

Abstract

As a result of government policies, increasing numbers of students are progressing to Honours degree programmes via Foundation Degrees. Many of the existing strategies that are in place to manage transitions within higher education have been developed in response to the needs of young, full-time students accessing higher education in a traditional manner at the usual time. This grounded theory study investigates the experiences of groups of non-traditional, mature, part-time students in order to understand and explain the transition from Foundation Degree to full degree study from their perspectives. The current study uses biographical data sheets, group and individual interviews to draw on the experiences of a total of 74 participants who completed their degrees in further education colleges and in the partner university. The grounded theory that emerged suggests that a student's experience of transition is linked to their ability to create and maintain a secure identity as a student. The findings indicate that the student identity provides a stable source of intrinsic support while encouraging adaptability to changing circumstances. An integral facet of this process is the capacity to adopt a transitional identity that emphasises the positive aspects of change and is predicated on drawing strength from coping with change. In order to present a comprehensive consideration of the data that contributed to the grounded theory, literature across a number of disciplines is discussed. The grounded theory submits that establishing a transitional identity not only facilitates the current transition but might also create a resource that could support future transitions by concentrating on the opportunities that accompany change. This should resonate with individuals undertaking transitions in different circumstances, and therefore, have application beyond education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	
Abstract	i
Table of contents	ii
List of figures	vi
List of abbreviations	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Definitions	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 The background and development of Foundation Degrees	7
1.1 Aims of Foundation Degrees	8
1.2 The role Foundation Degrees in widening participation	10
1.3 Studying higher education in a further education institution	13
1.4 Changes to the higher education sector in Wales	16
Chapter 2 Theories of transition	19
2.1 Theories of transition in adulthood	20
2.2 Developmental theory of transition	21
2.3 Contextual theory of transition	23
2.4 Lifespan theory of transition	26
2.5 Transitional theory of transition	29
2.6 Coping with transition	32
2.7 Stress appraisal	34
Chapter 3 Selection of methodological approach	37
3.1 Consideration of qualitative approach	38
3.2 Ethnography	39
3.3 Phenomenology	42
3.4 Selection of grounded theory	45
3.5 Key Characteristics of grounded theory	47
3.6 The development of grounded theory	49
3.7 Selected interpretations of grounded theory	52
3.8 Criticisms and limitations of grounded theory	57

Chapter 4 Design of the current study	61
4.1 Geographical context	62
4.2 Initial planning	64
4.3 Ethical considerations	65
4.4 Pilot study	67
4.5 Potential for bias	68
4.6 Sampling strategy	71
4.7 Data collection methods	72
4.8 Biographical data sheets	73
4.9 Interviews	75
4.10 Group interviews	76
4.11 Individual interviews	78
4.12 Timing of the interviews	79
4.13 Memo writing	81
4.14 Coding	83
4.15 The grounded theory approach adopted in the current study	86
Chapter 5 Data analysis	91
5.1 Biographical data sheets	91
5.2 Group interview 1	97
5.3 Group interview 2	105
5.4 Group interview 3	110
5.5 Group interview 4	114
Chapter 6 Analysis of individual interviews	119
6.1 Revisiting the coding process	120
6.2 experiences of the Foundation Degree	123
6.3 Experiences of the Honours degree	126
6.4 Relationships between students and lecturers	133
6.5 Becoming comfortable with degree study	137
6.6 Feeling part of a group	140
6.7 Continuing on the course	146
6.8 The lecturer perspective	154
Chapter 7 The generation of the grounded theory	161
7.1 Expecting	164
7.2 Handicapping	166
7.3 Relating	169
7.4 Adapting	171
7.5 Depending	173
7.6 Persevering	178
7.7 Changing	181
7.8 The lecturer perspective	182
7.9 Additional interviews	186

Chapter 8 The grounded theory	187
8.1 Issues that contributed to developing the grounded theory	188
8.2 Development of conceptual categories	190
8.3 Partnership	192
8.4 Clarity	196
8.5 Control	197
8.6 Confidence	198
8.7 Autonomy	200
8.8 The core category – identity	201
8.9 The transitional theory	207
8.10 The grounded theory	209
Chapter 9 Discussion of findings	215
9.1 Significant issues	216
9.2 Group relationships	218
9.3 Differences between HE and FE approaches	220
9.4 Formation of the student identity	222
9.5 Identity motives	226
9.6 Confidence, clarity and control	231
9.7 Claims to originality	
9.8 Issues relating to students views and perceptions of the transition from FD to Honours degree	239
9.9 Issues relating to the practical application of the grounded theory	240
9.10 Issues relating to the original application of the methodology	242
9.11 Additional issues relating to originality	243
9.12 Evaluation of the current study	245
Chapter 10 Conclusions	252
10.1 Proposal 1	253
10.2 Proposal 2	255
10.3 Proposal 3	256
10.4 Proposal 4	258
10.5 Proposal 5	260
10.6 Research summary	263
10.7 Reflective evaluation of using the methodology	264
10.8 Future research	269
10.9 Concluding thoughts	272

Appendices

- 1 Ethics Approval Form
- 2 Information sheet (students)
- 3 Information sheet (lecturers)
- 4 Consent form
- 5 Biographical data sheet (FD students)
- 6 Schedule for group interview (Honours degree students)
- 7 Example of a memo

List of Figures

Fig. 1 Data Collection	p. 61
Fig. 2 Foundation Degree/Honours degree provision	p. 62
Fig. 3 Research sample	p. 71
Fig. 4 Grounded theory process	p. 86
Fig. 5 Responses to Question 1	p. 91
Fig. 6 Responses to Question 2	p. 91
Fig. 7 Responses to Question 3	p. 92
Fig. 8 Responses to Question 4	p. 92
Fig. 9 Responses to Question 5	p. 93
Fig. 10 Responses to Question 6	p. 93
Fig. 11 Responses to Question 7	p. 93
Fig. 12 Responses to Question 8	p. 94
Fig. 13 Responses to Question 9	p. 94
Fig. 14 Responses to Question 10	p. 95
Fig. 15 NVivo Screen Shot – Individual interview transcription	p. 96
Fig. 16 NVivo Screen Shot – Nodes initial coding stage	p. 96
Fig. 17 Group Interview 1 – Initial coding	p.103
Fig. 18 Group Interview 2 – Initial coding	p.106
Fig. 19 Additional codes identified in Group Interview 2	p.109
Fig. 20 Additional codes identified in Group Interview 3	p.113
Fig. 21 Group Interview 4 – Initial coding	p.117
Fig. 22 Focused code – expecting	p.125
Fig. 23 Focused code – handicapping	p.132
Fig. 24 Focused code – relating	p.136
Fig. 25 Focused code – adapting	p.139
Fig. 26 Focused code – depending	p.145
Fig. 27 Focused code – persevering	p.153
Fig. 28 The tutor perspective	p.156
Fig. 29 Focused code – changing	p.162
Fig. 30 Focused codes that emerged from constant comparative analysis	p.163
Fig. 31 Summary of significant issues	p.188
Fig. 32 Transition to degree study - Model stage 1	p.191
Fig. 33 Transition to degree study - Model stage 2	p.195
Fig. 34 Transition to degree study - Model stage 3	p.203
Fig. 35 Examples of the contradictions that emerged during transition	p.207
Fig. 36 Model of the grounded theory	p.209
Fig. 37 Characteristics of the student identity	p.210
Fig. 38 Developing a stable yet evolving student identity	p.213
Fig. 39 Selection of issues that contributed to the originality of the current study	p.244

Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BDS	Biographical Data Sheet
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BIS	Department of Business, Innovation and Skills
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CMU	Coalition of Modern Universities (now Million+)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (now Department for Education)
FD	Foundation Degree
FE	Further Education
FEI	Further Education Institute
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institute
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HND	Higher National Diploma
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QCF	Qualifications and Curriculum Framework
TA	Teaching Assistant
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admission Service
UK	United Kingdom
WG	Welsh Government
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government

Acknowledgements

I thank all the students and tutors who consented to participate in the current study. Their willingness to give their time and to share their views and aspirations is greatly appreciated.

I wish to thank my Supervisors, Dr Ray Higginson, Dr Gina Dolan, and in particular my Director of Studies, Dr Andrew Rogers, for their support, encouragement and advice.

I want to express my gratitude to my family, Ian, Jake and Oli, for their patience, understanding and their belief in my ability to complete this paper.

Definitions

Foundation Degrees

Foundation Degrees, the first higher education qualification to be developed for 25 years, are located within level 5 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). The Qualifications and Curriculum Framework (QCF) defined the award as having a 'minimum of 240 credits across levels 3, 4 and 5 (with a minimum of 90 credits at level 5 and a maximum of 30 credits at level 3)' (HEFCW 2004). Foundation Degrees are usually designed to be studied over a two year period, or the part-time equivalent. They have several defining characteristics: 'employer involvement; accessibility; articulation and progression; flexibility; and partnership' (QAA 2010).

Non-traditional student

Non-traditional students may be described as entrants to higher education who have population characteristics that are not normally associated with higher education entrants. Non-traditional students come from social classes, ethnic groups or age groups that are under-represented (Harvey 2009).

Morey et al (2003) suggested that non-traditional students include mature students; those from lower socio-economic backgrounds; first generation undergraduates; students from ethnic minorities; and students with disabilities.

The current study

The current study refers to the grounded theory study that was conducted into transitions from Foundation Degree to Honours degree study described in this paper.

FD/degree transition

This term describes the particular version of transition explored in the current study. It refers to the progression from a Foundation Degree to a programme that enables the student to top-up to an Honours degree. All students in the current study followed their Foundation Degree courses in a further education college. Some students in the current study continued to the top-up programme in their further education college. Others moved to the University. Regardless of the setting, none of the students joined the third year of an existing degree course. They continued their degrees on programmes that offered discrete top-up provision.