



## **Learning Leaps: Making the Transition from Foundation Degree to BA/ BSc Top-Up in HLST Subjects**

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**Final Report and Case Study Article**

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## **Abstract**

This article offers an overview of the key points emerging from our research into the transitional issues experienced by students when progressing from Foundation Degree to Top-up or direct entry into final year of a BA course. We have both worked in the HE in FE sector for a number of years, and have observed a number of students over a range of disciplines, who struggle with academic progression from Foundation Degree onwards. This HLST Subject Network funded research and development project afforded us the opportunity to formalise our earlier observations, and investigate the students' experiences of transition, from both an academic and personal perspective.

In this article, we discuss the key issues that students report are either barriers to, or useful strategies for, successful progression on to Top-up or direct entry. We will also discuss the lecturers' perspectives on student transition, and offer examples of good practice in terms of learning and teaching, curriculum design, and other extra-curricular activities.

## **Introduction**

The broad aims of the project were to identify ways in which Foundation Degree students can be encouraged to engage with theory and practice, to clarify the processes these students go through to make 'learning leaps', and identify any barriers or challenges to their 'learning leaps', from both social and academic perspectives.

In order to complete the project we engaged with student groups from two key HLST areas: Sport Coaching and Development, and Service Management, through separate focus groups and interviews in order to capture student voices talking about their experiences of making the academic transition to the top-up year at the University of Brighton.

We also made contact with academic course teams through the use of a questionnaire for the Service Management programmes, and through a semi-structured interview with the Course Leader for Sport Coaching and Development Top-up, to elicit their understanding and expectation of the academic 'leap' that is required of students.

Additionally, we embarked on a literature search, bringing together a range of literature on the topic of Foundation Degree student transitions, as well as literature on threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2006, 2008), learning leaps (Wisker et al, 2006), theory into practice, and student motivation and engagement.

## **Methodologies**

Data collation and analysis techniques varied among the participant groups (Sports Coaching, and Service Management), due to the individual involvement each project researcher had with the students and course areas. For example, Rachael Carden, a teacher-practitioner researcher, carried out the data collation and analysis with the Service Management students and staff, and made extensive analysis using a content analysis approach (Miles and Hubermann, 1994) to reduce the data and find key themes. In contrast Catherine McConnell, a third-party researcher, arranged focus groups and interviews with the Sports Coaching staff and students which resulted in a more action research approach. The data collated was transcribed and audio analysed by key staff involved in the Sport Coaching and Development Top-up degree, and a peer learning intervention suggested by a student was piloted alongside the project.

### **Research Methodology – Service Management**

Of 25 students approached by email in October 2009 inviting them to participate in the study, nine agreed to take part in the first data collection session, and further investigation took place with four self-selecting students from the original group. Seven lecturers from the second year of the Foundation Degree programme at a partner college were also invited to participate. This was in order to investigate staff perceptions of the difficulties that these students currently face, and a further seven final year lecturers at the School of Service Management, University of Brighton informed the study about their perceptions of the students' 'threshold crossing' (Meyer & Land, 2006) in the final year.

The data collection method was based on the Krause and Coates (2008) model which compares expectations and experience amongst undergraduates in Australia by investigating seven key 'engagement scales': transition, academic, peer, student-staff, intellectual, online, and beyond-class (extra-curricular). An initial questionnaire, based on a Likert Scale around this model took place in November 2009 to investigate the expectations of the Foundation Degree students in their final year and to determine which of the seven areas were perceived to be most important. The areas identified as most important by the students were then investigated in a follow-up focus group with the same nine students.

During November 2009 and May 2010 third year lecturers at the School of Service Management were invited to complete a questionnaire based around the concept of 'threshold crossing' at level 6. The underpinning question themes were based on those used on the QAA and SEEC level benchmark statements, to investigate staff perceptions of students' progression and 'learning leaps'.

In May 2010 individual interviews were held with four of the original focus group

students to find out if their expectations had matched their actual experiences, and to investigate their understanding of the threshold concepts that had been identified by their third year lecturers. In order to make the study more reliable, and therefore more valid, an attempt was made to triangulate the data collection through further distribution of the questionnaire among Foundation Degree lecturers, and interviews with two students on the third year programme who had not progressed from Foundation Degree route, but had undertaken the BA (Hons) course from the outset. The format of the questions asked were identical to those used with the progressing Foundation Degree students.

Data analysis took the form of analytic induction based on Miles and Hubermann's model (1994) of identifying key themes through content analysis, undertaking reduction and clustering data.

### **Research Methodology – Sports Coaching and Development**

Between October and December 2009 a parallel project was initiated with the Top-up Sports Coaching and Development students, involving a small peer mentoring scheme led by a Top-up graduate. She held one hour, weekly sessions to support the students in their transition to university. The graduate mentor was trained in the areas identified by this research project, into institutional orientation, linking theory to practice, critical thinking, and independent study. Seven timetabled sessions were held for the Top-up students enabling them to ask questions, offer reassurance in terms of placement ideas, and offer signposting to University advice and guidance services.

In December 2009 a follow up focus group with nine students who had attended these sessions, as well as an in-depth interview with the peer mentor, helped to determine the suitability and effectiveness of the sessions. Interviews were also held with the Top-up Course Leader (December 2009) and with the Foundation Degree Course Leader at the partner college delivering the FdA Sports Coaching and Development (February 2010).

A further focus group was set up with seven Foundation Degree Sport Coaching and Development students studying at a partner college in June 2010 which followed an informal format and, with the consent of the students, was video recorded.

As a result of the success of the aforementioned peer mentoring scheme, another initiative was established in June 2010. A peer-led mentoring session, held at the University of Brighton, was run by three Top-up students to guide Foundation Degree students. The session took place on a scheduled day that final year BA Students were presenting at a dissemination event (the 'Chelsea Exhibition').

Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed in order for the data to be coded and analysed effectively. Participants signed consent forms prior to being

recorded to ensure ethical standards were adhered to. Both study approaches conformed to the Tier 3 University of Brighton Ethics Policy. All students and lecturers were made aware of issues around confidentiality, anonymity and ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

## **Results – Service Management**

The nine Service Management Foundation Degree (FdA) students who completed questionnaires and attended the group interview in November 2009, indicated that they had many areas of concern about crossing from level five to six during the academic year 2009-10. Most marked amongst the students was the expectation that the level of academic work would be much more challenging than in their previous year. Furthermore, when comparing themselves to the existing students the FdAs were uncertain as to whether they had the academic skills or subject knowledge for this level of study. Additionally, two key emerging themes (mutual comprehension of metalanguage and the use of the dissertation as a measure of threshold crossing) have been identified as areas for future research.

The six third year Service Management lecturers (L3s) who chose to participate in this study were asked to choose which of the SEEC (2008) benchmark skills they saw as most key to the successful progression from level five to level six. From the cognitive skills listed (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, application, group working, learning resources, self evaluation, information management, autonomy, communications, problem solving, application of skills, autonomy in skills use) analysis and synthesis were identified by 83% as key, and evaluation was identified by 67% as indicative of threshold crossing. The ability to work autonomously was also seen as a key transferable skill by 67% of the third year lecturers.

There are marked differences in the anticipated skills identified as threshold concepts of the Foundation Degree (FD) lecturers, and the experienced results of the third year lecturers (L3s). FD lecturers saw analysis and synthesis as less key to threshold crossing than L3s (analysis: FD - 70%; L3s - 83%), (synthesis: 57% - L2s; L3s - 83%). Furthermore, 57% of FD lecturers predicted that the ability to work autonomously would be key to threshold crossing, compared with 67% of L3s. 67% of L3s stated that this autonomous working was more challenging for FdA students than existing students in their third year. This could indicate that the FD lecturers do not perceive autonomous working to be as important as L3s to successful achievement at level six. However, the opposite trend is true for evaluation. All FD lecturers saw evaluation as vital to threshold crossing compared with 67% of L3s. Therefore FD lecturers would appear to be over-estimating the importance of the skill of evaluation for third year success compared with the perceptions of L3s.

Is there a shared understanding of what analysis is? Any confusion between lecturers and students over what constitutes 'good' analysis could have a significant impact on learners' achievement. Both FdA1 and FdA2 students highlighted this difficulty with FdA1 explaining:

*Exactly, again I don't quite know about this analysis thing. I've kind of got a broad 'analysis' - would you categorise my 'analysis' as the same as your 'analysis'? Are we thinking the same thing, different things, would there be a cross over or what? There again the tutor that's marking it, would they say that my analysis is good or...? (FdA1)*

Within the School of Service Management delivering the third year Top-up, and partner college delivering the Foundation Degree, discussions about assessment criteria should include an attempt to reach a shared understanding about what 'good analysis' actually is. When third year lecturers were asked if there was a common understanding both between themselves and the students of the exact definitions of analysis, evaluation and synthesis, all lecturers agreed that the definitions would vary quite widely.

In November, 2009 all nine FdA students anticipated that they would have to work more independently in their final year than on the FdA course. Five third year lecturers stated that autonomous working was problematic for FdA learners who were (generally) less able to work independently than existing students.

In May 2010, the FdAs stated that they had indeed found autonomous working problematic. They did, however, acknowledge that the ability to work with limited supervision and guidance was a necessary marker for this level of study. There appears to be a marked difference in the preparedness for autonomous working between the existing students and FdA students. A gradual lessening of tutorial support in the second year of the BA programme had prepared existing students to work independently in their final year. FdA students however found the changes in both the amount and form of guidance given by tutors at the partner college in year two, and at the University in year three, problematic.

In summary, the troublesome factors for the FdA students progressing from level 2 to level 3, identified by students and staff were found to include the following:

- Metalanguage (the inexplicit use of academic language)
- Preparedness for writing the dissertation
- Ability to analyse and synthesise information
- Confidence to work autonomously
- Mismatched expectations of tutorial support available

## Results – Sports Coaching and Development

The outcomes of the research conducted with the Sports Coaching and Development Top-up students' focuses upon the transitional issues that the students were most worried about before arriving on Top-up, also on the effects of the peer mentoring scheme on their transition. The data is qualitative in nature, and is not a large enough sample to be generalised, however, themes have been drawn from the transcripts in order to highlight the key issues these students feel are important to them personally.

Themes emerging from the focus group with Top-up students at the end of their first term, relating to transition:

- Student(s) had felt that achieving the Top-up would be 'out of reach'
- Prioritising and multi-tasking the workload
- Concerns about the amount of academic reading required
- Academic conventions, such as referencing (metalanguage)
- Orientation to the University, and 'fitting in' (identity)

Themes emerging from the focus group with Top-up students at the end of their first term, relating to peer mentoring:

- Students would value lecturer endorsement and input into the structure and content of mentoring sessions
- Mentor sessions should not be an afterthought – should be embedded within the timetable, preferably between core lectures and seminars
- Mentor sessions should not be held in a traditional 'classroom' setting – the environment needs to acknowledge everyone as equals with no clear position of authority
- Helped the Top-up cohort to interact and bond as a group

Similarly to the findings from the Service Management research, the expectations of tutorial support available did also feature amongst the Sports Coaching and Development Top-up students:

*... a lot of us have noticed... You're not being mollycoddled anymore; you've got to get on with it. (Top-up student)*

*At [college] they had more time to support you with any help you needed or tutorials and I think here that they don't support you enough, I don't think. (Top-up student)*

Relating to identity, a proportion of the Top-up students described feelings of inferiority as a Foundation Degree student:

*...last year I felt that we were second tier students to the rest of the University... it's quite annoying to be classified like that, like you're slightly less important because of the fact that you're on a Foundation Degree. (Top-up student)*

The 'leap' in terms of progression was also a topic raised by students, particularly in terms of the preparation and required prior learning experience necessary to succeed in many third year modules:

*... I don't know why they offer that module to us because for me we haven't got any sort of foundation ... I don't understand half the time what the abbreviations are... (Top-up student)*

The students were also aware that they would not receive any formal feedback on assessed work in the Top-up year before the semester break in February:

*Basically you come in and you're told your first hand in date is in January and you just think 'oh I'm going to cruise all the way through to Christmas'... (Top-up student)*

*...your first assignment of the year is in January and I just think to myself 'I'll just do it in a couple of weeks'. A couple of weeks beforehand I'll start it then, because that's the way we did it at college. (Top-up student)*

*I think if it was encouraged to give a bit of work in just to see what your writing style is like ... just to give you a bit of ... so you know what to expect and what sort of levels they're looking for. (Top-up student)*

In summary, the key issues identified with the Sport Coaching and Development Top-up students seem to concur with the findings drawn from the research with the Service Management students, mainly in the following areas:

- Experience of one-to-one support available is markedly less than experienced at their partner college when students enter the university environment
- Confidence in their ability to achieve the Top-up degree could be a barrier to learning and working autonomously
- The use of metalanguage (academic language and conventions) acts as a barrier
- Their status as Foundation Degree/ Top-up students was generally felt to be low (their perception)
- The delay in summative feedback until the end of semester one is problematic

## Conclusions

In conclusion, our research has identified a number of issues that students face when making the progression from Foundation Degree at level two, to Top-up at level three, particularly when the transition involves an institutional change. Some of the issues identified above relate to the students perceived barriers, such as confidence in ability, or their status as Foundation Degree or Top-up students. However, other issues are actual barriers, such as the persistent use of metalanguage within the University environment which is neither transparent nor made explicit to students, resulting in the mismatch of expectations of both staff and students. More could be done to enable lecturers in both partner colleges and the University to discuss learning outcomes, assessment criterion, curriculum design and level descriptors in order to align the Foundation Degree course with the requirements for achievement at level three.

The outcomes of our research have been raised with the relevant course teams who kindly contributed to this project, and we hope that institutional change at least at course level in HLST areas will take place as a result.

## Further Information

Should you wish to contact the project team for further information about this study, please email Catherine or Rachael:

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### **Biographies:**

Catherine McConnell is a lecturer in learning development within the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Brighton. With a background of teaching HE in FE, Catherine now conducts educational research into areas of academic and social progression and transition, and coordinates a successful peer learning scheme at the University.

Rachael Carden is a lecturer at City College Brighton and Hove, a partner college to the University of Brighton delivering HE in FE. Rachael teaches the business studies elements of a range of Service Management Foundation Degrees, and is conducting this research project also as part of her Masters in Education.