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Degrees of Freedom Revisited: Factors affecting Foundation degree students' choice of top-up (0051)

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Higher education has for many years been offered to UK students at Further Education Colleges (FECs) as well as universities. This provision differs in many ways from that offered in a university setting. Traditional degrees offered at universities are typically a commitment to a named three-year programme of study. Provision through FECs differs in the model of delivery as students typically enrol on a two-year associate degree, either a Higher National Diploma or Foundation degree. Foundation degrees (Fds) were introduced to meet the then government's agendas for widening participation and address a perceived graduate level skill shortage (HEFCE, 2000; Parry, 2003; Stevenson & Bell, 2009). These new degrees would largely be taught in FE colleges working in collaboration with HEIs (Foskett, 2005) with the HEI providing a progression route for third year honours degree study (Parry, 2003). Similar to the existing Higher National Diplomas (HND), Fds are a two year, usually vocationally based, HE qualification. These associate degrees represent a terminal qualification in their own right, but also offer a named progression route to a full degree. Initially the top-ups were provided through the partner HEI (Parry, 2003), but more recently colleges are validating their own top-up provision, where 53% of top-up providers are FECs offering 43% of top-up courses (UCAS, 2016).

This research sought to investigate what progressing students felt was important when making their decision regarding their final year top-up.

Methodology

Electronic questionnaires were completed by 107 second year (Level 5) Foundation degree students. Seventy-one were 71 female with an average age of 31, and thirty-five were male with an average age of 24, reflecting the demographic profile clusters identified by Harvey (2009). The students were from sixteen different colleges from across the UK, studying on 41 different courses spanning a huge range of subject areas.

Students were asked to rate the importance of ten specified factors for their choice of top-up degree.

Results

Table 1. Student destination choices based on the range of options available

	Only college top-up available	Only university top-up available	College and university top-up available
Remain at college	6	0	47
Move to alternative college	0	5	3

Move to university	0	6	14
Seek employment	1	3	5

There were significant difference in the choices that the students made ($\chi^2 = 30$, df = 6, $p < .0005$). When there was only a college-based top-up 14% chose to seek employment. When there were no options to top-up at the college 43% transferred to university, whereas 21% sought employments and the remaining 36% found courses at alternative colleges. Where the students had a choice between remaining at the college or transferring to university 68% chose to remain and only 20% transferred to university.

Table 2. Ratings of importance of factors in the decision making process.

	Remain at college (N=52)	Transfer to university (N=21)	Seek employment (N=8)	Taking a gap year (N=5)
Institutional reputation	4.48	5.14	3.88	4.80
Course reputation	4.92	5.48	4.00	6.20
Course qualification	6.13	6.24	5.38	6.40
Course content	5.73	6.00	6.00	5.40
Familiarity with college	4.98	3.24	3.63	4.00
Familiarity with staff	5.04	2.76	2.88	3.80
Local/personal commitments	5.46	4.38	4.63	5.80
Distance from home	5.23	4.71	4.88	5.60
Fees	4.85	3.85	5.88	6.20
Travelling/living expenses	5.18	4.52	5.50	5.50

(Scale: 1 = not at all important, 7 = extremely important)

Overall the *course qualification* and the *modules available* were the most important factor to all students regardless of their decision. Of least interest was the *institutional reputation*, in addition the *familiarity with staff* and *college* were of least importance to all students except those that were remaining at the college where it then became a much more important factor.

For those taking a gap year *fees*, *proximity to home* and *local personal commitments* were important features, which might indicate that they were taking a year out to save some money. They also referred to *familiarity with staff* and *college* as more important than those leaving to transfer to university or work, suggesting that they may be intending to return to the college to top-up.

Those who were seeking employment had very similar views to those who were transferring to university with the exception of the importance they placed on *reputation* and *fees*.

When considering what factors are important when deciding between moving to a university and remaining at the college the significant issues were that *familiarity with the staff* ($T = 4.44$, $df = 70$, $p < .0005$) and the *college* ($T = 3.56$, $df = 70$, $p = .001$) were more important to those who were staying, as was *commitments to the area* ($T = 2.17$, $df = 71$, $p = .033$). Those who were taking a gap year or seeking employment were most concerned with the *financial aspects* ($F_{(7,89)} = 2.07$, $p = .05$).

Conclusion

Building on a previous case study (Schofield & McKenzie, 2014), these findings suggest that the primary concern when deciding on a top-up degree is the course qualification and its content. Where the relevant course is available students are three times more likely to remain at the college rather than moving to a university. The most important factors differentiating these two options were the familiarity with the college and staff, and the proximity of the institution. The latter may be explained by the fact that the majority of respondents were mature students who have more commitments to the local area.

It is important to focus on these alternatives to traditional three-year degree programmes as these flexible progression options within a degree programme offer students more freedom and control over their study pathway and ultimate qualification. As students are increasingly becoming consumers in this changing HE landscape HE providers may want to constantly review the range and type of provision offered.

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