Bridging from FdA onto Honours degrees:
A Report on Students’ Perceptions

Diana Aronstam
London College of Fashion,
University of the Arts London

February 2009
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Introduction and Context

As part of the National Arts Learning Network (NALN) Bridging Curriculum project strand, students' perceptions of their bridging programmes in three NALN institutions were investigated. The research was carried out between December 2006 and January 2008. The respondents had all completed a Foundation Degree in Art (FdA), and were required to undertake a bridging programme in order to progress on to the final year of a BA Honours degree. This document reports on the findings from this research.

In accordance with Foundation Degree (FD) benchmarks, all are required to have a progression route in place to achieve an honours degree (QAA 2004). In some institutions, this progression is automatic, while in others students are required to undergo a bridging programme. These provide a means of making up ‘lost’ subject content as a result of the emphasis on work placement and vocational content in the FD. Entry requirements for these programmes vary, as do the length and content.

There is a dearth of qualitative information on this particular form of progression. While there is an extensive literature on transition, it has tended to concentrate on the move from further to higher education and the experiences of first year students. (See, for example, Christie et al, 2008; Bennett et al, 2008; Knox, 2005). Typically, the focus has been on students from a widening participation background. Thus, as Penketh and Goddard (2008) note, in their study on the experiences of mature women students progressing from FD to Honours, a “qualitative analysis of the perceptions of students progressing to honours by this route is ripe for investigation, particularly in relation to the significance this has for life-long learning and widening participation in Higher Education” (p. 315).

HEFCE’s (2008) review of Foundation Degree provision provides some useful statistical data in relation to progression. This indicated that 54 per cent [2,485] of FD home qualifiers from 2004-5 immediately progressed to an honours programme in 2005-6. Of these, 2,260 stayed on at the same institution, while 225 registered at a new institution. In the institutions where students stayed on, 87 per cent were given full credit for their preceding two years, with only 3 per cent having to start over. For those moving to a new institution, 14 percent had to start over, with 60 per cent being given full credit for their FDs. This represents a 10 percent drop in relation to figures for the previous year.

In terms of success rates, 76 per cent of those progressing onto a final year honours programme were reported as graduating in that year. Relative to figures for the previous year, this represents an increase of 5 percent. Of these, 8 percent attained Firsts, and 32 percent Upper Seconds. As the HEFCE (2008) report notes, a variety of explanations could account for the 24 percent who did not qualify: they may have failed, dropped out, qualified later on, or have been unable to qualify as a result of “some formality”.

The HEFCE (2007) review on Foundation Degrees points out that it would appear that for some students the transition from a FD to honours may be problematic, but in the absence of further data, it was not possible to draw firmer conclusions. One of the only
studies to have examined the experience of students progressing from a foundation degree at an FE college to an honours degree at a university found that the experience ‘created considerable levels of stress for the students’ (Greenbank, 2007: 91). This was largely attributed to the differences in culture between the FE and HE environments: the latter was found to have adopted a more academic approach, provided less support and emphasised independent learning to a greater extent. Penketh and Goddard (2008) found, in analyzing the narratives of mature women students, that while they had derived some confidence from their experience as FD students, their written assignments were the predominant concern. Most of these students, too, had not undertaken their FDs in the same institution, having studied either online or at an outreach centre.

The students reported on in the present study were accustomed to an HE environment from the outset of their FdAs, and did not have to adjust to a new institution for their final year; this would make for a substantially different experience from those progressing from FE institutions and outreach programmes. While the third year experience was not the main focus of the present study, some findings on this issue will be presented.

1.1 Aims of the current research

The aims of this research are as follows:

- To investigate students’ perceptions of their bridging programmes, across 3 institutions;

- To identify some of the issues for students making the transition from foundation to third year honours degree level;

- To identify good practice in bridging provision and inform new developments for those already providing such programmes, as well as for those who may choose to offer bridging at some point in the future;

- To disseminate the findings of this research to NALN institutions.
1.2 The participating institutions

Three institutions participated in the research. Confidentiality was guaranteed to both participating students and staff, and for this reason, the institutions cannot be named. All three institutions are providers of art and design courses. At Institution A, students from 3 bridging programmes were involved. At Institution B, students from 7 programmes participated, while at Institution C, 5 courses were represented in the research.

2 Data Collection

Research data was obtained from questionnaires, interviews and semi-structured group discussions, over a 13 month period between December 2006 and January 2008. The focus in each case was on the extent to which students had found their bridging programmes beneficial as a preparation for their third year. All respondents were self-selecting, having been informed that the research was taking place, and invited to take part.

The questionnaires were drawn up following semi-structured group discussions conducted in December 2006 with students at institutions A and C. As far as possible, the group discussions were facilitated rather than led, but prompt questions were introduced at times in order to encourage discussion of relevant issues. These discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed. A provisional coding structure was drawn up, according to themes. This approach was informed by grounded theory, as the themes were constructed from the data. Following this, responses were coded, verified by an additional person, and then analysed.

The findings for each institution are reported on separately in this document, and the specific methodology for each one is outlined in more detail in the relevant section. The original intention had been to run discussion groups and subsequently administer questionnaires at all 3 participating institutions, but practical problems prevented this from happening.

3 Findings

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1 The questionnaire asked students to identify 3 things they liked and 3 things they disliked about their bridging course, as well as recommend changes. It also asked respondents to rate the extent to which they felt the bridging had given them the confidence to progress.
3.1 Institution A

Three semi-structured group interviews were held at Institution A during July 2007, with students from three different courses. These took place at the end of their bridging programmes. Two of the programmes continued for a few days in September, following a break over the summer. Follow-up group interviews were held with students from two of the courses in November 2007 and January 2008.

All bridging programmes at this institution are run as discreet programmes, of varying lengths, at the end of the FdA. In order to progress onto the final year of Honours, students had to attain a Merit on their FdAs.

3.1.1 Course A

Six students participated in a semi-structured group discussion. Two were hoping to progress onto a BA (Hons) course in the same area, while the remaining 4 were planning to take a year out in industry before returning to complete the final year. As a result of this, it was not possible to run a follow-up session with these students in their third year.

Programme Details

The aim of the course was to introduce students to dissertation writing at BA level. This included choosing a topic and formulating a proposal.

The programme ran over two weeks at the beginning of July. This comprised a range of workshops, self-directed study periods and three individual tutorial sessions. The workshops covered brainstorming a topic, library research, writing up a topic and research progression.

General impressions of the programme

All respondents felt that some form of bridging was essential, as they were daunted at the prospect of having to jump from assignments that were 2000 words in length to a requirement to produce 10,000. Two, however, were sceptical about how the dissertation would benefit them in their future careers.

Respondents had mixed views about the timing and length of the programme. One noted that he had ‘switched off after his course’, while another felt that it was a good thing, as it was ‘the only thing on our minds’ at this point. There was general agreement that preparation for the bridging could have been better, as they had not known what to expect.

Two respondents were of the view that they could have completed the programme within one week, while another felt it had been a bit rushed. One stated that he would have liked to have undertaken the bridging unit in term 3 of his FdA.
All felt that their FdA programme had conferred upon them an advantage relative to their BA counterparts, in that it had equipped them with a range of essential practical skills.

One of the respondents felt ‘fairly confident’ at this stage about his proposal, while the remaining 5 felt ‘only a bit confident’ by the end of the programme.

What students liked about the programme

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- Guidance on how to structure an essay was helpful
- It was enjoyable getting different perspectives from different tutors
- It was helpful going into more depth on familiar topics
- The brainstorming session on different topics was interesting
- The tutorials were enjoyable
- We received a lot of good advice

What students did not like about the programme

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- There was insufficient guidance on the proposals… We still feel a bit fuzzy about them.
- The session on how to plan a dissertation - 1 ½ hours – was not enough
- The library session was too basic.
- The requirement to outline in 200 words what you’re going to do, with a bibliography, was very difficult as the literature is not yet known.

Students’ views on improving bridging

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- The first week … it focused on developing ideas… could have been over and done with more quickly.
- We would like longer individual tutorials to clarify …. The 20 minutes they gave us did not really help us feel confident about our work
- A longer library induction session would be good, so that we can find out more about electronic journals.
We need more time for dissertations …especially on the planning and proposal side.

If they gave us more handouts while the programme was running, we could refer back to them in the first term.

A detailed information pack would help us look back over what we had done.

3.1.2 Course B

Feedback was initially obtained from six students through a semi-structured group discussion. All planned to progress onto an honours degree the following year.

Programme details

The bridging programme ran over a period of five days – 3 in late June/early July and, following a 2 month period of independent study, a further 2 days in early September. In addition to this, students were given email support and tutorials. The focus was on preparation for the dissertation. Students had to present their research proposal and then submit this, along with a 4000 word research essay, by mid September.

General impressions of the programme

All respondents felt that the bridging had been a worthwhile exercise. Two strongly agreed with the statement that the bridging had increased their confidence, while four slightly agreed. Most stated that the dissertation with its 10,000 word requirement seemed very daunting, and that the level was “scary”.

All respondents were of the view that their FdA’s had conferred upon them an advantage over their BA counterparts, because of its strong practical focus. They would have liked more opportunities to meet the BA students in advance of the following year, given that they would be working collaboratively with them. While the core contextual programme in the second year had facilitated this to some extent, most stated that their timetables had not permitted them to attend many of these sessions.

What students liked about the programme

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- It gave us a kick start on the dissertation
- We gained experience in how to develop a question
- Reading around the topic was useful
- The small group discussions were helpful in identifying a topic
- I wouldn’t have otherwise thought about it until September
It was a chance to discuss our fears

I wouldn’t have had a clue about how to go about doing a dissertation without this course

It was good to look at examples of previous dissertations
We learnt some new theories
We felt well supported through the tutorials
I’d be panicking if I hadn’t done the bridging.

What students did not like about the programme

The time management session was perceived as unnecessary as it had already been covered within PPD.

Students’ views on improving bridging

Selected quotes from respondents:

More time should be dedicated to helping us work out our precise topics [only one person had a good idea about what their specific topic was going to be].

More discussion on ... theories should be provided – not just names and books identified. Another whole day should be given for this.

3.1.3 Follow-up interview, November 2007

Seven students participated in this follow-up group interview, 5 of whom had been interviewed previously in July.

The respondents remained in general agreement that the bridging programme had been of use to them as a preparation for their final year. Some felt that they had a better idea than their BA counterparts of what they wanted to do for the dissertation at the start of the year. All were of the view that making the transition to an already established group had been unproblematic.

However, all felt that the 5 day bridging programme had been too short, and that more individual tutorials were needed. The main reason they gave for this was that their direct questions had not been addressed, and they were seeking personal feedback on their performance.

All respondents felt that the essay itself had been a useful exercise; however, some expressed a wish for discussion about it subsequently, as it was directly connected to their dissertations.
All found it challenging to write the proposal. There was general agreement that a longer bridging programme could be useful in helping them with this. They also felt that it would have been helpful to have already narrowed down their topics through discussions with their supervisor from an early stage. They expressed disappointment that, contrary to expectations, the first term had not focused on the dissertation from the outset. For one respondent, it was difficult to “even think about my topic till I speak to the tutor”, who had yet to be assigned at the time of the interview.

Several respondents were experiencing confusion about the PPD element of the final year. One expressed a wish “that someone would tell me do some work on it.” There was general agreement that it would be helpful if PPD were discussed in more detail at some point in the bridging.

As a final point, students felt that details prior to the start of the bridging programme were “patchy”, and identified a need for explicit information to be provided to them well in advance of the programme.

3.1.4 Course C

Ten students participated in this semi-structured group discussion. Three were external applicants from another institution.

Programme details

The programme ran over a two week period in July. It aimed to develop essential skills for Level 3 honours degree study. The development of critical and analytical skills, research and academic writing skills, and strategies for independent learning underpin the unit.

Students were provided with a handbook which outlined the aims and learning outcomes, and provided timetable details and essential readings.

General impressions of the programme

Five out of the 10 respondents were of the view that their bridging programme had provided them with a deeper exposure to academic writing. Responses to the content were mixed: some felt that more emphasis on the dissertation was needed, while others were satisfied with the focus on essay writing. Critiques and peer assessments, which were new to them, were seen as useful inclusions. They felt that the main thing that had come across to them through the bridging was the idea of being independent in their studies.

What students liked about the programme

Selected quotes from the respondents:
 We were given a lot of information about the third year, and how to do the dissertation.

 The short critical piece on the article was good as we looked at how to make an argument and critically analyse.

 The interactive nature of the programme was really good.

 It helped me with written work – to structure work and how to research.

 Now I know how to do a good essay

 I wasn’t too keen on the topic, but when I got to into it, it helped me to structure essays properly.

**What students did not like about the programme**

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**

 I was expecting a lot more. We didn’t cover anything beyond structuring reports and essays

 I’m not sure I was properly prepared for the dissertation… we spent most of the time on essays

 It was a lot to digest in a short period

 Some of the sessions were a bit dry

**Students’ views on improving bridging**

**Selected quotes from respondents:**

 We didn’t get enough notice about the bridging… they should have given us timetables and dates long before it started.

 A handbook about next year would be good … just basic things, but written, not just telling us about it on the course.

 This bridging would be much better if they took our last piece of FdA work and got us to look at how to develop it. It should be a more individual thing… Writing a new essay didn’t really show me what I have to improve on next year.

**3.1.5 Follow-up interviews - January 2008:**
Five students participated in this discussion, 3 of whom had previously been interviewed the previous July. A sixth student was interviewed separately.

In reflecting upon the bridging programme six months later, the respondents confirmed that it had been helpful. The consensus was that the programme had given them an idea of how to structure, how to write academically and how to research. At the same time, respondents again noted that more explicit references to the dissertation during the bridging programme would have been helpful.

All respondents were of the view that they would have liked research methods and literature reviews to have been covered more extensively during the bridging programme, but they were divided as to how this could be accomplished given that it only ran for two weeks. Some suggested that it should be extended, but others were averse to the idea that it should take up more of their holidays. Three felt that were it to be held in September, this would allow for a three week programme.

In relation to joining a third year group, all the respondents agreed that this was not an issue, and that they were made to feel welcome. All felt that the BA students were ahead of them in relation to writing, but not practically. Several commented that the standard of writing was the most challenging aspect of the final year.

The respondents concluded that the most important function of a bridging programme was to provide them with the skills they would need to do well in the dissertation, and opportunities to discuss their proposals.

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- We had no clue before about how to write academically.
- We are used to writing reports. Now I have to write academically rather than from the top of my head.
- There was not enough emphasis on the dissertation – it would have been helpful if they had told us just what a big thing it is. Bridging could also have looked at writing the proposal, because it was hard to ensure that it was valid, specific and not too vague. This would have fired me up in the first term, and I could have spent more time on it.
- A tool to handle different sorts of text would have been useful – an introduction to textual analysis would be good.
- We had to analyse the text and focus on the methodology of the text, not only making abstracts from the text. I had a difficulty with this... The literature review almost killed me.
3.2 Institution B

At Institution B, one semi-structured discussion group was held with 12 students from 3 different courses. The respondents were in the final week of the first term of their Honours degrees. One group of students had articulated onto the third year of an existing BA, while the other two groups had gone on to dedicated top-up degrees. In order to progress, students are required to get 40 percent on their FdAs.

At this institution, bridging is not a discreet programme, but takes place in the third term of the FdA. Students can opt to go out on placement or undertake a bridging unit. There are a number of taught sessions, and students are required to submit an essay as well as a 1500 word research proposal.

3.2.1 Course A

General impressions of the bridging unit

For these students, the bridging unit was, to some extent, challenging. One of the main difficulties was the requirement to formulate their own question. While these respondents stated that they had had to do some writing in the previous year, most found the essay they were required to do difficult, as it was “research based”. One, however, countered this view, arguing that once they had completed their research, it was not difficult to go on to produce a written piece.

The respondents had mixed views in relation to the extent to which the unit had served as a useful preparation to the third year. For one, the main gain was in realising that he couldn’t produce 6000 words on the topic he had originally chosen, and that he needed to choose something he was “passionate about”. There was general agreement that one term to prepare them for their research project was insufficient.

These respondents expressed doubts about the value of having to produce an extensive piece of written work in their final year. One argued that: “I don’t think we should have to do stuff like that. In the actual working environment, I don’t think you do submit a report.” They perceived their practical work, crits and “long chats” discussing their approach to their work as more worthwhile activities. They nonetheless felt that a degree was a “necessary thing”.

All agreed that they were receiving excellent tutorial support in the third year. They were particularly pleased about the fact that they had already submitted a first draft, which “pointed us in the right direction” and were about to submit a second draft on which they would receive feedback before Christmas.

What students liked about the bridging unit
Selected quotes from the respondents:

- It was good because they said make sure over the summer you get good ideas, good preparation... because as soon as you get back, you’re going to be in it.

- Our tutors all push us to do our third year. That’s what they want us to do. Yes, it’s from the get-go [i.e from the start of the FdA].

- We were allowed to sit in on Honours’ students crits. We had the foresight of knowing what projects were ahead.

What students did not like about the bridging unit

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- These essays were research based. That was the hard thing.

- It’s only 1500 words. It doesn’t really matter in the end. That’s what’s really annoying. I changed my mind – I did the proposal. It was all rubbish. It’s nothing what I’m doing now.

- We were allowed to change our topics. It [the bridging] just proves you can write.

- I find it really difficult to write down my ideas. My brain doesn’t work in… like … Harvard blah, blah, blah. I’m constantly talking and thinking about what I’m actually doing. And to then change and put down concise ideas, document them, research them and put all that rubbish there, is really difficult.

Students’ views on improving bridging

Selected quotes from respondents:

- I didn’t know what the hell to do [for the research proposal]. Some sort of guidance…

- Before, we’d had the odd research essay, but it wasn’t exactly answering a question, more research a topic in 500 words. And then suddenly in the third year … you’re doing 6,000 words. It’s create your own question – you’ve done research before. Oh, okay, great…

- I don’t think a term is enough. I think having a theory lesson a week or theory unit per term, so then you know… But then the other side of it, I know it’s a vocational course, so do you enrol on the BA like you should and get that input, or do you stay on a vocational course like the FdA? … We get work experience.

- For the first two years, I knew I was going to go on to the third year, so I knew I was going to have to do a dissertation. But we were only doing minor essays –… And then
literally in the last term of the second year, we were told if you’re going on to the third year, you’re going to have to do some research for your dissertation. I’ve never seen a dissertation, an actual finished one. I think our teaching for the dissertation has been really good this year, but not in the first and second years - the theory stuff was random and sporadic then.

3.2.2 Course B

General impressions of the bridging unit

The students on this course had articulated onto the third year of an existing BA programme. They found the written demands for the bridging unit daunting, as they felt they had not done any writing in the first two years of their FdA’s that could serve as adequate preparation, and because they had been introduced to a range of new theoretical issues.

There was general agreement that one term to prepare them for a 6000 word research project was insufficient.

Several of the respondents perceived a difference between themselves and their peers who had elected to go into industry in the third term, rather than stay on for a third year. The consensus among these students was that those wanting to articulate didn’t receive much support.

All respondents found the timing in the third term of their FdA’s problematic; however, no clear consensus emerged as to what would be the best route for progression onto the third year. For some, a discreet programme at the end of their second year in the holiday period held some appeal, while for others, this was perceived as an incursion into their holidays.

A recurring theme in the discussion with this group of respondents was that they perceived themselves as lagging behind the BA students in relation to the dissertation. The BA students had a well established relationship with the lecturer, and this too left them feeling at a disadvantage. They were unanimous in stating that a theoretical grounding in the course of their FdAs would have made the dissertation easier. However, they stressed they felt they were ahead of their BA counterparts in relation to their design work. As one respondent put it: “… coming from the FdA, you’re more prepared, but not for the dissertation. If I had to do it again, I would still start from the FdA though, as practically I feel so advanced”.

Despite these difficulties, all respondents felt pleased that they had stayed on for the third year, as they saw the acquisition of a degree as an essential step in their careers.

What students liked about the bridging unit

Selected quotes from the respondents:
The support was good … we had a librarian who gave us useful handouts.

It [the theory] was so interesting, but I was so drawn about should I go and do my practical work which is actually more important in a way, or go and listen to these interesting talks… so lots of people missed the lessons.

At the beginning [the theory] was hard to grab on to, to get the hang of it. Afterwards it was okay. But at first, it’s such a shock.

We did get help. We had to learn techniques of Harvard referencing. So it was training us for the dissertation and the literature review … but it was a little bit too late.

What students did not like about the bridging unit

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- The people who went out into industry were treated a lot, lot differently … they got a little bit more credit for getting out there and doing the job. [There was an expectation that] it [the FdA] should be enough for us.
- It [bridging studies] came at the wrong time. We had our final project to hand in at the same time. It was really stressful.
- The suggested reading looked so interesting, but I just couldn’t find the time to do it.
- The essay question was far too broad … it was hard to narrow it down into 1500 words.
- We didn’t get any feedback on our proposal… the Bas, all summer, had built up a whole file of research. We weren’t told …. you will need substantial research.
- We were not given sufficient information about our forthcoming BA course.

Students’ views on improving bridging

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- The theory lessons were a bit of a shock to the system. We turn up, all of a sudden we’re talking about postmodernism. This is something we should have learned from the beginning. We should have had a grounding….
I think a four week programme in the holidays would help you realise whether you want to stay on or not. …But, if we did that, I would like it to be relaxed because after the I can’t even draw. I needed a long holiday.

I would suggest a summer course, but a lot of people have to work, so that wouldn’t work.

We who were articulating didn’t get told anything about …the course we were going on to – how they work, how they get taught. We got one introduction from the BA course leader, which scared the living daylights out of us.

3.2.3 Course C

General impressions of the programme

There was general agreement on the part of these respondents that the bridging unit had been useful in starting them off on their research project proposals. While they did not state it directly, the implication was that because they were confident in their written abilities, no particular interventions were required in the final term of the FdA in order to prepare them for the third year.

Students’ views on the bridging unit

These respondents did not identify any particular strengths or weaknesses in relation to the bridging unit. They stated that they had had no difficulty in dealing with the written assignments they were required to do. They felt that the 1500 word requirement for one of the assignments was “easy” because they had had to produce longer written pieces previously, and had “had loads of practice before.” Their view was that they had been expecting a major piece of writing in the final year, so the challenge was to “manage our time”.

The respondents were of the view that they were well supported in their decision to continue into the third year. While not everyone chose to do so, they felt that their progression had been seamless.

These students felt at ease with both their practical and academic work in the final year. While they described the 6000 word dissertation as “challenging”, they nonetheless felt prepared for it, as the following quote illustrates: “From day one we started doing academic stuff, research and theoretical studies”. They also noted that they received a great deal of tutorial support, which was easily accessible.
The respondents expressed confidence in their abilities to successfully complete the third year of the Honours degree. They attributed this to the fact that their FdA had provided them with the practices they needed in order to undertake a dissertation, these being written assignments as well as ongoing exposure to theoretical issues.

3.3 Institution C

At Institution 3, data were collected over a period of 12 months at several different junctures. Students from a total of 5 bridging programmes informed this research. In the first instance, semi-structured discussion groups were held with students from 4 bridging programmes in December 2006, in order to identify suitable questions for inclusion in the questionnaire. In July 2007 questionnaires were administered to students from 5 bridging programmes who had just completed their bridging. In addition to this, a number of students participated in semi-structured interviews. This was followed up with semi-structured group discussions in December 2007 with students from the same 5 bridging programmes, at the end of the first term on their Honours degrees.

Programme details

All the bridging programmes at this institution took place over a 4 week period at the end of the third term. In order to progress onto bridging, students were required to attain a Merit on their FdAs. These results were released in the second week of the bridging programme; consequently, some students would have been unable to continue.

Students from all courses first undertook a common week, wherein they were required to produce a group essay, working with students from different courses. This was followed by a 3 week programme within their specialisms. To pass the bridging, they had to successfully complete the group essay, and a further one or two assignments over the next three weeks, depending on their particular course. In 2007/8, students progressed onto dedicated top-up degrees, while previously they had articulated onto existing BA programmes.

Common issues

The group essay and advance communication about the bridging programme emerged as common issues across all the groups who participated in this research.

The majority of respondents were of the view that the group essay had served little purpose in preparing them for their final year, and that the exercise was, in many instances, futile as not everyone had participated in it. For a few, however, it was an opportunity to meet new students and experience new perspectives.

In a similar vein, a recurring concern was the extent to which respondents were clear about the practicalities of the bridging programme prior to it starting. Many were also exercised by the fact that their FdA result was only known two weeks into the bridging programme.
### 3.3.1 Course A

#### General impressions of the bridging programme

The discussion in this section has been drawn from questionnaires [36 respondents] and interviews with 11 students immediately following completion of their bridging programmes, and a semi-structured group discussion conducted with 8 students at the end of their first term on the Honours degree.

The respondents saw the bridging programme in very positive terms. They were of the view that it had provided them with an invaluable opportunity to transform their thinking in such a way as to facilitate the leap from the FdA to an Honours degree. Some observed that the bridging had helped them confirm whether they were suited to a third year of study, in that it had given them a good idea as to what to expect. Moreover, it brought them into contact with students from other pathways, which helped them foster new contacts for their final year. It also played an important role in building confidence for the forthcoming year.

Analysis of the questionnaires highlighted the fact that the vast majority of respondents were opposed to the common essay week; however, one of the respondents in the semi-structured group interview saw it like this: “…you had to work with people who had no real idea of what you do – they had preconceived ideas – getting through it was a test, but it was a good experience”.

The questionnaires also revealed that many respondents viewed the exhibition visits as a positive experience [but that the ensuing discussion about these could have been shorter], as well as the design project they were required to work on, as this required a greater degree of independence and choice than previously. For some, however, more guidance on the assignment would have made for a better experience.

#### What students liked about the bridging programme

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**

- *It made me think in a different way. On the FdA it felt as if there was a formula. The bridging was a chance to start diversifying. Now I am thinking not just as an … artist, but also about lighting, how things are styled.*

- *At first, the freedom was confusing … so were the different teaching methods. Then it became exciting.*

- *The bridging made us look at our concepts in a broader way. We visited museums and really unpacked things we saw. This made me approach my work differently conceptually.*
Starting the bridging programme, I was totally in the FdA way of thinking – just looking at the final image, and not the pathway there. I would think as a stylist or as a photographer. It was really nice to think as an artist and look at every different area.

We find it easier now to be able to speak about our work. When we had our final presentation, it made me realise how much my work has to be about the concept rather than just the final image.

The presentation really told us what was expected of you … you had to think in terms of not just the practical [but also] theory; you had to underpin, and look at what you do. …now, when I look at an image I can see the perspective of where the person producing it is coming from. There’s influences from Freud or from Butler. That’s what I was able to grasp.

Instead of worrying about going on to a new course, after doing the bridging I felt I could relax. I knew what I was going back into… When we came back, it felt as if we’d already been there.

What students did not like about the bridging programme

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**

- Bridging did not help me to write my research proposal – there was not enough time really.
- The first week was torture like having your teeth pulled – we could lose it.
- A whole day’s discussion on the exhibition was unnecessary – it got tedious.
- The title of the group essay in the first week was so easy. It wasn’t really thought about … A mini proposal for what you’re going to do would be better… there needs to be a substantial bit of writing.
- They didn’t tell us what it was about in advance of the programme. This made a problem for work.

**Students’ views on improving bridging**

The most frequent suggestions for improving bridging were that the group essay should be scrapped, and that it should provide opportunities for contact with third year students. Many noted that a full month was tiring coming just after their FdAs.

**3.3.2 Course B**

Data in this section were obtained from 17 completed questionnaires at the end of the 2007 bridging programme, as well as a semi-structured group discussion with 5 students at the end of the first term of the Honours degree.
General impressions of the bridging programme

Analysis of the July 2007 questionnaires indicated that the group was divided in relation to the value of the content of the programme: the most frequently recurring positive and negative aspect of the course was the content. For some, it provided an opportunity to develop their academic writing skills, particularly in relation to referencing, while for others it was repetitive and irrelevant.

More guidance and tutorials were the most frequent suggestions for improving the programme. Unlike other groups of respondents, a fair number were positive about the fact that they had had the opportunity to work in a group and meet new people through the common essay week; however, this view was not supported in the discussion group held in December.

Five students participated in this discussion group. As some of the quotes below illustrate, respondents were positive about the development of their academic writing skills; however, all felt that it represented a missed opportunity to prepare them properly for their forthcoming dissertations. They were particularly critical about the technology demonstration sessions, as they felt these were irrelevant to their final year or a repetition of what they had done previously.

These students were required to produce a literature review and an essay as part of their bridging programme. Some expressed confusion about what was required. Moreover, respondents felt that the bridging programme had largely required them to produce descriptive accounts, while the approach demanded on their current programme was more analytical.

What students liked about the bridging programme

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- I wasn’t so hot on referencing on the foundation degree, but bridging really helped with that – definitely for this [the third] year.

- I felt I learned a lot about academic writing – from doing bridging. …my writing style has completely changed. We were specifically told what belonged in an academic essay and what doesn’t … We always had to include diagrams before. It was made a lot clearer.

- They need to redesign the foundation degree. To make it more like a proper degree. Some of us didn’t know about referencing – but that’s something you can’t learn in 4 weeks, you need to be doing it previously to keep improving on it.
What students did not like about the bridging programme

*Selected quotes from the respondents:*

- Carrying over to this year, it [the literature review] hasn't been that relevant. We’ve had to do one for our applied research treatments, which has been quite different. We just wrote about a load of treatments in the bridging but there was no analysing it.

- We didn’t get any feedback on the last assignment. If we had, we could have learnt what we did wrong and applied that stuff to this year.

- He was going through routines. It didn’t relate at all. It wasn’t any advancement on what we had done, so we couldn’t write about anything different in our reports – it was pointless.

Students’ views on improving bridging

*Selected quotes from the respondents:*

- [It] would have been good [to learn about writing a dissertation proposal] on bridging. There’s only five lines in the handbook which tells us what we need to include.

- It would be good to cover techniques – ways of developing the dissertation.

- After the bridging, they should have given us what the possible topics were going to be … so we can start thinking about it.

- When bridging finished, they should have sent us a pack about what is going to be covered … this term. One of the things covered is stats. I’ve never ever done stats. If they had given us a reading list, it would have been so much better.

3.3.3 Course C

Data for this section were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 10 students in July 2007 and two semi-structured group discussions held in December 2007, at the end of the first term of the respondents’ honours degree. Students progressing on to this honours degree came from two different foundation degrees.

This presented problem for both groups, in that their experience in relation to an aspect of theory differed significantly. While one found the content interesting, the lectures dedicated to this area were too advanced for them; by contrast, the other group found the content repetitive. Many of the latter were of the view that the programme needed to be more intense and pressurising.
The respondents interviewed in July felt that the bridging had given them a good idea of what to expect on their final year; however, a number were taken aback at the extent of self-directed study expected of them. They saw their FdA as having spoon-fed them.

The overriding issue to emerge from the group discussions centred on the dissertation. Respondents felt strongly that the bridging should have been specifically directed towards preparing them for this. They also expressed concern about the type of writing that had been expected of them on the FdA and the fact that they would have to engage in a more “academic” style for their dissertations.

What students liked about the bridging programme

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**

- *The theory sessions made us aware of what we have to do*
- *It put us in touch with the Honours degree. I know now what to expect.*
- *The session on referencing and bibliographies was good.*
- *We had to pick an article from a journal, which had a marketing strategy and then write an essay about it. It was quite interesting.*

What students did not like about the bridging programme

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**

- *It was more like a summary of the last two years rather than an introduction to the next one.*
- *The bridging didn’t really look forward by giving you a framework for looking ahead - not for the dissertation or the specialism studies*
- *Even though the theory sessions were relevant, lectures this term have recapped on those. They’ve pretty much done the same thing as on bridging.*

Students’ views on improving bridging

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**
I think the first lecture we had on developing a dissertation title should have been at the end of the bridging to … let us be fully aware of what we were in for. It would have given us 2 or 3 months instead of 2 or 3 weeks.

We should be prepared on how to write a dissertation. It’s very academic and FdA is much more about writing in a report style in much more familiar language, whereas the dissertation is about discussing and analysing

I would have really benefited from been taught properly how to submit a literature review and methodology as we had to put this into our research planning assignment – coming from our pathway, we’d never done this before

You’ve got so much choice, so maybe if they had gone over past …at least then you’ve got the summer to be milling ideas over in your head; then you can go into a tutorial like, well, I’m thinking like this, rather than sitting there with a blank expression on your face.

Since we had our first dissertation tutorial in October it has just been a massive pressure to … try and get a good enough topic and I still feel really like that I don’t know if it is the right thing to be doing… I think that an extra six weeks over the summer to read and research would have been so beneficial.

3.3.4 Course D

Data for this section were obtained from 11 questionnaires and 5 semi-structured interviews in July 2007, and from a semi-structured group interview held at the end of the first term of the Honours degree.

Analysis of the questionnaires and interviews from July indicate that respondents found the theoretical content interesting, albeit somewhat repetitive. The session devoted to referencing was perceived as useful. Their main objection to the programme was that it was too lengthy and that the content should have been more tailored to their specific needs.

The respondents identified the information they had received on reflective writing as the most useful thing they had gained from the bridging. The main issue to emerge for them was the absence of guidance on research planning and the dissertation during the programme. They were of the view that the bridging been easier than they had expected, and were disappointed it had not brought them up to a higher level in preparation for their final year. Their perception was that the third year Honours degree students [with whom they were sharing certain lectures in the 3rd year] had had a more structured and directed experience with the dissertation which had commenced in the summer.

Despite these perceived shortcomings, the programme was nonetheless seen as a valuable opportunity. As one respondent put it:
I’d like to say something positive. I’m glad they run it and even though I don’t agree with the way they run it, I’m still going to get my BA at the end of it, because I wouldn’t feel happy just having an FDA. I wouldn’t get the job I wanted. I’m glad we’ve had the opportunity to do it, but if they could run it better, we could do better.

What students liked about the bridging programme

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**

- *It [reflective writing] is new to us in that format. It saved time this year. We got steps on how to go through it, how to do it. So we’re alright about doing it now.*

- *The amount of research we had to do for the essay, to have secondary research as well as your own views, that really helped for this project.*

- *We had some strategy lessons. I can see why they put it into bridging. We had design strategy this term.*

What students did not like about the bridging programme:

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**

- *The work we did in 4 weeks, we could have done in 2. Those weeks could have been used a lot more actively to get us up to a certain level.*

- *The lectures were quite repetitive, what we had already done for 2 years.*

- *They say with bridging that it sets you for BA level, but I don’t feel it did … We were set up to work quite hard. We were supposed to be getting up to a BA level, because we were going to be dropped in with BA students. We have been dropped in, and it’s hard.*

Students’ views on improving bridging

**Selected quotes from the respondents:**

- *They should have pre-briefed us on the start of BA. …. Maybe a week after the final submission on bridging.*
When we got that project, [the dissertation] I was a bit in shock. I had to automatically think about my questions. If we’d had the whole summer to think about it, I’d have been okay.

If we’d been given our research planning in the bridging it would have been a lot more clear. Once I got my head round it, it was actually quite easy.

3.3.5 Course E

Information for this section was obtained from 18 questionnaires and a semi-structured discussion group with 7 students held in July 2007, and a further discussion group in December 2007 with another 8 students. Respondents generally cited the new way of working – i.e. the independent study expected of them – as the thing they liked most about the bridging. For the July respondents, a lack of time, the workload as well as a shortage of resources and initial poor organisation emerged as the least favourable aspects of the programme. Respondents in the December group discussion were immensely positive about the programme, but highlighted the fact that it would have been preferable if it had dealt with the proposal for their final project.

Respondents from this programme expressed a great sense of accomplishment for having completed a very demanding set of tasks. They were required to produce a 1000 word proposal, a workbook of 100 pages, and include a sketchbook and development plan. The programme was seen as particularly useful in developing their skills, particularly in relation to research. Moreover, they felt that their perspective had shifted to a more “conceptual” one. As one respondent in the July group put it, “It was 3 weeks in 3 months”. Consequently, the respondents expressed a strong sense of confidence about going on to the final year of the honours degree. Of the 14 who responded to this question, 88 percent agreed [the majority strongly] that the course had prepared them well for the forthcoming year. Only 3 disagreed with the statement, 1 of them strongly.

What students liked about the bridging programme

Selected quotes from the respondents:

- I really enjoyed it., it’s not just about creativity. It’s about that thinking process – justifying, analysing. Really analysing everything you do, visually as well.

- I found it really useful that you didn’t have to make anything. It meant you could purely work on design work, you could be a bit more creative. …you didn’t have to work out [what] went where.

- It was a chance to talk to everyone. … and someone would tell you what to look at and then you’d do the same with them. You don’t really get the chance to interact with other students on the course
 Scary hundred pages. No way could we get that work done. But we all got it done… everyone was terrified.

 … it’s just one really short course that’s changed the way you work for 2 years into something else now.

What students did not like about the bridging programme

Selected quotes from the respondents:

 We didn’t get any feedback on the work we did…. It would have been nice to know what you did right.

 It was expensive producing everything.

 There were no facilities available to us so we couldn’t do samples.

Students’ views on improving bridging

Selected quotes from the respondents:

 Bridging should have something on proposal writing. Maybe the essay week could be about writing a proposal.

 I think the bridging should start you thinking about what you want do for your final research – that would really help, rather than … otherwise you just choose any old project.

 We should be told in the summer … one lecture just to make sure the proposal is going in the right direction… Some of us had busy summers working and other things. I didn’t give that much thought to my proposal.

4 Summary of main themes

As can be seen from the above accounts, there are a number of issues common to all the bridging programmes surveyed as part of this research. In this section, these issues will be discussed.

According to the QAA (2005), areas in need of attention in relation to progression arrangements include:
• Clear and timely information to students about all progression routes
• Well-designed progression opportunities appropriate to the expectations and needs of students
• A match between the modes of study on the articulated honours degree with the modes of study on the FD
• Provision of early information to students, including the selection criteria, where there is strong competition for places on the articulated honours degree
• Ensuring the FD provides an appropriate preparation, particularly in the curriculum and methods of assessment, for the honours degree.

All of these points were, to varying degrees, raised by the students who participated in this research, and these will be incorporated in the ensuing discussion. Implicit in this account is students’ perceptions of their third year experience.

4.1 The value of bridging for students
The general consensus among the students surveyed was that bridging has an important role to play in the curriculum. While they were critical of the content, very few of the respondents, both in the discussion groups or the questionnaires, suggested that bridging in its entirety was a waste of their time. Certainly, one group of students implied that their FdA experience largely obviated the need for a skills development programme to enable them to progress; however, they were nonetheless of the view that progression should not be automatic. The clear implication of this is that the majority of students perceive a need for some structured intervention to enable them to make the transition successfully to the final year of an Honours degree. The main reason for this would appear to be the difference between the FdA and Honours degree in relation to academic writing practices. While for many this was seen as a quantitative leap, most students also perceived that, on a qualitative level, more would be asked of them. This was particularly the case for those whose experience had largely been confined to report writing.

In the three institutions surveyed, there was considerable common ground in relation to both the strengths and weaknesses of their bridging provision. It would be fair to say that the respondents most satisfied with their programme were those whose bridging placed the dissertation at the centre of the programme. The most common strengths identified included the fact that the bridging had given them some idea of what to expect in their final year; some helpful guidance in relation to their work; some essential new theoretical perspectives, and the acquisition of some useful skills that would enable them to succeed. Structuring an essay, referencing techniques, reflective writing skills and undertaking a literature review serve as examples of this.

Altogether less common was evidence that the bridging programme had shifted respondents’ thinking in any significant sense. The quotes from some of the students suggest a shift in their student identity as a result of their bridging programme. For the former, there was a move away from an ‘FdA type of thinking’ to a more conceptual, theoretical approach to their work. This entailed seeing themselves as artists who engage in a process, rather than simply applying a formula to achieve a particular look.
This identity shift took on a different hue for some of their peers on one of the other programmes: the transition for them was a quantum leap in the process of creating a product. While as FdA students they had had to primarily grapple with practical elements of their design, this experience brought about in them an appreciation of the analytic dimensions of the process. They were also empowered through having successfully produced far more than they had imagined possible. This different emphasis is most likely a reflection of the fact that students on this programme are not required to produce a dissertation in their final year, but an extensive design proposal and rationale instead. Their counterparts at another institution conveyed a strong recognition of the importance of a theoretical basis to their output; however, unlike their peers discussed above, they appeared to have felt disempowered by this awareness, as they found the conceptual level very challenging in such a short space of time.

As is evident from the respondents’ quotes, there was widespread agreement that bridging represented a missed opportunity, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways, to adequately prepare students for the major requirement of the honours degree year – this being, in most cases, a dissertation. A substantial number of the respondents in this study found themselves struggling with the dissertation. For many, the significant omissions included opportunities to think about or formulate their topic; writing a proposal; planning the dissertation or final major project, and doing a literature review. For some, the bridging programme was seen as too short to do justice to all these areas. Respondents also invariably expressed a wish for more individual guidance as well as feedback on the work undertaken as part of bridging. This was, in many cases, not provided. It is recognised that the timing of the programme poses real problems for institutions to give students feedback; however, in its absence, they typically felt that their efforts had not been fully appreciated. Finally, many of the respondents expressed disappointment and frustration that, following the bridging, they had not been required to begin working on their proposals and topics. This was particularly the case where they had joined existing Honours students who had had this requirement imposed upon them in the summer break.

In most of the programmes surveyed, there were elements that students did not value. In one of the institutions, a large number perceived aspects of the content as irrelevant or repetitive, as they had covered the ground previously or it was being taught in the final year. In another, it was mainly the omissions in the programme that shaped respondents’ perceptions of value; however, some found the content too basic; unnecessary and the focus on essays, rather than the dissertation per se, unhelpful. For some, the main objections to the bridging centred on the difficulty of the programme, particularly for those who had not been previously exposed to theory and essay writing.

4.2 Information about progression and the bridging programme
All respondents indicated an awareness of the possibility of progression upon completion of their FdAs; however, many found the advance information on the nature of the programme insufficient and, at times, confusing. They were all aware of the entry requirements. These differed at one of the institutions, where students have only to attain a pass on their FdA to progress onto the third year. Most of these respondents were of the view that this was too generous, and that it should be made more difficult to
progress. Other respondents felt that the level of difficulty of the bridging programme had been overstated, and that the programme itself should have been more challenging.

Most respondents were of the view that progression was seen as desirable on the part of their FdA tutors. One group, in particular, stressed that from the outset of their FdAs, the notion of progression had been implicit.

4.3 Length and timing of programme
Unsurprisingly, respondents’ views varied considerably in relation to the length and timing of the programme. For some, the programme was too long and could have been shortened. For others, for example, those on a 5 day programme, it was not long enough. For those who had an entire term in which to complete their bridging studies, this issue did not arise. They were more exercised by the timing of the unit, which coincided with their final project work. Many were sceptical about the possibility of this shifting to the summer holidays, as they saw it clashing with work commitments or their need for time out from their studies. However, the majority of those undertaking bridging during the initial part of the summer holiday period did not raise this as an issue.

The biggest concern in relation to timing revolves around the fact that the FdA results are not always known at the start of the bridging course. Respondents were thus in the difficult position of not knowing whether they would be eligible to continue, particularly where a Merit profile is required. While it is hoped that students will have a good idea as to whether or not they are likely to meet entry requirements, there is evidence from tutors to suggest that some go on to the bridging in the knowledge that their continuing participation is in the balance. Clearly, institutions have to find a way to minimise the extent to which this happens: if bridging is to be held at the end of the FdA rather than in the course of the third term, it is difficult to delay its start till after the final exam boards have taken place.

4.4 Variability in programme content and format
This research has highlighted the variability in the bridging on offer, both between and within institutions. As can be seen from the above evidence, content differed considerably across and within the three institutions. It should be noted that at two of the institutions, students work towards a common set of learning outcomes while, at the third, these varied between the three programmes.

4.5 The relationship between the FdA and BA Honours third year
On a number of occasions in the course of the group discussions, the issue of differing approaches to study between the FdA and Honours degree arose. Perhaps most obvious was the fact that for most respondents, the extended writing requirements of the BA were perceived as a qualitative as well as quantitative leap. Many felt that the report writing they had had to do on their FdAs did not significantly prepare for them for dissertation writing. For a few, the absence of extended writing assignments and the lack of exposure to theoretical debates on their FdAs were seen as impediments to their success; however, once they had to grapple with theory in the bridging unit, they testified to having found it very interesting.
Some respondents indicated that they saw extended writing as irrelevant to their forthcoming careers. Their reasons for going on to the third year were largely instrumental, as they felt their job prospects would be compromised if they left with just an FdA. These students were thus approaching their final year with a fairly narrow conception of what they would derive from it in intellectual and conceptual terms. Moreover, they viewed the academic component as having the potential to undermine their achievement. This is perhaps not surprising given that Foundation Degrees privilege practical and technical expertise and knowledge (Yorke 2005).

At the same time, many perceived their BA counterparts as being way ahead of them academically and in a far better position to succeed in the dissertation. This was particularly the case where they were brought into close contact with the BA students. For some, having to encounter new lecturers, who had already established relationships with the BA students added to this sense of inferiority. However, invariably, as a result of the focus of the FdA, they viewed themselves as more technically capable, and thus in an advantageous position in this respect. While, for some, the third year will serve as an opportunity to refine skills already acquired on the FdA, it would appear that they have not recognised that the BA has a different set of concerns.

On a related point, many of the respondents in this study were exercised by the fact that they had not received as much individual guidance as they would have liked on the bridging course. While some stated that they had gained an idea of what to expect on the BA, there was scant evidence to suggest that this included an awareness of the cultural shift that they would be likely to encounter in relation to independent study, though one group of respondents did identify this as one of the best features of their bridging programme. Thus, the emphasis on self-directed work appeared, for many of these respondents, to be provoking a considerable amount of anxiety.

There were, however, others who felt liberated from the confining practices of the FdA. It should be noted that their sense of freedom was connected largely to their design practices.

For a few respondents, the modes of study they had experienced on the FdA matched what they were experiencing on the BA.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the relationship between the final year of the FdA and the third year of the BA in respect of grading was a source of confusion for some respondents. They were unsure as to whether they were carrying anything over from their FdAs or if their degree result would be predicated entirely on the final year.

4.6 The third year experience

References to the third year experience can be discerned throughout the discussion thus far. While there is a great deal of variability in respondents’ experiences from course to course, three issues stand out. The first is that it would appear, in a number of cases, that the momentum established on the bridging programme in relation to the dissertation was not carried through in the first term. Many found this disconcerting, and felt unable to engage in any significant work on this. It is not clear whether this was a
deliberate practice on these courses, or arose as a result of problems with teaching staff.

Second, many of the respondents who had articulated on to an existing Honours programme felt that they had integrated well onto the new course. As noted above, some, however, were of the view that, academically, they were at a disadvantage relative to their third year peers, but more advanced in practical terms. For a few, their sense was that their arrival in the third year had not been adequately prepared for, and they were left feeling that they were not being accorded the same respect and serious consideration as their peers.

Finally, despite respondents' quotidian concerns about their programmes and the pressures they were under, all felt that they had made the right decision to stay on. None indicated that they were likely to give up.

4.7 Areas of good practice
Throughout the research, many instances emerged of good practice in preparing students for progression. In sum, the key components of a comprehensive bridging programme could be said to encompass the following:

- the provision of clear and unambiguous information about the length and timing of the programme and selection criteria early on in the second year of the FdA;
- the inclusion of handbooks and written information for students while on the programme;
- ensuring that FdA students are at the same point at the start of the third year as their BA counterparts;
- the inclusion of content that directly paves the way for students to take on the academic demands of the final year;
- an opportunity to begin the initial planning for the dissertation;
- exploring with students how the BA final year will differ from the FdA;
- as far as possible, the provision of feedback to students on the work completed while on the bridging course;
- an opportunity to meet with third year students who have successfully completed the honours degree.

5 Concluding remarks
This study has provided an indication of the perceptions of foundation degree students who have undertaken a bridging programme in order to progress on to the final year of an honours degree. It has shown that students generally value the experience; however,
in many cases, they expressed a wish for bridging to address more specifically the academic demands they would encounter in the final year. Maintaining the momentum established on the bridging in relation to the dissertation/final major project early on in the first term was also seen as important to the respondents.

It has also highlighted the fact that bridging differs not only between institutions but within them too. This is in relation to not only the structure and content of the programme, but the learning outcomes as well. There appears to be no consensus as to what constitutes an appropriate set of outcomes for bridging. Furthermore, there is no clear answer as to whether a discrete model of bridging which takes place after students have completed their FdAs is any better than one placed in the final term of the FdA. There are, from the students’ perspective, disadvantages to both; however, a tentative conclusion from the small sample here suggests that they experience more stress when it coincides with their final major projects.

Given the small number of students surveyed, it is of course not possible to generalise the findings of this research; however, it is hoped that the insights generated by the participants will offer providers some pointers should they wish to initiate or refine their bridging provision.

This research has not addressed the extent to which FdA students are successful on their degree programmes. At the time of writing, information from all three institutions indicated that they had generally performed well, with a number attaining distinctions. There is no evidence to suggest that they performed less well than their BA counterparts; however, in the absence of precise data, this has not been possible to confirm.

Finally, this research would be incomplete without raising the question as to whether bridging is, in fact, necessary. In the course of my investigations, I encountered academics who argued that if the FdA were doing its job properly, it would obviate the need for a bridging programme. Most of the students in this research had had some exposure to Level 2 academic writing and a range of theoretical constructs while on their FdAs; however, they nonetheless felt they needed support in making the transition. Perhaps the main reason for this is that, within the context of the FdA, they perceive these areas of study as marginal to their programmes. Alternatively, they may be presented to students as being of less importance than their practical work.

The fact that students find the transition challenging is perhaps not surprising, given the differing emphases of foundation and honours degrees. As Yorke (2005) observes, the former privileges practical expertise and knowledge. It seems likely that the inherent tensions between the aims of the FdA and those of Honours degree study will continue to pose a challenge for those students making the transition, unless a shift takes place on the part of one or both parties. For this reason, bridging has an important part to play in easing this transition. As one Programme Director responsible for bridging and the ensuing third year put it:
The ability to engage in an intellectual design process is part of the FdA, but bridging gives you the opportunity to work to your own brief ... to become aware of the academic process, and it stimulates the kind of thinking students need for their final year.

Postscript

Since the completion of this report, all the participating institutions have been engaged in a process of modifying their bridging provision. Ensuring that there is parity of provision across the institution has been a central focus in this process.

Appendix A provides an example of a week that all students undertake in their bridging programmes, in one of the participating institutions. It follows on from two weeks during which students work on a course-specific project. The focus is on the dissertation/final major project which all students have to undertake in the third year.
References


