Students’ experiences of full-time Foundation degrees

A Report to fdf

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It is often argued that the UK has a world-class higher education sector. It is, however, an education system in which privilege is deeply embedded and which excludes many people from the benefits that are to be gained from higher education. Other organisations work to raise aspiration among young people and encourage them to engage with what higher education has to offer. *fdf* is focused upon changing the nature of what is being offered to people who are already in work - people who know that higher education will help them to get on in their careers but for whom campus-based, conventional university education just isn't an option – and individuals who want an employment-focussed alternative to the traditional university offer. For *fdf*, this represents a commitment to social justice within our higher education system.

*fdf* has recently published the findings of a number of research studies that have generated invaluable evidence of the impact of Foundation degrees. Research led by Claire Callender (Birkbeck) has confirmed that many employees take Foundation degrees because their existing qualifications are inadequate for their career aspirations and they want to get ahead. Employees report a range of benefits as a result of studying, including better performance in their job, greater job satisfaction and enhanced self-belief. Ongoing longitudinal surveys will reveal the impact of a Foundation degree on their longer-term career prospects.

This report by Jane Artess and colleagues focuses on full-time students. These students are generally younger than those who choose part-time study and many will enter the workforce for the first time on completing a Foundation degree. The research revealed that their primary motive for entering a Foundation degree was as a way of accessing employment opportunities. When compared with other higher education applicants, this group was far less likely to believe that higher education was ‘the normal thing for someone like me to do’ and this is consistent with the proven role of Foundation degrees in widening participation in higher education. One year into their course these students were very positive about their experiences.

As with any research, this study raised questions as well as providing answers. It is, for example, puzzling that a quarter of those surveyed felt that their courses did not offer ‘value for money’. Given that nearly 80% of the students felt that the tuition and learning support they had received was excellent, it seems unlikely that this reflects the quality of their experience. It is perhaps a sign of difficult times. The students who participated in this research were among the first group to pay variable tuition fees and graduated at a time of economic recession and rising graduate unemployment.
Despite such difficulties, the results of this research analysis are very encouraging and will provide a useful evidence base for those who are considering investing in Foundation degrees, whether students, employers or institutions. It is clear that their development by institutions has delivered positive levels of student satisfaction. Given the focus that there has been in recent times on student experience, this research offers some valuable insights into Foundation degree student perspectives.

As an organisation **fdf** is committed to supporting employers, apprentices and employees to gain access to the kind of higher education opportunities that they need whether this is through the Foundation degree, another work-based qualification or through short course and modular provision. Within this suite of possibilities it is important to develop coherent evidence bases upon which to evaluate the different options and it is clear from this research that the Foundation degree has successfully delivered benefit to those who have selected this route towards career development and personal fulfilment through higher education.

**Professor Derek Longhurst**

Chief Executive, **fdf**

August 2010
Executive summary

• Recent studies commissioned by fdf and others illuminate the complexity of the Foundation degree student experience and particularly the experiences of those who are studying on a part-time basis. However, rather less is known about the experiences of Foundation degree students studying on a full-time basis. In this report we seek to remedy this by using data from Futuretrack\textsuperscript{1} to illuminate the experiences of full-time Foundation degree students as they apply, enter and leave higher education.

• Most Futuretrack Foundation degree applicants decided to enter higher education because they saw it as part of their longer-term career plans and believed it would enable them to get a good job. However, they also felt that higher education was valuable in its own right, and expected the experience of being a student to provide them with opportunities for personal growth. At the end of their course, Foundation degree students described being a student as fun, but hard work. They felt that the experience of being a student had made them more employable, and were optimistic about their long-term career prospects.

• Despite describing higher education as a ‘good investment’ when they first applied, only around 40\% of Foundation degree students felt that their course was ‘good value for money’. This is particularly troubling given such positive reviews of the experience as a whole and warrants further investigation.

• Around a third of Foundation degree applicants indicated that they had chosen to study a subject because they enjoyed it, while over half applied to courses they believed would enable them to enter a particular occupation or lead to good employment opportunities in general. At the end of their course, four out of five Foundation degree students felt that subject they had studied would give them an advantage when looking for work, and over three-quarters believed the skills they had developed on their course had made them more employable.

• Most Foundation degree applicants indicated that their choice of institution was determined by their desire to study a particular course. They were much less likely than students on other courses to be influenced by an institution’s reputation or its ranking in ‘good university guides’, and when they were reflecting on their experience only half felt that being a graduate of their university would give them an advantage when looking for work.

\textsuperscript{1} Futuretrack is a longitudinal study exploring career decision-making among students in higher education.
When asked about the advice and guidance they had received before applying to higher education, Foundation degree applicants indicated that the material provided the institutions themselves was very useful, but felt that they would have benefited from more help and advice when choosing which course to study. Over a third felt that they had not received enough information about the relationship between higher education courses and employment options, and more than half were dissatisfied with the advice they had been given about the career implications of their post-16 subject choices. Foundation degree applicants found teachers and lecturers to be a useful source of advice and guidance, but only a third found their school careers advisers helpful.

Throughout their studies Foundation degree students continued to turn to tutors and course leaders for careers advice, but in their final year nearly two-thirds had not used their university careers service at all. Some indicated that they did not need to use the service because they already knew what they wanted to do after they finished their course, but others appeared not to know what the service offered or why it would be applicable to them.

At the end of their higher education experience, most Foundation degree students were still happy with their course, and two-thirds indicated that they would still choose to do the same course if they had their time again.
Introduction

Growth in the numbers of students working towards Foundation degrees suggests that the route is becoming increasingly popular with students and also with employers, many of whom actively support part-time Foundation degree students (Callender et al, 2010). Clear returns to Foundation degree learning are identified on a range of factors and in particular in relation to increasing levels of self-confidence in the work context (Yorke et al, 2010). In his review of literature relating to Foundation degrees, Harvey (2009) identified a range of evidence supporting the successful embedding of Foundation degrees as a way of achieving effective work-based learning and engaging employers; although as Yorke et al (2010) note, fully engaging employers still presents challenges.

Recent studies commissioned by fdf and others illuminate the complexity of the Foundation degree student experience and particularly the experiences of those who are studying on a part-time basis. However, rather less is known about the experiences of Foundation degree students studying on a full-time basis. In this report we seek to remedy this by using Futuretrack data to illuminate the experiences of full-time Foundation degree students as they apply, enter and leave higher education.

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2 The Futuretrack and Futuretrack: Part-time studies were commissioned by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) in order to capture the complexity of career development by examining the opinions and motivations of students as well as their view of the interventions which try to support them.
Futuretrack is a longitudinal study which explores career decision-making among students in higher education. It is funded by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU), and conducted by the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick. Its ultimate objective is to provide robust and comprehensive evidence to clarify the socio-economic and educational factors that determine career choices and outcomes.

In order to explore how respondents are accessing careers information and making sense of the relationship between higher education and career opportunities students are surveyed at four key stages:

1. Summer 2006 (prior to higher education entry)
2. Summer 2007 (one year on)
3. Autumn 2009 (when most will have completed their undergraduate programme of study)
4. Winter 2011/12 (when many will have entered the labour market)

In 2006 the research team aimed to conduct a census of the population (as opposed to starting out by selecting a sample); consequently all full-time 2006 UCAS applicants were invited to complete the first survey between May and December 2006. As the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) is able to contact the majority of higher education applicants by email, an email containing a personal link to the online questionnaire was sent from UCAS on behalf of the research team.

Between June and December 2007 Stage 1 respondents who had indicated a willingness to participate in future rounds of data collection were re-contacted and invited to complete the Stage 2 questionnaire. New entrants were also recruited via higher education institutions and the Futuretrack websites. These entrants were new to the survey, but had applied to UCAS in 2006.

At the end of January 2009 Stage 2 respondents who had indicated a willingness to participate in future rounds of data collection were re-contacted and invited to complete the Stage 3 questionnaire. New entrants were again recruited via higher education institutions and the Futuretrack websites. Researchers were also able to contact eligible students through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) via the 2009 National Student Survey (NSS). These entrants were new to the survey, but had applied to UCAS in 2006.
It was understood that the reliance on web-based collection methods might lead to significant response bias, but the potential to compare response with the full population profile in terms of most key variables – age, educational and social background, ethnicity, regional location – meant that it was possible to identify biases, to weight data to take account of them, and to consider a range of strategies to ‘rebalance’ the survey population.

This report examines the experiences of those students who applied through UCAS for a place on a Foundation degree course. Where appropriate it also compares their experiences to those of the Futuretrack cohort as a whole.

- **Stage 1** is comprised of 3,681 applicants who were accepted to study full-time in higher education in the 2006 UCAS application round and said they planned to study for a Foundation degree.

- **Stage 2** is comprised of 1,279 applicants who said that they started a Foundation degree in 2006 and were currently in higher education.

- **Stage 3** is comprised of 237 applicants who were in their final year in higher education and who said at Stage 1 that they planned to start a Foundation degree in 2006 and were accepted to enter higher education or who said in Stage 2 that they started a Foundation degree in 2006 and were currently in higher education.

The greatest challenge facing the research team is respondent retention and considerable resources are being invested in this. As a longitudinal study Futuretrack is dependent on the continued participation of the original cohort (although additional students were invited to join at later stages). Consequently it is necessary to maintain contact with participants over a long period of time, something that could not be done without the support of the wider higher education community.

The research team is particularly grateful for the support of colleagues at the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), Universities UK (UUK), the National Union of Students (NUS), the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), and the national Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
Foundation degree Students at Stage 1:
Applying to Higher Education

This section refers to the 3,681 applicants who said they planned to study for a Foundation degree when they were accepted onto a full-time higher education course in the 2006 UCAS application round. At Stage 1 around 4% of the Futuretrack population had applied to study for a Foundation degree.

Futuretrack Foundation degree applicants

When they applied to higher education, 36% of Foundation degree applicants were aged 18 or under, 30% were aged 19-20, 16% were aged 21-24, and 18% were aged 25 and over. Just over half (51%) were men. Around a quarter (26%) came from a managerial/professional background, while around 1 in 5 (22%) were from a routine/manual occupational background. Over half (54%) of applicants applying for Foundation degree courses were entering higher education with non-standard qualifications (compared to 35% of all Futuretrack applicants). Conversely, only 6% of Foundation degree applicants entered higher education with over 360 UCAS tariff points (compared with 25% of all Futuretrack applicants).

Why did Foundation Degree applicants decide to enter higher education?

Over half (55%) of Futuretrack Foundation degree applicants (and 55% of the Futuretrack population as a whole) indicated that the main reason they decided to apply to higher education was because they felt it was part of their longer-term career plans or would enable them to get a good job (Figure 1.1). This suggests that Foundation degree applicants are primarily looking at higher education as a way of accessing employment opportunities. It is also consistent with findings from previous studies, which suggest that most Foundation degree students choose to enter higher education in order to enhance their career prospects (Greenwood and Little, 2008; Foundation Direct, 2008).

When asked to consider all the influences that had prompted them to apply to higher education, 73% said that they saw higher education as part of their longer-term career plans and 73% felt that it would enable them to get a good job. Around two-thirds (67%) of Foundation degree applicants reported that they wanted to study a particular course or subject, while around three in five (58%) thought participating in higher education would help them to realise their potential.

Around one in five (21%) indicated that their parents encouraged them to apply to enter higher education, compared to around one in three (31%) of the Futuretrack cohort as a whole. Foundation degree applicants were less likely than other applicants to claim that entering higher education was ‘the normal thing to do for someone like me’ (23% compared to 36%). Futuretrack Foundation degree applicants were much more likely than other applicants to be applying to higher
Students’ experiences of full-time Foundation degrees

education with non-standard educational qualifications, and Tierney and Slack (2005: 376) have suggested that Foundation degrees are particularly attractive to those lacking formal qualifications ‘because they place emphasis on work-based learning blended with conventional academic study’. Their non-traditional educational background may, in part, explain why Foundation degree applicants were less likely than other applicants to think applying to higher education was a ‘normal’ thing for them to do.

Very few full-time Foundation degree applicants (only 5%) applied to higher education because they had been encouraged to do so by their employer. In comparison, research investigating the experiences of part-time Foundation degree students suggests that, for this group, employers play a much more important role in prompting a students’ entry to higher education, with more than a third reporting that they first started thinking about starting a course after being encouraged to do so by their employer (Callender et al, 2010).

Figure 1.1 Why did Foundation degree applicants decide to enter higher education?

Students who indicated that they had ‘other’ reasons for applying to higher education were given an opportunity to explain these reasons in more detail. Some were hoping to benefit from the wider university experience which they felt would ‘broaden their horizons’.
Students’ experiences of full-time Foundation degrees

‘[I want to] broaden my career horizons, test my learning capabilities, and to try a new experience.’

‘[I want to] make the best career (I can) in a particular subject, to be a more cultured person [and] to be able to increase my point of view and increase my knowledge.’

Others cited their love of a particular subject.

‘I am really passionate about the courses I am applying for.’

For students who were hoping to return to education after having taken a break, the timing of their decision to apply to higher education was particularly important.

‘After a break in education and working for 6 years, I have found I cannot achieve much more in my current job. I have always wanted to return to university to complete my degree, and now have the opportunity… I am now more secure financially.’

The value of higher education

This section looks at applicants’ attitudes towards higher education policy and the value of higher education. Foundation degree applicants were extremely positive about higher education; over 90% agreed that it is valuable in its own right, not just as preparation for employment (Figure 1.2). Over 90% felt higher education qualifications were a good investment, and around 70% agreed that a degree is essential for most good jobs. Over 80% indicated that they saw their time in higher education as an opportunity to clarify their career options, and over 90% believed that being a student would provide them with opportunities for personal growth. Foundation degree applicants were only slightly more likely than other full-time applicants to worry about that they would find the level of work difficult (47% of Foundation degree applicants were worried about this, compared to 45% of the Futuretrack population as a whole).

Over half (56%) of Foundation degree applicants (and 56% of the Futuretrack population as a whole) agreed that all institutions should charge the same annual fees, but a significant minority (around one in five) disagreed with this assertion.

Figure 1.2 How did Foundation degree students view higher education before they applied?

- An HE qualification is a good investment
- Being an HE student provides opportunities for personal growth and independence
- Education is valuable in its own right, not just as preparation for employment
- For most good jobs a degree is essential
- I see my time in HE as the opportunity to clarify my career options
- All universities should charge the same annual fees
- I worry that I will find HE work difficult

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Strongly agree Agree Not sure Disagree Strongly disagree
What determined their choice of course?

Nearly one in five (18%) of Foundation degree applicants were applying to study creative arts and design, while around one in eight (12%) Foundation degree applicants had applied to study a biological or veterinary science (Figure 1.3). Around one in ten (11%) were hoping to study engineering and technology, and 9% were applying to study business and administration.

When asked what determined their choice of course, around a third (34%) of Foundation degree students indicated that the main reason they were applying to a particular course was because they enjoyed studying the subject (Figure 1.4). Around one in five (19%) stated that they needed to complete the course in order to enter their chosen occupation, while around one in eight (14%) had chosen a course they felt would lead to good employment opportunities in general. These findings are consistent with the findings for the Futuretrack population as a whole.

Figure 1.3 What subjects did Foundation degree applicants want to study?
In a previous study, researchers suggested that younger Foundation degree students were more likely to choose a course because they were interested in the subject, while mature students were more likely to say that they were doing a course because they needed the qualification to enter a particular occupation (Foundation Direct, 2008). This is replicated in the Futuretrack survey, where applicants aged 26 and over were much less likely than students aged 18 and under to have applied for a course because they enjoyed the subject (18% compared to 40%), and much more likely to have applied for a course which would enable them to enter their chosen occupation (32% compared to 14%).

Applicants were also asked if they had any other reasons for choosing a particular course. Around three-quarters (75%) of Foundation degree students indicated that they were interested in the content of the course, and 72% said they enjoyed the subject. Foundation degree students were less likely than other Futuretrack students to be applying to courses because they offered participants the opportunity to spend time abroad (7% compared to 14%). They were also less likely than other students to indicate that they had chosen to study a particular course because they had previously secured good grades in subjects relating to that course (26% compared to 41%).

**Figure 1.4 Why did Foundation degree students choose a particular course of study?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>All reasons</th>
<th>Main reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy studying the subject</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I am interested in the content of the course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I need to complete this course to enter a particular occupation</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think it will lead to good employment opportunities in general</td>
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<tr>
<td>It will enable me to qualify for another course</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is a modular course and enables me to keep a range of options open</td>
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<tr>
<td>I get good grades in subjects related to this course</td>
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<tr>
<td>I had difficulty deciding and it seemed like a reasonable option</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I was advised that the course would be appropriate for me</td>
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<tr>
<td>It includes the opportunity to spend part of the course abroad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</table>

**What determined their choice of institution?**

Most Foundation degree applicants (47%) applied to a new (post-1992) university, while 8% applied to a Russell Group university and 18% applied to another old (pre-1992) institution. The remaining 28% had applied to ‘other higher education institution’. 
Sixty per cent of Foundation degree students (and 58% of the Futuretrack population as a whole) indicated that their choice of institution was determined by their desire to study a particular course (Figure 1.5). As a group, Foundation degree students were much less likely than other students to be influenced by an institution’s reputation for research or teaching, and only around a third (34%) indicated that their choice was determined by the institution’s reputation more generally. Similarly, Foundation degree students were also less likely than other students to refer to have based their decision on the recommendation of a ‘good universities’ guide or league table.

Many students cited the institution’s location as playing an important role in their decision making, but for different reasons. Foundation degree students were more likely than other students to have applied to an institution because it would enable them to continue living at home (34% compared to 23%), but less likely to have applied to an institution because it was in an attractive or interesting place (29% compared to 43%). Older students were also more likely than younger students to want to live at home, with 52% of Foundation degree students aged 26 and over indicating that this determined their choice of institution compared to around a third (33%) of students aged 18 and under.

**Figure 1.5 Why did students choose to study at a given institution?**
Future Plans

In order to explore the clarity of their long-term career plans applicants were asked to place themselves on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 = ‘I have a clear idea about the occupation I eventually want to enter and the qualifications required to do so;’ and 7 = ‘I have no idea what I will do after I complete the course I have applied for.’

Only around a third indicated that they had a clear idea as to what they were planning to do in the future, but 76% of Foundation degree applicants (and 72% of all Futuretrack applicants) placed themselves between 1 and 3 on the scale, which suggests they had some idea as to what they would like to do once they completed their degree (Figure 1.6). As in the 2008 Futuretrack report,

‘This distribution of responses illustrates a bias towards the ‘instrumental’ rather than the ‘drifter’ end of the scale (Purcell and Pitcher 1996), and may well reflect the increased awareness of higher education and the labour force as markets within which participants compete – and where education is seen as an investment by students and their families who have increasingly been required to contribute to its cost’ (Purcell et al, 2008).

Figure 1.6 Did applicants have a clear idea as to what they wanted to do after they finished their course?

Foundation degree students and pre-higher education advice and guidance

Sixty two per cent of Foundation degree applicants (and 65% of all Futuretrack applicants) felt that they were given enough, or even too much, information about the range of higher education courses that were available to them, and around half (51%) felt they were given enough information about the alternatives to higher education (Figure 1.7).
However, 52% of Foundation degree applicants indicated that they did not receive enough (if any) information about the career implications of their post-16 subject choices, and they were more likely than other applicants to have received none at all (26% compared to 19%). Half (50%) felt that they had not received enough information about the relationship between higher education courses and employment options, and 56% indicated that they would have preferred more in the way of individual careers guidance.

It is worth noting that applicants aged 26 and over were less likely than those aged 18 and under to have been satisfied with the amount of careers guidance they received. Less than half (44%) of the Foundation degree applicants aged 26 and over indicated that they had benefited from classroom-based careers guidance (compared to 81% of the applicants aged 18 and under), which may indicate that mature students are less able to access careers information than those who are continuing their education straight from school. Similarly, only 23% of applicants aged 26 and over felt that they had received enough information about their career implications of their post-16 subject choices, which may have contributed to their failure to access higher education when they were a school leaver themselves (Purcell et al, 2008). This is consistent with findings from the 2008 Foundation Direct study, which found that school leavers were more likely to be directed to Foundation degree courses by teachers, university open days and careers fairs, while mature students were more likely to have to rely on their own research or to talk to an employer.

**Figure 1.7 How much pre-higher education information and guidance did Foundation degree students have?**
Accessing careers information

Most Foundation degree applicants felt they were able to access all the information they needed before applying to higher education, and over 80% found the UCAS website easy to use (Figure 1.8). Applicants found the material provided by the institutions themselves to be particularly useful, with 86% indicating that they found university websites and prospectuses helpful. Nearly 60% felt that their teachers or lecturers had been very helpful, but only a third (32%) found the careers guidance provided at their school useful. Around one in four (25%) indicated that they found it difficult to choose a course, and 28% felt that they would have benefited from more help and advice when choosing which course to study. Overall, although most applicants managed to negotiate the information themselves, only around a third (31%) felt that they had received really excellent careers guidance.

Figure 1.8 What did Foundation degree students think about the various sources of support and guidance available to them?

When they first applied, how were Foundation degree students planning to fund their studies?

In 2004 The Higher Education Act ushered in a new system of variable tuition fees which would enable institutions to set their own fees, allowing them to charge students up to £3,000 a year. Instead of paying these fees upfront, students would be entitled to borrow the money from the Student Loans Company and pay it back at a later date. Variable tuition fees were introduced from 2006, which meant that Futuretrack students were the first cohort to be affected by them.
Most Foundation degree students (and other full-time students) expected to fund their studies by taking out a student loan from Student Loan Company Limited (Figure 1.9). Around half (53%) of all Foundation degree students expected to fund their full-time studies by working during term-time, but only a third (33%) of Foundation degree students aged 26 and over planned to work during the university vacation (compared to 56% of all other Foundation degree students).

Students aged 18 and under were much more likely than older students to be funding their studies by way of a non-repayable loan from a family member. Thirty per cent of students aged 18 and under expected a non-repayable contribution from a family member, compared to 22% of students aged 19-20, 19% of students aged 21-24, and only 11% of students aged 26 and over.

Figure 1.9 When they first applied, how were students planning to fund their studies?

The introduction of student loans and top up fees has not necessarily dissuaded applicants from entering higher education (Maringe et al., 2009), but financial constraints may play role in determining where they choose to apply, particularly if the applicant is from a lower income family (Callender and Jackson, 2008).

Comments made by Foundation degree students who participated in the Futuretrack study suggest that applicants were very aware of the financial implications of their choice when they decided to enter higher education.

‘I think that top-up fees are unfair as they stop a lot of people going into higher education as it will take them at least 20 years to pay, which means they have to put off having a family, buying a house and/or a car. I believe that it is crippling this generation who have to have a degree for them to get anywhere in this world.’
On a more practical note, 2006 applicants felt the process of accessing funding lacked clarity, and that students could be better advised as to the kinds of funding that might be available to them. They also struggled with the actual process of applying for funding and paying their fees.

‘It is difficult to be aware of how to pay for your university fees as there doesn’t appear to be a clear guide, but also things have changed this year which adds to the confusion.’

‘I did not have enough information about funding; I was told that my course would be supported – but it is not, therefore I am struggling financially.’

‘I find the application for the student loans the hardest to apply for as I have had the least amount of information about them.’
• Foundation degree applicants decided to enter higher education because they saw it as part of their longer-term career plans and believed it would enable them to get a good job.

• Foundation degree applicants were less likely than other students to report that their parents encouraged them to apply to higher education, and less likely to claim that entering higher education was 'the normal thing to do for someone like me'.

• In contrast to part-time Foundation degree applicants, few full-time Foundation degree applicants applied to higher education because they have been encouraged to do so by their employer.

• Foundation degree applicants were extremely positive about higher education, and described it as a 'good investment'. They felt it was valuable in its own right, and that a higher qualification was essential for most good jobs.

• Foundation degree applicants aged 26 and over were much less likely than applicants aged 18 and under to have applied to a course because they enjoyed the subject, and much more likely to have applied for a course which would enable them to enter their chosen occupation.

• Most Foundation degree applicants indicated that their choice of institution was determined by their desire to study a particular course. They were much less likely than students on other courses to be influenced by an institution's reputation, and more likely to have chosen an institution which would allow them to continue living at home.

• Most Foundation degree applicants felt that they were given enough information about the range of higher education available to them. However, over half indicated that they did not receive enough information about the career implications of their post-16 subject choices, and they were more likely than students applying for other course to have received no advice at all.

• Most Foundation degree applicants expected to fund their study by taking out a loan from Student Loan Company Limited, and around half planned to work full-time during term-time.
This chapter refers to the 1,279 applicants who responded to the second stage of the Futuretrack study when they were one year into their course. At Stage 2 around 4% of the Futuretrack population were studying for a Foundation degree.

**Teaching and Learning**

One year into their course students were asked to reflect on their day-to-day experience of being a student. They were invited to evaluate the tuition and learning support they received, and to describe the amount of work they were required to do for their course.

In general Foundation degree students were very positive about their experience of higher education. Most felt that they had sufficient access to library and web-based facilities, and nearly two-thirds agreed that they were given good feedback on their progress (Figure 2.1). Around 90% of Foundation degree students felt that they had a positive experience at their university or college, and over three-quarters (77%) agreed that the tuition and learning support they received on their course was excellent. This feedback is consistent with the findings of previous studies, which found that most Foundation degree students are satisfied with the quality of their course, and positive about their overall learning experience (Foundation Direct, 2008; Greenwood & Little, 2008).

It is worth noting that around one in four (26%) Foundation degree students did not feel that their course offered good value for money (compared to around 1 in 5 of the Futuretrack population as a whole). The concept of ‘value for money’ requires further investigation because it does not appear to reflect either the high levels of student satisfaction with higher education in general or with Foundation degrees in particular. Over 70% of Foundation degree applicants indicated that they felt higher education was a ‘good investment’ when they first applied, despite knowing that they would have to borrow a lot of money in order to cover the costs, so this dissatisfaction with the return on their investment must be a cause for concern. There are potentially many reasons why this might be found amongst Foundation degree students: firstly, it might be a response to the relative uncertainty about the longer term (employment) outcomes that as graduates, students might be able to expect; this might have been exacerbated by the recession. Secondly the fee arrangements put in place at the start of 2006 were new and for those ‘first generation’ Foundation degree students this may have added to the uncertainty about how loans would be repaid in light of lack of confidence about employment outcomes. However, this issue does not appear to affect only Foundation degree students and in order to make a more accurate interpretation of this finding, further research (including qualitative data collection) is recommended.
To what extent did Foundation degree students agree with the following statements about their experience of the academic year 2006/7?

- Being a student at the university or college where I studied was a positive experience
- I had sufficient access to web-based facilities
- On the whole, the tuition and learning support I received on my course were excellent
- My course was good value for money
- I was given good feedback on my progress
- Library resources were inadequate
- The amount of work I had to complete on my course was excessive
- The information and support available for new students at my university/college were not very good

Workload

Around a third (34%) of Foundation degree students felt that the amount of work they had to complete was excessive (Figure 2.1), while nearly half (48%) found that they were required to work harder than they had expected (Figure 2.2). These figures are slightly higher than in previous studies, which indicated that while many Foundation degree students found their studies more demanding than they had anticipated, at least half found the workload to be much as they had expected (Foundation Direct, 2008).

Did Foundation degree students find they had to work harder than they had expected?

- I was required to work harder than I expected
- The workload was much as I had expected
- I was required to work much less than I had expected
- Other
For the majority of Foundation degree students, as for most Futuretrack students, all the formal coursework took place on campus. Previous research has suggested that Foundation degree students typically undertake more than 5 hours of independent study per week, and often spend up to two or three days a week studying privately (Foundation Direct, 2008; Greenwood and Little, 2008). The information gathered by the Futuretrack research team is consistent with these findings, with around three-quarters (75%) of Foundation degree students indicating that they spend more than 5 hours a week studying for their course outside their timetabled lessons (Figure 2.3). Nearly half (48%) reported that they undertook between 6 and 15 hours of private study every week, while around one in eight (13%) committed to more than 20 hours of independent study.

Figure 2.3 How many hours a week did Foundation degree students spend in lessons and private study?

Accommodation

Futuretrack also examines students’ experiences of some of the non-academic aspects of higher education, such as travel and accommodation. This section explores where Foundation degree students lived during their course and how far they had to travel to attend lessons or extra-curricular activities on their university or college campus. It also asks what mode of transport Foundation degree students tended to use when they made this journey.

As a cohort, most Futuretrack students tended to live in traditional student halls of residence or other university-owned accommodation during their first year, but Foundation degree students were more likely to live at home with their family or partner (Figure 2.4). Most of the Foundation degree students who responded to the Stage 2 survey were under 25 years old, and nearly two-thirds were under 20, so age is unlikely to be the only factor at play here. Yorke and Longden (2008) warned that ‘commuter’ students, or those who do not live in university accommodation, can feel isolated as they find it more difficult than resident students to develop networks of support within the institution. It might be worth exploring the reasons students give for choosing to live at home in more detail, as it may have implications for the satisfaction and even retention of Foundation degree students.
Where did Foundation degree students live during the first year of their course?

Travel

Around 60% of Foundation degree students lived less than 30 minutes away from their university or college, compared to just over 70% of the Futuretrack population as a whole (Figure 2.5). Foundation degree students were less likely than other Futuretrack students to walk to university, and nearly two-thirds (65%) travelled to university by car or public transport (Figure 2.6). This may indicate that Foundation degree students lived further away from their university/college than other Futuretrack students, but were able to cover the distance in a shorter period of time because they drove or caught the bus. In the Foundation Direct study, researchers estimated that most Foundation degree students travelled between 1 and 10 miles, with around a third undertaking journeys of more than 11 miles (Foundation Direct, 2008).

How long did it take Foundation degree students to travel from home to university/college?

How did Foundation degree students usually travel to university/college?
Funding

Over 50% of Foundation degree students were funding their studies by means of a statutory financial support maintenance and/or tuition loan (Figure 2.7). Around a third (33%) used their personal savings to fund their studies, but few full-time Foundation degree students received financial support from an employer. This is in contrast to part-time Foundation degree students, who often receive a contribution from their employer towards their tuition fees (Callender et al, 2010; Yorke and Longden, 2010).

Students aged 26 and over were more likely than younger students to be in receipt of a grant from their local authority or higher education institution, and less likely to be funding their studies with a tuition or maintenance loan. As was indicated at Stage 1, older students were less likely than younger students to be funding their studies with a contribution from their family or partner.

Figure 2.7 How did Foundation degree students fund their studies?

- Statutory financial support maintenance loan: 56.4%
- Statutory financial support tuition loan: 54.4%
- Statutory financial support grants: 48.5%
- Earnings from vacation work: 33.9%
- Personal savings: 33.4%
- Earnings from work during term: 32.0%
- Grant/bursary from your university/college: 27.1%
- Other forms of borrowing: 20.9%
- Non-repayable contribution from family/partner: 20.0%
- Repayable contribution from family/partner: 7.5%
- Other: 4.9%
- Non-statutory grants from local authority: 4.8%
- Hardship or access funds: 3.4%
- Personal trust fund/income from investments: 2.1%
- Organisational/employer grant: 1.5%
Accessing careers information and guidance

This section explores how Foundation degree students accessed careers information during their first year of higher education.

Around one in four (23%) Foundation degree students attended a Careers Service event which was aimed at first years, but only one in ten (11%) attended a careers event which was aimed at the students who were doing their course (Figure 2.8). Around 20% obtained careers advice from family or friends, but few met with a Careers Services adviser or discussed their options with the Careers Service by email or telephone. Around one in seven (14%) visited the Careers Services website. When asked to comment further, many students indicated that they had discussed their career plans with their tutor or course leader. This anecdotal evidence is consistent with the findings of a previous investigation into the guidance needs of Foundation degree students, which found that around 45% of the students they interviewed had discussed their career options with their tutors, while around a third had used the careers service at the institution at which they were studying (Jackson and Tunnah, 2005).

It is worth noting that 41% of Foundation degree students indicated that they did not take advantage of any of the careers information or guidance opportunities that were available to them.

Figure 2.8 What kinds of careers information did Foundation degree students access?
Accessing the Careers Service

Most Foundation degree students (70%) did not visit the Careers Service in their first year (figure 2.9). Of those students who did, the majority only visited it once or twice. Foundation degree students were more likely than other students to indicate that they were unaware of their Careers Service (28% of Foundation degree students were unaware of the service compared to only 18% of the Futuretrack population as a whole). Students would not have accessed the Careers Service if they were unaware of the service, but they might also have thought they were still too early in their university to need careers advice at all. It may be useful to determine whether or not this is really the case, as Blasko (2002) suggests that students who engage with career planning earlier in their university careers are more likely to achieve success in the labour market when they graduate.

Figure 2.9 How many times did Foundation degree students visit their Careers Service in their first year?

Future Career Plans

One year into their course Futuretrack students were asked what they were planning to do after they completed their degree, and whether they were considering any further study.

Around 30% of Foundation degree students stated that they were not considering any further study and did not plan to take a gap year, so it is assumed that these students were hoping to go straight into employment as soon as they finished their course (Figure 2.10). Foundation degree students were less likely than other students to be planning to take a gap year to travel after they completed their degree (17% compared to 23%). However, many were considering further study of some kind, most commonly a taught Masters degree course or other training course (as opposed to a research degree or professional qualification). This is again consistent with the findings of Jackson and Tunnah’s 2005 survey for AGCAS, which reported that over 80% of the students interviewed said that they wanted to carry on studying after they had completed their Foundation degree.
Figure 2.10  

**What were Stage 2 Futuretrack Foundation degree students planning to do at the end of their course?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Foundation degree students</th>
<th>All Futuretrack students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrol on a taught Master degree postgraduate course</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete other education/training course</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take a gap year to travel</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study for another professional qualification</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrol on a PGCE</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply to do a research degree</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply for a postgraduate course outside UK</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Clarity of Career Plans**

Twenty six per cent of Foundation degree students felt that their experience in higher education had reinforced their original career plans, while around a third (30%) felt that they much clearer idea about their career plans after a year in higher education than they had done when they first applied. Only 6% indicated that their ideas about their career had changed completely, and 29% felt that their ideas were no more or less clear than they had been before.

As at Stage 1, students who responded to the Stage 2 questionnaire were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1-7 where 1 indicated that ‘in terms of long-term career planning I have a clear idea about what I want to do’ and 7 indicated that they had ‘no idea what I want to do’ (Figure 2.11). When they first applied to higher education around three-quarters of Foundation degree students felt that they had some idea about the occupation they wanted to enter once they completed their degree (Figure 1.6). One year on, the proportion of Foundation degree students who had a clear idea about their future occupation was still around 70%, but only 20% considered themselves to have a ‘clear’ idea about their future (compared to 31% at Stage 1).
Figure 2.11  One year into their course, did Foundation degree students have a clear idea as to what they wanted to do after they finished their course?
Student Experience of Higher Education: Key findings

• One year into their studies, Foundation degree students were positive about their experience of higher education, and felt the tuition and learning support they had received was excellent. Despite this, only 53% felt their course was good value for money.

• Most Futuretrack students tended to live in traditional student halls of residence or other university-owned accommodation during their first year, but Foundation degree students were more likely to live at home with their family or partner.

• Foundation degree students were less likely than other Futuretrack students to walk to university, and nearly two-thirds travelled to university by car or public transport. This may indicate that Foundation degree students lived further away from their university/college than other students, but were able to cover the distance in a shorter period of time because they drove or caught the bus.

• Most Foundation degree students did not visit the Careers Service in their first year. Of those who did, the majority only visited it once or twice.

• When asked about their plans for the future, around a quarter indicated that their experience in higher education had reinforced their original career plans, while around a third felt that they had a much clearer idea now than they had when they first applied.
Foundation degree Students at Stage 3:
Reflecting on Higher Education

This section refers to 237 Foundation degree students who started their degree in 2006 and were coming towards the end of their time in higher education. In 2009 students were asked to reflect on their time in higher education and consider whether they would still choose to study the same course again. They were also asked to outline their future plans with regard to further study and employment, and to evaluate the careers information they had used when making their career plans.

If students were given their time in higher education again, would they still choose to study the same course?

At the end of their higher education experience, most students were still happy with their choice of course, with around two-thirds of Foundation degree students (and 69% of all Futuretrack students) indicating that they would still choose to do the same course if they were given their time again (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 If Foundation degree students were starting again, would they still choose to do the same course?
Foundation degree students who indicated that they would choose to do a different course in a similar area often felt that the course they had chosen had not lived up to their expectations with regard to content or delivery.

‘[I] would choose a similar course, but not this one. The modules in the first year were not very strong.’

‘[I] would choose a similar course, but not this one. I feel my course doesn’t provide enough face-to-face learning.’

‘[I] should have done a specific physical geography degree rather than combining all aspects of geography.’

Some indicated that, with the benefit of hindsight, they would probably have chosen to do something completely different because the degree they had completed had not provided them with the experience or knowledge they were looking for.

‘[I would choose] something to do with analysing media and advertising. It interests me, and would allow me to use my written and presentation skills. The problem with my course (applied computing) is that it is far too difficult for me, and was very different from ICT (which I excelled in at AVCE level). Right now I just want to get out alive, find a job and get some stability.’

Others would have chosen a course which would make them more employable.

‘[I would choose a more computer-orientated course as there would be more chance of gaining employment at the end.’

‘[I would choose to study] catering – realised I have skills in this area, and more likely to find work.’

‘[I] would choose something more academic and useful as a career.’

Nevertheless, most Foundation degree students were satisfied with their experience, and would still apply to do the same course again.

**Future Plans**

As at Stages 1 and 2, students who responded to the Stage 3 questionnaire were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1-7 where 1 indicated that ‘in terms of long-term career planning I have a clear idea about what I want to do’ and 7 indicated that they had ‘no idea what I want to do’ (Figure 3.2).

At all three stages around 70-75% of Foundation degree students (and 70% of all Futuretrack students) placed themselves between 1 and 3 on the scale, which suggests that most had some idea as to what they would like to do next throughout the duration of their course (Figure 3.2). However, as they approached the end of their university career, only around a quarter of Foundation degree students felt that they had a clear idea as to what they wanted to do next, compared to over 30% at Stage 1. When students were then asked if their career plans had changed since the end of their first year in higher education, over 35% felt they had a ‘much clearer idea’ as to what they wanted to do in the future. Fourteen per cent indicated that their experience of higher education had reinforced their original career plans, and 18% felt that their ideas about their career were ‘less clear than before’. These findings illustrate the complexity of career decision making, and it would be interesting to explore this issue further in order to examine in more detail how the experience of higher education influences students’ professional ambitions and career choices. While the figures suggest a certain level of consistency in the proportion of Foundation degree students who have clear idea about their future plans, they do not indicate whether the plans themselves have changed as a result of students’ experience in higher education.
Students’ experiences of full-time Foundation degrees

Figure 3.2 Did Foundation degree students have a clear idea as to what they wanted to do next?

What did students plan to do after they graduated?

Most Foundation degree students planned to find a job after they graduated; with 45% indicating that they hoped to obtain employment related to their longer-term career plans (Figure 3.3). Seventeen per cent sought temporary employment, while 5% were planning to become self-employed. Sixty per cent of Foundation degree students (and 59% of all Futuretrack students) were confident that they would achieve their chosen objective in the year after the graduated. This is perhaps surprisingly positive given the economic situation in 2009, but follow-up focus groups suggest that this optimism was tempered by realism, and most students acknowledged that it was more difficult for them to find suitable employment than it had been for previous cohorts (Atfield et al., 2010).

Figure 3.3 What did final year students plan to do after they graduated?

- Other employment related to longer-term career plans
- Temporary employment while considering longer-term plans
- Travel or take time out
- Full-time postgraduate degree course
- Other
- Become self-employed
- Temporary employment while paying off debt
- Don’t know
- Undertake vocational training

- Foundation degree students
- All futuretrack students
Further study

Thirty one per cent of Foundation degree students (and 34% of all Futuretrack students) planned to go onto some kind of further study, with 21% applying for a full-time course and 9% applying for a part-time course. Around one in ten (11%) Foundation degree students planned to secure a job which included some kind of professional training. Of those students who hoped to go onto further study, around a third (33%) planned to do a postgraduate teaching certificate, and around a quarter (26%) planned to study for a taught Masters degree (Figure 3.4). Foundation degree students were much less likely than other students to be planning to go on to study for a taught Masters degree at this stage. This may be because they would need to complete their undergraduate studies first, but it could just be that Foundation degree students are not interested in studying a Masters degree course in general.

Figure 3.4 What kinds of further study did students plan to go onto?

As at Stage 1, most students believed that holding another qualification would improve their employment prospects, with nearly two-thirds (64%) reporting that they were considering further study because they thought it would enable them to access better career opportunities (figure 3.5). Although Foundation degree students were less likely than other students to believe that further study was essential for their future career, which may be due to the more vocational nature of the course they studied for their first degree. Over 40% were interested in the course in its own right, and over a third (34%) wanted to study their subject to a higher level. It would be interesting to investigate this further in order to explore the extent to which this interest in studying a subject in its own right is a consequence of the student’s experience of higher education more generally.

Most Foundation degree students (76%) planned to fund their further study by taking out a loan with Student Loan Company Limited. Around a third (29%) anticipated securing a postgraduate award or bursary, 37% planned to draw on their private funds, and 7% hoped to take out a Career Development Loan. Fifty per cent planned to fund their studies through paid work.
Employment

At the time of the Stage 3 survey (2009) 42% of Foundation degree students (and 51% of all Futuretrack students) had started searching for jobs and internships (this did not include students who were searching for short-term, vacation employment). Of those who had started looking for jobs, 54% had applied for a job related to their longer-term career plans, and 15% had applied for jobs that were not related to their longer-term career plans. Of those students who had started looking for jobs, 29% had accepted a job related to their longer-term career plans. Around a third (34%) had been offered (and were planning to accept) a job that was not related to their longer-term career plans. However, in the medium to long term, most Foundation degree students (78%) intended to secure a job that was related to their course.

Around 1 in 8 (13%) Foundation degree students had applied for unpaid work in order to gain experience in their chosen profession, and just over a quarter (27%) had considered applying for an unpaid role in the future. Over a third (35%) said that they would like to apply for unpaid roles but could not afford to do so, while 21% indicated they were not at all interested in securing an unpaid job. This suggests that most Foundation degree students recognise the value of gaining work experience through unpaid work, but that many simply cannot afford to work without pay, particularly when they may already have incurred debts while studying.
When Foundation degree students were searching for jobs they most commonly referred to prospective employers’ websites (64%), the local press (59%), and publications and websites that were dedicated to advertising graduate vacancies (57%) (figure 3.6). The most useful vacancy sources were prospective employers’ websites (63%), other internet vacancy sites (48%), graduate vacancy publications and websites (47%), and independent employment agencies and their websites (47%). Only around a third (34%) thought that their university careers service was a useful source of job vacancies, and half (50%) had not searched for jobs through the service at all. Foundation degree students were slightly more likely than other students to have searched for jobs in a Job Centre, and less likely to have referred to graduate vacancy publications or websites.

Figure 3.6 Where did Foundation degree students look for jobs, and how useful did they find these sources?
When asked what they were looking for in a job, the top four attributes cited by Foundation degree students were: flexibility for work-life balance (89%); long-term security (87%); opportunities for promotion (86%); and opportunities for further training (85%) (figure 3.7). Nearly 40% felt that it was very important that their job gave them opportunities for promotion, but only around a quarter (28%) felt as strongly about the need for a competitive salary. Less than half were looking for opportunities to work internationally, with around 42% indicating that this was not at all important to them.

**Figure 3.7 What did Foundation degree students look for in a job?**

Most students were looking for work in the South of England, although Foundation degree students were less likely than other students to be looking for jobs in London (figure 3.8). Quite a few students were interested in working abroad, with around 16% indicating that they would like to work in another EU country, while 1 in 5 (19%) Foundation degree students (and 22% of all Futuretrack students) would like to work overseas.

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Percentage of foundation degree students who gave this attribute a rating of 1, 2, or 3 on a 7 point scale where 1 = ‘very important’ and 7 = ‘unimportant’.
Sixty-one per cent of Foundation degree students (and 67% of all Futuretrack students) indicated that they would prefer to work in their home region, while around half (52%) were hoping to secure a job in the area they were studying in (Figure 3.9). Foundation degree students were more likely than other students to indicate that they needed to consider the needs of their family when looking for work (36% compared to 28%). Only around a quarter had based their decision on the employment opportunities available for people with their qualifications (27%) or the desire to secure a specific employment opportunity in that area (23%). It is interesting to note that, even during a recession, students were still more likely to use personal rather than occupational criteria to determine where they would like to work. It would be useful to explore this decision-making in more detail, as careers advisers often stress how important it is for students to be mobile if they are to secure their ideal role, particularly when competition for jobs is fierce (Jensen and Higgins, 2009).
However, in the long term most students indicated that they would be willing to consider moving a certain distance for work. Over a third (36%) were prepared to work abroad or anywhere in the UK, and a quarter (25%) would consider moving within their region (Figure 3.10).

**Figure 3.9 What reasons did students give for their preferred location?**

- I come from there
- Area where currently studying
- Need to consider the needs of family members
- Employment opportunities for people with my qualifications are good there
- Other personal reasons for wanting to live there
- Specific employment opportunities
- Will be able to love with parents
- Cost of living is affordable there
- Other

**Figure 3.10 Where do students expect to work in the medium-long term?**

- International (UK and work in or travel to countries outside the UK)
- Regional (might move within region started in)
- Local (no plan to move for career)
- National (do not expect to move countries within the UK)
- UK-based (do not expect to work outside the UK)
- Other
Around half of Foundation degree students (49%) expected to earn in the region of £15,000 - £20,000 when they first started work (figure 3.11). This is consistent with findings for the Futuretrack population as a whole, although Foundation degree students were more likely than other students to think that they would earn less than £15,000 in their first role, and less likely to think that they would earn more than £20,000.

**Figure 3.11 How much to students expect to earn when they start work?**

As they approached the end of their course, Futuretrack students were asked what kinds of skills they thought graduate employers were looking for (Figure 3.12). When Foundation degree students were invited to pick their top three from a list of twenty-one attributes, the most frequently cited choices were: a good work ethic (40%), ability/competence (24%), and experience (21%). Interestingly, when the choices of the rest of the Futuretrack population are included the top three become: a good work ethic (33%), communication skills (28%), and team work (24%). Greenbank (2009) points out that ‘Foundation degrees tend to be more vocationally orientated than honours degrees; so it may be that Foundation degree students’ understanding of employer needs is influenced by the structure and content of their courses which are understood to exemplify an ‘employer-led curriculum’. In Futuretrack it would appear that Foundation degree students are more likely to have a ‘task-orientated’ view of working life, while other students are more likely to think that employers will value skills which aid the ‘process’ of working life. This is an extremely under-researched area, and one which would benefit from further investigation.
Figure 3.12 What skills did students think graduate recruiters were looking for? (respondents were invited to identify their top three)
Careers guidance

At Stage 3, Foundation degree students who were approaching the end of their course were asked if they had taken advantage of any careers advice or guidance opportunities during their final year (figure 3.13). The three most popular sources of career information were: careers websites such as www.prospects.ac.uk (32%), advice on CV writing (31%), and Careers Services websites (28%). In most cases, Foundation degree students appear to have been less likely than other students to access the services provided by their institution’s Careers Service, particularly one-to-one advice sessions and careers events. Similarly, only 28% of Foundation degree students indicated that they had accessed their Careers Service’s website compared to over 40% of the Futuretrack population as a whole. Twenty-six per cent of Foundation degree students had not accessed any of the information suggested by researchers. This may be because they are accessing careers information by other means, but their disinclination to visit the Careers Service in person could also be due to the practical difficulties of living away from campus and having to travel in whenever they want to access these services.

Figure 3.13 Since the end of their first year, have students taken advantage of any of the following sources of career advice and guidance?

- Visited other careers websites, e.g. Prospects
- Advice on CV writing
- Visited Careers Service website
- Compulsory module to develop employment-related skills
- Careers event for students doing same type of course
- Advice on completing application forms
- Interview technique training
- One-to-one Careers Service advice session
- University-wide careers event for final year students
- Talked to Careers Service advisor about course or career
- Careers information from employer or work organisation rep.
- Careers event for particular occupation or industry
- Careers Service information or advice by email or telephone
- Other
- Other Careers Service event
- Optional module to develop employment-related skills
- Careers Service sessions to develop employment-related skills

Foundation degree students
All Futuretrack students
Nearly 60% of Foundation degree students indicated that they had not used their university careers service at all, but nearly 80% had discussed their options with teaching staff in their department and nearly three-quarters sought advice from family and friends (figure 3.14). However, one Foundation degree student suggested that students were not being made aware that these services are available to them, and the findings suggest that although Foundation degree students are just as likely as other students to seek advice from tutors and friends, they are much less likely to visit their university careers service.

Figure 3.14  Which other sources of careers information did Foundation degree students use, and how helpful did they find them?

Students who had not visited their university’s careers service were invited to explain why they had decided not to use this service. Only 5% said that their institution did not have a careers service (figure 3.15). Twenty-seven per cent felt that they already knew what they wanted to do in the future, and so did not need to visit the careers service, while around a quarter indicated that they were not planning to think about their next step until they had finished their course. Twenty-six per cent did not think that the careers service offered the kind of information they were looking for, and 17% did not know what information or advice the careers service could give in general. One Foundation degree student felt that their careers service focused on the needs of students who wanted to pursue a more ‘traditional’ career path,

‘The careers service has not got expertise in the field I wish to go into. They seem to focus on ‘main stream’ career paths (business, IT, public service, admin, retail, therapy etc) and have little knowledge of requirements for environmental science-based careers.’

In 2009, focus groups with final year students revealed that some students were sceptical about the value of the careers service until they actually visited it (Atfield et al, 2010). It may be that Foundation degree students are equally sceptical about the careers guidance offered by these services because they are not following a ‘traditional’ undergraduate course. Consequently it might be useful to consider how careers services could better publicise their expertise in helping students who are planning to pursue a career in a less traditional occupation, or those who are studying courses which already incorporate an element of work-based learning.
Reflections on higher education

Overall, most Foundation degree students enjoyed their experience in higher education and were positive about their future (Figure 3.16). They described being a student as fun (65%), but hard work (78%), and felt that the experience of being a student had enhanced their social and intellectual capabilities more broadly (76%). At Stage 1 over 90% of applicants agreed that higher education is valuable in its own right, and 94% felt that being a student offered opportunities for personal growth, so it appears that most students felt their experience met these expectations. Over three-quarters (80%) believed that the subject they had studied would give them an advantage when looking for work, although only 54% felt the same about the institution at which they had studied. Most felt that the experience of being a student (67%) and the skills they had developed on their course (77%) had made them more employable. Less than half (42%) thought it would be easy to secure their ideal job when they graduated, and 76% believed that it was more difficult for graduates to find suitable employment in 2009 than it had been in the past. However, students were optimistic about their long-term career prospects (66%), and 80% were confident that they had the skills employers looked for when they were looking to fill the kinds of roles in which students were interested.

Despite the fact that higher education met the objectives applicants identified at Stage 1, only 38% of Foundation degree students thought their course was good value for money. The issue of ‘value for money’ needs to be explored in more detail, but the comments made by the Foundation degree students who participated in Futuretrack suggest that this dissatisfaction was closely linked to their worries about tuition fees and student debt.

‘I have really enjoyed by experience at my university, and feel some members of staff are very valuable to the teaching team. However…I would have to say I wouldn’t recommend the university as the course is overpriced which is a shame!’
However, as a learning experience, Foundation degree students thought higher education was excellent preparation for both life and work.

‘The time I spent at university has opened by eyes to opportunities that I have not been aware of previously. I have realised that there are subject areas that we sometimes make ourselves think are hard but are in fact interesting once you get involved in them. I have met people from every corner of the world, which had broadened by ideas and my views on some countries, as well as learning about a variety of different cultures.’

‘Although I’m not sure what career I want to do into, the experience of being a full-time student has broadened my views of the world and given me a better outlook on how I will achieve my short-term goals.’

Figure 3.16 What did Foundation degree students think about their overall experience of higher education?

- It is more difficult now for graduates to find suitable employment than it was in the past
- Being a full-time student is hard work
- The subject I have studied is an advantage in looking for employment
- The skills I have developed on my course have made me more employable
- The experience of being a student has enhanced my social and intellectual capabilities more broadly
- Being a full-time student is fun
- I have the skills employers are likely to be looking for when recruiting for the kind of jobs I want to apply for
- The experience of being a student has made me more employable
- I am optimistic about my long-term career prospects
- The university I attended is an advantage in looking for employment
- My course is good value for money
- It will be easy for me to get the kind of job I want when I graduate

- 1 (Strongly agree)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 (Strongly disagree)
Reflections on Higher Education:
Key findings

- At the end of their higher education experience, most Foundation degree students were still happy with their course, and two-thirds indicated that they would still choose to do the same one if they were given their time again.

- Most Foundation degree students planned to find a job after they graduated, and nearly half hoped to obtain employment related to their long-term career plans.

- Around one in three Foundation degree students planned to go onto some kind of further study. Most believed an additional qualification would further improve their employment prospects, but around a third wanted to study their subject to a higher level and 40% were interested in the course in its own right.

- Students who planned to continue their education expected to fund their studies by taking out another loan with the Student Loan Company.

- Foundation degree students who were searching for jobs commonly referred to prospective employers’ websites, the local press, and publications and websites dedicated to graduate vacancies. Only half had used their university Careers Service.

- Around half of Foundation degree students expected to earn in the region of £15,000-£20,000 a year when they first started work. This is consistent with findings for the Futuretrack population as a whole, although Foundation degree students were more likely than other students to think that they would earn less than £15,000 in their first role, and less likely to believe they would earn more than £20,000.

- Most Foundation degree students turned to tutors and family for careers advice, with less than half seeking guidance from the Careers Service. When asked why they had not visited the Careers Service, around a quarter said that they did not think the Careers Service offered the kind of information they were looking for, and nearly 1 in 5 did not know what kind of information the service provided in general.

- When invited to reflect on their experience of higher education, Foundation degree students described it as fun, but hard work. They felt the skills they had developed had made them more employable, and were optimistic about their long-term career prospects. However, despite their positive experience, only 38% thought their course was good value for money.
Key Issues

1. **Pre-HE advice and guidance**

The Futuretrack study is designed to provide robust and comprehensive evidence to clarify the socio-economic and educational factors that determine career choices and outcomes. In this report we have considered why applicants decide to apply to Foundation degree courses and in doing so have illuminated some of the information their choices are based on. Purcell *et al* (2008) have already identified the need for better pre-higher education careers guidance, but there are a number of areas which are of particular significance to those with an interest in meeting the needs of non-traditional university applicants. Firstly, there is a need for better information about the career implications of students’ post-16 subject choices. Foundation degree applicants were more likely than students applying to other courses to have received no information about the implications of these choices at all, and over 50% felt that the information they did receive was inadequate. Secondly, there is a need to ensure that applicants are given the help they need to evaluate the existing information themselves. While most Foundation degree applicants felt they were given enough information about the range of higher education courses available to them, nearly a third would have liked more help in choosing which course to study. This suggests that there is a need for more personalised careers advice that is not being met by in-school careers guidance, and it cannot be met by teachers and lecturers alone. Finally, Foundation degree students appear to be less inclined than other students to consider the implications of attending a particular institution. This is important because previous research has indicated that the institution a student attends (along with subject they study) plays a fundamental role in determining their later employment success (Blasko, 2002). It would be interesting to explore the pre-higher education advisory-process in more detail, to examine if, and when, teachers and other careers advisers raise these kinds of issues, and how they advise students to approach them.

2. **Careers guidance while at university**

Throughout their studies Foundation degree students continue to turn to tutors and course leaders for careers advice, but appear reluctant to use their university careers service. Atfield *et al* (2010) have suggested that students are often sceptical about the value of university careers services, which may explain why Foundation degree students continue to rely on the information they can get elsewhere. It would be interesting to explore how students’ experience of professional careers guidance pre-higher education informs their view of careers professionals later in their university career, as it maybe that improving the former could prompt more students to take advantage of the latter.
3. Value for money

At the end of their course, Foundation degree students described being a student as fun, but hard work. They felt that the experience of being a student had made them more employable, and most were optimistic about their long-term career prospects. However, despite describing higher education as a ‘good investment’ when they first applied, only around 40% of Foundation degree students felt that their course was ‘good value for money’. One particular aspect of this for Foundation degree students may be a consequence of the structure of the degree which enables some to choose to qualify after two years and enter the labour market whilst others continue to ‘top up’ the Foundation degree to honours by taking up further study. Thus the progression to completion for Foundation degree holders is more complex than for (for example) bachelors degree holders; this particular context may affect the perception of value. Nonetheless this finding is particularly troubling given such positive reviews of the experience as a whole. As students are expected to invest more money into their higher education, so the concept of ‘value for money’ becomes ever more important. While the prospect of acquiring debt does not necessarily deter students from applying to higher education, those who enter are looking for a healthy return on their investment. Unfortunately, ‘value for money’ is an ambiguous concept, and further research is needed to establish what it means in the context of higher education generally, as well as Foundation degrees more specifically.
Students' experiences of full-time Foundation degrees

References

Atfield, G., Purcell, K., Pennington, M. and Jackson, P. 2010. Student career decision-making: Experience and research – making the connection. Manchester: Higher Education Careers Services Unit.


Appendix:
Futuretrack Survey Questions

Questions below have been selected from each of the three Futuretrack surveys at stages 1, 2 and 3.

Stage 1:

• Which of the following applied to you in deciding to enter HE and what was your main reason for entering HE
• What were your reasons for choosing a particular course?
• Which of the following influenced your choice of university or college?
• How do you plan to fund your higher education?
• On a scale of 1-7 where 1 means ‘I have a clear idea about the occupation I eventually want to enter and the qualifications required to do so’ and 7 means ‘I have no idea what I will do after I complete the course I have applied for’, where would you put yourself?
• Prior to deciding to apply for higher education, how much careers information and guidance did you have?
• In deciding to apply for a higher education course, how far do you agree with the following statements?
• Who else in your family has completed, or is studying for, a higher education qualification?
• What is your age and what is your sex?

Stage 2:

• How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your experience in the academic year 2006-7?
• How many hours in total each week (during term time) did you normally spend in timetabled lessons, tutorials, practical work, or other activities supervised by a lecturer or other academic?
• How many hours in total each week (during term time) did you normally spend working on coursework or study related to your course other than in timetabled class, alone or with other students?
• Which of the following has applied to you, in terms of your course? (relates to how hard they have found the course and how assessment was carried out)
• Where did you live during term time and how far did you travel to study
• How did you fund your studies?
• During your first year at university or college, did you take advantage of any of the following careers information or guidance opportunities?
Students’ experiences of full-time Foundation degrees

- How many times in the 2006-07 academic session did you use the Careers Service at your university or college? (either by visiting it, telephoning consultants or logging onto its website)
- At the moment, do you plan to do any of the following after completing your current course of study? (relates to career/study options)
- Have your ideas about your career changed since you started your course?
- On a scale of 1-7 where 1 means ‘in terms of long-term career planning I have a clear idea about what I want to do’ and 7 means ‘I have no idea what I want to do’, where would you put yourself now?

Stage 3:
- If you were starting again, would you choose the same course and why?
- Careers advice questions
- All of section 4 regarding future plans