

Building a successful foundation? The role of Foundation Year courses in preparing students for their degree

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Abstract: The widening participation agenda and the need to maximize retention has led the higher education sector to consider ways to support students' transition into degree courses. Foundation courses are seen as a means to achieve this, providing an opportunity for those who do not have the necessary qualifications to begin degree level work. The extent to which they succeed in preparing students for degree level study has yet to be evaluated.

This study sought reflections from current Level 4 students who had completed one of four Foundation courses across two universities, and collected Examining Board data to assess whether the performance of Foundation graduates is comparable to that of their peers. We also surveyed the number of Foundation courses available according to the UK's Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) and found a lack of consistency in the way these courses are described.

The Level 4 students had largely positive views of their respective courses stating that the experience had prepared them for degree level study. Developing a student identity and building academic confidence were two themes that permeated their responses. The performance data showed that there was no significant difference in outcome for Foundation Graduates and their direct-entry peers at the end of their first year on the degree courses.

Key terms: retention, foundation year, non-traditional entry, confidence, student identity, academic preparation.

Introduction

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of undertaking a Foundation Year course on students' subsequent academic progression in Higher Education (HE).

The impetus for this study was derived from two of the current drivers that influence Higher Education in the UK: student retention and widening participation (Rhodes and Nevill, 2004; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Yorke and Thomas 2003, Cook, 2004; Welsh Assembly Government Report, 2009). These drivers mean that Higher Education is now accessed by more students, who may not be adequately prepared for study at this level. At the same time the need to retain students is crucial for the success of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These two drivers appear in conflict and can make a challenging context for those delivering the degrees.

A number of factors have emerged as affecting student retention, and many of these are directly relevant to the widening access agenda. Some factors have an impact even before the student enrolls on the course. In Wales, a Welsh Assembly Government report (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009) on student withdrawal from higher education identified a range of demographic factors as key indicators of those at risk of withdrawal. Among these were background factors, such as gender (Cook, 2004; Woodfield, Jessop and McMillan, 2006; Sanders, Sander and Mercer, 2009), entry qualifications (Cook, 2004), and identity as a learner (Hockings, Cook and Bowl, 2007), family background in relation to prior HE engagement (Cook, 2004) and social support (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Rickinson and Rutherford, 1996; Thomas, 2002). In addition, factors to do with the choice of HE course and how that choice was made have also been identified as influential including route of entry (Cook, 2004; Davies and Elias, 2003), confidence in choice (Cook, 2004) and knowledge of course/ institution prior to arrival (Cook, 2004; Davies and Elias, 2003).

As well as these, the level of preparedness for university has been found to be influential (Cook, 2004; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Yorke and Thomas, 2003). Moreover the challenging nature of the transition to degree level study (e.g. Mercer, 2004; Hockings, Cook and Bowl, 2007) indicates how challenging the task of adequate preparation may be. Adapting to a different style of learning and teaching can present difficulties for new undergraduates who may also be experiencing simultaneous changes in their social and domestic circumstances (Stanley and Manthorpe, 2002). It is well established that students' expectations of university can be key to a successful adaptation (James and Beckett, 2006; Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2007) – and a mismatch between expectations and experience can be an indicator for attrition (Cook, 2004). Even more crucial to undergraduate success is the need to engage the students (Kinderman, 2007; Kraus and Coates, 2008; Trowler, 2010).

Whilst gender and family background are immutable, initiatives within the sector have the potential to impact on all the other factors and, thereby, to improve both student retention and the student experience.

In order to respond better to the potentially conflicting requirements of widening participation and improving retention, some universities provide Foundation Year (FY) courses for those without the formal entry qualifications for their chosen degree. According to the UK's Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), which was designed by the higher education sector to describe all the main higher education qualifications, undergraduate degrees comprise Levels 4-6, with A levels as Level 3, GCSEs grades A-C as Level 2 with grades D-G as Level 1. Within this framework, FY courses, are identified as Level 3.

The aim of FY courses is to prepare the students for degree level study, equipping them with the necessary skills, improving their confidence in their identity as learners and providing them with a taste of what is to come. Typically, these courses focus on both study skills *per se* and material relevant to the degree(s) onto which they feed. For these reasons, FY courses are increasingly popular as part of the widening participation agenda as they are designed to tackle many of the issues that influence retention at degree level. However, as yet, little is known about their effectiveness in meeting these objectives.

Our first objective was to identify the prevalence of FY courses across the sector. We undertook a review of the courses available on the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS), the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK. This review, in the summer of 2011 identified 819 Foundation courses, offered by a total of 106 HEIs. Of these, 92 were Foundation Degrees and therefore excluded from further analysis, leaving 727 courses. Across these we discerned 60 different formats for the descriptors ("BSc" or "BA" or "Fdn" plus indicator of topic). Some were listed as part of feeder degree(s) and some as stand-alone courses. The given duration of the courses varied from one-year to six-years; evidently some were part-time and, in some cases, the given time span included the subsequent degree but not in all cases and there was no apparent rationale underlying this dichotomy.

Applicants for FY courses fall largely into three main areas: those who did not achieve the required grades for their chosen degree course; mature learners returning to study; and those who need specific skills for their chosen degree (e.g. laboratory skills). In each of these cases, the student would not be permitted onto the first year of their preferred undergraduate course, meaning that without the FY course the candidate would have little or no chance of undertaking a degree. A key feature of these courses is that there is a guaranteed place on the chosen degree on successful completion of the FY course. The question becomes: can these courses transform ineligible degree level applicants into successful undergraduates?

To explore this issue our study was undertaken as part of a programme of research evaluating the impact of FY courses on students. This phase of the

study focused on FY students who had progressed to degree level study and, at the time of data collection, were completing Level 4 of Higher Education.

Sample and Methods

We collected data from graduates from four FY courses across two universities: Science and Health Professions FY courses in the University of the West of England (UWE); Health Science and Social Science at Cardiff Metropolitan University. For three of these four FY courses, the proportion of school-leavers to mature students was approximately 4:1; on the Health Professions course, this proportion was reversed.

The entry requirements for the two Cardiff Metropolitan FY courses required a minimum of 80 points across two A levels whilst the degrees onto which its student progress typically looked for at least 280 points across three A levels. For the UWE Science course, the entry requirement was 120 points to include at least one A level pass, whereas the degrees onto which it feeds typically required a minimum of 300 points. The Health Professions course had no formal tariff but rather considered each case individually, although the related degree courses had minimum tariffs of at least 240 points. Thus the gap in entry qualifications between the FY courses and the subsequent degrees was substantial.

Our participants were all on Level 4 in 2010-11; the first year of their chosen degree course after successfully completing a FY course in the same institution the previous year. All contact with these graduates for this study was conducted by a research assistant who was clearly separate from the teaching staff and who could therefore guarantee confidentiality to all participants.

There were two phases to data collection: we sought the views of students through focus groups and an electronic survey as well as progression data collected from Level 4 examining boards. We undertook a series of five focus groups with FY graduates as they were approaching the end of their first year of degree level study. Each group comprised only graduates from one FY course who thus already knew each other, making it more likely they would feel relaxed enough to speak freely. Timetabling issues meant that graduates from one course were split into two separate focus groups, (Social Sciences FY). In total 16 students (11 females, 5 males) took part in these groups including some mature students. The agenda for these groups comprised reviewing their experience of their FY course - what was, and what was not, useful about it - and the extent to which they felt it had prepared them for their current studies. These data were summarised and circulated to participants for commentary, amendments or additions. All comments received endorsed the summary as accurate. These focus groups were supplemented by an electronic survey sent to other ex-FY students which collected further qualitative data. We chose to deploy the survey for

additional data in case students who were not able to take part in the focus group wanted to add their views. Fifteen students completed the survey.

From the Level 4 examining boards in the summer of 2011 we collected data for those degree courses onto which three of these four FY courses fed. It was not viable to collect this for the Health Professions course, the smallest of the four courses with an annual intake of less than 20, fed into a number of health professional courses with large intakes, with only a few of the FY graduates entering each of these. This numerical imbalance would make examining board data collection somewhat unwieldy and any subsequent interpretation difficult. Data for the graduates from the three larger courses, each with annual intakes over 50, allowed us to measure how ex-FY students were performing in comparison to their peers who had not had the opportunity, or the requirement, to take a FY course.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committees in each institution. All FY graduates then completing Level 4 of a degree course were contacted by email and provided with information about the aims and design of the study; volunteers were sought to take part in the focus groups and, later, the survey link was emailed to all students towards the end of the summer term. In each case volunteering to take part implied consent.

Results

To ensure participants' confidentiality, the data from the focus groups did not record individuals so quotes below are designated by the Focus Group only. However survey participants, whose anonymity was assured, are identified by number.

Benefits of undertaking a Foundation Year course

The students' views of the experience on the FY courses were largely positive. They described the courses as well-structured and said that they felt well-supported by the staff and by other students. The phrases used to describe the course included a 'school for skills' (Group 5) and a 'stepping stone' (Group 3) into higher education:

Level [4] feels like it is going smoothly whereas students who did not do a foundation course are struggling (Group 5).

Foundation fills the gaps in knowledge for the subjects that we are learning now in Level [4] (Group 2).

The things you are taught on foundation bridges the gap between A levels and university perfectly. As A levels don't prepare you for university at all (Survey Participant 5).

They also compared it favourably with the alternatives that had been available at the time:

I would have found it [going straight onto the degree] an extremely stressful experience and I'm so glad I had the opportunity to understand some of the processes involved in doing a degree prior to starting it (Survey Participant 3).

It's better than going back and doing A levels (Group 3).

It's better than an Access course mainly because of the guaranteed place (Group 3).

The suggestion appears to be that 'going back' to retake 'A' levels would have felt like a retrograde step and that the training provided on the FY course was more tailored to their requirements than the alternatives. It is evident that a guaranteed place on successful completion of this course is a real incentive for those who otherwise would not be given a place on their chosen degree course.

Some suggested that attendance on the elements of the FY course should have been compulsory as they felt that not all their erstwhile peers had been putting in the necessary effort or learning the skills they would need.

It's a waste of time being on the course if you don't attend (Group 4).

This, again, would suggest an overall positive impression of their own experiences on the FY course and of what they had gained from it.

When asked to what extent they felt that the experience had helped prepare them for Level 4, their responses were again positive. They identified a range of useful academic behaviours they had acquired described as developing 'good habits' (Groups 3 and 4):

- These academic skills need practising (Group 1).
- The development of independent learning (Group 2).
- Having a good work ethic; being organised (Group 3).
- Essay writing skills (Group 4).
- Use an academic style in writing (Group 5).
- Getting back in to academic working and work (Survey Participant 3).
- Assignment writing, referencing, prioritising workload (Survey Participant 14).

Participants also identified the importance of social support, not just from their peers, but from academic staff as well:

You already feel settled with friends (Survey Participant 1).

The community between Foundation students; we supported each other (Group 3).

The development of relationships with other students and staff (Group 5).

We felt listened to during the Foundation year (Group 1).

There was an awareness that these things were different at Level 4 and that that the level of support offered to students differed from that on the FY course. One group of participants suggested reasons for this:

This may be due to financial pressures on staff (Group 1).

This may be due to lecturers at Level [4] having a different kind of academic relationship with their students (Group 1).

However, not everyone felt that the course had fully prepared them for what to expect on their degree:

During Level [4] the acquisition of knowledge feels like you have to start from scratch despite doing a Foundation course (Group 4).

You may think you are doing well in foundation but you found that it didn't actually prepare you for doing well in Level [4] (Group 2).

[FY Course] did not stress enough the extra reading you would have to do above and beyond the lectures you would have to do (Survey Participant 4).

This latter notion is interesting as it tacitly acknowledges the step up from Level 3 to Level 4 study.

Taken together, the students' views paint a picture of emerging confidence in their ability to study at the appropriate level (Figure 1), confidence being a key to successful studying (Sander & Sanders, 2006).



Figure 1: Perceived benefits of undertaking a Foundation Year course.

Drawbacks of Foundation Year Courses

There were also a few adverse comments on individual components or the manner of their delivery but there were no clear patterns in the criticisms. Some raised individual timetabling issues but, again, there was nothing that spanned the courses or seemed to be of universal interest. The one issue that did arise across participants identified a potential problem for these courses:

We couldn't see how useful some aspects of the course were going to be at Level [4](Group 1).

In many cases, this comment arose around mathematics or numeracy. It was evident that students had not expected to encounter numbers as part of their chosen subject area, perhaps feeling that they had left maths behind now that they had chosen to specialise. In some instances, the participants acknowledged that, once on the degree, the relevance of these less popular areas had become apparent. As academics we need to consider how this apparent lack of relevance is likely to impact on the students. If they perceive some aspects of their FY course as peripheral to their needs, this is likely to impact on both engagement and attendance. Indeed the non-attendance issue mentioned by participants may be, at least in part,

explained by students failing to see the essential nature of the skills they are being taught for subsequent study.

One more general theme did emerge, as a more negative aspect of undertaking such a course, and this was to do with the fragility of participants' developing identity as students. It appeared that in some ways these courses helped with this development by 'being in a university environment' (Groups 1, 2, 3 and 4). Conversely this identity was threatened if the FY course 'didn't feel as important as other courses' and was perceived to be 'not taken seriously' (Group 2). FY students appeared to feel at risk of being considered second class students, perhaps even not yet 'proper' students. They suggested that the staff who teach on these courses 'should be chosen carefully' and they resented it when it felt as if 'staff were chosen because of availability, as opposed to appropriateness to the course' (Group 2). Another group went as far as to suggest that 'maybe staff training could incorporate professional styles of teaching that are geared towards foundation students' (Group 3). This issue of selection of teaching staff and academic staff views of FY courses is one that requires further investigation.

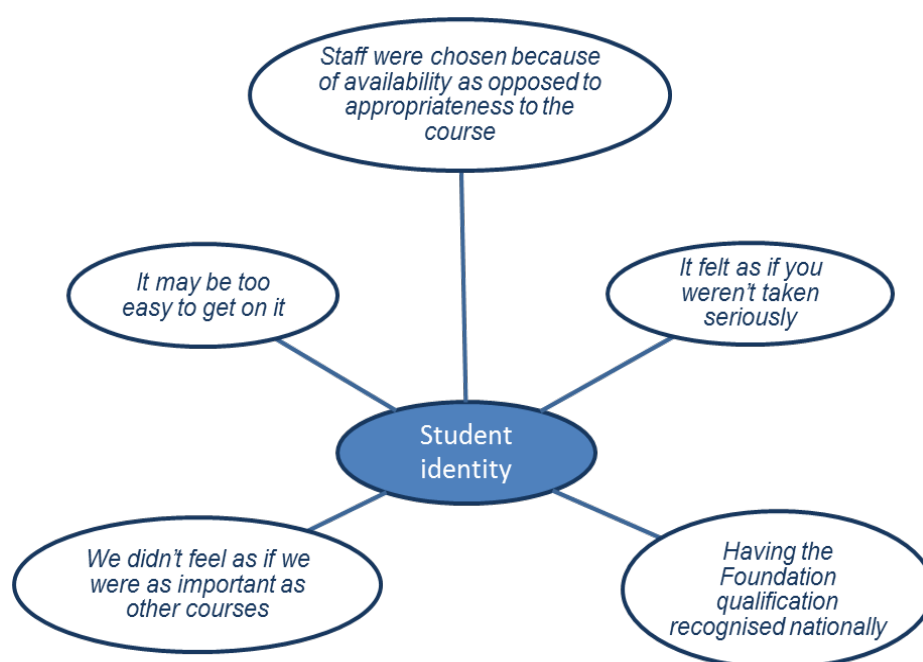


Figure 2: Drawback of undertaking a Foundation Year course

Progression data

Progression data were obtained from 16 Examining Boards in the summer of 2011 comprising outcomes for 899 students of which 119 were FY graduates. Table 1 gives a breakdown by discipline area.

Table 1: Student type by Discipline Area

	Foundation Year Graduates	Direct entry students
Science – University of the West of England	61	470
Health Sciences - Cardiff Metropolitan University	24	101
Social Sciences - Cardiff Metropolitan University	34	209
Total	119	780

It appears that the UWE Science course has a higher completion rate, with the best part of their cohort of 65 students continuing to degree level study. In Cardiff Met, approximately half of the Health Science and two thirds of the Social Science graduates continued to degree level.

For each discipline area, as represented by the three FY courses, an overall Level 4 mark was calculated for each student, comparing FY graduates with direct entry students on the same courses (Figure 3).

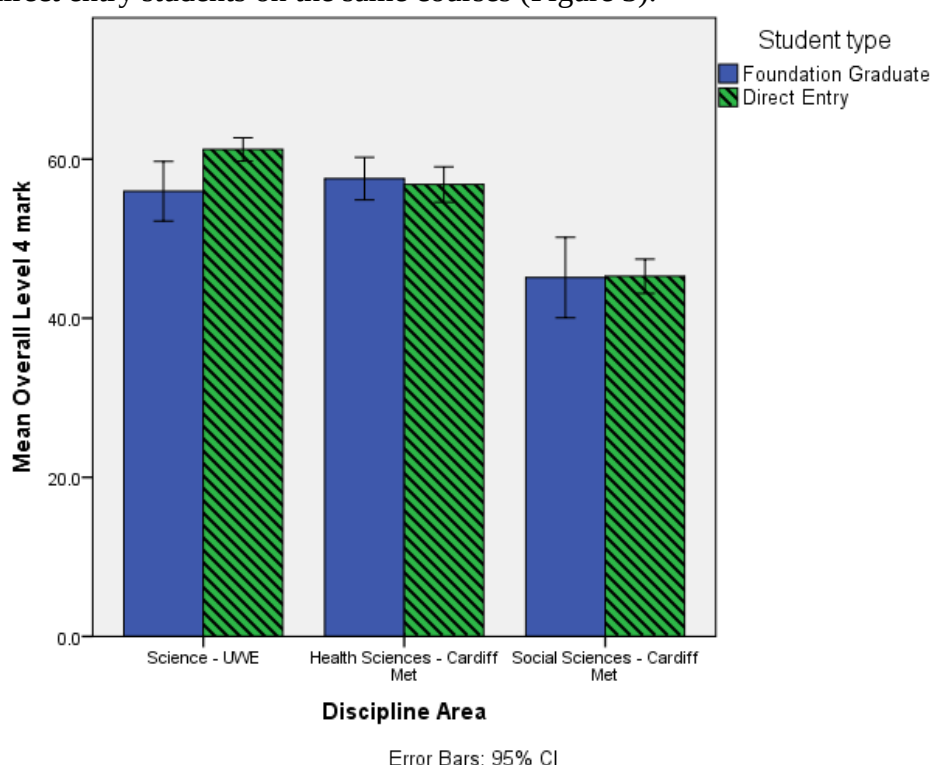


Figure 3: Level 4 Overall marks by discipline area: Means (SDs)

ANOVA confirmed that there was no effect of student type ($F_{1, 893}=0.892$, $p>.05$), although there was a significant difference between disciplines ($F_{2, 893}=20.437$, $p<.001$) and no interaction ($F_{2, 893}=1.641$, $p>.05$). That the Social Sciences mark at Cardiff Metropolitan University is lower than the other two is an artefact of the way in which data are presented at these boards. These spreadsheets include the marks for those who have withdrawn

from the degrees during the year and therefore have an incomplete set of marks, bringing down the overall average. The key finding here is that the overall mark for FY students is comparable to that of the other students on their respective courses.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The progression data are heartening in showing that those who successfully complete a FY course are in a position, at Level 4, to achieve at the same standard as their peers who entered straight onto the degree. Thus, although these students would not have been able to enroll onto their degree course without completing this Level 3 course, by the end of Level 4 they appear to be on a par with the rest of their cohort. In this study we do not have data on those not successfully completing the FY course who represented approximately one third of the initial entrants. However, we could surmise that non-completion of a FY course may have less impact on self-esteem than the equivalent non-completion at Level 4. This is an area that is worthy of further investigation. Nonetheless these data show that FY graduates are performing at an academic level equivalent to their peers.

The four FY courses that took part in this study were quite disparate in nature. Entry requirements differed between the two universities and the proportion of mature students in the one course contrasted markedly with the other three courses. Moreover the Health Professions course was taught away from the university campus which meant a different type of experience for these students. We have commented elsewhere on the different approaches of these students to their academic work (Sanders, Dalt and Regan, 2011). Given these differences, the commonality of the data from the three groups is noticeable, suggesting that these findings may be amenable to generalisation. However, that only two institutions were involved means a degree of caution is required.

Data from the students' views suggest that successful FY students who progress onto the degree of their choice have generally positive views of their experience and perceive a real value in this Level 3 course. Whilst this is encouraging, it is useful to remember what the theory of cognitive dissonance would suggest: that those who invest their time completing the course are likely to justify this investment after the event. It would therefore be surprising if participants, who were after all volunteers, did not present a constructive account of their experiences on the FY. That the detail of what they described showed consensus suggests a good deal of agreement about the perceived benefits of these courses.

It is evident that discipline-specific material is popular and generally well received by students whilst the more generic skills have a mixed reception. When the students can see the relevance of what they are doing and can discern that it will be direct preparation for degree level, they seem to be

prepared to engage and put in the necessary effort to benefit from the experience. They appreciate the opportunity to practise skills as they are taught and find the FY environment a safe place in which to practise. However, when they do not see the relevance, there is more reluctance to engage fully with the material. It is likely that we, as academic staff, are fully aware of the rationale behind each aspect of the syllabus and we know how it maps on to and prepares students for their degree level work. It is possible that we take this connection for granted, which in turn would mean that we may fail to explain it adequately or to justify its inclusion on the curriculum.

Recommendation 1

Staff teaching on a FY course need to ensure that a clear rationale for each aspect of the syllabus is made explicit throughout the duration of the course.

One negative aspect of undertaking a FY course appears to be its perceived low status. This impacts on the students in two ways. They feel as though they are not yet ‘proper’ students, that being on such a course puts them in an inferior position to those already studying at degree level. This, in turn, can adversely affect their development of a student identity, which is arguably something key to the learning process (Christie et al., 2009). The other perceived impact refers to the staff teaching on these courses; there was a view that this was a somewhat ad hoc process, rather than a vocation - that staff are assigned to this responsibility depending on their availability.

To some extent they were able to counter this negative experience by identifying advantages that they had once on the degree over those students who entered straight into Level 4. They cited their familiarity with practices and procedures, with staff expectations and feedback, even with the layout of the campus. However, the fact of having not been allowed to enroll straight onto a degree in the first place is likely to have had an adverse impact on their confidence in their own ability initially; if they then felt that others perceived them as second class students in some way, this is likely to have caused them further uncertainty in their own ability. As academic staff we need to be careful that we do not add to this by considering FY students to be somehow less important than others and to ensure that all students have equal rights to resources. The extent to which the staff teaching on these courses may also feel undervalued by their HEI is an area worthy of further investigation.

Recommendation 2

The status of FY courses should be reconsidered across the sector as a useful and necessary adjunct to degree level study. Part of this discussion could be used to effect a further recommendation.

Recommendation 3

The sector, with UCAS, should develop a more standardised way of describing and presenting FY courses to facilitate appropriate recruitment.

It would seem, therefore, that FY courses can provide a key opportunity for students who lack the qualifications to enter degree level study. They provide a skills training that will stand students in good stead throughout their academic career. They provide a means of helping to develop a student identity that will facilitate an appropriate 'emotional interaction between the student and the learning environment of the university' (Christie et al., 2008, p. 567). It is possible to suggest that programmes, such as these, may be considered one means of 'closing the gap' (Williamson et al., 2011, p. 146; Yorke 2000; Lowe & Cook, 2003).

What, then, can we conclude from these findings about the role of FY courses with regard to what works for student retention? We can see that these courses take students who are ineligible for degree courses and raise them to a standard of equivalent achievement to conventional direct entry students. We can also see that, on the whole, the successful FY graduates look back positively on this experience and believe themselves to have benefitted from it. However, we cannot yet conclude that successfully completing such a course improves a student's academic performance. It is certainly plausible that the skills and attributes acquired from the course enable a better standard of academic endeavour and an easier transition to degree level study than would otherwise be the case. This is not the only possible interpretation of these data. It is equally possible that the FY course, in fact, acts as a screening tool after negative decisions based on results from 'A' levels (or equivalent qualifications). If this is the case then what these courses are doing is providing prospective students with a second chance to prove themselves. Determining to what extent either of these two explanations apply is an issue for further research. What we can conclude, whatever the mechanism, is that FY courses provide an opportunity for studying at undergraduate level to candidates who would otherwise be prevented from taking a degree and, in this capacity, these courses do indeed build a successful foundation.

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