

About Policy Perspectives Network

The Policy Perspectives Network brings together ten universities from across England to share insights and intelligence on policy developments across the sector. We aim to offer an alternative perspective to policymakers on pressing debates and dilemmas, drawing on our institutional experience as well as the perspectives of students and stakeholders.

This informal grouping aims to complement existing sector bodies and mission groups. Our policy perspectives will be deliberately selective but based on agendas of collective importance to our institutions.

Members are Aston, Essex, Kent, Lincoln, Manchester Metropolitan, Middlesex, Northampton, Portsmouth, Plymouth and Sheffield Hallam.

Foundation years and the political landscape

Policy uncertainty has surrounded the future of foundation years (FYs) since the release of the Augar Review in May 2019. The review proposed that funding be withdrawn for FY students in degree courses. In January 2021, the Government released its interim conclusion to the Review, including plans for consultation on the treatment of FY students.

It is our collective position that removing support for FY students in universities would be shortsighted. There are currently 55,000 FY students in our universities and demand remains strong as students recognise the unique benefits of FYs in a higher education setting. The number of FY entrants in higher education institutions has quadrupled over the last five years.¹

In advance of the government's final response to Augar, this briefing sets out how FY in universities:

- provides a **route to success** for students who would otherwise not access opportunities.
- disproportionately meets the needs of students from more **disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds**.
- represents **quality and value** for students, taxpayers and employers
- ensures a **greater likelihood of progression** and complements other access routes including through FE, and
- **helps provide the skills** needed to deliver sustainable recovery and regional prosperity in a post-Covid economy.

Tim entered his foundation year as a mature student with O levels. He went on to graduate with a first-class degree in MEng Civil Engineering, having spent a work placement in Italy in an earthquake zone. He is now in his second year of a PhD.

University of Portsmouth

The contribution of foundation years: in summary

Foundation year provision enables universities to deliver four key objectives:

- 1) They allow **capable students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds a chance of** succeeding and achieving their potential;
- 2) They provide a vital **second chance for 'under-attaining' students to retrain and upskill** or mature students who want to re-engage with education;
- 3) They are a unique and effective way to help students **build the skills and confidence** necessary to progress to their highest qualification possible; and
- 4) They offer an important **pipeline for those seeking to focus on STEM** and help address **key skill shortages**.

The impact of Covid-19 only reaffirms the importance of FY provision in universities, given the devastating impact of the pandemic on educational and economic opportunity. For young people, a year of disrupted and remote provision has resulted in mental health challenges, learning loss, and reduced pastoral support, where FYs could provide an essential stepping stone into HE and an opportunity to build skills and confidence. For more mature students, they can help reskilling and retraining now necessary due to economic restructuring and retrenchment.

By drawing on our institutional analysis and the perspectives of students and stakeholders, we set out a compelling case for the future of FYs, on a more strategic and integrated footing, within the HE ecosystem. Current policy uncertainty undermines the capacity of universities to invest and innovate in its provision. We need to move beyond this, if FYs are to continue to provide an important avenue to educational opportunity for students in the future.

On the ground: foundation years across our network

Provision within our network reflects the diversity of the sector. From modest numbers in Portsmouth and Lincoln, to more substantial intakes at Manchester Metropolitan (13% of all students), Middlesex (21%) and Sheffield Hallam (6%), institutions have responded to student demand and portfolio opportunities, as well as demographic and skills profiles in our localities. The yearly FY provision across our network amounts to more than 6,200 students.

"The learning is diverse and interesting. I am constantly being encouraged to engage which is obviously key. My lecturers are easy to listen to and clearly demonstrate experience within the field".

Sheffield Hallam University

"The form of teaching is very different and you take pride in the fact you're at uni so you aspire to do better. I achieved, and continue to achieve, very good grades, very unrepresentative of what it was like in A-level Chemistry."

University of Kent

"We have such a diverse cohort of students that the experiences and the perspectives that they bring to the classroom creates this wonderful learning environment both for me and the other students in the year."

Aston University

1) Opening up opportunities for underrepresented students

FYs are increasingly opening up pathways for students who may face additional barriers to, or challenges during, their education. In 2017/18, 32% of students on foundation years in universities came from a disadvantaged background, up from 25% in 2011/12. By looking across our institutional data and profiles, our experience reinforces HESA analysis that foundation years are acting as an important avenue for widening participation.² This is also reflected in their prominence within our five year institutional Access and Participation Plans, as agreed with the Office for Students.

Across our institutions, foundation year students may be:

More likely to be male and from an underrepresented background:

- Sheffield Hallam, in 2020/21, a higher proportion of entrants were males from IMD decile 1 (18% compared to 11% of all other entrants) and were white males from IMD decile 1 (13% compared to 8% of all other entrants).

More likely to be from a BAME background:

- At Aston, the majority of students are from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (87.9% in 2019/20), and the proportion has been growing year-on-year.
- At Essex, 55% of students are BAME compared to 45% of all students.
- At Northampton, 57.7% of entrants were BAME in 2019/20.

More likely to be from a disadvantaged or underrepresented background:

- At Kent 31% of entrants were from POLAR Q12 compared to 25% of all students.
- At Middlesex, 55% of entrants came from lowest indices of multiple deprivation deciles (1-3) in 2018/19.

More likely to have a disability:

- At Lincoln, 23% of students declared a disability compared to 16% of the overall population.
- At Plymouth, higher proportions of students on a FY declared a disability; 3-5% higher compared to the overall undergraduate population.

Jasmin is in her final year of a BSc in Biomedical Science. She has achieved a 1st class for each year of study and hopes to work in a laboratory environment. She is a Student Ambassador and a Student Learning Assistant, which she attributes entirely to being a prior Foundation Year student.

Middlesex University

"The Foundation Year course...allowed me to experience the Law degree in a way that let me decide whether this was something to pursue."

University of Essex

2) Providing a second chance for study

FY courses at university offer a unique second chance to young adults who have not achieved the qualification to fulfil their potential and progress to an undergraduate degree. They are used to help students who have not met the required entry requirements for year 1 or students who have not studied the right subjects to enter their degree of choice.

Research conducted by Sheffield Hallam found that students on FY courses wanted the 'university experience' and the perceived 'independence', 'freedom' and 'responsibility' that comes with being a university student.³

For those who had not achieved required grades, an integrated Foundation Year presented the best opportunity to 'progress', or 'move on', without the need to repeat A-levels or go back to college. It allowed some to share the experience of going to university with their peers rather than 'being left behind'.

"I chose the foundation study framework because I wholeheartedly refused to do 3 years in the college. I didn't enjoy the 2 years I spent there already so, when I found out that I had enough points to get into university, I decided to take my chance and go...it is one of the best decisions I have made"

University of Northampton

Similar findings were found in recent research at Essex, with the consensus amongst students who took part that 'studying a FY enables them to improve their knowledge and learn skills to prepare for Year 1'. Importantly, the FY offers a stepping stone to a full degree within a university, providing reassuring clarity about a straight-forward and continuous education pathway within the one institution.

"I am a mature student who decided to continue my education after more than 20 years break from learning... Without [the] foundation year I would have struggled a lot... I just cannot believe that three years ago I wasn't ready for undergraduate course and now I am considering a Masters degree."

University of Plymouth

For other students, a FY in a university offers the chance to re-join education outside of a school or college environment. This may be particularly important to students who have had negative experiences in education or are older and who want to return to education after a long absence, and in areas of the country where student choices are limited by local quirks in the availability of provision; in Plymouth, for example, students are unable to take A levels in further education colleges, as A level qualifications are only available in schools.

In our experiences, some learners, particularly those who are reluctant to (re)engage with education, are attracted by the prestige and value of doing so in a university environment, and with a clear sense of where this first step will lead. It would therefore be counterproductive to remove this option from the educational mix.

3) Building skills and confidence to progress to a full degree and beyond

FYs are also invaluable in preparing students with the skills and confidence needed to progress and achieve their highest possible educational potential. They enable access to cutting-edge university facilities and diverse knowledge-based communities and help to overcome the challenges that many find in transition to a higher education environment.

A review of the evidence around widening access interventions, commissioned by TASO, highlights that "many students feel under-prepared for higher education, and this may contribute to a feeling of alienation when they arrive on campus".⁴ It also notes that "successful interventions appear to be those that not only raise academic aspirations, but also equip learners with the tools to fulfil those aspirations, by enabling them to develop transferrable skills which support their learning and boost confidence".

This may be particularly important for the "most vulnerable and excluded group of learners" who the report highlights are "often overlooked": those without conventional education qualifications. This approach is seeing results, particularly when compared to Access to HE courses. OfS analysis showed that a higher proportion of students progressed to a degree programme in the four years after taking a FY (79%) than following an Access Course (62%).⁵

"Self-directed learning is the main thing that I have got from [the] Science Foundation Year. Being able to teach yourself is the fantastic gift that you need if you want to succeed."

University of Lincoln

Across many of our universities, progression rates have been improving. For example, at Kent, the 2018/19 progression rate for all FY students was 80%, at Lincoln 90.5% completed the FY with 81.3% progressing into Year 1 and at Middlesex 77% of FY students continued into year 1 of HE study in 2018/19 and 18% exited the programme.

4) A pipeline to STEM and a route to addressing skills shortages

FY courses are playing an important role in diversifying the entry routes into STEM and addressing skills shortages. Analysis by the OfS found that in 2017/18 Engineering and Technology was the second largest subject for entrants to foundation year courses (12% of entrants), followed by Biological Sciences (11%), with the largest area of provision being in Business and Administrative Studies (26%).

Progressing to HE through a FY may better prepare and ameliorate the transition for students wanting to focus on STEM subjects due to:

- A depth and specialism of subject curricula not available through an Access course, particularly in Mathematics;
- The opportunity to build core knowledge with a clear sense of how and when it can be applied;
- Gaining experience of assessment and examinations and developing “academic stamina” (and including key skills such as referencing, note-taking, essay writing, academic discussion), helping to build skills and confidence;
- A different, more interactive and (potentially) engaging style of teaching and learning where students gain experience of presentations, peer assisted learning and team-working;
- A more diverse learning community, where students often have more varied social, educational backgrounds and learning needs;
- Inclusive practice with teachers (and students) who are invested in working together to identify and break down barriers to engagement.

“The foundation course for Early Years and Childhood Studies has eradicated any doubts I had about “not being smart enough” for university. The tutors have accommodated my needs as someone who is partially deaf and fostered my unique personality and learning styles as well as helping me to gain confidence in a wide range of skills.”

Manchester Metropolitan University

In summary

By drawing on our institutional analysis and the perspectives of students and stakeholders, we set out a compelling case for the future of foundation years, on a more strategic and integrated footing, within the HE ecosystem.

Foundation years provide an important platform for reaching disadvantaged students, building skills and confidence, and responding to local skills shortages. Current policy uncertainty undermines the capacity of universities to invest and innovate in its foundation year provision. We need to move beyond this, if this type of provision is to continue to provide an important avenue to educational opportunity in the future.

For further information on this or the Policy Perspective Network, contact:

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ENDNOTES

This scope of this analysis is limited to foundation year provision in higher education in England. We present a snapshot of foundation year provision across our network and the wider sector, using both externally published and internal in-year data. Kent: Home, first degree, students. MMU: October intake. All levels except PGR. Middlesex data: October intake. Plymouth: First degree only. Sheffield Hallam: In year enrolment statistics as at 23/11/20.

¹ HESA Student Full Person Equivalent v1, Provider country: England, Year of course: foundation year. Via heidiplus.hesa.ac.uk

² HESA, *Year 0: A foundation for widening participation?* 2019 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/blog/16-05-2019/foundation-year-research>

³ Research by Directorate of Student, Engagement, Evaluation and Research (STEER) for Sheffield Hallam University, *From focus groups and interviews with 20 students*, November 2017.

⁴ Robinson, David and Salvestrini, Viola, *The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: a review of the evidence*, 2020, Education Policy Institute for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in HE (TASO).

⁵ Office for Students, *Preparing for degree study: Analysis of Access to HE Diplomas and integrated foundation year courses*, 2019, Corrected 2020.