

Whose benefit is it anyway? Dispelling the deficit model of non-traditional learners in higher education using focus groups

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Abstract

Although it is a commonly held view that Foundation Year students lack the confidence and the academic skills usually held by 'typical' university learners (Ford and Grantham, 2003; Marshal, 2016), anecdotal evidence would contradict this deficit view. Many Foundation Year students have held challenging jobs or positions of responsibility prior to joining the course or are mature students with the experience and transferable skills that brings. This means they are organised, critical thinkers with interesting and insightful suggestions on how the course is organised and on the subject matter being studied. This research aims to reveal the benefits and skills these students already possess by utilising the student voice. Through the use of focus groups with seventeen Foundation Year students in various disciplines, what they bring to the programme was examined through thematic analysis. This led to three categories of value being identified: pedagogical value, pastoral support, course-management. These findings contradict the idea that the benefits gained in education are a one-way process. Accepting and welcoming the valuable viewpoints and contributions students can bring raises implications for how these benefits can be harnessed more effectively to advance higher education and improve the student experience.

Keywords

Non-traditional students, critical pedagogy, teaching and learning, higher education

Introduction

The notion of education's purpose being to bring about change, improve or even save its learners is a pervasive one (Valencia, 1997; 2010). Popular culture has employed this trope with films such as *To Sir With Love* (1967) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995) portraying the idea of the teacher as saviour with little consideration of the agency the learners themselves bring to the situation and environment. It could be argued that this is a positive impact of education with marginalised groups being given

opportunities, understanding and support they are often not afforded. Higher Education (HE) participation has been growing in the UK (and worldwide) for the last 60 years (Smit, 2012) which has meant individuals who may not ordinarily have had access to this level of education now do so. In addition, there is a growing awareness (and pressure) for the need to widen participation to further encourage those from areas of low participation and from minority groups to apply for a place at university (Hinton-Smith, 2012). There is a discord in that these groups of students can be perceived to be 'lacking' the cultural, social and academic knowledge and skills to be able to succeed at this level, and that they need to be helped and taught to acquire these skills. However, this can lead to unintended consequences.

The traditional deficit model of education being employed as stated above, regardless of how well intentioned this may be, can lead to a number of negative outcomes (Smit, 2012; Valencia, 1997; 2010) including:

- Self-fulfilling prophecy, the labelling of low (or high) expectations has been found to impact the behaviour and expectations of teachers, and subsequently, the grades achieved by students (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). At its most extreme, some education professionals may deduce that the educability of those with deficits may be too challenging or even impossible (Valencia, 2010).
- Historically, stereotyping and casual (and not so casual) prejudice including racism, ableism and classism has impacted on educators' ability to recognise the challenges these marginalised groups may face, and to recognise how their behaviours may actually be the real cause of any perceived difficulties (Valencia, 2010). The fact that many of these claims and beliefs are often based on pseudoscientific evidence which has been refuted and rejected, has not filtered through to all professionals.
- Victim-blaming with education programmes aimed at the poorest in society, for example, rather than addressing health inequalities and poverty which may be the real driver for differences in attainment. The classic response to any group with lower achievements is to change the victim, rather than the system which discriminates or is unfit for purpose. This often culminates in placing a higher workload on these 'at risk' students (for example, recommending extra classes to improve study skills). This means institutions, governments and educators shirk their own responsibilities and avoid addressing complex social issues (Gorski, 2011).

- The neo-liberal discourse that dominates the HE sector may also ‘pathologize’ non-traditional learners. University students should be independent learners not requiring too much support. It is easier for the institution to require the student to conform to their expectations than it is for the system to be flexible and considerate (Mallman and Lee, 2017). This places the blame and responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the student.
- The expectation that students should adhere to the dominant culture and reject their original background (Smit, 2012).
- Power imbalances which are disempowering rather than empowering in terms of educators being the ‘experts’ or ‘saviours’ of those seen to have a deficit.

Foundation-year provision is predominantly portrayed as meeting a deficit in the student’s academic, cultural and skills abilities as a given (Bernard, 2015; Gorski, 2011; Shapiro, 2014). This does not originate from students, however, as their views are notable by their absence in this assumption. So from where does this assumption originate? Lawrence (2003) suggests it is born of pre-conceived expectations of non-traditional learners, but also the tendency for higher education institutions (HEIs) to be resistant to change and being unwilling to examine their own systems and methods, as previously stated. Therefore, anyone not mastering the standard HE discourse is under-prepared or failing in some way. Ford and Grantham (2003) found that the deficit model is influenced by practitioners who presume diverse students are automatically coming into education with a short-fall in skills of some kind rather than having been ill prepared by their previous educational experiences (Marshall, 2016). In addition, many educators may not have been exposed to diverse groups themselves and the stereotyping and expectations may have their own negative impacts as stated. It may also lead to the requirement for students to conform to a standard HE experience: middle class, white and anglicised.

A possible definition for foundation year “provisioning of modules, courses or other curricular elements that are intended to equip students with academic foundations that will enable them to successfully complete an HE qualification” (Nkonki et al., 2014 p.57) can immediately be observed to meet the deficit model, which raises a potential conflict. There is clearly a need to address an ever widening body of students (Nkonki et al., 2014), and any skills deficit they may have (Pearce et al., 2015), but this needs to be from a social justice standpoint (Wilson-Strydom, 2015) concentrating on the wider issues that have led to any perceived deficit rather than seeing this as a flaw in the student body (Marshall, 2016).

There have been attempts to address these preconceived ideas and allow the students concerned a voice. Case (2015) investigated the wider context of a student's learning using the voices of foundation-year engineering students which demonstrated that non-traditional learners are not necessarily a homogenous group all with the same needs. Marshall and Case (2010) conducted a case study and that focused on one foundation year engineering student who came from an impoverished background but displayed all the signs of resilience needed to be a successful HE student which again challenges the expected deficit view. Pym and Kapp (2013) investigated a foundation year programme that had successfully changed its focus from a traditional deficit model to one that encouraged the students input and voice and the value they bring. This was a gradual process over five years and used various quantitative data collection methods taking into account the students home life but also the support needed to succeed academically. Further examination of student agency was the focus of Ellery and Baxen's (2015) research where they concluded student agency should be the central element of any foundation-year programme. In the extended degree studied in this instance, they found again that the deficit model idea was held by those delivering the course and that the students were seen as passive recipients of the education delivered rather than active participants. They conclude that, rather than take a deficit standpoint, the challenges and obstacles that have been overcome to attend university should be celebrated and utilised.

Aims: Primarily, this research aims to reveal the benefits and skills these students, specifically foundation-year students, already possess through using the student voice and establish the benefits and skills this diverse student cohort brings to the course. Secondly, it aims to address the lack of input afforded to students in how they and their experiences are viewed and to allow marginalised voices to become a part of the discourse.

Method

This qualitative research has been carried out alongside a larger doctoral thesis and is cycle one in a participatory action research process (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005; McNiff, 2013).

Design

A constructivist standpoint was used regarding individual examples provided by the participants recognising differing experiences but not discounting the wider societal,

context. A focus group was employed to gather qualitative data regarding what benefits the higher education institution has gained from this cohort.

Sample

The sample of 17 participants were recruited from a population consisting of 126 students studying foundation-year programmes in the University during the 2018/19 academic year (13.5% of all students studying Integrated Foundation Years within the Faculty). The cohorts were from the Faculty of Business and Society (96) and the Faculty of Life Sciences and Education (30) and from the same institution. Subjects being studied by students included business, finance, history, criminology, law and psychology. An opportunity sampling method was used in the first instance with an initial briefing and email being delivered to all of the population and volunteers were requested. A total of 17 participants participated across three discussion groups. Their characteristics are presented in Table 1. Of the 17 students, 6 participated in focus group one (FG1), 9 in focus group two (FG2) and 2 in the final group (FG3). This highlights the 'non-traditional' nature of this cohort in terms of age and additional learning needs, for example. Participation in these groups was anonymous.

Characteristic	N	% of sample	% total cohort
Gender			
Female	13	72	64
Male	4	28	33
Age (Mean Years/Range)	26	27 (46-19)	M=24 R=36 (56-18)
Domicile			
Home	14	82	95
International	3	18	5
Additional Learning Needs Identified	5	29	17
Integrated Foundation Year			
Business	2	12	17*
Criminology	1	7	19
Health & Social Care	3	18	7
Law	5	28	7
Psychology	5	28	25
Youth Work	1	7	2

Table 1: Characteristics of Focus Group Participants (Total N=17)

*total for this section is less than 100% as not all integrated foundation year degree pathways were represented in focus groups

Data collection

All enrolled students studying Integrated Foundation Year programmes within the researcher's faculty were invited to participate in one of three 90-minute focus groups investigating the benefits foundation year study can provide. This was done by opportunity sampling and the composing of an email to these students. These groups were led by the researcher who has experience in the learning and education of foundation-year students. The students were able to choose a group with a time that was convenient to them and the discussion groups were conducted in a meeting room based at the university. A questioning route was designed which had been developed in consultation with other foundation-year practitioners (see appendix 1) and this was delivered to the students verbally by the researcher/moderator for discussion. The items for discussion related to the reasons for studying this course, the benefits to be gained by students but also the benefits to be gained from the students. This route was to ensure the focus group covered the necessary areas, but contained very little input from the moderator who is experienced in focus group delivery. Each session lasted 90 minutes including a settling down period, briefing and debriefing. Each group recorded their thoughts on flip chart paper and the discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the moderator. The moderator was the author of this research.

Data analysis

The transcriptions were analysed inductively using thematic analysis, a methodology suitable for identifying and organising shared experiential themes in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were read and broad themes which emerged from each transcript were identified. The content of these themes was shared with the participants involved for accuracy checking purposes.

Ethical considerations

Approval was obtained from the University of South Wales' Ethics Committee. All students were completing foundation-year study but participation in the focus group was optional. Participants were provided with an information sheet and written informed consent was obtained prior to the discussion taking place (see appendix 2). No identifying characteristics accompanied the data collected. Quotations were not assigned to individual participants to guarantee anonymity.

Results

The thematic analysis resulted in three main categories being identified (Pedagogical Value, Pastoral Support and Course Management) with sub-categories within two of these (see Figure 1).

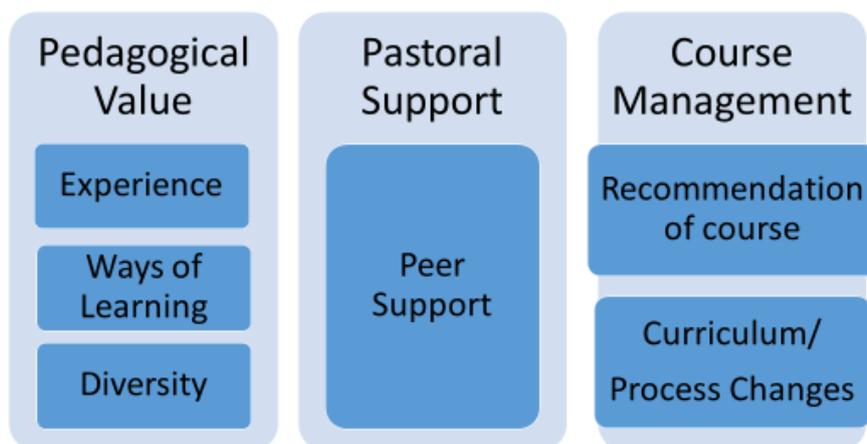


Figure 1: Categories Identified through thematic analysis of focus group data

Pedagogical Value

Experience: All of the focus groups mentioned the life experiences that non-traditional learners bring to the course that help with contributions and understanding of the learning taking place. This fell under two main categories: work experience and personal experience. Lecturers with many years' experience of the classroom may lack up to date practical, industry skills if they exist at all. This relevant, hands-on experience is something students value (Holdsworth, Turner and Scott-Young, 2018). This student input, therefore, provides recent, relevant insights into what is happening in the 'real world' of work. One female participant clearly made the link between the theoretical learning lecturers could impart and how this linked to her work experience in safeguarding and the contribution she could make:

'...made me realise there was more than I was doing on it...from a theoretical point of view.' (Focus Group 1 [FG1], Participant 1 [P1]).

Shannahan (2000), in a study investigating the benefits mature students can bring to learning, labelled one category as 'been there, done that'. The participants in her study agree that this not only adds to their learning experience but this insight makes

learning itself easier. Psychology and sociology were mentioned most frequently as subjects the participants in this piece of research found comfortable in addressing due to their experiences.

Personal experiences were also used in a positive way, both in aiding lecturer's understanding of certain topics but also in building up the confidence of the students. One participant experienced she was helping to educate staff with her particular additional need:

'I felt on a small scale I was making them aware of issues people may have.'
(FG2, P2).

Many of the students on the course have experienced life events, illness or additional needs and this direct insight provided by their contributions allows a deeper understanding to develop in staff which can benefit future cohorts. There are some downsides to experiences being freely shared by students, although discussions are encouraged. One is protecting themselves, with some students over-sharing and potentially leaving themselves feeling exposed or vulnerable. In addition, it can mean there is a danger of learning being side-lined by the tangents these types of discussion promote and with some individuals monopolising the narrative. It is important, therefore, for lecturers to be sensitive when these sorts of discussions arise, and to have the confidence to know when it is time to move the conversation forward.

Ways of learning: In addition to life experience, Shannahan (2000) found mature students displayed a deeper approach to studying and had honed skills such as time management and organisational abilities through running a busy home or from attaining certain positions of responsibility. The ability to think critically was a skill the participants felt strongly they could demonstrate and their age and experience helped with this:

'It gives you a wider perspective and allows you to criticise and
evaluate.' (FG1, P5)

This ability to evaluate was both at a subject and self-reflective level. This disagreement to certain areas of the curriculum challenges lecturers; class-based learning is certainly not being delivered to a passive audience who will accept everything at face value. This is also motivating and stimulating for the teaching team and keeps delivery fresh and interesting. In terms of self-reflection, one of the purposes of the foundation year is to demonstrate development and progress in the student's learning. Having a cohort who are self-aware and accepting of this potential

for change certainly helps. This confidence in ideas and opinions can be detrimental, however, with some students being unable to accept empirical evidence that challenges their strongly held beliefs, and the challenge mentioned earlier can sometimes descend into conflict within the cohort and, in extreme cases, between lecturers and students.

Having the initiative and confidence to try new methods of learning was also evident in this cohort. Christie (2008) found that non-traditional students are more likely to spontaneously and actively participate and initiate learning strategies that they may have used previously in other areas of their life such as discussion groups. This had the added bonus of boosting their confidence levels in knowing they were not alone and helping with the transition to higher education. Holdsworth, Turner and Scott-Young (2018) found that life experiences impacted positively on the resilience shown by students when focusing on their workload.

Diversity: One of the areas that provoked the most input from the participants, were the benefits a diverse student cohort brings and the learning this can evoke.

‘Because we get to talk about culture, especially in sociology, we have got to learn a lot.’ (FG2, P4)

This is beneficial in the excellent learning examples that can be discussed comparing education or healthcare in differing cultures, for example. It also encourages lecturers to consider their teaching practices for individuals whose first language may not be English or who may not be experienced of areas of British culture that home students may take for granted. By making these adjustments, all students can benefit (Shaw et al., 2008). In addition to the business case to be made for recruiting overseas students, for example, there are also pedagogical benefits as described. Shaw et al. (2008) address the many advantages a diverse student body can bring to teaching and learning, including a preparation for the variety of individuals that would be encountered in the world of work (Gurin, Nagda and Lopez, 2004) and that reasonable adjustments made for the international cohort can benefit all students (Marshall and Mathias, 2016).

Pastoral Support

The friendships and social support gained from fellow students on the foundation year was anecdotally already well recognised by the teaching team. The depth and value of this assistance was surprising, however, with many participants feeling it was hugely important for their progress.

‘...they are my go to...it’s really helpful’ (FG3, P2).

This support and feeling of belonging is clearly beneficial to the students. Specific mention was made of the use of *WhatsApp* as a mechanism for communication. Quan-Haase and Young (2010) found from interviewing undergraduate students that instant messaging tools are primarily deployed as they allow relationship growth and consolidation. This strategy has unintended benefits for staff too. From the discussions, many students will message a fellow student before emailing a member of staff to clarify a matter which would decrease the number of referrals received and the subsequent workload. One potential negative is cases where a confident student has provided inaccurate or unsuitable advice to others.

The conflict of being pulled in too many directions for non-traditional learners is a widely-held belief (Pearce, 2017) , but they may actually have support that traditional students do not have, such as a stable partner or long-lasting friendships (Shannahan, 2000; Mallman and Lee, 2016; 2017) that may not have the superficial character of more short-term relationships. Holdsworth, Turner and Scott-Young (2018) found that students were adept in identifying that support networks helped with their resilience at university.

Course Management

Recommendation of Course: With recommendation being seen as the seventh most important reason why an individual would choose a particular university and 12.9% of respondents to a recent pole placing that factor as top of their list (Bhardwa, 2017), this is a key marketing tool. A number of participants have stated recommendation by family or friends who have previously studied the course was key in their decision to pursue their place, as can be seen from this quote:

‘a friend did it last year and gave me really good feedback’ (FG1, P1)

In addition, current students are endorsing the qualification through direct signposting, but also through being an effective role model and ambassador.

‘it’s encouraged my friend to go to uni...I’m really excited for her’ (FG3, P2)

Not only is this a recruitment method, but it will also mean potential students have a better understanding of what the course really involves thereby helping with their transition into higher education, and they can benefit from the social and cultural capital of knowing someone studying at university.

Course/Process Changes: A significant number of initiatives and improvements have been made on the course based on student input. This is not 'lip-service' but rather seen as a key element in how the course develops. The participants also picked up on this:

'how much our feedback is asked for....I really appreciate that' (FG2, P2)

This confidence, willingness and openness to express ideas is something that is very much valued from the cohort. This can come through formal mechanisms such as Course and Module Reviews and Student Representative Meetings, but also through informal channels. Two suggestions were made in the focus group discussions which are being explored in more detail: using the information on the value of the course as a tool to assist students who are finding engagement difficult and approaching the application process for foundation-year study in a more sympathetic manner. Both of these suggestions have been forwarded to the university departments concerned.

There are times when students do not like an element of their study and are very vocal about it but it is a necessary element. There is often a resistance to study skills, for example, but we respectfully suggest that these skills are needed for study in higher education and previous students look back on these sessions positively with hindsight.

All three collections of participants contributed to this area of their focus groups, with FG1 contributing slightly more than the other two. All groups made comments under each of the themes identified above, with no theme being noted as a singular occurrence, suggesting saturation of ideas had been achieved. FG2 made the least reference to the experience they bring to the course, but their mean age was lower than that of the other two groups (23 years) with a number who were 18 and 19 meaning they would not have the life or work experience of some other participants to draw upon.

Discussion

These focus group discussions have highlighted the many valuable contributions non-traditional learners can bring to a course, demonstrating the widely held deficit model may not be an accurate representation and meeting the first aim in allowing the benefits and skills these students, specifically foundation-year students, already possess to be revealed. These benefits can be harnessed to benefit the course, the experience of staff and, most vitally, the student's view of themselves. It was essential for the aims of this research that this was the student voice and not based on presumptions by those in positions of power which met the second research aim. A

number of the themes that emerged were known and already performed as a matter of course, such as requesting and acting upon student feedback. Other themes were more surprising and arise as fortunate, unintended consequences, such as the level and depth of peer support. This raises a number of implications for practice.

Implications

There are valuable skills and resources that non-traditional learners bring to a course of study and these may not be fully considered, utilised or even recognised, as stated in the first aim of this research. This would clearly be of benefit to the course and the teaching and learning that takes place, but can also be used to empower individuals who may not believe they have much to offer in a higher education setting compared to their more traditional peers. Batchelor (2006) talks of supporting 'vulnerable' students (despite having issues with the term and its connotations of weakness) to have a voice and to recognise there are many types of experience that can be valuable. This does need to be handled carefully to avoid putting pressure on those who may not have the energy (Batchelor, 2006) or do have additional responsibilities (Shannahan, 2000; Pearce, 2017) that 'typical' higher education students do not have.

By establishing that learning is a two-way relationship between learner and lecturer, this can empower both parties and assist in breaking down traditional power imbalances that exist within education which would further strengthen the emancipation aspect of aim two of this research. Barnett (2007) refers to this as 'reciprocal pedagogy' and by accepting this relationship it can inspire everyone involved. This will involve a culture change for some lecturers and also students who may desire being told what to do and the sometimes comforting idea that the lecturer is an 'expert'.

By demonstrating the value that non-traditional learners bring more explicitly, these benefits can be addressed and used in a more purposeful manner, rather than as a positive, unintended consequence. The diverse nature of the student body could be built into the curriculum, for example, to enhance the learning experience of all. This may require careful management, as mere contact between different groups is not enough to foster good relationships. Allport (1954) maintains that there needs to be a level of closeness between all parties, a common, clearly defined goal and an equality of power with no one being made to feel 'other'. This would require some management by lecturers and buy-in from students.

By encouraging consultation with students (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014) through working on projects, non-traditional learners are being provided with

opportunities to grow their confidence, levels of responsibility and ownership of their learning (Barnes, 2010). It also allows a learning community to develop which benefits academic and support staff. Many mature students see starting higher education as a 'catalyst for change' (Shannahan, 2000) and may welcome this opportunity to have an input and make a positive, wider contribution. This student collaboration could also be used to improve the marketing and application processes employed by HEIs when recruiting non-traditional students from those who know. Many foundation-year students report anxiety prior to and upon starting their course and with previous student's input, these processes could be finessed with the transition and change to HE student being less emotionally demanding.

Limitations of the Study

The group setting may have inhibited discussion of more personal issues and this is an inherent issue of the focus groups as a data collection method (Krugar and Casey, 2014). However, the group processes can be one of the major strengths of focus groups with group dynamics providing additional information that other research methods cannot and present added "synergy, snowballing, stimulation, and spontaneity" (Williams and Katz, 2001:2).

There also needs to be a recognition, acceptance and appreciation of the power dynamic that exists between the lecturer/researcher and the students/participants (Kamberelis et al., 2018). Despite steps being taken to make the setting comfortable, safe and welcoming, the fact the researcher was the participants lecturer also, may have impacted on what was divulged. Focus groups can be an effective way of redressing the power imbalances that often exist in research. By viewing and treating the participants as the experts on the subject matter, this can be empowering (Williams and Katz, 2001; Kidd and Parshall, 2000) especially for groups who may not experience this often.

Conclusion

Much of the research on deficit thinking in education has been carried out in school settings. This research hopes to redress this balance by exploring how it may impact on non-traditional learners in higher education, but also by demonstrating the many positives these individuals can bring. The 'deficits' of being older, having to work alongside studying, being from a very different culture or having caring responsibilities may actually provide these students with advantages and resources more traditional learners may not possess. There are many examples of individuals challenging the

orthodoxy of the deficit model (Valencia, 2010), but it is a difficult process to get right. Students clearly require the knowledge needed to succeed at university, but by embracing differences, recognising that certain issues may exist with the institutions and systems not the individuals and celebrating the successes, non-traditional learners can feel welcomed and empowered in higher education.

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