



## **Open College Network London Region - FACE Research Project**

### ***'Are Access to Higher Education learners being recruited onto Foundation Degrees?'***

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The research undertaken by Open College Network London Region (OCNLR) explored the incidence of progression of learners registered on QAA approved Access to Higher Education courses onto Foundation Degrees (FD) in the London area. With the increase in the number of FDs in London Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and in partner Further Education Colleges (FECs) requiring additional and targeted recruitment, it is of interest to investigate whether cohorts of Access to HE learners are already, or could be, presenting a pool of qualified entrants for entry onto FDs.

Two questionnaires were distributed to FECs and HEIs, OCNLR provider and supporting members. Questionnaire A was distributed to 2008 -2009 Access to Higher Education students and the second, questionnaire B, to first year Foundation Degree students enrolled in September 2008. The final analysis is based on one central London Further Education College. The research returned a total of 46 questionnaires: 42 completed questionnaire A and 4 completed questionnaire B.

The focus of the questionnaire covered the following key strands:

- the learner background and general profile of the students,
- the fit between the Access to HE course components and the Foundation Degree curriculum,
- the sources of information about students chosen FD, the application and selection experience and the value and benefits of any guidance received,
- General profile of Foundation Degree learners.

Apart from the dissemination at the FACE conference the results will be shared with OCNLR providers and will be featured on the OCNLR website and shared with the National Open College Network and the Regional OCNs.

The research question; “Are Access to HE learners being recruited onto Foundation Degrees?” has enabled an investigation of actual practice and progression routes for Access to HE learners.

We will firstly provide an overview and analysis of respondents completing Questionnaire A, identifying the key outcomes and significant statistical data and qualitative material. We will then provide a similar approach to the analysis of those respondents completing Questionnaire B.

### **Questionnaire A:**

#### **The Access to HE learner background and general profile**

42 current Access to Higher Education students completed questionnaire A. Of these 42 students, 34 identified their gender: 17 female and 17 male. The even gender balance may be related to the fact the cohorts were studying a range of units from the business and computing curriculum areas; an area which often attracts proportionally more male students than other curriculum areas

In terms of the age of students, like national trends in Access enrolments, the average age is becoming younger. Of 42 respondents, 73% provided their age, the majority (77%) of respondents were aged between 19 and 24: 32% being 19-20 and 45% being 21-24.

In terms of the ethnicity of the 42 respondents, 51 % provided this information, the largest ethnic group being Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students (BAME) representing 67%, white European 14%, white British 14% and Other white 2%.

#### **Previous learning**

77 % of students had previous experience of studying and gaining UK qualifications, with the greatest number 43% having vocational qualifications such as BTEC Certificates or Diplomas and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ). 34% had studied for GCSEs, 11% had European qualifications and 8% qualifications from non European countries.

In terms of the students current Access studies, 69% expected to achieve 45 level three credits or more with 31% expecting below 45 credits.

#### **Student choice of Higher Education courses of study**

The vast majority of the respondents were planning to continue studies in subjects related to their Access studies with 64% of students planning to study Business/Finance and Computing.

The respondents' choices of HEI courses were predominantly affected by three factors: interest in subject (28%), career plans (26%) and desire to continue studying at university (26%). However, when asked what affected their choice of institution, 32% said location was the most important factor with 30% citing the course and facilities and 24% saying the reputations of the selected HEIs were important.

Of the 42 students, 69% when asked if they had considered studying for a FD said no they had not, a selection from the reasons given were:

*'No because I didn't want to study at college'*

*'No prefer bachelor degree because there are more job prospects available if you have a BA degree'*

*'No way'*

*'No I would like to study at a university'*

*'No because this concept for my future studies was not included in my Access course'*

*'No – I took the Access course to gain a full degree'*

Clearly among these respondents the general consensus of understanding is that they value a BA/BSc degree more, particularly in terms of gaining employment. But the primary reason appears to be the ambition to study at university. Which presents the notion that Foundation Degrees are perceived by this particular cohort of learners as something you study at college, which then equates to a lower level of study. The responses also suggest that the kudos of a university education is important to the student.

Interestingly, some of those that said yes they had considered studying for a FD, support the perception of those that said they would not consider a FD. 21% had considered studying for a FD citing the following reason for doing so:

*'Yes if I didn't get the credit university was asking for'*

*'Yes if I didn't receive a university offer'*

*'Yes if not had offer accepted from my first choices'*

*'Yes only as a last resort'*

Here the FD is seen at best as a reserve and worst as a 'last resort' Arguably, it was not surprising that the 10% whose preferred choice was a FD were more positive in their reasons for choosing a FD. They had very specific reasons for choosing foundation, citing the following, in particular:

*'Yes, because any course to do with business is useful education'*

*'Yes it is cheaper and I will have a lot of support'*

*'Yes, cheaper, closer, more familiar and less stressful'*

Whereas, those respondents who chose BA/BSc degree courses cited career plans, interest in subject as key factors in their progression, those choosing FDs mainly cited location and economical factors.

## **Questionnaire B:**

### **The Foundation Degree learner background and general profile**

We only managed to locate 4 FD students currently in year one to complete questionnaire B. Of these 4 students, all identified their gender: 2 female and 2 male. Although a much smaller number the gender balance was in line with respondents to questionnaire A.

In terms of the age of students, like national trends in Access enrolments, the average age is becoming younger. All 4 respondents provide their age, 50% of respondents were aged between 19 and 25: with one aged 28 and another 37.

In terms of ethnicity they identified as Japanese, Asian, Turkish and Black Caribbean.

### **Previous Learning**

Although those ex Access students nearing completion of year one of their FDs cited financial reasons for their choice and location they also recognised the quality of teaching and the course material as important factors.

Of the 4 respondents, 2 named ESOL as their previous educational experience and highest qualification, 1 cited GCSEs and the other had a Turkish High school qualification. Unlike the 2008-2009 existing Access cohort none cited having studied for a UK vocational qualification. They had all achieved above 45 credits ranging from 51 to 69 level three credits.

### **Student choice of Higher Education courses of study**

All 4 students had progressed from the FECs Access to Higher Education course and had continued at the college to study on the Business FD. All the students were interviewed for FD.

The main factors influencing their choice of FD were primarily the suitability of the course in line with subjects studied on the Access to HE course, as well as financial considerations and quality of the teaching.

*'Financial reasons and more suitable than going to university'*

*'I want to further develop knowledge of business for future career'*

*'Cheaper than going to university'*

*'Studied at college before so used to tutors, teaching and assessment methods'*

Students were also asked their main reasons for their choice of higher education institution. Interestingly, the familiarity of the institution was a key factor in their choice:

*'Studied access course at college, liked teachers and course'*

*'Happy to stay at college, good teaching'*

*'Like atmosphere, teachers helpful. Studied here before'*

*'Studied at the college before so used to tutors, teaching and assessment methods'*

As a final question the students were asked how well their studies on the Access to HE course had prepared them for the FD. All positively endorsed the Access to HE course:

*'Very well, excellent foundation of knowledge attained has been most useful on FD programme'*

*'Really good knowledge of Business in preparation for FD'*

*'Yes, good foundation and knowledge, study techniques, time management essential to FD'*

*'Study skills – learning of really beneficial to FD. Would recommend to other students'*

## Conclusions

From this small piece of research we cannot establish to what extent Access to Higher Education learners are being recruited onto Foundation Degrees?' Initially it was hoped to have a more significant research sample to establish more fully the incidence of progression of Access learners to Foundation Degrees (FD) in the London area

What the investigation has established is that the preference of the majority of learners on this vocationally oriented course is to progress to BA/BSc degree programmes; this progression route being seen as the most beneficial in terms of future career prospects. It is also clear that FDs are associated with the further education college and therefore seen as similar to the Access to HE course. Therefore for many they don't consider the FD as a higher level of study.

From the comments of the Access to HE students they do not associate FDs with universities and therefore it could be argued they do not recognise FECs as places to also study HEI courses. However those first year FD students appear to be having a very positive experience and see studying at the same institution where they studied for their Access to HE certificate as an advantage in terms of relationship with tutors, location and financial savings.

From this small sample it shows the majority of Access to HE students are not choosing FDs as a viable option for progression to further study, with 69% not even considering FDs, and of the 21% who had considered FDs many cited it as a last resort.



To ascertain further conclusive evidence of reasons why access students are not considering FDs a more substantial research sample would be required. However, this investigation poses questions for FECs and HEIs delivering FDs and how they are perceived amongst Access to HE students.

As a follow up study it would be interesting to track the experience of this year's Access cohort who plan to study for a FD to see if their pre-conceptions alter once they have completed a year of their studies at HE level.