PRISM Journal
Early View (2025) https://doi.org/10.24377/prism.article1626

An investigation into the Social, Academic, and Developmental value of Arts and Humanities Foundation Years

Christinna Hazzard,[1] Daniel J. Feather,[2] Jan Ludvigsen,[3] Silvia Cont,[4] Katie Taylor,[5]

[1, 3, & 4] Liverpool John Moores University, School of Humanities & Social Science (Lead Author C.K.Hazzard@ljmu.ac.uk)
[2] University of Pretoria, SA; & Liverpool John Moores University, School of Humanities & Social Science (D.J.Feather@ljmu.ac.uk)
[5] Independent Scholar (katie.taylor@kingstrust.org.uk)

Received: 21/07/2023
Accepted for publication: 26/09/2025
First published in Early View: 22/10/2025

Abstract

This research paper explores the social, academic, and developmental value of arts and humanities foundation years at university. The research was conducted with students at a post-92 university in the northwest of England and investigates their experiences of undertaking a foundation year course in the arts and humanities. It focuses on students' perception of the course's value in terms of the educational and personal benefits to them. The research was conducted in the context of the 2019 Review of Post-18 Education conducted by Sir Phillip Augur that recommended funding be withdrawn from university foundation year courses. Our research found that most students would not have continued studying had a university foundation year course not been available to them, and that the course benefitted them in a number of ways, including by developing their self-confidence and their sense of belonging in a Higher Education (HE) environment. Our findings demonstrate that foundation years at universities continue to play an important role in widening participation in the arts and humanities at a time when these subjects are themselves under threat, and therefore remain valuable in promoting social justice and inclusivity in HE.

Keywords: Foundation Year; Augur Review; Widening Participation; Social Justice; Student Perspectives

Introduction

In the UK, foundation years play a vital role in widening access to Higher Education (HE). This entry route is more common amongst underrepresented backgrounds such as mature students, students from black or ethnic minorities, and students who are the first generation in their family to go to university (Braisby, 2019; McLellan et al., 2016; Nathwani, 2019). The number of students entering HE Institutions via foundation years has grown considerably in recent times. Whilst this is just a fraction of the intake of all students enrolling at university, the trajectory of growth of foundation level courses underlines the positive impact of recruitment strategies, especially in those communities where participation in HE is low. This article uses the arts and humanities foundation year

  ISSN: 2514-5347

at a post-92 university in the northwest of England as a case study to analyse the experience of students accessing higher education through this entry route. We argue that foundation year courses play a vital role in widening access to HE, promoting social inclusivity, and expanding the opportunities for students from backgrounds that are underrepresented in UK universities.

This article has been written in part as a response to questions that have been raised about the quality of foundation year (FY) courses. Indeed, it has been suggested that the increase in institutions offering this entry route, which coincided with a demographic shift in the number of 18-year-olds, is evidence that to university hierarchies these courses are little more than a "cash cow" (Kernohan, 2019; Griffiths et al, 2018). It is in this context that Philip Augar's (2019) review of post-18 education and funding concluded that foundation level courses in universities in England represent poor value for money and should have their funding withdrawn. Augur contended that students should be re-directed to access courses taught in Further Education (FE) colleges, which provide another entry route into HE for students who do not have the necessary qualifications for direct entry (2019). This recommendation fails to recognise the significant differences between these two routes into undergraduate study. FYs attract far more students under the age of 20 whilst a larger number of over-21s attend access courses (Finlayson, 2019). Additionally, FY students are also statistically more successful in terms of progression with 79% of students going onto undergraduate study compared to just 62% of those who undertake an access course (Finlayson, 2019).

While the government backtracked on Augur's recommendation, it has been proposed that a fee cap of £5,197 be introduced for foundation years to bring them in line with access courses (Hale, 2022). While at face value this appears like a compromise which would solidify the long-term future of foundation years at universities, in the context of an increasingly marketised HE system in which decisions are often entirely profit driven (Brown, 2011), university management may be reluctant to maintain foundation year provision if it offers a reduced income. This problem is particularly acute for foundation year courses in the arts and humanities, where undergraduate provision for these subjects has already been withdrawn from a number of HE providers. Indeed, even institutions who have maintained their undergraduate provision for arts and humanities subjects have chosen to withdraw foundation provision. This is, in part, a reaction to another challenge faced by HE providers – the institutional performance measures brought in by the Office for Students (William, 2022a). These indicators could potentially see courses penalised if they do not hit potential targets in terms of retention, progression, and graduate employment within 15 months of completion.

The immediate threat, however, is that university bosses appear to be pre-empting negative results and are assuming these will be prevalent in arts and humanities subjects, despite recent research by the British Academy which rebuffs claims regarding the employment prospects of graduates from these subject areas (British Academy, 2020). This has led to the withdrawal and/or suspensions of courses at the University of Roehampton, University of Wolverhampton, and Sheffield Hallam University. There is also an assumption that foundation year students pose a greater retention risk which is seeing universities remove this entry route, particularly from arts and humanities courses, in an attempt to curate their performance measures. In our experience this assumption is misguided, and with the right levels of support students who undertake foundation years have the same potential to thrive in HE as students entering directly into the traditional 'first year' of university (level 4). The arts and humanities foundation year course at the heart of this study has seen high retention rates, with year-year increase over the first four years of the course and a pass rate of above 90% for the 2019 to 2022 period.

If the trend to withdraw arts and humanities foundation year courses continues, the opportunity to study these subjects in university is removed from those students who remain underrepresented in HE. While access courses might still offer an alternative route, it is unclear if similar numbers of students would choose to undertake this form of study. Indeed, in the survey conducted as part of this study, when asked if they would have undertaken an access

course if the foundation year was not available, 93.6% of students answered 'no'. In the focus groups we conducted this narrative was developed further with students discussing how they felt university was the natural next step and that remaining at college would have felt like a punishment for underachieving in their A-Levels.

Against this backdrop, this article will assess the value of arts and humanities foundation year courses to the students who undertake them. Drawing on questionnaire feedback and qualitative focus group interviews with students, this article both extends the literature on foundation years in the UK context and contributes to the growing body of literature appreciating foundation year students' own experiences.

Context

The arts and humanities foundation year course focused on in this study consists of roughly 40 students from five programmes. The students undertake six modules over the course of the year, three in each of the two semesters. These are each worth 20 credits which is comparable to how undergraduate courses are organised at the institution in question. In the four core modules students are taught together for lectures but are split into two seminar groups based on subject, with similar subjects grouped together (for example History and International Relations and Politics are one group, English, History of Art, and Media Culture and Communication are the other). There are also two subject specific modules for each programme. This format has been adopted as it allows a degree of subject specific teaching while maintaining efficiency on a relatively small course. Additionally, by doing three modules per semester the structure of their respective undergraduate programme is replicated, thus preparing them for the transition to level 4.

The university itself has a high number of students from backgrounds underrepresented in HE, with 22% of students coming from low participation neighbourhoods. This compares very favourably to the HE sector as whole; in the period 2015/16 to 2019/20 only 11.8% of students attending an HE course were from low participation neighbourhoods (HESA, 2020). According to internal institutional data the percentage of arts and humanities foundation year students who come from low participation neighbourhoods is slightly higher than the institutional figure (26.5%). This highlights that even at an institution that thrives in widening access to HE, FYs are still one of the most accessible routes into university for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Literature Review

In England and Wales as of 2021 there are currently 140 universities that offer FY courses (Kettley and Murphy, 2021). In 2017 UCAS listed 400 different FYs whose structure, provision, and target students varied considerably (O'Sullivan, Byrne, Robson, and Winter 2019). FYs have traditionally been offered in STEM disciplines, however, the numbers of FY programmes in the arts, humanities, and social sciences are growing and have been recently brought to the attention of the general public and academics through the news of Cambridge and Oxford's new FY courses (PA Media, 2021; McKie, 2021; Holmes-Henderson and Watts, 2021; Williams 2022).

A number of widening participation (WP) policies have been introduced since the Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition Government in 2010 stated it wanted to 'attract a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds' into HE (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018, p. 5). For example, in their 2011 White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' they defined WP activities as those which aimed 'to recruit students from the groups…identified as under-represented, and then to ensure their success' (Ellis and Allan, 2010, p. 24; Department for Business, 2011). One of the ways that HE institutions responded to WP policies was by establishing FY courses (Ellis and Allan, 2010). There are two general motivations for the development of such courses as WP activities: to widen access to students whose A-Level results fall below entry requirements, and to increase diversity by accepting applications from students who did not take A-Levels (Leech, Marshall, and Wren, 2016). Broadly, the students taking FYs are those identified under WP agendas as "non-traditional" either because they have no or lower than expected A-Levels or because they are mature, first-generation, part-time students and/or those

entering HE via vocational training routes (Wint, 2022).

The ways that FYs are run in the UK is hugely variable. Leech et al. (2016) established a model for identifying the most common kinds of FY and identified eleven possible combinations of entry requirement and delivery type. For example, where some courses required UCAS points for all applicants, others required them only for under-21s or not at all. The categories for delivery type were also varied, including, FYs taught in Academic departments, in specialist centres, in FE colleges, or a combination of FE and HE institutions. Furthermore, some FY applicants are also evaluated based on their social background and experiences, including if they come from a low-income household, are a care leaver, or refugee and/ or asylum seeker. This focus on social and financial barriers to HE in the assessment process for FY courses stems, in part, from a particular understanding of WP which emphasises access to highly selective universities as the key to social mobility (Kettley and Murphy 2021).

Indeed, WP programmes and agendas have tended to focus more on elite and highly selective universities where the social diversity of students has traditionally also been more limited. Russell Group universities like Oxford and Cambridge, for example, have long been criticised for the number of privately educated students they accept onto their degree programmes and their lack of support for socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Williams, 2022; Tidman, 2021; Major and Tompkins, 2021; OfS 2019). The Office for Students (OfS) has increasingly put pressure on selective universities to increase participation from areas with low rates of HE engagement which has put them at risk of losing out on funding if they do not make greater progress towards equalising their entrants (OfS 2019; Boliver, Banerjee, Stephen and Powell, 2022). Of the 140 universities in England and Wales who currently host FYs, 15 of those are Russell Group universities who have reduced entry criteria and/or admissions metrics and tuition fees (Kettley and Murphy, 2021). Both Cambridge and Oxford's new FYs will offer privately funded, free places to students who achieve BBB at A-Level, a reduction of their typical AAA entry requirements. However, unlike FYs in universities which charge fees and guarantee entry onto a related degree program if the student passes the course, at Oxford and Cambridge students must complete the course at the 'required level' to progress (University of Oxford, 2025).

However, there is evidence to suggest that for the majority of non-traditional students more than financial support is necessary to overcome recruitment and, vitally, retention biases (Leech et al., 2016). Whilst highly selective universities can afford to focus on fees-centric models of provision, this is not likely to be enough to attract and retain students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Through semi-structured interviews with first-generation FY students at a highly selective institution (Durham University), Hindle et al., (2021) found that their experience of university was characterised by a lack of economic resources, academic skills preparedness, and cultural and social capital compared to more privileged students. These results were replicated in similar research conducted by Attridge (2021) on working-class students attending Oxford University. Interviews with these students revealed that they experienced their life in HE as a dilemma, where their new identity as university students was in contrast with their previous working-class identity.

Examining the process of designing the FY for Cambridge and a survey of 304 prospective target students, Kettley and Murphy (2021) have argued that broader pedagogical transformation is needed to tackle the financial and cultural barriers to attendance at the institution. In general, highly selective universities tend to focus more on recruitment as the key factor in WP than on student retention (Boliver et al., 2022; Leech et al., 2016; Kettley and Murphy, 2021; Chipperfield, 2012; Wint, 2022; Ellis and Allen 2010). This results in blind spots around what it actually means for students to attend and be successful at university. This is indicative of broader debates in the sector which consider whether access to HE is an effective means of social mobility (UK Data Service, 2018). It also raises questions about whether social mobility should be the central aim of WP to HE, and about the validity in the past emphasis on elite universities in WP schemes; questions to which this article responds.

According to Wood, Su, and Pennington (2024), 'education is often viewed as a way of achieving social mobility by equipping people with the skills deemed necessary for individual progress in the labour market' (p. 79). The Social Mobility Commission defines social mobility as 'the link between a person's occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents' (2024). The idea of social mobility as means to overcome social inequality has increasingly been criticised for placing too much responsibility on the individual (Wood, Su, and Pennington 2024). Indeed, the admissions pages for the Oxford Astrophoria Foundation Year, marketed at 'those with significant academic potential, who have experienced severe personal disadvantage or disrupted education' (University of Oxford, 2025), illustrates precisely this rhetoric of social mobility as 'an essentialised conception of talent and ability which extend hierarchies of social worth' (Wood, Su, and Pennington, 2024, p. 80). The problem with this dominant narrative of WP *qua* social mobility commonly is that it pays little or no attention to the structural conditions that create and sustain inequality in the first place.

Where the rhetoric of social mobility promotes upward mobility narrowly in economic and employment terms, the idea of social justice offers a more nuanced lens through which to view inequality. Although defining social justice can be difficult, McArthur suggests that there are 'broad principles' that underpin most definitions: 'valuing and respecting the lives of others; a commitment to lives where we have choice; relieving suffering, and a fair distribution of life chances and rewards' (2024, p. 10). By reorienting the aim of WP in HE towards social justice rather than social mobility, this article unpacks the notion 'value' in relation to FY courses, expanding it beyond the discourse of 'value for money' which has dominated the debates surrounding the legitimacy and costs of FYs as well as their purpose in WP agendas (Baker, 2022; Policy Perspective Network. (2021).

As mentioned, the research for this article was carried out at a post-92 university with a student body comprised primarily of first-generation working-class students, and like many other post-92 universities, the university thereby already plays a role in WP and access to HE. Post-92 institutions also offer a different learning environment to elite universities, as ensuring students are supported to progress through their studies is already a priority. The research gathered in this article, thus offers novel insight into the specific experiences of FY students at a post-92 university, as well as reflections on designing a course that prioritises social justice rather than social mobility.

This article also contributes to a growing field of literature that examines student perspectives on FY provision and the barriers they faced to HE (Black, 2022; Wint, 2022; Chipperfield, 2013; Allen and Anderson, 2020). This body of work tends to include reflections on the pedagogy and curriculum design of FYs, particularly in terms of using positive group dynamics to instil confidence in non-traditional students and how to avoid so-called deficit thinking. Dampier et al., (2019), for instance, note that FY students are often discussed in terms of their deficit around achievement and knowledge, and their greater need for support, and that this can lead to them being thought of as needing to be "fixed" to adapt to the existing privileged HE context (Parkes, Mathias, Seal, McGowan, and Hall, 2018). Murray *et al* make a similar point about the idea of imposter syndrome, the term describing the persistent feeling of 'being a fraud despite one's achievements, often with the fear that one will be exposed' (2023, p. 750). This is often presented as an individual issue, a narrative that ignores social and institutional contexts as well as sideling the structural inequalities that generate the feelings of inadequacy in the first place (Murray *et al*, 2023).

To oppose this, it has been proposed not to 'assume that students have failed the education system' and instead acknowledge that 'university study has failed them' (Seal and Parkes, 2019, p.7). O'Sullivan, Bird, Robson, and Winters (2019) surveyed students accessing HE through a series of pathways including FY courses and found that FYs had a positive impact on students' sense of belonging, confidence, and their academic preparation. In their study O'Sullivan, Robson and Winters (2019) retrieved follow up data post course completion to investigate the impact of FYs. Their data showed that the FY completion offered students the chance to build and

maintain supportive relationships with academic staff and increase their sense of confidence and autonomy.

As noted at the outset of this review, FYs play a vital and evidenced role in the rates of students progressing to and completing undergraduate degrees. The predominance of highly selective universities in discussions around WP policy focusses on financial barriers. This limits the discussion around the broader value of these courses and disregards the efforts and value of the policies and agendas of other universities. Indeed, as this review has shown, less selective universities already contribute to widening participation to higher education. The research presented in this article examines the role played by an arts and humanities FY at a post-92 university where entry requirements and curriculum design is already inclusive compared to Russell Group and highly selective institutions that have tended to be the focus of previous studies. It thereby offers new insights into how students perceive the value of FY courses at time when changes to HE funding structures has also altered general views of FY provision as "egalitarian" projects, seeing them increasingly as new ways for universities to increase revenue (Wint, 2022).

Methodology

This study seeks to understand the value of arts and humanities FYs to students. However, rather than measuring value in financial terms, such as the standard social mobility indicators (income and occupation), it applies a social justice approach to the conceptual framing of "value". In doing so it places emphasis on how the students perceive the value of the FY, in developmental, social, and academic terms.

This article's data is drawn from a larger, exploratory mixed-methods evaluation of how an arts and humanities FY at a UK University may promote social justice and enable diverse learning environments (see Feather et al 2024). As such, this research's strategy can be understood as aligned with the case study approach – which permits an in-depth, exploratory examination of a 'program, event, activity, [or] process […] bound by time and activity' (Creswell, 2014: 241). Whilst we acknowledge, in turn, the difficulties in drawing generalizable conclusions from this case study, it should also be mentioned that this was not the overarching aim of the current study.

First, after obtaining ethical approval, we launched an online questionnaire. This was distributed to students who had undertaken the arts and humanities FY between 2018-2021. 47 respondents completed the questionnaire which contained questions about students' experiences of undertaking a FY. Second, we conducted four focus groups with students (n=12, see Table 1) in order to acquire a more nuanced qualitative understanding of FY students' perceptions (Osborne and Collins, 2011). In total, three focus groups took place in-person, and one via Zoom (in March and April 2022). These focus groups were facilitated by a research team member and audio-recorded for the purpose of transcription.

Focus Group #	Composition
1	2 women, 2 men
2	2 women, 1 man
3	2 women
4	2 women, 1 man

The data emerging from the questionnaire and the focus groups was supplemented by secondary sources, including internal institutional data, policy-documents, white papers, and media sources. Upon analysing the focus group data, a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was adopted in order to identify codes and categories that informed empirically driven themes through open, axial and selective coding stages. This approach enabled the research team to induce theory from the data, whilst allowing for constant comparison between our different forms of data that, in turn, allows the researchers to 'identify, develop, and integrate concepts' (Corbin, 2017, p. 301). One dominant theme that emerged from the focus groups is that students identified the FY as a generator of confidence for undergraduate study and beyond. This is central to how students perceive the value of the FY, both socially, academically and developmentally.

Analysis: Developing Confidence for Success in Undergraduate Study & Beyond

The main theme that emerged from our data analysis related to confidence and how it may serve as a key barrier to education for many students. Indeed, 63.8% of the surveyed students expressed that completing the foundation programme improved their confidence and/or self-esteem. This was also touched upon often in the focus groups. In part, this confidence related to understanding the university setting more broadly, including how assignments work, modules are organized, expectations placed on students, and available support.

This confidence emerged for some students after initial uncertainties about whether university would suit their abilities. For example, one student recalled:

> saying to my sister before I started my foundation I was like 'oh I just don't know if I'm gonna be capable of it cos, like, I did get those low grades in my A Levels', I thought I don't really know, what if I'm just not gonna be capable of getting good grades in uni. So it was nice to do the foundation and know that, like, if I am putting the work in I can actually get better grades than my A Levels and see that pay off and boost my confidence a bit before going into first year when it starts to really count towards your final grade, like, in second year. (Student 4B)

Student 3D, on the other hand, explained that although she was accepted on to the undergraduate course, she chose to do the foundation year instead because she had been out of education for four years and 'was really anxious' and 'decided just to kind of get myself back into, like, learning and academia'. The student said that the course helped her gain confidence and was 'probably one of the best decisions I made'. She also commented on the transition to online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, that 'if I hadn't have done that foundation I probably would have dropped out' and 'having that foundation year course gave me that sense of security where I could be, like, 'it's fine cos this is what it's meant to be like, this is what it is and this is what it will be like as, you know, as soon as this is over'. This comment highlights the importance for students that they understand what university is 'meant to be like', which was an important aspect in building their confidence as they progressed into undergraduate study, especially when teaching was moved online in 21/22.

As we have shown in the first part of this study (see Feather *et al* 2024), the foundation year helped students develop practical academic skills needed for undergraduate study, but our data also reveals that students gained a set of social skills and understanding of the norms and expectation of university, which in turn boosted their confidence. Several students considered this an important aspect of preparing them for undergraduate study. Student 3C, for instance, explained that one of the things she found valuable about the course was that it 'introduced university life to you' and gave you a:

> taste of what university would be like before I actually went onto the main course […] you know, like making friends, the building, finding your way around the building, so it's, like, what's expected of you, things like that. (Student 3C)

One of the things highlighted by the focus groups was that many first-generation university students lacked confidence precisely because they struggled to imagine what 'university life' would be like. This was revealed in an insightful comment from Student 3D, who explained that 'none of my family went to uni, erm, don't laugh at me but, like, the extent of my knowledge was, like, Americanised TV shows and [...] and obviously it's not like that at all'. Another student stated that they benefited from learning:

> how, like, modules worked and how you have different semesters because coming from college to uni you don't realise that, like, it's a different structure so that kind of set you up into knowing how the structure works and how the assignments work, and they set assignments each semester for each module. So that was a lot easier transitioning into undergraduate. (Student 4B)

This quote clearly illustrates the value of introducing students, especially those who have little or no family experience of Higher Education, to university without expectations of prior knowledge about the learning environment and social norms associated with things like seminar participation and how to address academic staff. This is often overlooked in undergraduate inductions and first-year introductory modules, which are more focused on advancing students' core knowledge of the subject and tend to assume students understand what is expected of them in lectures, seminars, and personal tutor meeting.

Creating an unintimidating and supportive learning environment has been key to the success of the arts and humanities FY course focused on in this study, and several students said they felt the course was less 'pressure' (Student 3B and Student 3D) and that staff were supportive and encouraging. Indeed, for foundation years to be successful it is vitally important that staff adapt their approach to ensure students feel well supported and able to approach them both with academic and pastoral issues. In the quote below, one recalls their first experience of a seminar and feeling nervous about speaking in front of others:

> you did have a bit of a lump in your throat to, like, talk, like, regardless of whether you're a confident person or not cos you've got a thing, like, it's uni now, like, this is you have it in your head that this is high, intellectual stuff and, like, so what I say you think you need to say something good all the time when you come to realise, like, you've got not to be scared of being wrong, whatever you're saying and just speak your mind. (Student 3B)

It could be argued, as another student did, that as part of this transition year staff need to act 'in-between' being a teacher and a 'full blown lecturer' (Student 4C). Student 3D stated that as a result of the foundation year course they felt much more confident approaching their personal tutor when they needed support compared to other members of their undergraduate cohort who 'don't know how to talk to their personal tutor'. This highlights another skillset acquired by students on the foundation: the ability to communicate effectively with their personal tutor, as well as an understanding of the role and importance of this relationship to their ongoing academic success. These are vitally important skills to develop, particularly in the context of the mental health crisis currently engulfing higher education institutions (Bryant *et al*, 2022).

Several students also commented that the experience of attending lectures and seminars on the foundation year proved a significant advantage when they started Level 4 in comparison to other students who had attended sixth form or college prior to starting their undergraduate courses. Student 1E was surprised when they started Level 4 and many people 'just didn't really know how it [lectures and seminars] worked' but felt this was something that they had 'learned in the foundation year'. Student 3D commented that they and the other foundation year students are often the main contributors in seminars and Student 3B recalled that they felt 'a lot more comfortable, like, with the discussions' and noticed other students 'who were just starting, like, that they obviously had never had, like, a big debate or discussion'.

For some students being in the university environment was itself an important part of their decision to come to university for a foundation year course, rather than attending an access course at a FE college or resitting their A-levels at sixth form. Student 4B, for instance, who had attended college for her A-levels after finishing High School but did not get the right grades to enter at level 4, said

> I have really enjoyed, like, the way you learn within the uni compared to college I think the idea of it being like another year of college [..] would have put it in my mind that it would have been like college again and I don't think I would have liked that because, […] I just didn't enjoy that type of learning compared to uni.

In addition, Student 4C, who had been encouraged to resit her A-levels by a sixth form teacher, felt that resitting 'sort of holds you back a bit', whereas a university foundation year was an opportunity to 'start afresh again'. She also explained that the idea of resitting had 'a bad connotation to it' amongst her

peers at sixth form and that going to university meant you were not being left behind. Several other students also mentioned worrying that there would be a negative attitude around foundation programmes before they embarked on the course. One student recalled feeling:

> quite worried to accept the foundation offer, er, because I'd heard there's, like, a stigma around it, feeling like 'oh you're not good enough to get on to the main course', people think you're, like, a bit stupid but that was just, like, just me being silly, erm, and, yeah, I was really glad I did it. (Student 3C)

Another student agreed that there was 'definitely that stigma of foundation year' and felt that they weren't 'smart enough to get on' to the undergraduate course (Student 3D). However, our survey data suggests that most students felt a foundation year was a better option than college as they would still be attending university and taking part in university life alongside the rest of their year group:

> when you see friends from college and they go to uni and then meeting all these new friends and, like, moving out and living independently and you're kind of still at home and sometimes you can feel quite left out without that, I think the foundation year then enables you to still move out whereas you probably wouldn't if you did, like, another year at college (Student 4B).

It seems that being at university was a priority for many of the students we surveyed and interviewed, and that being in this environment rather than repeating a year at sixth-form or taking a course at college made feel like they were succeeding. These comments highlight the fact that FY courses often actively contribute to resisting so-called deficit thinking and imposter syndrome by supporting the construction and reconstruction of students' past experiences within the education system in a more positive light (Parkes et al., 2018).

Indeed, the foundation year focused on in this research sought intentionally to reconfigure feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy which many of the students associated with having to do a foundation year when they first arrived, by placing emphasis on developing students into confident learners, with the knowledge, skills, and resilience to succeed on their undergraduate courses. Our success in this evidenced by the fact that, 76.6% of students surveyed felt that the course helped them prepare for undergraduate study. Student 4B described the course as 'an improvement year' that gets 'you, like, in another position' after having felt disappointed by their a-level results. Some students, including student 2B, even felt that the course made them more prepared for undergraduate study than their peers who had come straight from college or sixth from:

> I was a lot more prepared actually going into first year. Some people were, like, they were, like, a deer in headlights in class, didn't know what really what was going on but cos we had an idea, especially when it come [*sic*] to, like, referencing and things like that. (Student 2B)

This student stated that they were 'quite glad, like, to help people if they needed the help' while another mentioned a group project in which they were able to help other students develop their referencing skills. Student 3D also explained that when she started her undergraduate course she would help others find their way around university buildings, 'it sounds like I'm being big headed but I was just, like, 'I've been here' (Student 3D). She explained that the foundation year course helped her overcome her feelings of being less academically able and even instilled in her the self-esteem and confidence to support her peers:

> I think maybe doing that, like, proved to myself,[…] 'I am smart, I can do these things' and then maybe it does sound a bit big headed but then when everyone else kind of was, like, struggling with referencing and I was, like, helping people out and I was 'oh yeah you just, you know, you just have to do this, this and this' and it made me feel smarter, I guess, like, it just made me feel a bit better that I knew what I was talking about cos I'd already previously done an entire year.

These comments reveal a positive yet under-explored aspect of FYs - namely, that due to their additional experience of university, foundation students often take on positions of mentorship when

they start their undergraduate course, which has a wider benefit for entire student cohort.

Conclusion

In adding to recent academic and policy debates concerning the status, future, and purposes of FY and arts and humanities subjects situated in UK Higher Education, this article drew from a larger evaluation of how an arts and humanities FY at one UK University might promote a more socially just and diverse learning environments. Our case-study reveals that one of the key FY outcomes – as perceived by students - are tightly attached to the notion of confidence. Such confidence, we argue, is twofold. First, students expressed that the FY provided them confidence within the university space which contributed towards an improved understanding of everyday practices at university including expectations placed upon them, the organization of modules and assignments and extant support mechanisms. Second, students felt that the FY equipped them with key academic skills (e.g., referencing, sourcing literature, academic writing). This, accordingly, enhanced their confidence as they proceeded onto the next level of the undergraduate degrees. This, in turn, remains highly compatible with the idea of FYs as central in widening access to HE and promoting social inclusivity. Moreover, although the students included in this study emphasised the social, academic, and development value of the Arts and Humanities FY, very few mentioned the economic/ financial value.

Not only does this suggest that the priorities of students who apply for FY courses are not necessarily motivated by the same concern for upward social mobility that drives dominant discourses around FYs, WP, and HE more broadly, but also that the idea of 'value' itself can be productively framed with an emphasis on social justice rather than social mobility. Against a policy backdrop where the purposes and values of FYs are heavily contested, these findings are important because they emphasise both the social and educational roles of FYs. Whilst acknowledging that our findings are limited to our case-study, this study still contributes to existing research on the FY in the UK (see Leech et al., 2016; Becker, 2021). As the contestation over FY years continues, key avenues for further research relate to the continued, critical examination of public discourses surrounding FYs and the juxtaposition of such discourses with FY students' own versions and perceptions.

Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare/s no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Research referred to as part of this article was produced as part of a Masters Dissertation at Leeds Beckett University.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Research Institute for Literature and Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University for generously funding this research. We would also like to thank Dr Kathryn Walchester and Dr Rebecca Bailey for their time conducting focus groups as part of this research

References

Allen, B. and Anderson, C. (2020). The Impact of Widening Participation Admissions Policies on Science Foundation Year Students' Experience. *Journal of the Foundation Year Network* 3, 57-66. https://jfyn.co.uk/index.php/ukfyn/article/download/55/47

Augar, P. (2019) Review of post-18 Education and Funding: Independent Panel Report [online]. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf [Accessed 08/08/2022].

Attridge, Éireann. (2021). Understanding and managing identity: working-class students at the University of Oxford. Journal of further and higher education, 45(10), 1438-1453. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1985979

Baker, Simon. (2022). Arts and humanities cuts 'becoming endemic', warns UK union. *The Times Higher Education*. May 20, 2022. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/arts-and-humanities-cuts-becoming-endemic-warns-uk-union [Accessed 16/8/22].

Becker, Lucinda Maria. (2021). Creating an Accidental Sense of Belonging in a Foundation Flock. *Journal of the Foundation Year Network*, 4, 25-32. https://jfyn.co.uk/index.php/ukfyn/article/view/72/60

Black, Anna M. (2022). Vocational and Mature Student Success in Higher Education Foundation Programmes. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education* 70(2), 105-121. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2021.1923306

Boliver, Vikki, Banerjee, Pallavi, Gorard, Stephen and Powell, Mandy (2022). Reconceptualising fair access to highly academically selective universities. *Higher Education* 84, 85–100. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00755-y

Braisby, N. (2019). The value of foundation years in higher education [blog]. *Higher Education Policy Institute*. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/08/05/thevalue-of-foundation-years-in-highereducation/ [accessed 14/11/2020].

Brown, R. (Ed.) (2011). *Higher Education and the Market*. Oxon: Routledge.

Chipperfield, Sarah R. (2012). The effect of group diversity on learning on a university-based foundation course, *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 36(3), 333-350. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2011.632817

Chipperfield, Sarah R. (2013) Self-preservation and the individualisation of risk in university-based foundation course students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 37(5), 623-642. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2011.645472

Clifford, Marie. (2018). Are Foundation Year Courses Value for Money? *Journal of the Foundation Year Network* 1, 161-174. https://jfyn.co.uk/index.php/ukfyn/article/view/16/26

Connell-Smith, Anna. and Hubble, Sue. (2018) Widening participation strategy in higher education in England [online]. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8204/CBP-8204.pdf [Accessed: 08/08/2022].

Corbin, J., 2017. Grounded Theory. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12(3), 301-302.

Creswell J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches* (4th ed.). London: SAGE Publications.

Dampier, G, Baker, L, Spencely, C, Edwards, N, White, E, Taylor, A. (2019). Avoiding the Deficit Model and Defining Student Success: Perspectives from a New Foundation Year Context. *Journal of the Foundation Year Network* 2, 41-52. https://jfyn.co.uk/index.php/ukfyn/article/view/32

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. (2011). *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*. June 2011. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf [Accessed 11/8/22].

Ellis, R and Allan, R. (2010). Raising aspiration and widening participation: diversity, science and learning styles in context. Journal of Further and Higher Education. Volume 34, 2010. 23-33. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770903477078

Feather DJ, Hazzard C, Ludvigsen J, Cont S, Taylor K. 2024. A Wellspring for New Pedagogical Approaches: The Importance of Foundation Years for Universities. *Journal of the Foundation Year Network* 6, 19-27.

Finlayson, A. (2019). "Preparing for Degree Study: Analysis of Access to Higher Education Diplomas and Integrated Foundation Year Courses." *Office for Students*.

Hindle, C., Boliver, V., Maclarnon, A., McEwan, C., Simpson, B., and Brown, H. (2021). Experiences of first-generation scholars at a highly selective UK university. *Learning and Teaching* 14(2), 1-31. https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2021.140202

Holmes-Henderson, A., & Watts, B. (2021). What grades are needed to study Classical subjects at UK universities? *The Journal of Classics Teaching*, 22(44), 86-92. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631021000210

Kettley, N., Murphy, C. (2021). Augmenting excellence, promoting diversity? Preliminary design of a foundation year for the University of Cambridge. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42(3), 419-434. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1886050

Kernohan, D. (2019) 'Why abolish the foundation year? [blog], Wonkhe, retrieved from: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/whyabolish-the-foundation-year/ (November 2020).

Leech, S., C.A. Marshall, and G. Wren. (2016). "Understanding Foundation Year Provision." *Widening Participation, Higher Education and Non-Traditional Students*, edited by C.A. Marshall, S.J. Nolan, and D.P. Newton, 19–40. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

McArthur, J. (2023). Understanding Social Justice: Why it matters**.** *PRISM* 5(2), 9-17.

McKie, Anne. (2021). Cambridge launches foundation year for students with BBB grades. *Times Higher Education*. Jan 13 2021. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/cambridge-launches-foundation-year-students-bbb-grades [Accessed 3/8/22]

McLellan, J., Pettigrew, R. and Sperlinger, T. (2016) Remaking the elite university: An experiment in widening participation in the UK. *Power and Education* 8(1), 54–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743815624117

Major, L.E and Tompkins, K. (2021). Why highly selective universities need to demystify admissions for student applicants. *Higher Education Policy Institute*. 9 August 2021. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/08/09/why-highly-selective-universities-need-to-demystify-admissions-for-student-applicants/ [Accessed 10/8/22].

Murray, Ó., M., Chiu, Y-L., T., Wong, B., and Horsburgh, J. (2023). Deindividualising Imposter Syndrome: Imposter Work among Marginalised STEMM Undergraduates in the UK. *Sociology* 57(4), 749-766.

Office For Students (OfS). (2019). Highly selective universities must follow through on promises to improve access, regulator warns. *Office for Students*. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/highly-selective-universities-must-follow-through-on-promises-to-improve-access-regulator-warns/ [Accessed 10/8/22]

O'Sullivan, K., Byrne, D., Robson, J., Winters, N. (2019). Who Goes to College via Access Routes? A Comparative Study of Widening Participation Admission in Selective Universities in Ireland and England. *Social Inclusion* 7(1), 38-51. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i1.1647

O'Sullivan, K., Bird, N., Robson, J. and Winters, N. (2019) Academic identity, confidence and belonging: The role of contextualised admissions and foundation years in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(3), 554-575. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3513

O'Sullivan, K., Robson, J. and Winters, N. (2019). 'I feel like I have a disadvantage': how socio-economically disadvantaged students make the decision to study at a prestigious university. *Studies in Higher Education* 44 (9), 1676-1690. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1460591PA

Parkes, S., Mathias, L., Seal, M., McGowan, K. and Hall, P. (2018). Becoming a Newman Foundation Year Student: Conscientization to Promote Democratic Engagement, Meaningful Dialogue and Cooperative Working. *Journal of the Foundation Year Network* 1, 71-86 https://jfyn.co.uk/index.php/ukfyn/article/view/21

Policy Perspective Network. (2021). Foundation Years. *Policy Note* 1. https://www.shu.ac.uk/news/all-articles/latest-news/policy-perspectives-network

Seal, M., & Parkes, S. (2019). Pedagogy as Transition: Student Directed Tutor Groups on Foundation Years. *Journal of the Foundation Year Network* 2, 7-20. https://jfyn.co.uk/index.php/ukfyn/article/view/40

Social Mobility Commission (2024). What is Social Mobility? https://socialmobility.independent-commission.uk/our-work/what-is-social-mobility/ [accessed on 05/03/25].

Tidman, Z. (2021). England's most selective universities worst for social mobility, report finds. *The Independent*. 24 November 2021. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/russell-group-universities-social-mobility-b1963442.html [Accessed 10/8/22]

UK Data Service. (2018). Is being the first in your family to attend university a sign of success of Widening Participation? *Data Impact Blog*. 1/10/2018

https://blog.ukdataservice.ac.uk/first-in-family-students / [Accessed 3/8/22]

University of Oxford. (2025). Oxford's Astrophoria Foundation Year Programme. https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/increasing-access/foundation-year [Accessed 05/03/25].

Williams, Tom. (2022). Oxford launches foundation year for students with BBB grades. *Times Higher Education*. May 4 2022. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/oxford-launches-foundation-year-students-bbb-grades [Accessed 3/8/22]

Wint, N. (2022). Why do students choose to study on engineering foundation year programmes within the UK?, *European Journal of Engineering Education*.https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2022.2047895

Wood, M., Su, F., and Pennington, A. (2023). 'You just need to work harder': Misalignments between the rhetoric of social mobility and education for social justice. *Power and Education* 16(1), 78-87