically, foundation year courses also provide universities with additional revenue through an additional year of fee income. Students must consider whether they are willing to incur the additional debt, given that fees are often equivalent to any other undergraduate year at university.
(Sanders, Daly and Fitzgerald, 2016). Students must balance these concerns against other potential benefits of studying a foundation year. Such benefits have been a further point of discussion in previous literature.

Potential benefits of foundation years for students

The evidence reviewed above suggests that overall, students entering the foundation year may have less family experience of the higher education environment, or to put it another way, a lack of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This is relevant because, internationally, ‘first-generation’ students, whose parents do not have degree-level qualifications, are more likely to leave their course without achieving the target award (Adamecz-Völgyi, Henderson and Shure, 2020; Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013). It is thought that where students’ families have a good understanding of the demands of a university course, they are more likely to be able to offer effective support and encouragement, or to pass on relevant background knowledge about university life (Groves and O’Shea, 2019). However, being a first-generation student should not be seen as a deficit that needs to be remedied. Studies have pointed to the strengths and resources that first-generation students may bring to the university community, and rejected the notion that universities should try to ‘manufacture sameness’ in their student cohorts (Bejarano and Valverde, 2012; O’Shea, 2016). From that perspective, the foundation year might indeed seem like an attempt on the part of universities to ‘manufacture’ a student who will ‘fit in’ with the main cohort when entering the first year, as well as having the academic skills necessary to pass their assessments. However, this is likely to align with the goals and aspirations of the individuals who have chosen to study the course. The examination of their own perspectives is the focus of this current study.

Beyond a focus on academic skills, the foundation year can be seen an opportunity to acclimatise students to the processes, procedures and norms of higher education. This may be considered as ‘bridging capital’ (Putnam, 2000, as cited in O’Sullivan et al., 2019), where the new opportunities afforded through the foundation year allow students to forge connections within their institution, and with a diverse group of contemporaries. This facilitates social mobility and provides a
means by which universities can seek to address educational disadvantage and widen access. A study by Hale (2020) focused specifically on social class and sought the perspectives of practitioners heavily involved in the design and delivery of foundation year courses at four different institutions. Some of the staff interviewed by Hale (2020) noted that students from a working-class background may lack ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) in the sense of having had less access to so-called ‘high culture’ in the form of art, literature and theatre, for example. This is thought to be relevant because of references to art and literature that might be made during teaching, or by other students, at least on some types of degree course (Hale, 2020).

Going further, the notion of embodied cultural capital suggests that the prior cultural and familial experiences of middle-class students are apparent in their demeanour, and mark them out as ‘belonging’ at university (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). Some of Hale’s participants felt that it was their role to help working-class students assimilate and ‘fit in’ with middle-class peers, but others felt it was their role to help students challenge or even subvert cultural norms prevalent at university. However, despite their different viewpoints in terms of class politics, all the practitioners in Hale’s study agreed that the foundation year conferred advantages to their students in terms of an understanding of, and ability to navigate, the practical day-to-day life of university by the start of the first year.

In summary, it has been argued that the foundation year confers benefits to students in practical, academic and social terms. In the sections below, we review quantitative and qualitative research that has directly investigated the experiences and outcomes of students.

Previous research on academic experiences of foundation year students

In terms of academic outcomes, research on the experiences of foundation year students is sparse. Although the number of studies is small, they provide reason for optimism. In the O’Sullivan et al. (2019) study, outcomes compared favourably with students who had entered at first year through a
contextualised admissions programme. Students on the foundation year programmes had a sense that their academic skills, confidence and ability had increased throughout the year, which was not the case for contextualised admissions students. This longitudinal mixed-methods study followed students throughout the foundation year itself, but not beyond into the first year where they would join the main cohort of students entering university through traditional means. Sanders and Daly (2012/13) conducted a qualitative investigation of students’ experiences late in their first year of the main degree, and again the findings were generally positive. Students reflected on a process of familiarisation with the facilities and procedures, and knowing the ‘etiquette’, in line with the aim of the foundation year to provide students with ‘navigational capital’ (O’Sullivan et al., 2019). While there were some dissenters, most students felt that the foundation year had left them better prepared for the first year than was the case for students entering through the traditional route, and this had developed their academic skills and confidence. Participants in this study also reported that foundation year courses were preferable to ‘going back’ to re-do A Levels.

A small group of former foundation year students interviewed much later on (while undertaking postgraduate study) concurred with this view (Bartels-Hardege, 2018), as did the staff interviewed in Hale’s (2020) study, many of whom reported that their foundation year students tended to go on to have better academic outcomes than their direct-entry students. In a study of the experiences of foundation year students at Oxford University, it was the close guiding relationships with academic staff through the tutorial system that were seen as central to this increase in students’ confidence in their academic abilities (O’Sullivan, Robson and Winters, 2018). Overall then, qualitative data gathered directly from students and staff is positive about the academic benefits of the foundation year.

The available quantitative data supports similar conclusions. In Sanders and Daly’s (2012/13) study, such data lent weight to students’ own perceptions of their abilities. At the end of the first year of the main degree, there was no difference in average marks between students who had entered from the foundation year and those who had entered through the traditional
route. Clifford (2018) reported positive outcomes for foundation year/extended degree students in Wales, with improvements in both completion rates and degree outcomes.

**Previous research on social experiences of foundation year students**

Beyond academic outcomes, research has also considered the social experiences of foundation year students. O’Sullivan *et al.* (2019) found that students’ sense of belonging at university increased over the course of the foundation year, as opposed to contextualised admissions students, for whom it did not. The qualitative data from focus groups showed that sense of belonging was facilitated by connections to other students on the foundation year, with mixed reports about relationships with ‘direct entry’ students in the first year.

Sanders and Daly’s (2012/13) focus group respondents reported that they had made good friends on the foundation course, and had good relationships with staff. It is unclear whether they formed connections or friendships with other incoming first-year students. The participants in Bartels-Hardege’s (2018) study reflected on their experiences from a greater distance, having moved on to postgraduate study, but again noted the friendships they had formed on the foundation year as being a key positive factor that had helped them throughout their undergraduate career. In summary then, the participants in all three studies reported good social relationships within their foundation year cohort, but it is unclear how much they communicated or socialised with students who entered directly into the first year. This question was considered further in the current research.

**The current study**

Our study used focus group methodology to explore the experiences of students from a foundation year as they entered the much larger first year of a psychology undergraduate degree programme. With data collection occurring at the start of the new academic year, this allowed students time to reflect on the foundation year in the months since its completion. A study by Tett, Cree and Christie (2017) identified the move from first year to second year as an important transition point in the
student journey, where students’ sense of belonging to the institution was bolstered by strong peer relationships. Our foundation year students similarly had enough time to establish friendships with others in their class, and this was one of the issues we asked them to reflect on, looking back on the previous year. We also sought their views on the value of the foundation year in terms of the academic preparation for the main degree programme.

Their perspectives were also influenced by their experience of returning after the summer and observing the newly arrived students. For these new students, the first weeks of transition into the first year are known to be a time of upheaval, often referred to as the ‘encounter’ phase of the transition process (Coertjens et al., 2017; Nicholson, 1990). In the first few weeks of term, students make sense of their new environment before moving to an adjustment phase, where they learn to cope with its demands (Coertjens et al., 2017). Coertjens et al. (2017) suggest that a stabilisation phase occurs after students have had their first experiences of assessment, after which only minor adjustments will be needed.

Other authors have considered that the term ‘transition’ refers to a much longer process of change and development (for a review see O’Donnell, Kean and Stevens, 2016), but for the purposes of this paper, we focused on the period at the start of the year, where the foundation year students and newly arrived students encountered each other on the course. Our focus groups explored both academic and social experiences, allowing us a window to view the transition of new students as perceived by students who have already attended the university for a year. We sought to understand how well the foundation year students integrated with the larger cohort – whether they felt part of this group or separate from it. The timing of data collection for the present study therefore adds a new dimension to previous reports in the literature about students’ perspectives on the foundation year.

Method
Design

A qualitative investigation was conducted, comprised of three semi-structured focus groups and an online interview.

Participants

Eighteen foundation year students were interviewed about their experiences. Participants were all aged over 18; 15 participants were female and three were male. All participants had completed the foundation year programme in psychology and were currently in the first semester of their first-year undergraduate degree programme. The university is a large post-1992 institution with a high proportion of local students (over 40%). The undergraduate psychology programme is accredited by the British Psychological Society, and at the time of the study had an intake of around 250–300 students in the first year and around 30–60 in the foundation year.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via an advertisement placed on the School of Psychology’s Research Participation System in the autumn of 2019 and 2020. Students who were willing to participate could self-select a time and date to participate in a focus group. Participation in the study involved the award of four points on a research participation scheme. Two in-person focus groups were conducted in 2019 (n= 12), and one online focus group was conducted in 2020 (n= 5). One student also spoke about their experiences in 2020 via an online one-to-one interview. The in-person focus groups took place in a classroom on campus. The online focus group and interview took place via Microsoft Teams. All were audio recorded and transcribed word for word for analysis. Data collection was facilitated by Kayleigh Sheen (KS). The students were familiar with KS as a lecturer on their foundation year programme.

Prior to participation all students received a full participant information sheet, which was relayed at the beginning of the focus group/interview, and verbal consent was obtained. A semi-structured topic guide with prompts was used for the focus groups and interview, to facilitate exploration in four key areas;

(1) reflections on foundation year (challenges, successes)
Focus groups were chosen as they were a suitable method for generating an open debate on the positives and negatives of the foundation year. Students may have felt reticent to speak frankly to the researcher in a one-to-one setting. In the company of others, the group was able to co-create a response to the issues raised in the topic guide, and to use others’ responses as memory prompts. Students were able to contribute where they felt comfortable and stay silent when they did not. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, one of the focus groups (and the interview) took place online, which can differ from a face-to-face focus group due to the restriction, or loss of non-verbal cues, and body language. However, the same topic guide was used throughout, and the interviewer (KS) was experienced in facilitating qualitative data collection both in-person and virtually, and care was taken to mitigate the impact of this difference.

Analysis

Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and codes organised using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo. Thematic analysis was chosen as a suitable analytic method because of its flexibility for use in discovering patterns of meaning within the data set. It is suitable for phenomenological research that examines participants’ subjective experience; in this case, the way participants made sense of their academic endeavours and social encounters during the foundation year and the beginning of the first year. Transcripts from the focus groups (2019 and 2020) and interview were analysed together by KS. Analysis comprised of six phases: familiarisation (reading and rereading transcripts); generation of initial codes; collation of codes into initial themes; review of themes and repeated checking of data; naming and defining.
themes including examination of internal homogeneity; and external heterogeneity before producing the final analysis. An iterative process of checking coherence and consistency between coded data against themes and subthemes was undertaken. Disconfirmatory evidence, where present, is reported.

Results

Three overarching themes were identified, relating to perspectives on the foundation year as a valuable 'stepping stone' into university (Theme 1), views on identity development as a university student (Theme 2), and students’ experiences of integrating with other students (Theme 3). Each theme had two further subthemes. These are detailed below, with illustrative quotes provided.

1. A valuable 'stepping stone' into university

This theme incorporated reflections on the perceived utility of the foundation year for further study, at both course-specific and wider university level.

1.1 Developing skills that are useful for later study

Students recognised that the skills they had developed throughout their foundation year would be (and was) valuable when they began the first year of undergraduate study. Examples of these skills included writing essays and time management:

‘It gave me – as the foundation year name suggests – a very excellent foundation, so that was very, very helpful. It’s definitely made this year a lot easier for me, at least compared to I think students who haven’t done the foundation year because stuff like knowing how to reference, knowing how to write an essay, managing your time as well – so it has really levelled up my foundations so that was really helpful.’ (INT1)

Familiarity with assignment requirements and relevant software was also frequently cited as useful, specifically the use of statistical software package SPSS:

‘I sort of know what to expect now. Like for this year – the way they want us to write essays and lab reports and use SPSS and stuff, I’ve had like a year of practice almost before
it like properly counts to what – the degree I want in the end.’ (FG3 PPT 5)

1.2 ‘Having the chance’ to go to university

On a more general level, the ability to complete a foundation year was viewed as a useful opportunity to pursue university-level education. Students felt that completing the foundation year provided a useful ‘stepping stone’ to continuing their education, forming part of their bigger plan to study psychology.

‘Yeah like happy that I was able to do what I wanted to do even though I didn’t do as well at A-level, it made me feel confident that I could still do this even though I didn’t get straight onto it.’ (FG2, PPT1)

Some students felt that the ability to complete a foundation year highlighted the university’s approach to inclusion, that they as a student were welcomed into university life.

‘It made you feel that the uni wanted you to come even though you had not got the grades – they wanted to help you get there.’ (FG1, PPT9)

Despite positive accolades from the majority of students, there was however recognition of the financial implications of completing the foundation year.

‘Without sounding horrible it just felt like we paid 9 and a half grand to just do A-levels again.’ (FG1, PPT10)

2. Identity development as a university student

This theme encompassed students’ views about their own development as a university student having completed the foundation year. Within this, students reflected on aspects that contributed to their sense of being a higher education student both in the context of the School of Psychology and the wider university community.

2.1. Feeling familiar with the university, making you feel part of it

Having completed the foundation year, many students reflected that the experience had provided them with a sense of familiarity with the university. For some, this was attributed to familiarity with the campus; for others it was confidence in their ability to
complete the tasks required for their course or access to different buildings and facilities on campus. This familiarity led to a feeling of being part of the university, and being a Liverpool John Moores University student. When entering the first year of their undergraduate programme, this familiarity led to confidence.

‘... when I started this year I knew where the café is and Starbucks and how to access things as well like the things that – how to get books out the library how to – the things like that we had to do last year so – and like SPSS again like – things like that are really from – from the foundation year are really, really useful because I was taught last year how to do it so it makes – especially the last couple of weeks – ten times easier because I come here with no anxiety, knowing exactly how to get there exactly what I need to do, how to do this thingy if I need to do it kind of thing whereas if I’d just turned up two weeks ago straight into level four I would have been like...no chance [laughs]’. (FG1, PPT7)

There was recognition that the transition to university had already been made during the foundation year. Students felt ‘settled in’ to the city and the campus, and this enabled a stronger focus on the course when progressing to the first year.

‘Last year I had a lot more like – the big move coming here and meeting new people, your course and all that – now we’ve sort of done and you know where you’re staying, you’ve figured out your friend group and now all you really have to do is focus on the course.’ (FG2, PPT1)

Although many felt part of the wider university community, fewer students felt that they were a psychology student or part of the school of psychology community.

‘I think last year I felt more of a part of the uni as a whole than I did – than as I felt as a psychology student because – as we were saying before – it felt like a general course than a psychology.’ [FG1, PPT2]

2.2. Not a ‘proper’ university student yet

Despite recognition of the positives, some students felt that there was a difference between foundation and undergraduate study. This difference led to the feeling of not being a ‘proper’ university student yet. Sometimes this was attributed to the
content of the foundation year course, where a variety of topics, including sports science and anthropology, were included in the curriculum. For these students, this prevented the feeling of studying for a degree in psychology and was instead compared to their previous experience of attending college.

'It felt like I was at school like last year – like a college student – we just had to turn up for lessons and then just go, kind of like that feeling.' (FG2 PPT 1)

For a small number of students, it was the level of material that was included in the course that reinforced their perspective of the foundation year being different to undergraduate study.

'It just made us feel a bit dumbed down because – the way people interpret foundation year is like – I mean obviously it's not but it's like "oh well you weren't good enough to get on straight away so we are just going to give you a foundation year".' (FG3 PPT 2)

Some students commented on the perceived stigma of a foundation year. Sometimes this perception originated from their own views on what a foundation year represents, and concerns over judgements from peers regarding their own ability.

'But I generally feel like everyone's looking at me thinking 'oh you're thick”, even if they don’t even know what course I’m doing.' (FG2, PPT1)

Sometimes this sense of stigma was perpetuated by how material was delivered or framed during a teaching session.

'Even in the lectures the lecturer would skip a few slides and be like you won’t get this bit…' (FG1, PPT9)

3. Integration with other students

The final theme describes students’ experiences of meeting other students and developing their own peer networks at university. This encompasses views on meeting students within the foundation cohort, other undergraduate psychology students, and university students in general.
3.1. ‘We know each other much better’

There was a clear sense of community within the foundation year cohort, reported by all those interviewed. It was felt that the smaller cohort size of the foundation year facilitated the development of a good support network, where all students knew each other and could approach one another for help or guidance. Completing the foundation year was also recognised as something they all had in common, and reinforced the feeling that they would all continue their journey into higher education together.

‘I think just having it in common like you know you’re doing the same course you know you’re going to progress together – even if you’re going to different courses you’re still in that foundation year – and I think you just have that in common…’ (FG2, PPT2)

Interestingly, several students reflected on their own peer groups within the foundation course in comparison to those they observed since commencing the first year of their undergraduate programme. There was a sense of superiority for their own experience, and it was felt that the same was not present for those who had just entered the undergraduate programme without the foundation year.

‘Like the year ones now don’t look like they’re all talking to each other – or like – I know it sounds daft, but we’ll meet to go into lectures together – whereas – our foundation year seems like we have a few friendship groups.’ (FG1, PPT9)

3.2. Difficulty meeting other students

Despite having formed strong peer groups within their cohort, students reported that there had been little to no integration with other psychology students throughout the year. Sometimes this was attributed to the reduced need to do so, given that they had already formed friendships within the course.

‘There was nowhere in it – to give us a chance to meet anyone from the actual psychology course? If that makes sense. We never had to – to meet others.’ (FG3, PPT3)

Other students commented that there was limited to no opportunity to meet other students, either within the wider
psychology programme or the university, despite attempts to do so.

‘Didn’t know how to? I was in like a Facebook group chat that was with other psychology people but then I realised that they were all first years so I kind of like had to leave.’ (FG3, PPT5)

Students also felt that this reflected their experiences so far in their first year of undergraduate study too, where the opportunity to meet other students remained limited. Underpinning this perception was recognition of the larger cohort size of the undergraduate programme, limiting opportunities to meet others.

‘I’ve spoken to one today and that was the first time...’
‘... and she said sorry can I just save this seat!’ (FG1, PPT 7&8)

‘I don’t think there’s any opportunity to actually make friends with people because there’s just like 200 students in one room and most people like just come in and then they leave.’ (FG1, PPT 6)

Discussion

Foundation year courses have been argued to be an important vehicle for widening participation in HE, but such assumptions must be evaluated using a range of methods. Findings from this qualitative study highlighted that, overall, students valued their experience on the foundation year programme. This was attributed partly to the skills they had developed as a result of the year, such as academic writing and referencing, and subject-specific skills such as the use of statistical analysis software. Familiarity with the academic requirements of the course, and of the campus, contributed to a sense of being a university student. The small cohort size enabled students to form a supportive network with their peers, and this was valued when entering into the first year of the undergraduate programme. There was however recognition of limitations attributed to the foundation year such as the financial cost and the challenges faced in meeting other psychology and university students. Some students felt that the foundation year was inherently different to an undergraduate course, restricting their ability to form an identity as a university student and at times leading to a sense of stigma.
There was also a perceived disconnect between completing the foundation year in psychology, and identification as a psychology student.

It has been questioned whether a foundation year course really provides additional skills and abilities, or simply gives a ‘second chance’ to students whose A Levels did not meet the entry requirements but who were ready for HE (Sanders and Daly, 2012/13). From the current study, the perceived utility of the foundation course was in part related to the development of familiarity and confidence in both course-specific and wider academic skills. Rather than the refinement of skills already attained at school or college, the value of the foundation year may lie in the earlier introduction to key skills that will further benefit students as they progress through undergraduate study. The progression and relevance of the course content, with an emphasis on the connected curriculum, may also be an important feature in the design of foundation year programmes. Students in our study did feel that they had gained useful skills, but also at times questioned the relevance of the knowledge they were accumulating in relation to their target award.

Another way in which students felt they benefitted was in the accumulation of ‘navigational capital’ (O’Sullivan et al., 2019), i.e. a bank of knowledge about the culture and practices of higher education. This finding is in line with reports from students on the different foundation years included in the O’Sullivan et al. study. Although practical rather than scholarly, this type of knowledge may be important in fostering a sense of belonging and in keeping students on the course if difficulties are encountered. As discussed previously, research shows that foundation year courses do tend to have disproportionate numbers of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Clifford, 2018; Leech, Marshall and Wren, 2016; Office for Students, 2019; O’Sullivan et al., 2019). Students who face financial pressures, or who feel alienated from the university community, may be more likely to leave the course early. Therefore, if successful completion of the foundation year equips students with relevant navigational capital and academic skills that assist them in going forward to complete their degree, this adds weight to the argument that foundation year programmes are an effective approach to widen participation.
However, it must be acknowledged that given the timing of our study, it did not include those who might have withdrawn during the foundation year itself. There is some previous research on predictors of retention during the foundation year. Sanders et al. (2016) found that the success of foundation year students could be predicted at the start of the year by using the Academic Behavioural Confidence Scale. Unrealistically high expectations about grades, and doubts about the ability to attend sessions, were both predictive of future drop-out from the course. Sanders et al. (2016) recommend targeted interventions to support students at risk of withdrawal. So, what is captured here is only the perspective of students who completed the year. However, all of those interviewed in the present study felt that their experience of the foundation year had been worthwhile. Even the topics they struggled with did not discourage them from continuing with HE, but did lead to a sense of ‘just wanting to pass’ to ensure progression. Overall though, it was clear most students felt the foundation year had increased their sense of confidence about the study skills and general academic behaviours that would be required throughout the programme.

Another issue relating to the timing of the study was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although most of the data collection took place in the autumn of 2019, some additional data were collected online in 2020. The shift to online was due to the nationwide restrictions on gathering in person at that time. Although there is a risk of losing some information from non-verbal cues in online focus groups, they are nevertheless considered a feasible way to gather qualitative data (Robinson, 2019). The lockdown and pivot to online teaching had wide-ranging implications for the student experience in the UK, but this was not a prominent theme identified in our data, likely due to asking the students to reflect on a foundation year that had been completed almost entirely in person until its final weeks. At the time of our 2020 data collection, early in the autumn semester, it was unclear how long the disruption was set to continue, but there can be no doubt it presented an additional barrier to future social integration for these students. Despite this, all the students who participated in this study reported that they had formed strong, positive and helpful peer friendships during the foundation year, largely attributed to their small cohort size.
The development of social relationships at university have been identified as highly beneficial, and an important source of emotional support to ‘buffer’ against stressful situations (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Similarly, the inability to socially integrate with peers has been identified as one of seven factors impacting upon retention (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This aspect of our findings is in accord with previous studies where students have reported close friendships with their immediate cohort (Bartels-Hardege, 2018; O’Sullivan et al., 2019; Sanders and Daly, 2012/13). Our focus on the transition to first year has illuminated some of the difficulties that students had in forming additional connections with individuals outside this group. Such connections could be advantageous in providing a form of ‘bridging capital’ through which social mobility is advanced by increasing diversity within the social network (O’Sullivan et al., 2019). It could also promote a sense of belonging to the wider learning community within a subject discipline. Therefore, this highlights a requirement for universities to consider how they may provide opportunities for enhancing peer networks outside of the foundation year cohort.

The question of ‘value for money’ of the foundation year has come under increased scrutiny in the UK with the publication of the Augar review (Department for Education, 2019). Indeed, the financial implication of completing the foundation year in comparison to retaking A-Levels was highlighted by one student in the present study. Quantifiable benefits are beyond the scope of the current study; however, our findings concur with previous research showing that students do perceive value in their foundation year experiences (Bartels-Hardege, 2018; O’Sullivan et al., 2019; Sanders and Daly, 2012/13). The students in our study attributed their positive experience of the foundation year partly with the development of relevant skills and improved confidence in their studies. They saw the foundation as a stepping stone to a university degree, in line the ambition that such courses should be a mechanism to widen participation in HE.

**Recommendations for practice and research**

Several key recommendations were highlighted from the findings of this study. The first is that providers need to articulate
very clearly to students the value and relevance of skills developed as part of the foundation year curriculum. This should be through course documentation, at induction, and indeed at every opportunity during programme management. In broad multidisciplinary foundation year courses that incorporate subject disciplines outside of the students’ target award the reasons for asking them to study these additional subjects should be explained. This may involve mounting a defence of the benefits of a broad general education before subject specialism (e.g. Campbell, 2023). Citing reasons to do with efficiency and staff workload will be unlikely to garner much sympathy, especially from fee-paying students, so the decisions behind curriculum design should be defensible on pedagogical grounds, with the whole staff team made aware of the rationale.

The second recommendation is that students should be provided with opportunities to network with peers at different levels of the undergraduate programme of their target award. This could be managed through social or induction events, or through a peer mentorship scheme. These interventions could help foster a stronger sense of community within the overall programme of study, and contribute to a stronger perception of belonging to a subject discipline. In courses where students do not decide on their target award until the end of the foundation year, hearing from students in later years may be helpful to the process of decision making.

Thirdly, it is recommended that all teaching staff be mindful of the phraseology and communication used throughout teaching sessions, to mitigate inadvertently reinforcing the notion of stigma for foundation year students. Sensitivities about ‘levels of understanding’ may be greater within this group than among students who have entered directly.

Finally, it is recommended that further research examines the value of the foundation year and how it is perceived by both students and staff. Such research needs to take into account the multiple interpretations what ‘value’ may represent, and similarly different understandings of educational quality (Harvey and Green, 1993), and might be suited for further qualitative investigation. Meanwhile, examination of the success of foundation years in facilitating access to HE by students from a
range of diverse groups would be beneficial. Future studies would benefit from the application of large-scale mixed-method or quantitative approaches to examine the background of foundation year cohorts, and their subsequent outcomes over time. Such research is needed to complement qualitative approaches in evaluating the success of foundation years in widening participation.

Limitations

The views expressed by students may not represent all those who have completed a foundation year. Students who complete the year, and volunteer for a focus group, may be more inclined to justify their choice for having undertaken a foundation year, afterwards, to avoid cognitive dissonance. The students who are well integrated into their social environment may also be more likely to volunteer for a focus group. The views of students who left the foundation year before completion are not represented in this study. However, this study found that focus groups were a successful method to elicit rich data for our thematic analysis. The students from this relatively small and tightly knit cohort appeared comfortable to discuss their university experiences with each other, and to examine the positives and the negatives. Future research could use this method to follow a foundation year cohort over a longer period of time, and conduct focus groups at other key points in their journey.

Conclusion

The experience of completing a foundation year was largely viewed as positive by students. The course content facilitated the development of familiarity and skills relevant to further undergraduate study, and as a result some students felt more prepared and confident when returning to the next academic year. Some students felt that they had transitioned to adopt a university student identity. However, for others this was limited by a perceived stigma of completing a foundation year and the content of the course. The social networks formed within the cohort were strong, although there was an absence of opportunity to meet other students outside of the foundation year course.
Although students generally felt that completing the foundation year was worthwhile, universities must do all they can to ensure this is the case, and to integrate foundation year students as valued members of the learning community.
References


