‘Bridging that Gap’ Between Foundation Degrees and Top-Up to Honours Level: the transition experiences of students entering level 6 at the University of Worcester

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Abstract

Foundation degrees are 2-year higher education programmes in technical and professional skills that provide a qualification in their own right, but can also be used as a progression route to year three of an Honours degree. This option has been taken up by a growing number of students since the introduction of Foundation degrees, but research has shown that the transition to year 3 from a Foundation degree has been a difficult experience for a number of students. The current study explores the experiences of a cohort of students progressing to year 3 of an Honours programme at the University of Worcester. Findings reflect those of previous studies, which indicate that the transition from year 2 of a Foundation degree to year 3 of an Honours programme is experienced as a greater jump than for the equivalent level of academic progression for students continuing on the Honours degree. Recommendations are made for easing the transition for Foundation degree students topping-up to Honours level, but it is acknowledged that bridging the gap is a joint responsibility between university and student.

Keywords: Foundation degree, top-up degree, progression, transition, threshold concepts.

Introduction

The introduction of Foundation degrees (FDs) in 2000, set up by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (DfES 2007), was intended to provide graduate-standard, technical and professional skill-training that fulfilled the requirements of employers (Burke et al 2009). Foundation degrees are 2-year, higher education qualifications designed through the collaboration of universities, further education colleges (FECs) and employers (Burke et al 2009). The programme includes academic study and a work-based learning component, the latter being described as a relationship between learning and work/employment (Keeves and Outhwaite 2001) and learning while doing (Rowley 2005). Although Foundation degrees are validated by universities, a significant proportion of them are delivered by local FECs working in partnership (Rowley 2005). The current study is concerned mainly with students from Foundation degrees validated by the University of Worcester under the Institute of Health and Society, which include: Health and Social Care; Learning Disabilities; Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH); and Mental Health. The university also offers FDs in Learning Support and in Early Years under the Institute of Education, which are included in this study.

Foundation degrees are qualifications in their own right, but they also provide credit accumulation and transfer at levels 4 (year 1) and 5 (year 2) as a progression route to a related Honours degree programme (Rowley 2005). Since the inception of FDs, a growing number of students have been entering the final year of an Honours degree (Pike and Harrison 2011): of
the 2007 – 2008 FD graduates in the UK 59% of full-time and 42% of part-time students progressed to Honours degree programmes the following year (HEFCE 2010).

This paper explores the experiences of a cohort of students making the transition from Foundation degrees, the majority delivered by partner colleges, onto level 6 of an Honours degree in Social Welfare at the University of Worcester (UoW). The rationale for this study arose from the perception among transition students that there was a gap between themselves as ‘top-up’ students and their continuing third year peers. This research aims to explore the nature of this gap and make recommendations to ease the transition experience in the future. In reviewing the literature on transition from FECs to university, this paper will also consider some deeper transition issues of the learning process which may have significance for the findings of the current study.

**Transition from foundation degrees**

One of the aims of Foundation degrees is to contribute to widening participation in lifelong learning for those who may not otherwise have considered entering higher education (Burke et al 2009). An advantage for such students, who are often in full or part-time employment, is that it offers flexible and accessible study, often in local FECs, and that the workplace experience provides a significant proportion of the learning and assessment (Burke et al 2009). Symes and Macintyre (2000) point out that work-based learning has always been a feature of vocational, educational and technical courses, and research shows that students across most FDs consider their work-based learning assessments to be particularly meaningful, because they relate to concrete reality (Burke et al 2009). This, however, may be a moot point and suggests that learning for some is not meaningful unless it has direct application to the work place and, indeed, it has been found that both students and course directors understand work-based learning to be more about experience than how it can generate learning (Burke et al 2009). Symes and Macintyre (2000) argue that such an attitude undermines the essential feature of higher education, in which knowledge is pursued for its own sake, and is in such a case only of value for its use and application. This point will be returned to later, as it may have significance for the issues around transition.

Another feature of accessibility is that the entry criteria for Foundation degrees are lower than for Honours degrees, and it is likely that a relatively high proportion of students who enter Foundation degree programmes are able to do so through more diverse and less standard entry qualifications than those required by the traditional Honours degree entry route (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2005). In addition, teaching in FECs is usually in small groups, with quite specific direction at the beginning and autonomous learning developing slowly (Rowley 2005). However, herein lies a fundamental difference between the culture of FECs and of universities. Rowley (2005) argues that a feature of the FEC is to be responsible for the student experience, while the university has responsibility for maintaining the standard and reputation of its awards.

These features suggest that the culture of FECs may be better suited to non-traditional students, but if these students wish to progress to Honours level in the culture and environment of a university, there needs to be strong collaboration between these institutions. This collaboration goes without saying if FDs are delivered in partnership, but it could be argued that this process should be strengthened in the lead up to transition. This is recognised by the HEFCE, who suggest that there should be clear transition arrangements for those FD students who wish to progress to Honours level (HEFCE 2000), and Rowley suggests that it
should be standard procedure for the two years of FD to be followed by a bridging unit of three to four months prior to entering the 3rd year (Rowley 2005).

It seems clear from the above that the transition from FDs to level 6 represents a significant step up the academic ladder, particularly when the former are delivered by FECs. Before considering the transition experiences of the UoW students, the current literature on transition issues will be reviewed.

**Review of literature on transition issues.**

It has been noted that there has been little published research into transition across both institutional and programme boundaries, from a FEC to level 6 at university (Nelson 2006; Penketh and Goddard 2008; Pike and Harrison 2011). The following findings shed some light on how transitions have been experienced by students and how, in some instances, they have been addressed by the delivering institutions.

The Accessible Higher Education (AcHE) project run by the University of Plymouth Colleges, in conjunction with the University of Bournemouth, was designed to build the capacity of its 19 participating colleges to design and deliver FDs that could provide seamless progression to Honours degree level (Dixon et al 2005). This idea was born out of research into the experiences of students progressing from FD in Public Services onto a BSc (Hons) Public Service programme. The first transition cohort received only a limited transition programme and the subsequent move to university was found to be affected by student uncertainties. One example of this was the perception that they were less welcome in an environment that has traditionally held vocational courses to be academically inferior to Honours programmes (Dixon et al 2005). Lecturers also recognised that they needed to be vigilant for any hidden prejudices they may hold in this regard. Another factor affecting students’ ease of transition was that 3rd year lecturers expect students to take responsibility for their own learning to a high degree. As pointed out earlier by Rowley (2005), students studying at FD level in FECs are likely to have had a more intimate and directive experience with their tutors than those at a similar level in a university environment. The AcHE project designers took this into account also, suggesting that lecturers take a more student-centred approach to the learning process (Dixon et al 2005). However, it was recognised that 2nd year Foundation degree students need to be intellectually challenged and be able to demonstrate that they have ‘learnt how to learn’ (Dixon et al 2005, p37). Again, it was acknowledged that good channels of communication between university lecturers and their FE colleagues are paramount.

Student feedback acquired through conducting focus groups and an end of year questionnaire from this first transition cohort to the University of Plymouth highlighted a number of other issues. Students experienced a feeling of ‘difference’, characterised by the following: underdevelopment of writing skills, referencing and avoiding plagiarism; concerns around their ability to manage an Independent Study, particularly the skills of literature searching; lack of IT skills; the type of language used by university lecturers and their expectation of student understanding; the amount of reading expected of them; and lack of self-esteem felt in joining the continuing 3rd year students.

It was also found that if college-based students felt themselves to be part of a university structure, they were more likely to progress to Honours level. With this in mind they recommend periodic visits to university to familiarise themselves with the campus and make
contact with university staff. Dixon et al (2005) also recommend that the transition programme should start early and be an integral part of the FD course, so that students are aware from year one of a natural progression to year three.

A case study carried out by Hills (2006) reports on an initiative designed to address the problems associated with student transition and their relation to student non-completion. This initiative was the result of findings by the University of Sunderland that factors contributing to student drop-out usually occurred during transition between different levels of education. These difficulties included the following: A perceived lack of student support; alienation; social isolation; inappropriate programme choice; inadequate study and time-management skills; lack of knowledge of university culture; and unrealistic expectations of commitment needed for success.

In addition, it was found that students needed to be ‘weaned off’ dependence on staff-led study methods, for instance dependence on handouts, and the treating of information as facts rather than evidence, a kind of ‘surface learning’ left over from previous educational experience (Hills 2006 p88).

As a result of these findings, the University of Sunderland developed a bridging module, delivered mainly through e-learning. This is an assessed module at level 5, awarding 20 credits on a pass/fail basis, which students study in their own time during the summer prior to their entry onto level 6 of an Honours programme. Progression to level 6 is therefore not only dependent on successful completion of the FD, but also the bridging module. The bridging module is also used as a diagnostic tool, whereby tutors give feedback and pointers for improvement during induction week.

The module content includes transition to higher education, academic writing skills, critical thinking, and research skills. The majority of the material is generic, with a subject-specific assessment section set by individual programme leaders. The use of video clips allows new students to hear the views of current students on various learning and teaching issues, such as studying independently, and online communication tools also allow discussion and social networking, in order to ease the feeling of vulnerability and isolation. The pilot module was evaluated by an external consultant and showed largely positive feedback on the content, but accessing the site caused some problems and had hampered the experience.

The authors conclude that although their findings indicated a positive impact on student understanding of university life, anxieties around academic ability and decisions about course selection, it was not possible to claim that student retention or drop-out was necessarily correlated with the bridging module. They do, however, state that this bridging module has been disseminated at a regional and national level and that all transition students can potentially benefit from participation.

Penketh and Goddard (2008) carried out a piece of action research to investigate the experiences of mature women students progressing from a FD in Teaching and Learning Support onto a BA(Hons) in Teaching, Learning and Mentoring. In contrast to the other studies in this review, the students in this research were not moving from FECs, but had taken their Foundation degrees at the university. From this point of view their experience of change should have been less challenging, as the timing of lectures remained largely the same and they were familiar with the campus. However, academically the respondents noted a significant difference from their FD study. Students were provided with an opportunity to use journals to record and reflect on their experiences relating to the transition and a number of key themes emerged, including the connection between academic and social experience,
anxiety about academic writing and time-management difficulties. In connection with the latter, it was noted that the students in this study were all women who had fairly heavy commitments outside university, and many of their anxieties were connected with the tension between work, home life and study.

The researchers in this study were both staff at the university where it was carried out. This study was not as comprehensive as the previous two, but the authors concluded that it had raised their awareness of structural and cultural difficulties encountered by non-traditional students such as mature women, and they made recommendations that would address the time management issue, which was the most pressing concern for most students.

Research by Winter and Dismore (2010) shows similar findings to previous studies. They argue that much research into progression from FECs to university concentrates primarily on the curriculum, but it was noted that cultural differences between FECs and university have significant impact on students’ learning and overall integration into university life. Lowe and Cook (2003) point out that these cultural aspects of higher education are often overlooked and it is assumed that they will be addressed through subject teaching alone. Winter and Dismore (2010) used three themes as the basis for their research question: Student experience at the partner college, the transition induction process and their experience to date at university.

As with previous studies (Rowley 2005), students reported that their FEC experience had been more ‘comfortable’ than at university, that they had limited experience of autonomous learning and academic expectations were more attainable. After transition to university, some students reported being asked to refer to 2nd year Honours degree work, of which they had no knowledge, and were told to go and learn it for themselves (Winter and Dismore 2010). One interesting finding was that those students who were already more inclined towards autonomous learning were better able to integrate into university learning. They were also able to identify gaps in their own knowledge and address them, and adapted more easily to new learning approaches. Many students, however, reported an inconsistency in marking standards between FECs and university.

Most respondents found difficulty in integrating, noting that no social event had been provided for transition and continuing students to get to know each other, resulting in a clear division of student groups. When lecturers tried to get students to mix, for instance in small working groups, it was found that the groups tended to be dominated by the continuing students.

From their findings, Winter and Dismore (2010) recommended a better induction process, the design of a bridging module, and increased dialogue between FEC and university staff to develop awareness of the needs of transition students.

Pike and Harrison (2011) conducted a qualitative study into the transition experiences of a small group of students entering the final year of an Honours programme. Their findings also accord with those of previous research. The key themes identified were: the need for better information and communication; the perceived differences between FECs and university; confidence in their academic ability; and integration. They also found that some university lecturers had expectations that FD students would have difficulty with year 3. This finding reflects that of Greenbank (2007) who found that some university lecturers felt that former FD students would benefit from joining the 2nd year of an Honours programme, some
expressing the view that parity between FDs and the first two years of an Honours degree is questionable.

Pike and Harrison (2011) acknowledged that their study was limited to a small cohort of students, and that the self-selection of the respondents meant that their views may not be fully representative. However, they concluded that the range of difficulties experienced by transition students could be minimised by strategies to address smooth progression and made recommendations to improve communication between FECs and university, review the induction process, provide information to enable informed choices about progression, and establish peer-mentoring with continuing 3rd years.

The authors pointed out that it was interesting and somewhat disappointing that the findings from their study reflected those of previous studies, presumably suggesting that little had changed over the years. Indeed it could be argued that, from the above studies, there is a suggestion that the findings and recommendations of research into transition experiences have not yet had a wide impact nationally. However, as Pike and Harrison (2011) point out, students also have their own role to play in their educational experiences. It could be suggested that there may be other factors at the heart of the education process which affect the transition from one level of learning to the next, not just in terms of academic level but also on a conceptual level. This idea has been explored by Land et al (2005), who refer to the point at which this transition takes place as a threshold concept which requires mastery before the student can move on.

Threshold concepts

According to Land et al (2005) a threshold concept is a particular concept in a subject area which can be likened to a doorway or portal, which opens up new ways of thinking about that subject. There may be more than one threshold concept and Land et al (2005) describe them as those which bind the subject together. Grasping a threshold concept entails a shift in the subjectivity of the learner, resulting in a transformed way of understanding, interpreting or viewing something without which, it is argued, the learner cannot progress (Land et al 2005). As an example, Meyer et al (2006 p 3) cite grasping the concept of heat transfer to enable trainee chefs to understand why it is important to choose the correct cooking vessels. They argue that such a ‘turn’ in understanding any subject marks an initiation into that subject culture. Mastering such threshold concepts may allow the learner to make connections of which they were previously unaware (Meyer et al 2006). However, an important point raised by Cousin (2006) is that threshold concepts themselves may be grasped in too rigid a manner if not taught from a research-minded approach, which allows for the questioning of the concept itself. Returning to the previously mentioned findings of Hills (2006), that transition students tended to accept information as fact rather than evidence to be questioned and explored further, it can be seen that both student and lecturer have their part to play in the transition across thresholds of understanding.

It can be argued that mastery of a threshold concept requires moving out of one’s comfort zone, a requirement recognised by Land et al (2005) who refer to this new awareness as ‘troublesome knowledge’. Cousin (2006) suggests that the reason it is ‘troublesome’ is because this move away from previously held ideas is emotionally uncomfortable. It may be argued therefore that, for some students, such a repositioning may be too uncomfortable and therefore resisted. Perhaps even more significantly for the current study is Cousin’s suggestion that mastery of a threshold concept is not only connected to the concept itself, but
is inherent in the academic and social experience of the student (Cousin 2006). To take this further, it could be argued that transition itself is a threshold experience and therefore needs to be approached with that awareness.

The threshold experience and encounter with threshold concepts is of course not confined to students progressing from FDs to university, but the notion may shed some light on difficulties encountered in the transition, which will be discussed further in this paper.

As highlighted by Pike and Harrison (2011), research into progression from FDs to Honours degree programmes has been fairly consistent in its findings in the last few years. The current study was conducted in response to the experience of being a transition student at the University of Worcester, and the findings will be discussed in relation to existing evidence and the theory of threshold concepts and experiences.

Methodology and method

A qualitative approach was used for data collection as the research was concerned with looking for emerging themes (Holliday 2007) in the students’ experience. The methods employed were questionnaires and focus groups. Questionnaires were sent to the following:

- Top-up students at UoW: BA(Hons)Social Welfare
- Top-up students at UoW: BSc(Hons)Applied Health Sciences
- 2nd year FD students at UoW: Health and Social Care
- 2nd year FD students at UoW: Learning Disabilities
- 2nd year FD students at UoW: CAMH
- 2nd year FD students at Hereford Technical College: Health and Social Care
- 2nd year FD students at Hereford Technical College: Learning Support
- 2nd year FD at students Halesowen College: Health and Social Care

The reason for the inclusion of current/recent FD students was to ascertain what factors influenced the choice to progress or not onto an Honours programme and what would be helpful to prepare for study at level 6. Top-up students were asked to comment on their experiences in their current course of study and to suggest ways that could have eased the transition. The intention was to explore the full reality of the student experience, so open-ended questions that allowed for expansion of themes were used (Denscombe 2007), followed by an option to participate in a focus group in order to discuss issues. The results were divided into two groups according to whether they were FD or top-up students, the latter organised into positive and negative points.

Ethics

Respondents were assured of anonymity, unless they chose to give their name. Those who agreed to participate in focus groups were given the right to withdraw at any point.

Response

Ten questionnaires were returned from top-up students and nine from FD students. Seven of the top-up respondents were from FECs, three from the UoW. Only one FD student from UoW returned the questionnaire, but a further four agreed to participate in a focus group. Five top-up respondents and five FD respondents participated in a focus group.
Findings

Top-up students

Positive points

- Good choice of modules. Modules offered covered a wide subject area, were interesting and thought provoking.
- Lecturers were friendly, knowledgeable of their subject, supportive and good teachers.
- Meeting new peers gave greater scope for discussion and debate.
- The Independent Study (IS) provided freedom of choice to pursue an area of interest.
- Support was good: tutorials, drop-in sessions for IS support, induction week and IT support were very helpful and accessible.
- Advantage of having been a UoW campus student for the FD.
- Valid way of continuing education to degree level.

Negative points

- Administration and communication prior to the start of the course: students from FE colleges felt they were not given sufficient information about their top-up year, resulting in two students feeling they had made the wrong progression choice.
- Submission of IS proposals was required by the end of induction week for top-up students, whereas continuing 3rd years had had the previous semester to prepare and submit theirs.
- Prior knowledge did not match that of continuing students, for example in politics and social welfare.
- Insufficient prior skills in critical analysis.
- Perception that continuing 3rd years were better prepared for study at level 6.
- Mandatory modules not good progression from the FDs in Learning Support or CAMH.
- No extra help was offered by teaching staff.
- Induction week was combined with incoming 1st year students to the Honours programme, and transition students felt that their induction needs were different.
- Lack of acceptance and understanding from continuing 3rd year students.
- Larger teaching groups, combined with the above point, undermined the confidence of some top-up students to speak up.
- Some students felt their confidence was ‘badly knocked’ when they received their first assessment grades, as they had previously had ‘excellent grades’.
- First experience of exam for some students.

Suggestions for easing transition included: an induction event with the continuing 3rd years; a reading list before the summer; a summer school/bridging module; greater awareness by lecturers of gaps in FD student knowledge; and a lecturer from the University to visit FE colleges to talk about top-up options.
Foundation degree students

Nine out of the ten students who returned questionnaires intended to progress to level 6 of an Honours programme. The reason given by the one student for not choosing to progress was stated as ‘time’. The following points were given as being potentially helpful in preparing for progression:

- Comprehensive information about course content, assessment methods and timing of taught sessions.
- Academic writing sessions
- Information and Learning Services (ILS) induction for students coming from partner FE colleges.
- Access to module content and reading lists prior to start of course.
- More information on the IS.
- Information about possible work placement requirement
- Previous/current top-up students to talk to prospective students about their own experiences.

The FD students who participated in the focus groups had all chosen to progress to Honours level and had studied for their FD at the university. These students all spoke positively of their academic experiences and felt it was a good preparation for level 6. The following comments were noted:

Reasons for choosing to continue:

‘I’ve done two years, I can’t leave now.’

‘[The progression] is a brilliant opportunity’

‘I don’t want to let go’

‘..very positive experiences on the Foundation degree’

Academic experience on FD:

‘Support is always there but you have to access it yourself’

‘You can do anything, support is there’

‘Excellent preparation for next year’

‘The 2nd year is good preparation [for progression] as learning is more independent than in the 1st year’

It was pointed out that students who attended tutorials did ‘brilliantly’, but many did not take this opportunity and it made a noticeable difference. A new development in year 2 of the FD has been the undertaking of a literature review, which students acknowledged as being good preparation for their independent study. The only negative points expressed by FD students in the focus group was a slight feeling of apprehension about the social and academic challenges of progression; one student felt this was just her own personality and to be expected with any new situation, an opinion reflected by the rest of the group.
**Discussion and recommendations**

These results provide a picture of student experiences which may at first appear to be somewhat contradictory. Looking at the positive and negative points identified by the top-up students it can be seen that certain experiences were positive for some but negative for others. It is interesting to note, for example, that some students found lecturers to be friendly and supportive while others said that no extra support was available. Likewise, meeting new peers had the advantage of greater scope for discussion and debate for some, while others felt intimidated by the larger groups and less sympathetic 3rd year cohort. However, many of the negative points reflect findings from existing research, for example: feelings of academic inferiority or unpreparedness (Dixon et al 2005; Greenbank 2007); greater expectations of autonomous learning (Dixon et al 2005; Hills 2006; Winter and Dismore 2010); difficulties in integration with continuing 3rd year students (Dixon et al 2005; Penketh and Goddard 2008; Pike and Harrison 2011; Winter and Dismore 2010); inappropriate programme choice (Hills 2006); inconsistency in marking standards between FECs and university (Winter and Dismore 2010); and insufficient induction (Dixon et al 2005; Hills 2006; Pike and Harrison 2011; Winter and Dismore 2010). The last point can be connected to the resulting recommendations and practice of some researchers, of introducing a bridging module to ease progression.

It is interesting to note that the positive feedback from the FD students who intended to progress to Honours level came largely from those who had undertaken their study within the university community. They felt confident that their FD had been good preparation for study at level 6 and any misgivings were put down to a natural apprehension when faced with a new challenge. This accords with the findings of Dixon et al (2005) that students who felt part of the university culture were more likely to progress to level 6. These students also pointed out that support on the FD had always been available, but they had to make the effort to access it. Conversely, several top-up respondents who had come from FECs felt that they were not academically prepared for level 6 and there was no extra support available once they came to university. The latter point may be connected with the small teaching groups they were used to, where teaching is more directive and support immediately available rather than having to be accessed by appointment.

However, not all of the negative response came from FE students, so location of learning is not necessarily the only factor affecting transition. It may be significant that all the respondents were women, most of who were in employment and had commitments at home. This reflects the findings of Penketh and Goddard (2008), where although the respondents had not made the transition across locations, they still found the step up to Honours level 6 challenging due to time-management difficulties. It could therefore be suggested that transition issues for some students in the present study may have been affected by similar factors, which may have prevented them seeking help at ‘out of hours’ times. Nevertheless, it may be argued that support for study is a shared commitment between student and lecturer, and that the successful transition student has understood the shared responsibility for crossing academic thresholds, whatever their circumstances.

Since the balance of positive and negative responses from the top-up students seems to be mixed across those who came from FECs and those who had previously studied at UoW, it is not possible to say conclusively that location, with its inherent academic and social difference, is the main reason for the ‘gap’ between Foundation degrees and Honours level 6. The complaint that no extra help was available for those who felt that their knowledge and skills were not up to the standard of continuing Honours students, for example, was made by
both groups. Likewise the perception that the continuing students were better prepared for their Independent Study. Nevertheless, respondents from the UoW from both top-up and FD cohorts felt that previous study within the UoW campus put them at an advantage. The question still remains as to why some students experienced more ‘gap’ than others. A consideration of threshold concepts may shed some light on this.

Meyer et al (2006) suggest that the process of learning involves entering an in-between state of understanding a concept that they term a liminal space, from which the student may progress to a deeper understanding of the concept. This in-between phase is characterised by uncertainty, and may result in the student either retreating to a previous state of basic understanding, or in resorting to ‘mimicry rather than mastery’ of the concept (Cousin 2006 p139). As pointed out by Cousin (2006) the new knowledge to be mastered may be troublesome as it requires moving out of the comfort zone, and she also suggests that this is inseparable from the whole academic and social experience of the student. As suggested earlier, the process of transition from FDs to level 6 is a threshold experience in itself and, as the findings of this research show, academic and social difficulties have marred the process for a significant number of students. To explain further it may help to consider some previously mentioned characteristics of FDs.

It has been pointed out that the entry criteria for Foundation degrees is lower than for the traditional entry route to Honours degrees (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2005), which may account for some students feeling academically unprepared for level 6 study; but it may be argued that if the two years of FD study constitute an accepted progression route to an Honours programme, these discrepancies should have been ironed out by the time of transition. In the words of Dixon et al (2005 p37) students by this time should have ‘learnt how to learn’. However, as research has shown, there has been some doubt as to the parity between FDs and levels 4 and 5 of Honours programmes (Greenbank 2007). It might be that the academic experience of FDs tends more towards ‘linear learning’ (Land et al 2005) with fewer threshold experiences, whereas students on Honours programmes may have already encountered these by level 6.

Another point is that FD students have tended to value knowledge and learning predominantly in terms of their use-value (Burke et al 2009). It could be argued from this that students may choose not to struggle with the troublesome knowledge referred to earlier, and merely treat information as fact rather than evidence, thereby avoiding the threshold experience and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Indeed, personal experience on both a Foundation degree programme and a top-up year has encountered the view from peers that certain subjects were a waste of time as they were not relevant to their work life. This may be connected to the complaint by some respondents that some mandatory modules were not a good progression from their FD studies. If students approach a threshold concept with this attitude, it could be suggested that they may retreat into a previous state of understanding, as mentioned earlier, and may resist asking for help as that would still require a move out of the comfort zone. To take this further, if they approach a threshold experience, such as transition to an Honours programme, with the same attitude it may be suggested that they are bound to experience a gap between themselves and those students who are likely to have already accepted the sometimes uncomfortable nature of new knowledge.

Although it should be acknowledged that transition to level 6 presents challenges to both transition and continuing students, it has been recognised that the natural anxiety of 3rd year students is more intense for direct entrants at level 6 (Shobrook 2005). One of these challenges is the requirement to undertake an Independent Study (IS), an anxiety expressed
by top-up respondents in the present study. The nature of the IS requires engagement with the research process which, it could be argued, means approaching threshold concepts and going beyond surface learning, necessitating a shift in subjectivity leading to new interpretations (Land et al 2005). As Cousins (2006) points out, students need to be prepared for a critical and research-minded approach to their studies at this level, a lack felt by some top-up respondents in the present study.

This discussion has considered the findings of the present study in the light of prior research into transition from FDs to Honours programmes, and it is clear that these findings reflect many of those from previous studies. What is not conclusive is the correlation between location of previous FD study and successful transition. Further exploration into the ‘gap’ was made by considering the theory of threshold concepts. While it may be argued that all learning involves transition across thresholds, the theory has been applied to some of the present findings and may go some way towards understanding transition difficulties. Since the transition of the top-up cohort in this study, some academic changes have been made to the FD programmes by the UoW, namely the introduction of a literature review in year 2, the inclusion of a module on politics in year 2, and generally more autonomy of learning by this stage. Following suggestions from respondents and from previous studies the following recommendations are made:

- Clear information about appropriate progression route, given in the first term of the 2nd year.
- The introduction of a bridging module in the summer prior to the 3rd year, on the university campus, which could also be used for diagnostic purposes.
- Induction event(s) with the continuing 3rd year students.
- Establish a peer-mentoring system with continuing students.
- Access to reading lists for mandatory modules prior to the summer break.
- Increased dialogue between FECs and the university to facilitate greater awareness by university staff of possible gaps in transition student knowledge.
- More parity in academic rigor between levels 4 and 5 of FDs and Honours programmes.

Weaknesses of study

The small sample of respondents is a weakness of this study, and the findings may not therefore be fully representative (Robson 2002). As pointed out by Bell (2005), researchers are dependent on the goodwill of respondents, so this is difficult to avoid. Another difficulty was that, as the study was authorised late in the academic year, accessing respondents had to be done with some haste, allowing also for people’s study commitments. For this reason, much of the literature review was done after the initial phase of the empirical research. Had this been done the other way round, the questionnaire for top-up students would have included more prompts, for example what qualifications were held prior to beginning the FD and the level of extra-curricular commitments.

The consideration of threshold concepts in relation to the transition from FDs to Honours programmes could be explored further, but was not within the scope of this study. Further research into transition issues is needed, as the current findings suggest that the experiences of a ‘gap’ are still posing problems for many students. As a comparison, research into the
transition experiences from level 5 to level 6 of continuing Honours study might be appropriate.

As the researchers in this study are both connected to the University of Worcester, one as student and the other as lecturer, there is a question of researcher bias. Both are aware of this and have endeavoured to approach the data in an objective manner. As the main researcher, the student has benefitted from a greater understanding of the issues experienced by peers as a result of conducting this study.

**Conclusion**

The use of Foundation degrees as a progression route to an Honours degree is an increasing practice, and for many students this represents a transition across institutional as well as academic boundaries. This study was carried out in response to the perception by student peers that the transition proved to be more difficult than anticipated. The findings show that there is a perceived gap between Foundation degrees and level 6 of Honours degrees that is not explained simply by the natural transition experience from one academic level to the next. The results of this research are in accordance with those of previous studies and recommendations are based on a combination of previous findings and suggestions by the respondents of this study. It is acknowledged, however, that addressing the gap is a shared responsibility between the delivering institution and the student, and that bridging that gap could be understood as a threshold experience on the way to new knowledge.

**The researchers**

The researchers consist of an academic partnership between a student and lecturer. Jenny Bolsius holds a Foundation degree in Learning Disabilities and a BA (Hons) in Social Welfare, having progressed onto a top-up programme to complete the latter. Both courses of study were taken at the University campus. Briony Williams is Programme lead in Foundation degrees in Applied Social Sciences under the Institute of Health and Society at the University of Worcester.

**References**


