A fresh start: foundation studies at the University of Glamorgan

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What is Foundation Studies?

The University of Glamorgan mission statement specifies a fundamental commitment to serve the community in Wales. Within this commitment, a widening participation strategy is embedded firmly within all areas of the institution. The foundation studies programme, a project initiated by the Centre for Lifelong Learning, is a major contributor in the university's widening access policy. It has the advantage of offering one access point to students and has defined a clear threshold for entry.

The University of Glamorgan recognising that policy proposals at regional and national levels had led to the need for higher education institutions to do more to widen access and increase participation has taken action to extend and develop its foundation programme set at level 0. From the mid 1990s, the university had a small but established Science, Engineering and Technology Foundation Year (SETFY). It is this programme which acted as a model for the rationalisation and extension of Foundation Studies across a much wider curriculum.

Foundation studies is defined as pre-undergraduate experience, and offers appropriate skills and knowledge that allow learners to progress on to level 1. The foundation studies programme is designed specifically to provide appropriate foundation courses for students who want to study at university but do not have the traditional entry qualifications.

The level 0 programmes are designed as an integral part of the university's HND and degree programmes. On each level 0 programme, students study three core modules in study skills, numeracy and computing. The remaining 80 level 0 credits are achieved by study of subject specific modules. The twenty-three foundation programmes give access to all university undergraduate awards. Students who successfully complete the foundation studies certificate are guaranteed progression to level 1 of the appropriate award.

The first enrolments to the pan university foundation studies programme were in September 2000. There were 250 enrolments in 2000, 435 in 2001 and over 485 in 2002.

70-75% of the cohort comes from areas within 10 miles of the university. Just over half the students are under 21 years of age. These students may have studied insufficient or inappropriate A levels or failed to achieve the required grades. The majority of the remaining students are 21-30 years of age. These students typically will have left school at 16 and started work. Their employment choices are limited within the South Wales area and most will have had jobs with poor career progression and low pay. A significant number, particularly women, will have found only part-time work, often balancing more than one part-time job. The remaining 12-15% of students over 30 years of age are seeking more fulfilling careers or have suffered redundancy. Foundation Studies also acts as a safety net for level 1 students who experience difficulties mid-way through the first term of their degree programmes. There has been significant use of this 'fall-back' facility. It has enabled students who would otherwise have left, to remain in higher education.
Almost all the students study full-time. A part-time route is available.

Many people within the South Wales Valleys communities have lower than average aspiration, personal confidence and attainment. The majority of the students know little about higher education as neither their parents, siblings nor friends have studied at this level. Significant financial support is available but many of the younger students continue to live at home during their studies.

The foundation studies programme has been successful in attracting non-traditional, educationally disadvantaged students, but attracting such students is not enough. It is important to retain them and to ensure that they receive the education most suited to their needs and talents. The diverse nature of the foundation cohort means that the students need enhanced support to aid retention. Widening access and retention must be considered as two sides of the same coin. Any widening access strategy has to address questions of support and retention from the outset. In planning the management of the foundation programmes the university was aware of the needs of these non-traditional students. The respective schools have academic responsibilities for their foundation learners, but at the same time it was felt that the administrative, academic and pastoral care of individuals required additional centralised support. In many instances foundation learners require advice linked with the building of confidence and what might be termed "special attention". The foundation studies unit offers this 'special' support to foundation students and works closely with the Drop-In Centre, Student Services, Tracking Officer, Progress File manager, and retention officers in academic schools to co-ordinate, initiate and encourage strategies to increase student retention and successful completion.

Much work has been done on the reasons for undergraduate non-completion. The students discussed are often traditional first year students. Several contributory factors have been identified. Braxton et.al. (1995) pointed to difficulties in social and academic integration. These are found to be greater for students living at home. Failure of schools to prepare students to be independent learners and ineffective study strategies have also been highlighted. Yorke(1998) has shown that boys are more likely to lack study skills and that they show less commitment.   Age is also a factor. Yorke(1998) found more dissatisfaction with teaching among younger students. Mature students are seen as more committed and motivated. Older students, however, have greater family and work responsibilities which may impede their progress.
How do these findings match our experience of foundation students?
All these problems can be observed but they are more acute. For example approximately 70-75% of foundation students are local and many of them live at home. For younger student particularly this presents a problem. They come to the university only for classes, regarding it as an extension of school, some even referring to the university as 'school'. The rest of the day is spent at home. As a result they begin to feel that they are neglecting their friends, friends with whom they do not quite 'fit' anymore and also that they do not belong at the university either. As to preparation at school, many of our students left at 16. Of those who returned many gained disappointing grades at A level. With this experience they are indeed less motivated, committed and prepared. Among the mature students motivation and commitment are high. Many of these students are of an excellent standard but outside responsibilities do intrude on their work pattern.

It is essential therefore that retention strategies do not just assist at a crisis point but intervene before a crisis occurs. A range of support mechanisms is in place to assist this diverse group of students. Some of these are unique to foundation and are built into the programmes. Others are available to all students.

General Support Services
The Education Drop-in Centre (EDIC) offers academic support to all students. Its team of tutors offers one–to- one tutorial support. The centre has a wide range of study skills materials available. Throughout the academic year it runs regular seminars on many aspects of studying.
EDIC surveys student views on its services every year and the opportunity for one -to- one help consistently rates most highly. Students appreciate being able to talk to someone outwith their own department, feeling that they can talk and admit to problems more freely.

Student Services offers counselling services, support for disabled students and financial advice. Again the staff work closely with the Foundation team in identifying problems and referring students. This year use of these services by foundation students, perhaps not surprisingly, is proportionally greater than for other groups. For many of them university had never seemed a realistic goal. They are worried about the financial implications, about family commitments and about whether they are 'up to

it' academically. The Student Finance staff give information and practical help. Counselling services are available by appointment. This year having reviewed the particular problems that foundation students encounter, a pilot scheme has been launched with the Health Sciences students. Seminars have been run on topics such as assertiveness and stress management to see whether we can better equip students to deal with their situation before problems arise.

These services undoubtedly play an essential part in supporting our students. We feel however that it is important to go beyond these measures for foundation level. In developing the programmes we have tried to build in support and empowerment in terms of staff and services and also in the way that the teaching, assessment and feedback is designed.

Foundation Support Initiatives

The Foundation Studies Unit
The Foundation Studies Unit has 3 staff: co-ordinator, academic tutor and administrator.   The unit operates an open door policy and the office is always staffed. This gives students one central contact point for information on all programmes. The unit co-ordinates all foundation programmes and offers pastoral and academic support. The unit administrator keeps all student records and registers of attendance. Our experience is that those with poor attendance are more at risk of failure or withdrawal. All schools have therefore agreed to keep registers. The administrator then contacts the students to discuss the situation and offer help.
The co-ordinator and academic tutor both teach on one of core modules, Learning Strategies , and also teach their own disciplines at level 0, Law and Education respectively.

The Foundation Studies tutor offers academic support to students. Students are encouraged to call at any time to discuss work- related matters. Regular one to one tutorial slots are also available for students who wish to discuss a particular problem or assignment in depth. Students book these sessions in advance. Tutorials were regularly booked last year. It has seemed however this year that students prefer just to drop-in when they need help and the appointment facility has not been greatly used. The students who do arrange appointments seem to wait until they have reached crisis point before coming. Various methods of arranging tutorial time are under review for next year.
The Foundation studies tutor also works closely with the EDIC, tutoring in the centre one afternoon a week and teaching on their seminar programme. She also monitors foundation students' use of the service. The centre's staff refer foundation students to the foundation tutor when they are busy to minimise waiting time. Minimising the delay is important as many students do not initially appreciate how long a piece of work will take and consequently tend to be working to tight deadlines. Also having made the decision to come, it is important not to turn the m away as lack of confidence may mean that they do not return for a later appointment.

Schools Foundation Tutors
Each academic school has a nominated foundation tutor who looks after the level 0 students studying in their department.   The foundation tutors meet regularly to discuss academic, pastoral and administrative matters. This pan university group has worked extremely well. All staff have shown great commitment the idea of foundation studies and have raised the profile of the programmes within their respective schools. The meetings provide a forum for the exchange of information, planning of programmes and discussion concerning teaching methods and assessment.

Module Tutors
Individual module tutors offer academic support. These are all experienced teachers as it is acknowledged by the schools that these students are their most vulnerable students and require experienced hands to guide them into working effectively at degree level.

Teaching, Assessment and Feedback
Teaching methods, assessment and feedback are particularly important in developing non-traditional students. Much research emphasises the characteristics of what students regard as good teaching (Entwistle &Tait 1990, Laurillard, 1993, Ramsden, 1992). Ramsden (1992) argues persuasively for appropriate well-designed assessment and for the power of timely, detailed feedback. Entwistle & Tait (1990) also underlined the importance of prompt feedback, illustrating the significant role that lack of feedback plays in student failure. The significance of these features is even greater at Level 0. Students on all programmes encounter a variety of teaching and assessment methods to acclimatize them to HE. Care is taken to provide meaningful feedback quickly.

Induction
Students' experience at induction is crucial to how they settle in to the university. Lowe and Cook (2003) highlight inadequate induction as a significant cause of underachievement and withdrawal for first year students. This is more critical for foundation students. The programme provides an introduction to the university, the academic schools and sources of support. Two innovative sessions are featured. The first session, run by a member of academic staff with considerable experience of counselling is an ice-breaker session, set in a traditional lecture theatre but encouraging students to talk in small group and also to the whole class.
The second is the HE Workout, 'a working day' giving students an insight into the work that they will be required to tackle. They are given a question to answer in groups. They spend the day researching the topic and preparing a response. They then report their results in a short presentation.
They find it challenging but it boosts their confidence when the task is completed

Research and Learning Strategies
As an additional mechanism to monitor progress and also to build confidence and motivate students a research project has begun this year. Within the Learning Strategies module, where students are already discussing study methods, motivation, time management and reflection, they are asked to complete the Assist Inventory (Entwistle & Tait, 1996) in week 5. The timing coincides with the period when students are beginning to settle to some work but also when withdrawal rates peak. Using SPSS the results are monitored for students with particular difficulties and these are addressed on a one – to – one basis. In May the test will be repeated to assess whether the students approaches have altered. One of the most significant findings relates to the fear of failure scale. While the inventory links this to a surface approach to learning, 80% of the foundation students who completed the inventory recorded a high score irrespective of whether their approach was rated as surface, deep or strategic overall. This is an indication of the uncertainty and lack of confidence which typifies level 0 students.
Next year Assist will be administered in week 5 again. This will be followed by the Building Excellence questionnaire (Rundle and Dunn, 2000) to further explore the student's learning styles. The aim of this approach is twofold. Firstly explaining the students' preferred learning style should show them how they might work effectively and build confidence. Secondly, as argued by Andrew et al (2002), identifying students' preferred styles might usefully be seen as a starting point from which students will develop into more versatile learners These two instruments will allow us to identify and help at risk students but also give students information about themselves and facilitate discussions that take place in class about what effective study at HE level entails.
The Learning Strategies module addresses motivation, skills and reflection. It gives students a chance to practise a range of skills and styles of writing which will be required in subsequent years. It also contains elements of peer and self assessment. Assessment requirements are: a SWOT analysis of themselves; a précis exercise; a group presentation on a subject of their own choice and a reflective report on their own learning. This picks up themes from the SWOT analyses and encourages students to reflect on their own progress.
Mindful of anxiety about their ability to succeed and for the necessity for prompt and full feedback, the SWOT analysis is given out in the first workshop to be handed in the next week. This forces students to confront themselves and also gets them over the hurdle of the first piece of assessed work. The teaching team returns this to students within a fortnight thus giving them a feeling of achievement and some useful feedback.

The presentation is the task that students mention in their SWOTs and reports as the one they most dread. It is also the one which, once successfully completed gives most satisfaction.

Progress Files
The SWOT and the report feed into the students' progress files. The University's Progress Files Tutor is piloting progress files with the Foundation students and works closely with the Foundation Team. Progress files require regular meetings with tutors to assess progress and set targets. During the pilot, we have encouraged students to work in pairs as mentors for each other. This has worked particularly well, the students being both forthright in their views and supportive of each other.

The ways in which we support our students is constantly under review. Focus groups with past students and with teaching staff are part of this process.
In September 2003 we plan to introduce a 'buddy' scheme for students who enrol late and have thus missed the induction week.   This has been done on an ad hoc basis this year and has proved successful. In addition an information pack for those enrolling after induction will be introduced. Certain groups, notably the Chiropractic students showed interest in starting their own study group this year. Developing this idea and ways in which the Foundation Unit might facilitate it will be discussed in the student focus groups at the end of this year.

In exploring and reviewing support mechanisms it is becoming increasingly apparent that what we are talking about are not really 'special' measures but is basic good practice in teaching, assessment, feedback, monitoring and support.

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