

Face Report: Student Expectations and Experiences

This is the first of two reports on a research project entitled *Attracting, and keeping students, from non-traditional backgrounds: an investigation of factors that impact on student choice, performance and retention*. The research is one of five successful submissions funded by Forum Access and Continuing Education (FACE) in 2006-2007.

This first report concentrates on the qualitative aspects of the research: an investigation into the views and perception of current and prospective HE students. The second report is a statistical analysis of the retention rates and achievement levels of widening participation and non-widening participation students using different variables: home postcode in an area of low participation and entry qualifications. Please see the *Face Report: Widening Participation; retention and achievement*.

This report investigates the expectations and experiences of widening participation students and non-widening participation students, focussing on the views and perceptions of two groups of students i) learners at 3 local FE colleges and ii) HE students in the first year of university. The students were asked about the factors that had influenced their institution and programme choices and about their expectations of university; the HE students were also asked about their experiences in the first semester and how this compared to their expectations.

A note about terminology

Widening participation is a high profile topic, but as a concept is difficult to define. Trying to identify a widening participation *student* is equally problematic; widening participation students have been described as: individuals from under-represented groups (including certain ethnic groups, socio-economic groups 4-7¹), students with a disability, mature students; those with low A level points or non-traditional qualifications; individuals living in areas of low participation²; the first generation in their family to attend HE or a combination of these factors. Short of working with datasets that include the appropriate variables or asking individuals intrusive questions, it is often difficult to determine if a student could be classified as widening participation using the list above. In this research, the most considered and practical approach has been adopted: participants have been asked if one or both of their parents went to university, if the answer was 'no' they are regarded as a widening participation student.

Background

Over the last ten years there have been determined moves to widen participation and encourage a more diverse range of students, with different social and educational backgrounds, to enter higher education. However, national statistics and research indicates that although the numbers of students entering higher education has increased considerably in recent years³, the numbers from widening

¹ Small employers, lower supervisory, semi-routine and routine occupations.

² Based on the percentage of the eligible population to enter HE.

³ The number of undergraduates (full time and part time) increased by a factor of 2 between 1982 and 2000 (Yorke and Longden, 2004)

participation backgrounds have decreased in proportion (Layer, 2005; DfES, 2003; Stuart, 2002). Institutional data from HEFCE indicates that students from widening participation⁴ backgrounds are more likely to leave their courses by the end of the first year. Research also suggests that students from widening participation backgrounds or with lower entry qualifications are more likely to leave university early (Aston and Bekhradnia, 2005; National Audit Office, 2002). Students may leave their courses for a number of reasons; studies by Yorke (1999) and Davies and Elias (2003) highlight several factors that may lead to withdrawal including: wrong choice of study, academic difficulties, financial problems and wrong choice of institution.

This report investigates the views of widening participation (first generation) students and non-widening participation, comparing and contrasting the factors that influence their choice of institution and programme choice and moves on to discuss expectations about learning in a HE environment.

At the end of this report (see the *Comment* section below), there is a discussion relating student feedback to the potential risk areas highlighted above by Yorke and, Davies and Elias.

FE College Students' Expectations

Methodology

Focus groups were held with year 13 students (17 -18 year olds) in three local FE Colleges, referred to below as colleges A, B and C. The colleges have a mixed student profile with learners from inner city schools, schools in the surrounding residential areas and several local independent schools. 22 students took part in the research, 21 were in the process of applying to university, or had already made their choices, 1 student was not planning to apply to university in the near future but said that he may consider doing so later and took an active part in the discussion. The sessions focussed on the factors that had informed their choice of institution, why they had chosen their HE programme, their expectations of university and any additional information that they felt would have helped them make a better informed choice or assist them in their preparations for university. The points covered were broadly similar to those used in the interviews with the higher education students (see Appendix A).

The FE students were studying academic or vocational A levels. College A offers a portfolio that comprises mainly A levels and has an intake that includes students from a range of schools including a number from the independent sector. Colleges B and C have a mixed portfolio of academic and vocational qualifications and draw students from a wide range of local schools. In College A, two of the five students had one or both parents who had attended university; 2 other students had an older brother or sister who had been, or currently attending university. In Colleges B and C (group sizes of 9 and 7 students respectively) one student in each session had a parent or parents who had been to university; there were fewer

⁴ Using HEFCE variables relating to lower socio-economic groups and entry qualifications.

brothers or sisters at, or who had been to, university. It was evident that more students in the group at College A had access to individuals within their household (parents/brothers/sisters) who had some experience of university. However, it would be inappropriate to identify the group as a whole as non-widening participation, this would obscure individual differences and stifle the responses of students who are the first in their generation or family to go to university. Feedback from all groups is taken on an individual basis and where a majority view is expressed this is clearly stated.

The discussion below summarises the student feedback and highlights any similarities or discernable differences between widening participation and non-widening participation students.

Research Findings

Factors influencing institution and programme choice

Feedback suggested that students were considering a wide range of universities. Some students at College A were considering local universities, but the majority were applying to universities up to 250 miles from home. The situation was reversed in colleges B and C, where most of the students were applying to local universities (within 25 miles). This may be due to individual differences, but could indicate that a significant number of the students at College A did not feel obliged to study in the local area and were generally more confident about living further away from home.

University open days had a significant impact on the students' perceptions of an institution and could be an important deciding factor; one student declared that he had been discouraged by 'distant', disinterested staff at one university and consequently had discounted that institution. Another student stated that staff at a university had appeared 'stern' and 'regimented'; he had decided not to apply. The majority of students felt that the 'friendliness' of an institution was important and if an institution gave this impression they felt confident about applying. 'Friendliness' of either staff or an institution was also highlighted several times during the FE sessions and in feedback from HE students – please see page 5 below.

Feedback indicated that students choose a course because it offered them the opportunity to continue with an area of particular interest e.g. sport or because it would enable them to follow a specific career path e.g. pharmacy or a combination of these two factors. The majority of students had chosen an institution because it had a good reputation in their chosen discipline; only a minority considered the overall academic reputation of an institution. There was no significant difference in the responses of students who were the first generation or first in their family to go to university and those who were not regarding programme choice.

When asked about career plans, some students were quite definite about the career path that they wanted to follow, others had not considered this in depth. However, all the students at College C and the majority of those at the other colleges felt that completing a university course would significantly improve their

career prospects and that they would be able to secure a job without difficulty when they had finished their course.

Expectations

When prompted to think about learning in a HE environment, most students did not know how many hours this would involve, although some students expected they would be required to spend approximately 30 hours per week in lectures or other study. When asked about learning and teaching environments, the majority of students were familiar with the concept of a lecture, but were unsure about any other teaching and support arrangements they would encounter, such as, how many hours would be spent in lectures and other types of studying. HE students made similar comments and discussed how this uncertainty had affected their experiences, please see page 5 below. Uncertainty or misconceptions about study time and the role students are expected to play, may lead to a mismatch between expectations and experience and possibly academic difficulties; this is discussed further in the *Comment* section below.

Financial matters were discussed, but none of the students regarded this as a potential problem area. A number stated that going to university would inevitably incur extra expenditure and although they had no idea how much money was involved they would 'manage to get through somehow'. The absence of any realistic expectations about the costs is a cause for concern, particularly in view of the comments made by HE students (see page 6 below) and clearly a potential problem area which could lead to early withdrawal; this is also discussed in the *Comment* section below.

In the FE sessions, students were encouraged to identify information that they thought would help prepare future applicants for both the academic and social aspects of university life. Useful topics cited were information about facilities in the area, social life and university accommodation. However, requests for more information about course content, course structure and estimates of how much time would be spent in lectures and independent study occurred frequently; reinforcing uncertainties about the HE learning environment and the universities expectations of students. A number of FE students suggested that information from existing HE students would provide a useful and more reliable view of university life as they were somewhat distrustful of the picture presented generally in university prospectuses.

The FE sessions did not highlight any major differences between the views and expectations of widening participation and non widening participation students. Location was the only area where there was a slight difference in feedback with non-participation students more willing to travel further away from home. However, there were a number of misconceptions and areas of uncertainty shared by widening participation students and non-widening participation students, these are discussed further in the *Summary* section below.

The next section focuses on the experiences and expectations of students in their first year at university; in the *Summary section* below there is a brief discussion

about similarities in the feedback from FE and HE students and how the issues raised could have implications for early withdrawal.

HE Students' Expectations and Experiences

Methodology

Semi-structured individual interviews were held with 12 first year undergraduate students about to start the second semester. The students volunteered in response to a notice posted on the Students' Union website; respondents were studying a number of different degrees across the university.

The interviews focussed on a number of key points about the factors that informed institution and programme choice, students' first semester experiences and information that could be used to help prospective students develop more realistic expectations (see Appendix A).

In addition to the face to face interviews, an online questionnaire was posted on the Student Union's website based on the questions in the interview schedule. The online survey generated a further 17 responses from students studying a range of subject disciplines.

Thirty minutes was allocated for the face to face interviews. In the interviews students were relaxed and generally accommodating, willing to share their views and experiences. Although the online survey did not produce the same quantity or quality of feedback, most students answered all the questions and provided more detailed explanations when required. Feedback from the online questionnaire generated similar responses to those generated by the face to face interviews.

Using the 'first generation' definition, 17 students in total could be regarded as widening participation and 12 as non-widening participation.

The discussion below is based on both the interview and online responses.

Research Findings

Factors influencing institution and programme choice

The university's location, rather than academic reputation, was the most important factor for widening and non-widening participation students when choosing an institution. Portsmouth's proximity to the sea was a major aspect for consideration, other important factors were a city based campus, a vibrant social scene and the 'friendliness' of both the University and city. It is interesting to note that friendliness was a re-occurring theme with both HE and FE students; students appeared to equate 'welcoming' with 'friendly' and indicated that friendly teaching staff or a friendly institution suggested an environment in which they would be happy living and studying.

Students' choice of institution, in many cases, was influenced by the distance from their home or parents' address; the majority of students stated that they choose a university because it was 1-2 hours from home and they could travel home readily on public or private transport. Although students were not asked directly about the

location of their home address, implicit feedback indicated that all those surveyed had a home address in the south east, south London, south west or south Wales; most of their other first choice institutions had also been a similar distance from their home address.

Many HE students stated that one of the reasons they wanted to go into higher education was to gain independence from their parents; it was evident that students wanted to free themselves from parental control but they wanted to ensure that the 'safety net' of home was within easy reach.

The above discussion indicates that location is a strong driver for institution choice. This substantiates findings in a marketing survey commissioned by a University to investigate potential students' choices (Hobsons, 2006). Location as a factor in students' choice of institution is discussed further in the *Summary* section below.

Feedback from students suggested that when choosing their course programme, many students did so because they felt a commitment to that subject area, either because it was a lifelong passion or because they did particularly well in that area at school. Some students were more instrumental in their approach and chose a subject that they considered would help them prepare more effectively for a specific career; some students specifically chose an accredited course for that reason. There was no significant difference between the responses from widening and non-widening participation students.

When asked who had assisted them in their choice of university or course, students cited teachers, parents and friends. Teachers and parents who had been to university tended to emphasise the importance of investigating the academic credibility of either a course or an institution. In most cases, the parents of first generation students were also supportive, but this took a more general format with parents being described as 'encouraging'. In the case of 2 first generation students their parents did not have any input, but they had been advised by friends. Friends were the source of information for a number of students, mainly about social activities at university and outside; however, in a small number of cases students enrolled for a course on the recommendation of a friend. HE and FE respondents both valued the views of friends and indicated that a student perspective about university life including academic experiences and living in student accommodation would be particularly valuable.

Expectations

Students were asked what they hoped to gain academically and personally from their studies. As suggested above, a number of respondents stated that they wanted to gain a qualification that would help them with a career. Some students were unsure about what they wanted to do after university, with some opting for a period of travel. However, a number of students were very definite about their career plans and were confident that they would be able to work in the industry of their choice. This is consistent with feedback from FE students suggesting that many students consider that a university education will secure them a 'good' job, often in a field of their choosing.

A number of HE students stated that they wanted to develop general skills that would enhance their employability, such as working with other people, becoming more proficient at making presentations, being able to organise their time more effectively. Many students had also welcomed the prospect of meeting new people and making new friends.

Confidence and independence were mentioned frequently by widening participation and non-widening participation students; the majority valued the opportunity to operate independently from their parents and felt they would gain more confidence by organising their own time and finances. However, it also became clear that for many students, operating independently was not as easy as they had anticipated (please see *Experiences* section below).

Experiences

The mismatch between academic expectations and experiences was an issue for the majority of students. As suggested in the *Background* section above this could lead to early withdrawal and may be particularly problematic for widening participation students.

When asked if their course was meeting their expectations, the majority indicated initially that it was, but then there was some hesitation; there were some aspects about which they were disappointed. This was mainly due to a lack of pre-entry understanding about the course content, the structure of the course and the university's expectations in terms of student attendance and commitment. These three areas are discussed in more detail below.

Feedback suggested that some students were unsure about the individual topic areas that they would be studying and the course content; one HE student stated that she considered leaving because some of the units in the first semester had been focussed on study skills rather than the subject she had chosen⁵. In the case of combined honours programmes, a number of students had concentrated on finding out more about their 'favourite' or main subject area, but were less informed about the content of other subject areas. Consequently, a number felt that they were ill-prepared for some elements of their programmes and that learning experiences for 'secondary' components were disappointing.

Later in the survey students were asked what would have been useful to know about their course at the pre-entry stage, 25 students stated that they would have liked to know more about the course content before they started their course.

Experiences did not match expectations for many widening and non-widening participation students regarding workload and the balance between contact time and independent study. The majority of students expected significantly more contact time and less independent study, in some case this resulted in disappointment and dissatisfaction. This was a major problem for a number of

⁵ This is not criticising courses which included study skills modules, the issue here is the mismatch between expectations and experience.

students and in many cases students felt that they would have coped with more contact hours. As well as dissatisfaction, many students felt that at the pre-entry stage that they had a lack of understanding about the academic environment and basic concepts, such as independent learning, seminars or the role of the personal tutor. In some cases they perceived this had been detrimental to their learning, because it had taken them some time to understand what was required of them and they were unsure as to whom they should turn for advice. Students in FE colleges also displayed similar uncertainties about workload, course structure and the meaning of some academic terminology (see page 3 above).

Some students stated that they had managed to plan their independent study effectively, but many, including a number of first generation students, had been unsure how to organise and structure independent study time. One student stated she was finding it difficult because at college they had been 'told exactly what to read and where to find it and it was not like that at university', another was unsure what to do outside lecture time and spent most of her free time watching television.

When asked about information that would have been useful at the pre-entry stage, a significant number stated that they would have liked to see an example timetable or a plan of a 'typical' week. Students in FE colleges had also stated that they would find this information useful.

Expectations and experiences relating to non academic matters were also discussed; misconceptions about other aspects of a student's life, particularly if they are causing major concerns could impact on a student's integration into university life and subsequently their academic progress.

Managing finances was a major area of concern for many widening participation and non widening participation students. In some cases this represented a serious problem and they felt that they had seriously mis-managed their money by overspending in the first few weeks. However, some students felt that they were learning to manage their finances by the end of semester one. Feedback indicated that those who were the first in their family to go to university were finding this a particularly difficult area because they may not be able to ask parents for financial assistance or they could not find a suitable part-time job.

A number of students indicated that if they had known how much money they were likely to spend they would have saved more before they came to university and they felt it important that prospective students should be made aware of costs and the need to save before they started at university.

A close study of the interview feedback and online responses did not highlight many major differences in expectations and experiences between HE students who were the first in their generation to attend university and those who were not. Both groups had similar, often major concerns about a number of key areas; they felt that some aspects of university life did not match their expectations and that in a number of ways they were quite unprepared for the reality of living and studying in a higher education environment. However, despite their concerns, the majority

of students felt that they were coping with their studies and had integrated socially and academically into university. They also considered that they were progressing satisfactorily with their learning.

Summary

This section highlights the main points above.

The factors that impact on the choice of institution, course programme and expectations was similar for FE and HE students and there were no discernible differences between the responses from widening participation and non-widening participation students.

Institution choice. For most students the major factors that influenced institution choice was close proximity to home, an 'attractive' location and the 'friendliness' of an institution. Many students were familiar with various aspects of the location because they had relatives/ friends that lived in the local area or they had attended an open day and gained some knowledge of the area in that way. It is unlikely that where location is concerned that there would be a mismatch between expectations and experience. However, the friendliness or ambience of the university was also an important factor. When students described the institution as friendly there was an indication that the students were starting to develop a sense of belonging and a 'relationship' was starting to develop. Engendering a sense of belonging and commitment to an institution is important. Research indicates that many students may consider leaving for a variety of reasons, but one of the major differences between doubters who leave and those who stay may be a commitment to the university and the learning experience (Mackie, 2001). Yorke (op cit) implies a positive experience during the induction phase aids continuation; student feedback suggests that it is possible that this relationship may start earlier in the pre-entry period.

Expectations. The majority of students surveyed chose to study a specific programme because they had a particular interest in the subject area. However, many were unsure about the structure and content of the course. When these points were discussed with HE students, it became clear that this was a potential problem area and could impact on the quality of their learning experience and may affect their decision to stay – see page 5 about the student who considered leaving her course because of non-subject related content. In a similar vein, students were unsure about the HE learning environment, how many hours they would be in lectures or expected to study in their own time. These are serious misconceptions which could lead to early withdrawal or lower levels of achievement (due to a period of adjustment) for widening participation and non-widening participation students.

The majority of students stated that they welcomed the opportunity to gain some independence from their parents, however, feedback from HE students suggested that their independence was threatened by a serious mis-management of their finances. Students in FE colleges did not regard this as a potential problem area, but for many students already at university this was a major issue and they suggested a greater awareness of costs at the pre-entry stage would have been

beneficial. Financial problems are one of the reasons why students withdraw (Yorke, Davies and Elias, op cit), and this could present a major problem area particularly for widening participation students, causing them to seek part-time work, which has a detrimental impact on their studies (HEFCE, 2006a).

There were no distinct differences between the views of widening and non-widening participation students on these points, but a number of issues were raised that concerned all students. Investigating these areas further has implications for further study, please see section below.

Reflections on the research and future possibilities

This research focuses on young students (less than 21 on entry), with traditional entry qualifications and undertaking full time degree programmes. This is partly symptomatic of any small scale research project where numbers are limited and partly due to accessibility of research samples. A limited research sample may raise issues regarding generalisability and transferability. However, a parallel research project, recently completed would suggest that some of the student feedback is transferable. In the parallel project I have investigated the factors that impact on the expectations and experiences of mature part time Foundation Degree (FD) students, a number of whom were studying in local franchise colleges. The FD students had different reasons for their choice of institution and programme (mainly convenience of college/university, professional requirements or the desire to improve promotion prospects), but perceptions about their course and their experiences were broadly similar: at the application stage accessibility and 'friendliness' were important, but many were unclear about how the course would be structured or what would be required of them. These similarities would suggest that there is a case for additional efforts to be made to provide better information and pre-entry activities that prepare students more effectively for academic study. The importance of the issues raised would also indicate that there is scope for further study that includes a wider range of students including mature students, part-time students, distance learners and international students.

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