

## **Bridging from FdA to Honours degrees: A Report on Students' Perceptions**

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### **Background and context**

As part of the National Arts Learning Network (NALN) Bridging Curriculum project strand, students' perceptions of their bridging programmes in three NALN institutions were investigated. The research was carried out between December 2006 and January 2008. The respondents had all completed a Foundation Degree in Art (FdA), and were required to undertake a bridging programme in order to progress on to the final year of a BA Honours degree. This document reports on the findings from this research.

In accordance with Foundation Degree (FD) benchmarks, all are required to have a progression route in place to achieve an honours degree (QAA 2004). In some institutions, this progression is automatic, while in others students are required to undergo a bridging programme. These provide a means of making up 'lost' subject content as a result of the emphasis on work placement and vocational content in the FD. Entry requirements for these programmes vary, as do the length and content.

There is a dearth of qualitative information on this particular form of progression. While there is an extensive literature on transition, it has tended to concentrate on the move from further to higher education and the experiences of first year students. (See, for example, Christie et al, 2008; Bennett et al, 2008; Knox, 2005). Typically, the focus has been on students from a widening participation background. Thus, as Penketh and Goddard (2008) note, in their study on the experiences of mature women students progressing from FD to Honours, a 'qualitative analysis of the perceptions of students progressing to honours by this route is ripe for investigation, particularly in relation to the significance this has for life-long learning and widening participation in Higher Education (p. 315).

HEFCE's (2008) review of Foundation Degree provision provides some useful statistical data in relation to progression. This indicated that 54% (2,485) of FD home qualifiers from 2004-5 immediately progressed to an honours programme in 2005-6, the vast majority remaining in the same institution. In the institutions where students stayed on, 87% were given full credit for their preceding two years, with only 3% having to start over. For those moving to a new institution, 14% had to start over, with 60% being given full credit for their FDs. This represents a 10% drop in relation to figures for the previous year.

In terms of success rates, 76% of those progressing onto a final year honours programme were reported as graduating in that year. Relative to figures for the previous year, this represents an increase of 5%. Of these, 8% attained Firsts, and 32% Upper Seconds. As the HEFCE (2008) report notes, a variety of explanations could account for the 24% who did not qualify: they may have failed, dropped out, qualified later on, or have been unable to qualify as a result of 'some formality'.

The HEFCE (2007) review on FDs points out that it would appear that for some students the transition from a FD to honours may be problematic, but in the absence of further data, it was not possible to draw firmer conclusions. One of the only studies to have

examined the experience of students progressing from a FD at an FE college to an honours degree at a university found that the experience 'created considerable levels of stress for the students' (Greenbank, 2007: 91). This was largely attributed to the differences in culture between the FE and HE environments: the latter was found to have adopted a more academic approach, provided less support and emphasised independent learning to a greater extent. Penketh and Goddard (2008) found, in analyzing the narratives of mature women students, that while they had derived some confidence from their experience as FD students, their written assignments were the predominant concern. Most of these students, too, had not undertaken their FDs in the same institution, having studied either online or at an outreach centre.

The students reported on in the present study were accustomed to an HE environment from the outset of their FdAs, and did not have to adjust to a new institution for their final year; this would make for a substantially different experience from those progressing from FE institutions and outreach programmes. While the third year experience was not the main focus of the study, some findings on this issue will be presented.

### **Aims and methodology**

The study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of their bridging programmes across three institutions, and to identify some of the issues for students making the transition from FD to the third year of an honours degree. It also sought to identify good practice in bridging provision and to disseminate this information widely across the NALN partnership.

Three institutions participated in the research. Confidentiality was guaranteed to both participating students and staff, and for this reason the institutions cannot be named. All three institutions are providers of art and design courses. At Institution A, students from 3 bridging programmes were involved. At Institution B, students from 7 programmes participated, while at Institution C, 5 courses were represented in the research. Bridging programmes ranged in length from 5 days to a term, and while many were run as discrete programmes, others were presented as an integral part of the FdA programme.

Research data was obtained from questionnaires<sup>1</sup>, interviews and semi-structured group discussions, between December 2006 and January 2008. The focus in each case was on the extent to which students had found their bridging programmes beneficial as a preparation for their third year. All respondents were self-selecting.

The questionnaires were drawn up following semi-structured group discussions conducted in December 2006 with students at institutions A and C. As far as possible, all group discussions were facilitated rather than led, but prompt questions were introduced at times in order to encourage discussion of relevant issues. These discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed. A provisional coding structure was drawn up, according to themes. This approach was informed by grounded theory, as the themes were constructed from the data. Following this, responses were coded, verified by an additional person, and then analysed.

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<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire asked students to identify 3 things they liked and 3 things they disliked about their bridging course, as well as recommend changes. It also asked respondents to rate the extent to which they felt the bridging had given them the confidence to progress.

### **Summary of main themes**

According to the QAA (2005), areas in need of attention in relation to progression arrangements include:

- Clear and timely information to students about all progression routes
- Well-designed progression opportunities appropriate to the expectations and needs of students
- A match between the modes of study on the articulated honours degree with the modes of study on the FD
- Provision of early information to students, including the selection criteria, where there is strong competition for places on the articulated honours degree
- Ensuring the FD provides an appropriate preparation, particularly in the curriculum and methods of assessment, for the honours degree.

All of these points were, to varying degrees, raised by the students who participated in this research, and these will be incorporated in the ensuing discussion. Implicit in this account is students' perceptions of their third year experience.

### **The value of bridging for students**

The general consensus among the students surveyed was that bridging has an important role to play in the curriculum. While they were critical of the content, very few of the respondents, both in the discussion groups or the questionnaires, suggested that bridging in its entirety was a waste of their time. Certainly, one group of students implied that their FdA experience largely obviated the need for a skills development programme to enable them to progress; however, they were nonetheless of the view that progression should not be automatic. The clear implication of this is that the majority of students perceive a need for some structured intervention to enable them to make the transition successfully to the final year of an Honours degree. The main reason for this would appear to be the difference between the FdA and Honours degree in relation to academic writing practices. While for many this was seen as a quantitative leap, most students also perceived that, on a qualitative level, more would be asked of them. This was particularly the case for those whose experience had largely been confined to report writing.

In the three institutions surveyed, there was considerable common ground in relation to both the strengths and weaknesses of their bridging provision. It would be fair to say that the respondents most satisfied with their programme were those whose bridging placed the dissertation at the centre of the programme. The most common strengths identified included the fact that the bridging had given them some idea of what to expect in their final year; some helpful guidance in relation to their work; some essential new theoretical perspectives, and the acquisition of some useful skills that would enable them to succeed. Structuring an essay, referencing techniques, reflective writing skills and undertaking a literature review serve as examples of this.

Altogether less common was evidence that the bridging programme had shifted respondents' thinking in any significant sense. The quotes from some of the students suggest a shift in their student identity as a result of their bridging programme. For the former, there was a move away from an '*FdA type of thinking*' to a more conceptual,

theoretical approach to their work. This entailed seeing themselves as artists who engage in a process, rather than simply applying a formula to achieve a particular look.

This identity shift took on a different hue for some of their peers on one of the other programmes: the transition for them was a quantum leap in the process of creating a product. While as FdA students they had had to primarily grapple with practical elements of their design, this experience brought about in them an appreciation of the analytic dimensions of the process. They were also empowered through having successfully produced far more than they had imagined possible. This different emphasis is most likely a reflection of the fact that students on this programme are not required to produce a dissertation in their final year, but an extensive design proposal and rationale instead. Their counterparts at another institution conveyed a strong recognition of the importance of a theoretical basis to their output; however, unlike their peers discussed above, they appeared to have felt disempowered by this awareness, as they found the conceptual level very challenging in such a short space of time.

There was widespread agreement that bridging represented a missed opportunity, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways, to adequately prepare students for the major requirement of the honours degree year – this being, in most cases, a dissertation. A substantial number of the respondents in this study found themselves struggling with the dissertation. For many, the significant omissions included opportunities to think about or formulate their topic; writing a proposal; planning the dissertation or final major project, and doing a literature review. For some, the bridging programme was seen as too short to do justice to all these areas. Respondents also invariably expressed a wish for more individual guidance as well as feedback on the work undertaken as part of bridging. This was, in many cases, not provided. It is recognised that the timing of the programme poses real problems for institutions to give students feedback; however, in its absence, they typically felt that their efforts had not been fully appreciated. Finally, many of the respondents expressed disappointment and frustration that, following the bridging, they had not been required to begin working on their proposals and topics. This was particularly the case where they had joined existing Honours students who had had this requirement imposed upon them in the summer break.

In most of the programmes surveyed, there were elements that students did not value. In one of the institutions, a large number perceived aspects of the content as irrelevant or repetitive, as they had covered the ground previously or it was being taught in the final year. In another, it was mainly the omissions in the programme that shaped respondents' perceptions of value; however, some found the content too basic, unnecessary and the focus on essays, rather than the dissertation per se, unhelpful. For some, the main objections to the bridging centred on the difficulty of the programme, particularly for those who had not been previously exposed to theory and essay writing.

### **Information about progression and the bridging programme**

All respondents indicated an awareness of the possibility of progression upon completion of their FdAs; however, many found the advance information on the nature of the programme insufficient and, at times, confusing. They were all aware of the entry requirements. These differed at one of the institutions, where students have only to attain a pass on their FdA to progress onto the third year. Most of these respondents were of the view that this was too generous, and that it should be made more difficult to progress. Other respondents felt that the level of difficulty of the bridging programme had been overstated, and that the programme itself should have been more challenging.

Most respondents were of the view that progression was seen as desirable on the part of their FdA tutors. One group, in particular, stressed that from the outset of their FdAs, the notion of progression had been implicit.

### **Length and timing of programme**

Unsurprisingly, respondents' views varied considerably in relation to the length and timing of the programme. For some, the programme was too long and could have been shortened. For others, for example, those on a five day programme, it was not long enough. For those who had an entire term in which to complete their bridging studies, this issue did not arise. They were more exercised by the timing of the unit, which coincided with their final project work. Many were sceptical about the possibility of this shifting to the summer holidays, as they saw it clashing with work commitments or their need for time out from their studies. However, the majority of those undertaking bridging during the initial part of the summer holiday period did not raise this as an issue.

The biggest concern in relation to timing revolves around the fact that the FdA results are not always known at the start of the bridging course. Respondents were thus in the difficult position of not knowing whether they would be eligible to continue, particularly where a Merit profile is required. While it is hoped that students will have a good idea as to whether or not they are likely to meet entry requirements, there is evidence from tutors to suggest that some go on to the bridging in the knowledge that their continuing participation is in the balance. Clearly, institutions have to find a way to minimise the extent to which this happens: if bridging is to be held at the end of the FdA rather than in the course of the third term, it is difficult to delay its start till after the final exam boards have taken place.

### **The relationship between the FdA and BA Honours third year**

On a number of occasions in the course of the group discussions, the issue of differing approaches to study between the FdA and Honours degree arose. Perhaps most obvious was the fact that for most respondents, the extended writing requirements of the BA were perceived as a qualitative as well as quantitative leap. Many felt that the report writing they had had to do on their FdAs did not significantly prepare for them for dissertation writing. For a few, the absence of extended writing assignments and the lack of exposure to theoretical debates on their FdAs were seen as impediments to their success; however, once they had to grapple with theory in the bridging unit, they testified to having found it very interesting.

Some respondents indicated that they saw extended writing as irrelevant to their forthcoming careers. Their reasons for going on to the third year were largely instrumental, as they felt their job prospects would be compromised if they left with just an FdA. These students were thus approaching their final year with a fairly narrow conception of what they would derive from it in intellectual and conceptual terms. Moreover, they viewed the academic component as having the potential to undermine their achievement. This is perhaps not surprising given that Foundation Degrees privilege practical and technical expertise and knowledge (Yorke, 2005).

At the same time, many perceived their BA counterparts as being way ahead of them academically and in a far better position to succeed in the dissertation. This was particularly the case where they were brought into close contact with the BA students.

For some, having to encounter new lecturers, who had already established relationships with the BA students added to this sense of inferiority. However, invariably, as a result of the focus of the FdA, they viewed themselves as more technically capable, and thus in an advantageous position in this respect. While, for some, the third year will serve as an opportunity to refine skills already acquired on the FdA, it would appear that they have not recognised that the BA has a different set of concerns.

On a related point, many of the respondents in this study were exercised by the fact that they had not received as much individual guidance as they would have liked on the bridging course. While some stated that they had gained an idea of what to expect on the BA, there was scant evidence to suggest that this included an awareness of the cultural shift that they would be likely to encounter in relation to independent study, though one group of respondents did identify this as one of the best features of their bridging programme. Thus, the emphasis on self-directed work appeared, for many of these respondents, to be provoking a considerable amount of anxiety.

There were, however, others who felt liberated from the confining practices of the FdA. It should be noted that their sense of freedom was connected largely to their design practices.

For a few respondents, the modes of study they had experienced on the FdA matched what they were experiencing on the BA.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the relationship between the final year of the FdA and the third year of the BA in respect of grading was a source of confusion for some respondents. They were unsure as to whether they were carrying anything over from their FdAs or if their degree result would be predicated entirely on the final year.

### **The third year experience**

While there was a great deal of variability in respondents' experiences from course to course, three issues stand out. The first is that it would appear, in a number of cases, that the momentum established on the bridging programme in relation to the dissertation was not carried through in the first term. Many found this disconcerting, and felt unable to engage in any significant work on this. It is not clear whether this was a deliberate practice on these courses, or arose as a result of problems with teaching staff.

Second, many of the respondents who had articulated on to an existing Honours programme felt that they had integrated well onto the new course. As noted above, some, however, were of the view that, academically, they were at a disadvantage relative to their third year peers, but more advanced in practical terms. For a few, their sense was that their arrival in the third year had not been adequately prepared for, and they were left feeling that they were not being accorded the same respect and serious consideration as their peers.

Finally, despite respondents' concerns about their programmes and the pressures they were under, all felt that they had made the right decision to stay on. None indicated that they were likely to give up.

### **Areas of good practice**

Throughout the research, many instances emerged of good practice in preparing students for progression. In sum, the key components of a comprehensive bridging programme could be said to encompass the following:

- the provision of clear and unambiguous information about the length and timing of the programme and selection criteria early on in the second year of the FdA
- the inclusion of handbooks and written information for students while on the programme
- ensuring that FdA students are at the same point at the start of the third year as their BA counterparts
- the inclusion of content that directly paves the way for students to take on the academic demands of the final year
- an opportunity to begin the initial planning for the dissertation
- exploring with students how the BA final year will differ from the FdA
- as far as possible, the provision of feedback to students on the work completed while on the bridging course
- an opportunity to meet with third year students who have successfully completed the honours degree.

### **Conclusions**

This study has provided an indication of the perceptions of foundation degree students who have undertaken a bridging programme in order to progress on to the final year of an honours degree. It has shown that students generally value the experience; however, in many cases, they expressed a wish for bridging to address more specifically the academic demands they would encounter in the final year. Maintaining the momentum established on the bridging in relation to the dissertation/final major project early on in the first term was also seen as important to the respondents.

It has also highlighted the fact that bridging differs not only between institutions but within them too. This is in relation to not only the structure and content of the programme, but the learning outcomes as well. There appears to be no consensus as to what constitutes an appropriate set of outcomes for bridging. Furthermore, there is no clear answer as to whether a discrete model of bridging which takes place after students have completed their FdAs is any better than one placed in the final term of the FdA. There are, from the students' perspective, disadvantages to both; however, a tentative conclusion from the small sample here suggests that they experience more stress when it coincides with their final major projects.

Given the small number of students surveyed, it is of course not possible to generalise the findings of this research; however, it is hoped that the insights generated by the

participants will offer providers some pointers should they wish to initiate or refine their bridging provision.

This research has not addressed the extent to which FdA students are successful on their degree programmes. At the time of writing, information from all three institutions indicated that they had generally performed well, with a number attaining distinctions. There is no evidence to suggest that they performed less well than their BA counterparts; however, in the absence of precise data, this has not been possible to confirm.

Finally, this research would be incomplete without raising the question as to whether bridging is, in fact, necessary. In the course of my investigations, I encountered academics who argued that if the FdA were doing its job properly, it would obviate the need for a bridging programme. Most of the students in this research had had some exposure to Level 2 academic writing and a range of theoretical constructs while on their FdAs; however, they nonetheless felt they needed support in making the transition. Perhaps the main reason for this is that, within the context of the FdA, they perceive these areas of study as marginal to their programmes. Alternatively, they may be presented to students as being of less importance than their practical work.

The fact that students find the transition challenging is perhaps not surprising, given the differing emphases of foundation and honours degrees. As Yorke (2005) observes, the former privileges practical expertise and knowledge. It seems likely that the inherent tensions between the aims of the FdA and those of Honours degree study will continue to pose a challenge for those students making the transition, unless a shift takes place on the part of one or both parties. For this reason, bridging has an important part to play in easing this transition. As one Programme Director responsible for bridging and the ensuing third year put it:

*The ability to engage in an intellectual design process is part of the FdA, but bridging gives you the opportunity to work to your own brief ... to become aware of the academic process, and it stimulates the kind of thinking students need for their final year.*

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