

Are Foundation Year Courses Value for Money?

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Value for money is a term that has, and continues to be, applied to Higher Education in the UK. Universities are held to account in terms of the quality of their provision and the student outcomes achieved. The aim of this paper is to investigate how value for money is defined and who value is being measured for, focusing on Foundation Year courses. Various measures are employed to define value for money, but they share common features: a focus on student judgment and metrics such as progression, retention and graduate outcomes. Students are the main focus when value for money is being discussed, and there are many immediate benefits (increased confidence, improved completion) as well as longer term benefits (improved wages, health and societal engagement) in being a university student. There is an investment on the part of the student and society, but the returns outweigh the initial outlay financially and socially. The implications of this study include the need to design a measure of value for money that considers the long term as well as immediate benefits of Higher Education, in particular through Foundation Year provision, improving education on what student debt entails for students and their parents and more tailored support for non-traditional learners.

Introduction

The Context

In March 2016 the Welsh Government published its 'Support for Foundation Years' consultation. Its purpose was to investigate the economic feasibility of Foundation Year (FY) courses in Wales for both students and the government (Welsh Government, 2016a). The outcome of this consultation, which received 31 responses from various stakeholders, was that FY courses should continue. However, The Welsh government stated that the number of students choosing these courses, along with their progression rates onto undergraduate degrees, needs to be more closely monitored and that research needs to be initiated into this area, in particular to investigate 'value for money' (Welsh Government, 2016b, p. 11). In the context of the consultation document, the additional year's funding that is required for a student to study a FY in Higher Education (HE) when compared to other options offered at Further Education colleges

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and the additional cost this places on the Welsh government who were subsidising undergraduate fees at the time, including the FY, meant that FY provision was not considered to offer 'value for money'.

The consultation was the driving force for this preliminary investigation into the idea of value for money and its relevance to HE, in particular FY provision. Although the consultation concerned FY delivery in Wales, the information in this report can be applied in a variety of ways to FY programmes across the UK. The aim of this paper is to define value for money in the context of FY provision, establish whose judgement this concerns and the factors that need to be considered for each of these interested parties. The first area to be reflected upon, however, is the wider social and political context within which the question is being framed.

This paper is part of the initial stages of a PhD project which aims to address the question of value for money in relation to FY provision in more detail and investigate the issues raised. The project will use a mixed research method ranging from quantitative analysis of outcomes and progression to qualitative methods such as interviews and narrative work. The participants will be FY students, past and present, but also lecturers who predominantly deliver on FY programmes. It is hoped this research will go some way to addressing the lack of research that exists regarding FY delivery and support the deeply held beliefs that FY is a valuable and essential element of any Higher Education Institute's (HEIs) course profile.

What is the Driving Force Behind the Interest in 'Value for Money' in Higher Education?

The scrutiny placed on Higher Education and whether 'value for money' is being provided is a growing trend. Representative news stories over the last two years include:

- students leaving university with over £50,000 of debt (Coughlan, 2017);
- the head of the National Audit Office stating students could sue some Higher Education Institutions for mis-selling of their degree programmes (Havergal, 2017);
- a recent survey reporting that less than 35% of students state their course is 'good value for money' (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2017).

There has also been resistance to this negative stance: McKie (2018) cites Professor Franz Berkhout, a Dean at King's College London, as stating there is a 'fixation' on value for money that ignores the other benefits that HE brings to the wider society and that this has 'narrowed and impoverished' views of HE. This type of news story would appear to be in the minority, however. The mostly negative, inflammatory, reporting would clearly colour any individual's view towards HE and the impact of the media on opinion is well documented. For example, Interpretive Effect Theory sets out the idea that the media establishes an agenda and individuals within society begin thinking about these ideas as accepted wisdom (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). So the idea that HE may not be delivering value for money is now in the public consciousness and that of policy makers.

The current economic climate may also explain the interest shown in 'value for money' in HE by the media and other areas of society. McRae (2018) posits that some observers of HE may conclude it has had an 'easy ride' since austerity measures were brought into play in 2010 by the coalition government. The same government that was introducing ever-smaller budgets for schools, hospitals and local authorities, also introduced higher fees for students studying in Higher Education in 2012. Headlines regarding large surpluses for universities would not do anything to prevent this perception (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2015).

The change in 2016 regarding how universities are monitored may also have shifted opinions about value for money. Two departments now oversee HE: the Department for Education for the teaching element of university life and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy for research outputs (McRae, 2018). This has divorced two vital functions of higher

education and there is no longer a pragmatic view that teaching and research are two sides of the same coin that offset each other in terms of cost.

It is worth noting that Higher Education Institutions being seen as businesses is not a new phenomenon and has been a growing trend since the 1960s. It is a logical application of marketization; by focusing on providing better value for money and applying a business model to universities, it is proposed students, society and the economy will prosper and processes will become more effective (Furedi, 2012). However, HE does not run under pure market forces as there is still state control, there are regulation of costs and state subsidies are applied as it is acknowledged by some that universities do benefit society as a whole (Brown, 2012). Due to this conflict, applying a pure business term like 'value for money' to higher education is troublesome and the problems begin with defining the term in this context at all.

Defining 'Value for Money'

The Oxford English Dictionary (2018) defines 'value for money' in terms of "reasonableness of cost of something in view of its perceived quality". In the transaction between buyer and seller the quality of a product is assessed in relation to its cost. In a standard business transaction this definition works; a cup of coffee can be judged by its taste and cost. But when the 'product' is many years away from being 'owned' by the 'customer' and is also reliant on their own input, it may be a bit of a stretch to expect the average student to make a judgment on value under these conditions. Are the students paying for a qualification that will get them into employment? Are they paying for the experience HE brings? Is it both? Any measurement tool put to students is requesting that they define an experience that is intangible as something quantifiable (Furedi, 2012). If we follow this business model through to its logical conclusion, is the customer always right anyway? Students may know how they want to be taught or what they prefer, but this may not be what is best for their progression and development.

The idea of value for money being applied to HE has become the norm; it is part of legislation within the UK with The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) specifically looking at improving the 'economy, efficiency and effectiveness' of HE providers in England with a similar focus on monetary issues being an element of The Higher Education (Wales) Act (2015). This emphasis on value for money has resulted in a number of government initiatives attempting to measure it. The Higher Education Policy Institute's (HEPI) *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2017), for example, asks this question of undergraduates: "Thinking of all the things you've been asked about in this questionnaire so far, which statement best describes your view of the value for money of your present course?" The previous questions touch on issues such as contact time, feedback, and the quality and qualifications of teaching staff. Only 35% of respondents rate their course as very good or good value for money, but the setting up of the question in relation to the previous statements could be viewed as leading. As it only measured 14000 students in 2017, less than 5% of the number of respondents to the National Student Survey (NSS), it has not generated as much impact among HEIs (McRae, 2018). Another recent survey, the *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey* (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2017) has raised the idea of 'low value for money courses', but overall does show higher potential earnings for those with degrees. The current economic climate would also focus students' minds on money in terms of future debt versus earnings, as would the media's often negative framing of value.

In 2017, the Teaching Excellence Framework was introduced which brings together student satisfaction from the NSS, destination of leavers data, continuation rates plus other factors such as the demographics of students and the location of the HEI (Office for Students [OfS], 2018). This measure is in its infancy, but will no doubt become a key focus for both

government and students. In the last twelve months, the Education Committee has set about measuring value in relation to the following variables: vice chancellor pay, destination data, graduate outcomes, social justice and supporting of disadvantaged students, quality of teaching and the role of the OfS (Parliament, 2017). Meanwhile the Office for Students (2018) in conjunction with the National Union of Students is currently conducting a 'major piece of research' investigating value for money, focusing on fees and other charges, what students recognise as value, students' concerns about value and improved transparency regarding this. The outcome of this research will be interesting to see.

None of these measures specifically focus on FY students and, in fact, the survey respondents are often final year undergraduates. Conducting one or more of these measures on a sample of FY students and comparing the outcome to the general student population would establish if there are any differences in terms of satisfaction towards their course or graduate earnings. This is proposed for future research in the larger doctoral thesis.

As can be seen, the measures used vary with metrics being employed in some cases and other qualitative, subjective measures being used in others, or a combination of the two. This certainly muddies the waters in terms of establishing what value for money is in HE, but it does acknowledge that defining value for money is complex and is not just related to finance. It is also important to consider who we are measuring value for money for. That is one of the difficulties in providing a clear definition and one which the next sections attempt to address.

Student Perspective

As previously outlined, many of the measures of value for money look at the student's perspective, as they rightly should. It is worth noting that there are potential issues in this approach as covered in the introduction; students may find it difficult to assess the value for money of their course whilst they are studying their qualification as the benefits may come in the future. Also, the view of the student as being a 'consumer' may not be the best fit for education at all; one of the purposes of a university education is to challenge individuals' thought processes and this may colour their view of the 'product' or 'service' being received. This section will investigate some of the factors influencing how a student considers the value of their university education with particular focus on FY provision.

Improved Skills and Support

There are quantifiable gains for students who complete FY courses in Wales. International students show an improvement in their completion rates: 95% compared to 87% for other HE courses. Home students have the same completion rates as other HE students, but are entering HE with a lower tariff (4% have no A-Levels, compared to 1% of general HE candidates). For the 155 students embarking on an extended degree, which follows the same pattern as FY provision, 100% of students achieved a 2:1 or higher compared to 66% of students on standard degree programmes in 2014/15 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). Why might there be these gains?

FY students report that they feel better equipped to deal with the demands of HE. Sanders and Daly (2014) state that increased skills, development of student identity and improved confidence are positive aspects of the FY experience identified by the student body and Lagrosen et al. (2004) reinforce this with the support and expertise of lecturers and their ability to understand the specific needs of FY students being seen as benefits. There is evidence that this level of support can lead to improved retention in FY students; Simeoni (2009) found the quality

of teaching and approachability of staff eases the transition of FY students onto their degree programme. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (2016) speak of the 'demystification' of Higher Education for FY students which would further support the idea of the importance of the transition FYs provide. Research on Foundation Degree students (a different type of course but with many similarities) further supports these claims. Ooms et al. (2012) found that 62% of Foundation Degree students reported positive effects on their self-confidence and 57% stated positive effects on life skills. Tierney and Scott (2005) present similar findings and also reported that while students found balancing their lives outside of university with the requirements of the course difficult, the support and guidance provided for Foundation Degree students eased these demands. When FY students have been asked about studying in FE, they report a variety of reasons why they did not want to: the improved facilities at HE, access to HE lecturers, ability to apply for a loan (Universities Wales, 2016) and the 'demystification of HE' (HEFCW, 2016).

Employment Prospects

Graduates are more likely to be employed, earn higher wages, have higher job satisfaction and find it easier to change jobs (Brown, 2010). A HE experience creates confidence, independent thinking, open mindedness and the ability to work collaboratively (Millburn, 2009). These skills are going to be vital in the job market of the not too distant future; it is estimated that by 2020, 80% of new jobs will be graduate level (Universities Wales, 2015). Employers value a number of skills that graduates demonstrate including the ability to think quickly, show initiative and challenge orthodox methods (Hogarth et al., 2007). Although there is more to employment than potential earnings, the facts cannot be disputed: graduates earn on average £12,000 more a year than non-graduates (Office of National Statistics, 2018) and lifetime earnings are estimated to be £168,000 greater for men with a degree compared to those without and a staggering £252,000 greater for women (Walker and Zhu, 2013). Considering FY students in Wales are more likely to be from Communities First areas (the 10% of the most deprived areas in Wales) and from low participation areas (Universities Wales, 2016), these improved employment opportunities are highly significant. In addition, employers will reap the rewards of the skills gained and the innovative ways of thinking those with a university degree will bring to their roles (UK Innovation Survey, 2009) and by increasing productivity at work (Hermansson, et al., 2010).

Social Mobility and Outlook

A university education is not just about increasing potential earnings but also about the improved access to political, social, educational and cultural capital for the students and their own family - although the role earnings plays in relation to these factors is complex (Millburn, 2009). Blanden, Goodman, Gregg and Machin (2004) found a causal link between higher income and increased educational attainment at all levels: a well-educated parent who earns more will have better educated children improving their socio-economic status and graduates are half as likely to experience their children having difficulties with their education than non-graduates (Bynner and Egerton, 2001). Having a parent with a university education positively impacts on a child's cultural capital; their ability to present themselves in the accepted way for HE life and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, university educated individuals are more likely to participate in local government and take advantage of social resources (Feinstein, Budge, Vorhaus and Duckworth, 2008; Brown, 2010). As already stated, FY students are more likely to come from areas of deprivation or low HE participation, so HE offers these students opportunities that they might not otherwise experience.

In addition, research has found that those with a university education were more tolerant of the idea of immigration and the benefits this brings (Borgonovi, 2012). This could be due to levels of education or understanding, or explained by Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954). This theory states that mere contact, but especially that in which there is a common shared goal, will reduce prejudice. In Wales, only half of FY students come from Wales (Universities Wales, 2016). The rest are other UK and international students. This relates to a criterion for intergroup contact: working in close proximity with individuals students would not usually meet with the shared common goal of passing the course decreases any prejudices held and improves relationships between disparate groups.

Health Benefits

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) reports that graduates live for 8 years longer than those with lower educational attainment (Guerra-Carrillo, Katovich and Bunge (2017) have found that the more highly educated an individual, the more effective their cognitive functioning becomes; lower cognitive functioning is a key indicator in dementia. Cause and effect is difficult to establish in any of these studies; is it the educational process that makes individuals more healthy or the increased earnings that allow for healthier choices? Fletcher and Frisvold (2009) have demonstrated that graduates are more likely to make use of preventative measures such as check-ups and screening programmes whilst Baum, Ma and Payea (2010) found graduates were nearly twice as likely to take part in regular, vigorous exercise. Tillman et al. (2017) found a decreased risk of coronary heart disease among university educated individuals. Potential mechanisms could include being less likely to smoke (Bynner et al., 2003), having a lower body mass index (Cutler and Lleras-Muney, 2010) and having lower blood lipid levels. Graduates are also less likely to drink to excess (Kuntsche, Rehm and Gmel, 2004). The links between social class, income, employment and health is well established in the literature (Knott, 2015). By providing opportunities for those with lower incomes or from deprived areas to enter HE FYs can improve the health and life opportunities of certain sectors of society.

Contributing to Society

Bynner et al. (2003) found that those with a degree were more likely to vote, get involved with public debate and be less cynical about the political process. As previously stated, FY students are more likely to come from socially deprived areas in Wales where turnout to vote is lower (The Electoral Commission, 2005). Graduates are also one and a half times more likely to volunteer, and this increases as graduates get older. There is also a decrease in anti-social behaviour; an inverse correlation exists between the number of people having a degree level qualification and the level of crime (Feinstein et al, 2008). Children from socially deprived areas are also more likely to show criminality due to a number of factors — poverty and lack of opportunity being two examples (Morris and O'Malley, 2016). If their parents are able to access university education through courses such as FYs, the generational effects again become evident.

Debt

The elephant in the room in any discussion regarding value for money of HE is the current fee system in England and Wales. In particular FY students will pay an additional year's fees compar-

ed to those who enter directly onto an undergraduate degree. Taking into account factors such as interest, living costs, and potential loss of earnings while studying, the figure of £50,000 of debt quoted earlier does not seem difficult to imagine. However, for Welsh students there are a number of caveats to this. All Welsh students will be eligible for a £1000 non-repayable grant. In addition, further grants are means tested for students from lower income households. There are also schemes in place to help once the loan becomes repayable (Careers Wales, 2018). Another factor to consider is that the total loan amount does not have an impact on the repayment amount and repayment begins only when earnings reach a certain threshold (£25,000). Society, potential students and their parents are in desperate need of education on what 'student debt' really means (Universities UK, 2018). Another issue is that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more debt adverse than their middle class equivalents (Hinton-Smith, 2012). As a larger proportion of FY students come from these backgrounds, education on what the debt means is something that needs to be explored.

Conclusion

Most measures of value for money include student opinion and outcomes, as they rightly should and the immediate gains/costs. Few measures, however, consider the 'softer' skills gained, such as confidence, or the long-term gains for students such as the potential impact on their children. There is also work to be done on communicating the nature of student debt. More positively, it might be helpful to focus on communicating the message presented through research carried out by the OECD (2011) that graduates have increased life satisfaction over non-graduates, even when taking increased income into account (cf. ONS, 2011).

Institutional Perspective

The benefits felt by FY students are also important for HEIs. These include the improved completion rates of international students and the outcomes achieved by Home students entering HEIs with lower entry tariffs via Fys. There are also other areas where FY courses can provide benefits to the HEIs who offer them.

Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) Agenda

More than three quarters of FY students in Wales study STEM subjects (Universities Wales, 2016). and this figure would be even higher if extended degrees were taken into account — with all of these being science based in Wales. The need for individuals with STEM skills is seen as being important at a national (HEFCE, 2009) and Welsh level (HEFCW, 2016). There is seen to be a shortage of potential employees with these skills. With more than 75% of FY students studying STEM subjects, this has the potential to contribute to a recognised shortfall in the current knowledge base in the UK. There are clearly a number of caveats to this: it will be necessary for the graduates of STEM related degrees to progress onto jobs in this area of which there is no guarantee. It has also been suggested that the claims made by the funding councils in England and Wales in relation to this shortage are inaccurate: there are enough STEM graduates in the UK, but they are not choosing to work in technical industries for a number of reasons (Phillips, 2013). It could, however, be argued that by educating a larger number of individuals in this area (and Fys will naturally contribute to this), the potential employment field will expand. Additional benefits to HEIs include the research outputs — and related finances — generated by strong STEM representation. Society as a whole also benefits; the internet, CAT scans and numerous

vaccines are a handful of examples of the life changing innovations that have their roots in university research (Online Universities.com, 2012).

Meeting the Widening Participation Agenda

A number of studies have investigated and attempted to define 'non-traditional' students. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) suggest they have one or more of the following characteristics: being older than average, from a working class background, from an ethnic minority background, an immigrant or from an unconventional educational background. This fits with HEFCW's (2016) findings on FY students in Wales that they are 8% more likely to be an older student and 6% more likely to be from areas of deprivation than other new entrants. Interestingly, there is a higher proportion of male students on FY programs: 62% compared to 39% of first year students (Universities Wales; 2016). In general, there is an under-representation of men in HE (Tight, 2012; Hillman and Robinson, 2016), so FY programmes are going some way to addressing this. With those from lower socioeconomic groups making up 50% of the population but only 29% of first-time undergraduates (McCaig, 2012) FY also balances the socioeconomic disparities in HE to some extent. For example, 44% of FY students in Wales come from areas of deprivation and 37% are aged 21 or older (HEFCW, 2016). However, Trowler (2015) disagrees that there is a standard definition for 'non-traditional' students and that the concept is more difficult to unpick; although white males are under-represented in HE, Gorard (2008) suggests they would not be included in typical definitions of 'non-traditional'. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) have noted that the number of non-traditional learners in higher education has grown (UNESCO, 1998 cited in Schuetze and Slowey, 2002) but there has been little strategic planning to meet the needs of this cohort and so FY provision might have an important role to play here.

Income

Universities charge an additional year's fees for FY students and FY students contribute to the considerable amount of income generated for Welsh HEIs and the Welsh economy as a whole (Times Higher Education, 2017). This additional year's cost to students was the reason given for the Welsh Government's concern about FYs. It is worth noting that a large proportion (50% of 775 students in 2015/16) of FY students in Wales are not from Wales (Universities Wales, 2016) and so would not be eligible for any additional support, meaning fees received by HEIs are not subsidized by the Welsh government. As previously stated, some students welcome the opportunity to apply for a loan, a choice that would not be afforded to them in FE. There are other economic benefits to HEIs and the wider, local economy from having a strong HE presence. Universities in Wales generated £600 million of export earnings and 4.6% of all global trade in the country (Universities' Wales, 2015) while in the UK as a whole this figure is £5.66 billion (Universities UK, 2017) with FY provision being a small, but nonetheless important part of this.

Conclusion

FYs are an additional income stream for HEIs. They also meet a number of important agendas in Wales and beyond: they attract under-represented groups and are disproportionately tailored towards STEM subjects. This is fulfilling the wider societal functions of enabling social mobility for those who may not otherwise have the opportunity to study at university and filling the skills gap that exists in the workforce to allow the UK to compete on the world stage. 10% of FY students in Wales are international with an additional 39% coming from the rest of the UK (Universities Wales, 2016). This opens up the country to individuals who may not otherwise

come here and they will reside in Wales for four years with all the positive impacts to the economy that brings.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the issue of value for money in relation to HE and the parties impacted by university study. It is clear the benefits are wide ranging and impact various layers of society; the more highly educated the individual, the happier, healthier and wealthier they generally are. These all mean less reliance on public services and more tax being paid, which benefits wider society. There is no doubt that HE is a costly enterprise for students and the tax payer, but the overall returns are positive. When looking directly at FY students, they are more likely to be from lower socio-economic groups and low participation areas, so social mobility is being encouraged with all the consequent benefits that brings. In addition, STEM subjects are the most commonly studied FY courses, which provide the UK with the workforce the 21st century demands.

As previously mentioned, some of the negative discourse surrounding HE is due to the costs borne by the tax payer and the feelings of 'unfairness' that students and HEIs get that level of support when other areas of society do not. There is no disputing that HE is subsidized by the state with 35% of fees paid by the tax payer (Universities UK, 2017). However, that is not the full picture. It is estimated that HE contributes £21.5 billion to the UK economy (1.2% of GDP) (Universities UK, 2017) and international students contribute £20 billion more even when taking into account the additional strains on public services. Part of this is the increased earnings enjoyed by graduates; London Economics (2011) states the return on students' degrees being part funded is 10.8% with each graduate providing £89,000 extra tax revenue over their working life. These figures are for university students as a whole, but FY courses will have an impact on this.

A number of issues have been recognised through the writing of this article, which need to be addressed if Fys are to continue to flourish, and benefits identified would positively impact on HE in general. The majority of measures of value for money described in the introduction focus on areas experienced by the students now; The Student Academic Experience Survey, for example, emphasises how well students feel they are taught. If discussion on the far-reaching, positive consequences of HE participation was broadened, less emphasis might be placed on short-term experience. The way in which student debt works also requires clarification for students and their supporters. There are many misconceptions regarding student debt and its potential reconfiguration (as is being suggested in the press as this report is being written) may be one way in which this is addressed (Morgan, 2018). Information on the fact the debt does not need to be paid until earnings pass a certain threshold, that the monthly payments are capped regardless of how much you earn and that there are numerous grants and bursaries available could all be more widely acknowledged and published.

The way in which HEIs approach widening participation is also something to be explored. The student body in the UK is not solely made up of 18 year old, A-Level students and, for once, white males are under-represented. Some see the measures put in place by HEIs to address the needs of non-traditional students as being 'tokenistic' and that WP is effectively a way to increase numbers rather than helping under-represented groups (Hinton-Smith, 2012). With FY provision being made up of non-traditional students in greater numbers than other areas of HE, there is an opportunity to focus on what can be done to support these learners, but also to offer these lessons to HE in general. FY lecturers will have countless insights which could benefit the whole institution.

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About the Author

Marie has worked with adult learners for 19 years. This has included Further Education and, for the past six years, Higher Education. Her educational background is psychology and she has an MSc in Clinical and Abnormal Psychology and is about to qualify as a professional coach and mentor. Marie has recently started a PhD and the main research question is the same as this paper. Marie considers herself fortunate to be the Course Leader of a vibrant Foundation Year course and to have made great contacts through the Foundation Year Network, so early indications are that finding participants should not be too onerous a task. She has recently adopted two fantastic children, both under three, so has developed a key interest in the impact of early life trauma. In addition to this being a personal area of significance, Marie is beginning to see the impact this may have on many of her students who may not have had the best start in life and would like to explore the implications of this in older learners.

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