Recovering the Student Voice: retention and achievement on Foundation degrees. <u>Version 5</u>

Daphne Hampton and Margo Blythman, London College of Communication, University of the Arts London.

Introduction

The first year student experience has a very high profile as a topic in contemporary higher education but how much do we know about what our students really think about their first learning experiences on their Foundation degrees? Recovery of the student voice is an area that Foundation degree practitioners need to consider as part of our strategy to improve the quality of student learning. Our research is located within a form of the interpretivist tradition. Although we would not wish to deny the importance of structural factors in society, we regard knowledge as being constructed through an understanding that different people and groups, in different power relationships, experience the world in different ways. As we argue later, it is important to give voice to the experience of the least powerful.

In this chapter we focus on the student experience, on the highs and lows of the first two terms on some full-time Foundation degrees at the London College of Communication (LCC), a constituent college of the University of the Arts London. Our context is outlined in more detail later in the chapter. We also examine the views of our students on one of our planned strategies to support Foundation degrees, student to student mentoring.   Our particular interest is student retention and achievement. As such, the chapter crosses the boundaries of academic research and practical recommendations. Issues that students themselves perceive as creating obstacles to, and opportunities for, student achievement and retention are identified and practical suggestions are made as a result. The student voices inform staff on action needed enabling research to relate directly to teaching and learning. We locate ourselves as practitioners whose work is underpinned by the scholarship of student support (Blythman et al 2006). In this chapter, student support is highlighted as a key component for achieving success, with particular emphasis on the role of student mentors as an aid to engagement and learning. As institutions struggle with increasing student numbers, a more diverse student body and declining resources, then a wider range of methods of student support needs to be explored and evaluated and our view is that student mentoring is under-recognised.

Retention and the first year experience

Bousted and May(2003) refer to the crucial role of the first term in retention. There is a growing body of research in the UK on student retention and emerging research suggests that similar findings apply to achievement. Much of the most useful and relevant research, when considering retention of Foundation degree students, comes from further education (FE). It is worth noting that the higher education (HE) 'non-traditional' student is the FE

'traditional' student. FE has been struggling with issues of retention for many more years than HE and so there is a wealth of experience and literature to be drawn on. Key FE findings suggest that college based initiatives can make a difference thus we should move away from models that individualise student failure and look more to institutional factors (Martinez 1997). A survey of the literature on FE student retention (Fitzcharles 2001) concluded that the student experience of the institution is a significant factor in retention and that colleges can adopt strategies which will improve retention rates. Kenwright (1996) found that, even where there was considerable individual difficulty, students persisted if they valued the course enough; if students felt they were having a useful learning experience, they would battle through family problems, health or money difficulties and remain on the course.

The majority of successful strategies identified in the FE literature fall into the following five categories (Blythman and Orr 2001;2002):

- Best fit initiatives through ensuring that the student is on the right course
- Supporting activities including study support, enrichment activities
- Financial support such as bursaries
- Connective activities which build the connection between the student and the college. These include enhanced tutorial and mentoring
- Transformational activities such as raising student expectations and self belief through careers and progression activities

Evidence also suggests that students who access support have lower drop out rates (BSA 1997) and that study support and close monitoring through personal tutorial increases retention of 'at risk' students and improves achievement (Martinez 2000). Students constantly weigh up the costs and benefits of completion (Martinez and Munday 1998). It is also important to note that the reasons students give for drop-out depends on who asks and there is an argument for ensuring independent research where students feel freer to give their real reasons (Martinez 1995). It is also important to research those who stay, as well as those who leave, since factors which appear to cause withdrawal, such as financial hardship, may also be true of those who stay (Kenwright 1996). Overall. factors affecting retention and achievement are likely to be complex, multi-faceted and require a joined-up approach in terms of institutional strategy (Martinez and Munday 1998).

Turning to HE, research on retention of undergraduates (Yorke 1999) suggests that the following are key factors in causing students to drop out:

- Poor quality of student experience
- Inability to cope with the demands of the course
- Unhappiness with the social environment
- Wrong choice of programme
- Matters related to financial need
- Dissatisfaction with aspects of the course and student support structures

Research at the London Institute of Education (Coate and Spours 2003) on retention of part time MA students suggests the following are important institutional factors:

- individual support and formative assessment for students on their first piece of assessed work, particularly written work

- regular, focused and rigorous feedback on assessed work

- 'early course practices' such as interviewing potential students and thorough induction into course and course expectations

- recognition that requests to defer on assessments may indicate student is 'at risk'.

Of course, the students in the Coate and Spours study were experienced learners who were educational professionals but it is interesting to note that, if these factors were important for relatively sophisticated learners, how much more important they might be for Foundation degree students. Yorke and Thomas (2003) highlight the importance of early formative assessment and both pre-entry and first year. Johnstone (1997) points out that early identification of 'at risk' students is essential for their retention and achievement. However, it is not always easy to bring about supportive changes in the way courses are delivered. Taylor and Bedford (2004) point out that, within retention discussions, academic staff tend to focus on student-based factors rather than issues of teaching and learning methodology and the curriculum.

The first year student experience is a current priority across the UK. Of particular interest is the work of the Scottish higher education enhancement themes (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk). This has much to offer those of us working outside Scotland. They are addressing the fundamental question 'what do we really want students to get out of their first year?' Their first enhancement theme is the first year curriculum with a focus on structure, content and ' the extent to which the co-curriculum can be owned by the students themselves'. Their second enhancement theme is empowerment which is:

> to equip them at the start of their studies with the skills, capacities and knowledge to be as effective as possible as independent learners for the rest of their programme, and for their subsequent employability, professional development, and for that matter, lifelong learning (p.1 proposed approach).

This theme includes, as a key idea, trying as far as possible to tailor the provision to the individual by providing considerable feedback and help on progress at this individual level. The second key idea highlighted by this Scottish enhancement theme is to re-examine the whole nature of induction and see it more as a process over a period of time rather than a series of one off events. This builds on their previous work on best practice in induction (QAAHE 2005).

The third Scottish enhancement theme, which the authors acknowledge is the most challenging, is that of student engagement. They argue that:

> this sub-theme should primarily focus on the learners' relationship with peers: how can an institutional culture acknowledge and help to shape the attitudes and norms that are so influential in the first year experience? Ideas that will be explored might include peer-mentoring, peer-support and peer-tutoring of first-year students by students from later in their programmes; collaborative work that is carefully designed and carefully led to encourage the nurturing of peer-relationships that engage with learning tasks; establishing a culture of sharing learning outputs (especially through emerging technology); and encouraging engagement with employability issues in the first year curriculum. (p.2 proposed approach)

Of particular interest in this last theme is a recognition that higher education is under pressure in relation to resources and student numbers and there is a need to move more of the responsibility for learning to the students. But this is approached through a serious attempt to identify authentic enhancing experiences rather than pat 'solutions' which satisfy the finance director but not the students.

At LCC we wish to engage with these issues and argue that a starting point is students' perception of the current experience. Many students have compelling stories to tell and listening to the student voice about the first term is important. It can help staff reflect on what is required to offer the learning experience that students need to encourage them to stay on and fulfil their potential on their Foundation degree.

Our research is related to a student support model which sees 'student failure' as a complex concept requiring considerable critical examination including a focus on how this is experienced by the student (Peelo et al. 2002). This research into recovering the student voice can help staff change their views on what retention means and how best to achieve it.

LCC and Foundation Degrees

LCC has been delivering Foundation degrees since 2001-2002 and offers them in a range of subjects within our specialist art, design and communication curriculum. At the time of writing in 2006 we have 15 Foundation degrees with almost 1000 students. All these courses are full time and attract both those new to higher education and some who wish to convert from other disciplines as a form of career change. These include such areas as Interior Design, Media Practice, Journalism and Surface Design. The University of the Arts London has its own FE offer and we try to ensure progression routes right through from FE to research degree. For this reason, perhaps unusually, all our Foundation degrees are fully taught within the university rather than local FE colleges. For those students who wish and are able to continue beyond Foundation degrees to BA Hons, there is no need to change institution and indeed we are now developing some top-up years to tailor this opportunity better for graduates of Foundation degrees.

LCC is strongly committed to personal academic tutorials (Blythman et al 2006) and study support (Jackson and Blythman forthcoming) as key tenets in

our strategies for high student retention and achievement within the context of widening participation. Student to student mentoring is another key strand in the overall student support policy. We are as committed to changing university structures and cultures as we are to 'adjusting' the individual student to cope with existing practices. (Jackson and Blythman forthcoming)

The research

Listening to and acting on the student voice means staff can 'encourage the institution to organise their support activities around the needs of the students (HEFCE 2003/15 p.17). On a more conceptual level, we believe that people experience the world in different ways, largely affected by their power position in particular contexts. The social world is understood through a variety of perspectives coming from multiple realities and this is best captured through social actors being able to 'name the world' (Freire 1996 p.69). Our methodology for this is semi-structured interviews. For these reasons we report our research below with an emphasis on the students' own words.

The research explored how the students perceive barriers to learning in their first two terms at LCC by the use of semi-structured interviews with fifteen students across three full time Foundation degree courses, in Interior Design, Travel and Tourism and Visual Design and Display. We chose these courses because we wanted to focus on the experience within one School in case there were School specific factors.   Our research interest was to focus on the high points and low points of their perception of their experiences in an open way that did not prejudge what issues would be important to them as opposed to the standard student feedback questionnaire. Our student sample was quite mature, almost half were over thirty and more than half of our respondents came from outside the UK, mainly other EU countries.
The interviews explored aspects of the students` lives before and during terms one and two with a focus on what, in their eyes, had been good or bad experiences.

Research Findings

The first notable finding was that most students were using the course to help with a career change.

> When I left school, I think I took the wrong career path. I was more or less persuaded not to go to art college because my parents asked what are you going to do at the end of it…..I`ve always regretted not having done something creative. I'm at a time in my life when my son is older and luckily I can afford to take time off to do this course (Julie- female, 46 years old, career in banking.)

> I wanted a new break as my husband passed away and I had always been creative at home. One day I was reading at home and I saw the advert (for the Foundation degree course) (Soraya - female, 54 years old).

> Well, I did a City and Guilds course, but on reflection I really wish I`d come to the Access course here before doing this foundation degree….It would have given me a good stepping stone into this course, which I am doing to change career direction (Emma - female, 39 years old, clerical worker).

This would suggest that Foundation degrees are making a contribution to the employability agenda as well as widening participation.

Students were asked to describe their experience of the first term. Eight main themes emerged.

The first was the pressure that students felt combining home and work commitments with studying, a finding one might expect with a group including a number of mature students.

> Well, I have a family as well and I need to spend some time with them so it`s quite hard to fit everything in….college, work and family you know (Soraya)

Secondly, they reported strong feelings of being overwhelmed by so many new experiences.

> Well, initially I found it all overwhelming. It was all new and you`re not quite sure what you are doing. Sometimes you`re given a talk on something or you`re given a brief and you don`t always know what the tutor wants. You`re doing your best but you`re not always sure whether what you`re doing is correct, but it seems to come right in the end (Julie)

However this was ameliorated by their perception of good student support being available.

> I like the course because I have a fantastic tutor….he`s very nice and makes you feel good when you are coming to the course, which stops you worrying about all the new things. The tutor is very special and he really likes what he does here (Michelle - female, 24 years old.)

Thirdly, the students stressed how enjoyable the course was, with good information and good staff.

> It`s been just fine. I didn`t expect it to be as hard, because there`s a lot of work to be done. I really like it though, it`s enjoyable. (Lucy - female, 18 years old)

> I enjoy the course. The staff are great. I enjoy coming to college every day and learning new stuff. (Miguel - male, 20 years old)

Fourthly, students showed appreciation of the practical nature of the course, especially compared to an honours degree taken previously by one of the respondents. She was studying the Foundation degree within a few years of graduating and was using the Foundation degree to change career direction.

> It is much more practical and useful than the Honours degree (Adeye - female, 28 years old)

> When I came for the interview, the building was full of end of year shows and it was quite an inspiration. There was some beautiful work on display and it`s always had a really high reputation. So when I was accepted on to the course I was really pleased that I would be doing work like that (Julie).

The other four key findings that emerged from the analysis of the student interviews were more critical of the experience but in terms of general

criticisms that students, on all kinds of courses and institutions, make of contemporary UK higher education. They reported that they felt the classes were too big and daunting, the problems of being a foreigner with no family in the UK making it harder to study, the lack of enough high quality equipment and the pressures of group work.

> It`s been quite good because the course is good and the people here are really good as well. It`s just the group work is a bit pressuring (Lucy).

The students were then asked what was their best experience in the first term. Seven aspects were reported, with many respondents combining two or more.

The seven were: doing well in the first project/getting A grades in the first term, all the support to help integrate into the course and college, learning new things, meeting new people, gaining confidence, knowledgeable and enthusiastic lecturers and learning practical knowledge and skills in a specialist area.

The following quotations illustrate these points:

> The best thing would be meeting new people, and obviously learning new stuff (Miguel)

> Well, we were offered quite a lot of support, which I found fantastic. I was worried to start with as I am a mature student but I found an incredible response from everyone (Soraya)

> Getting A grades, that was fantastic. I had never got A grades at school (Emma)

> Well, basically I`ve really enjoyed absorbing all the information really. And meeting new friends and getting more confident in my drawing skills again and now I`m a little more confident in my own abilities (Julie).

Bousted and May (2004) argue that networks and friendships are a main source of academic and personal support which can start with the induction programme . A welcoming atmosphere from the group, the lecturers and the institution is seen as important, reflecting Wang`s (2000) 'aura of the classroom'. We argue at LCC that the most important thing to plan for student induction is the kind of atmosphere you want to create. Activities that enable students to get to know each other, as well as the teaching team, are vital. Students on these Foundation degrees tell us that meeting new people, gaining confidence and all the support to help integrate into the course and college were some of their best experiences in term one.

Students were also asked, as part of the research, about their worst experience of their first term. Four students reported that they had not had a worst experience.

> I don`t think there is a worst thing for me. I`m finding it all quite positive. I mean some days you get a bad day where things don`t always go quite as well as you`d like, but, no, I`m finding that I enjoy it all (Julie)

For four students balancing college, home and work emerged as their worst experience.

> Even though I found that the course probably wasn`t quite as intense as I imagined it to
> be, I think that balancing the college work and home is enough of a struggle for me….it
> has meant that I have less time for things outside college (Emma)

Yorke`s (2000) findings regarding factors affecting student decisions to leave
include the inability to cope with course demands, together with matters
related to financial need. Balancing college, home and work could include
both these factors.

Four students stated that the realisation that their IT skills were very limited
was their worst experience. Universities are sometimes dazzled by the
sophistication of the IT skills of younger students and forget that there is still a
backlog of students whose education may pre-date the digital age. HEFCE
(2003) cites educational background as a factor affecting retention and this
includes exposure to IT skills.

One student reported time management problems as her worst experience,
stating that this was more complicated than balancing college, home and
work. This student wanted guidance on prioritising college assignments,
reading, lectures and seminars/studio work as well as help with balancing the
college, home, work portfolio.

> Handing my essays and other assignments in on time, meeting the deadlines, was my
> worst experience. I didn`t know which one to do first and then there were all the lectures
> and briefs to do and I didn`t know if I was allowed to miss anything….. and I work part time
> and want to meet my friends and see my family (Lucy).

Two students referred to the college learning environment, specifically the
poor heating, as their worst experience. Sometimes we forget or
underestimate the importance of these environmental factors but listening to
students often reminds us of how grim it can be to work in a building that is
always too hot or too cold, or with inadequate lifts or other infrastructure
problems.

The Potential of Student Mentoring Schemes

We also wanted to investigate students' views on the potential usefulness of
having student to student mentoring systems and to investigate the student
experience of mentoring. Yorke and Thomas (2003) emphasise the
importance of a supportive, friendly first year climate and point out that
students' pattern of engagement with universities is changing and we need to
recognise this. Topping (1996 quoted in Falchicov 2001) defines mentoring as
'a 1:1 supportive relationship between the student and another person of
greater ability or experience'.

 LCC has had small scale mentoring schemes on honours degree courses for
several years and have found them to be beneficial. Mentoring helps students
settle into the course and college culture while enabling them to fulfil their
academic potential, with consequent good retention. With widening
participation on institutional agendas, mentoring schemes provide an
additional tool in the armoury of support for `at risk` students. We wanted to

discover Foundation degree students' views on mentoring, in particular potential benefits of such schemes and the qualities needed by a mentor. We were interested in how Foundation degree students thought they would benefit if they had the help of a second year student. Also we needed to know what they would like help with. Again, research into the student voice leads to practical recommendations.

The students were asked if they had ever heard of student mentoring schemes. Most students had but none had participated in one. Before continuing with the interviews, the students were given a brief description of the role of a mentor.

The students were asked what qualities they thought were needed to be a good mentor. The following factors emerged:

- good knowledge of the course and college,
- being approachable,
- good listening skills,
- being motivating,
- patience,
- honesty and trustworthiness,
- being hardworking,
- helpfulness,
- friendliness,
- having time for the mentee as a person,
- being encouraging and
- intelligence.

Almost all students thought it would make no difference whether a student mentor was male or female. One student disagreed .

> I think females might give other females more time but males would be more objective in their help (Emma).

All fifteen respondents stated that the mentor`s personality would be the most important factor for them. On being asked why it would be good to have a student mentor in year one, the students gave the following replies.

First, to learn techniques and skills:

> Well, they can help them. If the second years done the same thing as the first years done, it`ll help the first years see what to do. Give them ideas and learning new skills and how to do their work (Lucy)

> With research or IT skills for example (Emma)

Second, to get support/advice with assignments and with college life:

> If I had a mentor here, I`d be able to sort of ring him or her and say have you got a minute…..and could you go through that with me,….and how they`d managed themselves through the course (Emma)

Third, to brainstorm problems:

> Well, discuss basic ideas and what you need to do in your assignments (Melissa - female, 21 years old)

Fourth, to help improve/see what is possible:

> I think we`d have lots of questions how you go about things…..what I`m doing, can I do it better, can I improve? I think the second year students know much more than the first years. It would be great, actually. I would gain more motivation and more determination (Soraya)

> I think really if I had any problems, and maybe had some doubts in my own ability, maybe the mentor would say look don`t worry about that because I had the same problem but I`ve overcome it by some extra courses or I`ve had a chat to somebody that`s given me a little bit of extra help and I think that can be quite positive to think that other people have had the same problems and they`ve managed to overcome them (Soraya)

Fifth, to give guidance:

> I feel that they could steer us in the right direction, more than the tutors, in which way to handle assignments. And I think that would be a great advantage, especially for someone like me because sometimes I will read the brief and it goes over the top of my head. (Alice female, 35 years old)

Sixth, to learn about the course:

> They would tell us about the course itself and what you should achieve, what things you`ll be learning and stuff like that, and what you should work for. (Lucy)

> Well, I`d probably be ready for the following year and know what to expect. (Miguel).

Clearly, mentoring is seen as promoting an awareness of the norms, values and practices of the academic world. It can improve confidence and increase subject knowledge. Owen (2002) states that a good induction programme is essential but may produce an overload of information which will be forgotten within three months. These Foundation degree students perceive mentors as a way of keeping this knowledge alive and fresh in their minds. Mentors can act as a form of 'ongoing induction' (Bousted and May, 2003) They can also provide informal feedback to complement the formal feedback of assessment, enabling students to learn more from each experience. But they also have another role for the university. New students are likely to talk more freely, and have more opportunity for individual informal conversations, with mentors which can then be fed back, anonymised, to the course and university to help identify issues of concern to students and what they regard particularly positively. So mentoring in itself becomes another channel for the student voice.

The Need for More Research

Having conducted this small scale research project our view is that we need to know much more about how Foundation degree students experience higher education. Listening to the student voices should be one way of achieving this

all important goal. More research that recovers the student voice should be undertaken within Foundation degrees to help achieve this. Analysis of the overall findings reveals some interesting discussion points and areas for further research. Most students interviewed were using their Foundation degree to help with a career change. Are many of our students studying Foundation degrees in order to facilitate a career change? Is this the experience across the country? If so, there are interesting policy implications which would also benefit from research. It might make us re-consider the way we introduce the employability agenda into the courses. Another key research area is those who do not complete successfully. We chose to focus on those who stayed because so much recent focus has been on those who drop out but we do need research which listens to those for whom Foundation degrees did not work. Again, some longitudinal studies to examine the student experience over the duration of the course would enable us to have more than brief snapshots and we would hope that, as the number of Foundation degree students increases and graduates that there would be studies of their progression beyond Foundation degrees into both top-up years and employment.

The Way Forward

Our respondents' accounts of the best experience of the first term show students valuing opportunities to gain confidence and meet new people. The student voice also tells us the importance of strong student support to help integrate into the course and college. These aspects should be built on and reinforced by Foundation degree course teams in pre-entry, induction and the first term. For our respondents this support is one of the most positive factors in their learning journey. The student voice also tells us that learning new and practical knowledge and skills in a specialist area is one of their best experiences in term one, reminding us that 'the nature of success for the learner is measured against the usefulness of the qualification and of the skills and knowledge gained' (Calder,1993).

Looking at worst experiences reported, the realisation of their very limited IT skills was identified by four respondents. This may reflect the numbers of mature students on the courses and shows that institutions should not take IT skills for granted, but offer diagnostic sessions, followed by confidence boosting IT training sessions. Balancing college, home and work was also reported as a worst experience by four students. This highlights the necessity of strong student support being offered to help students with these issues in term one.

On the basis of our findings we would wish to argue the following. The provision of student mentors is seen as very helpful by all our respondents. Serious thought should be given to providing a student mentoring scheme on the first year of Foundation degree programmes. Additionally, an excellent support infrastructure in the first term is essential. This should be there for the whole year and not just induction. Good support must also be offered at the pre-entry stage. Student mentors play a key role in reminding their mentees of

what support is available, the 'ongoing induction' (Bousted and May, 2003). which recognises the need to treat induction as a process, not an event.

Foundation degree first year students need to feel that they are being taught by enthusiastic, knowledgeable and caring staff. The student voice shows that they see this as a key factor in their success. Managers should pick with care those teaching and managing first year Foundation degree courses. Of course this is not without its problems. We have argued elsewhere (Blythman et al 2006) that within the current pressurised environment in higher education, research continues to have more status than teaching and that even within teaching any kind of student nurturing activity has even less status in a way can be perceived as gendered. Morley (1998) points out that the 'emotional labour' of offering support and being caring often falls to women.

We argue, however, that students value the practical specialist skills available from studying a Foundation degree and they tell us that they need their confidence building from the very start. This includes pre-entry as well as induction. Extra resources devoted to the first term bring the student good benefits and are valued by them, and are likely to contribute to improvements in retention and achievement.

Additionally, large classes are seen as very daunting. Many Foundation degree students are mature returners or have come from Access or similar courses and are unused to such learning environments. Thought must be given to making these large group learning experiences a more human proposition for the student. The use of sub-groups within groups and even sub-sub groups, ensuring that all students have a structured very small group to which they belong, can make a contribution to a student sense of community. Finally, some mature students are arriving with limited IT skills and plans must be in place to identify these students early and give them the skills they require while not undermining their confidence further.

Finally, Foundation degrees have enormous potential for British higher education. They make an important contribution to widening participation, the employability agenda and are therefore of both social and economic importance. There are many ways of evaluating their impact on the UK higher education system and our view is that, as part of this evaluation, we have a responsibility to understand as many dimensions of them as possible through the students' accounts of their experience. Foundation degrees have the opportunity to offer students a unique and valued experience but we as practitioners have to continue to work to ensure this potential.

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