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CASE STUDY

# Fostering belonging and reflection: supporting continuation and degree success among foundation and year 0 students

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## ABSTRACT

This case study examines the impact of targeted pedagogic interventions on student progression and continuation within a Foundation (Year 0) programme at a UK university. Over four academic years, a series of community-focused strategies were implemented, including a reflective Personal Development Planning (PDP) module, structured collaborative group work, adaptive interdisciplinary curriculum design, and initiatives to foster a sense of belonging. Analysis of student outcomes indicates improvements in Foundation pass rates, progression to degree study, and continuation within higher education compared to earlier cohorts. The findings suggest that reflective practice supports student resilience and self-awareness, while collaborative and interdisciplinary learning strengthens peer networks and social integration. Access to degree-level spaces and responsive curriculum adjustments further enhanced engagement and motivation. Overall, the study provides evidence that holistic, relational approaches can positively influence both academic outcomes and student experience, offering practical strategies for supporting diverse cohorts and strengthening transitions into higher education.

**KEYWORDS:** continuation, student belonging, reflective learning, learning development, foundation year, widening participation.

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## Introduction

Foundation or Year 0 programmes serve a vital role in higher education by enabling students with diverse academic and social backgrounds to transition successfully into degree-level study. Students entering these programmes often face challenges including varied prior academic achievement, differing levels of preparedness, and, in some cases, mental health or learning support needs. These challenges can impact retention, progression, and overall student experience.

This case study presents an analysis of a four-year curriculum intervention in a Foundation programme at a UK university. The programme aimed to improve pass rates, degree progression, and student engagement through strategic pedagogic changes. Interventions were designed to enhance reflective practice, collaborative learning, and a sense of belonging, while also supporting student satisfaction, wellbeing, and academic success. This focus was particularly important because it was observed that even students who successfully completed the Foundation programme were not always passing their subsequent degree courses.

It is also important to note that the average entry grades of students joining the Foundation course have slightly decreased in recent years. Some applicants who might previously have entered Foundation are now admitted directly to the first year of a degree, resulting in cohorts with a broader range of academic preparedness. At the same time, cohort sizes and the teaching team have reduced, leading to the combination of groups. While this initially required rethinking delivery and group dynamics, it ultimately had a positive impact: larger, mixed groups encouraged peer interaction, and a smaller teaching team enabled stronger personal connections with students and more consistent pedagogic reflection.

The programme sought to level the playing field for students from more challenging educational or personal backgrounds and respond to changing student profiles, evolving attitudes towards higher education, and declining national enrolment figures, where continuation and retention have become increasingly important. Additionally, the interventions accounted for post-COVID shifts in student learning patterns, engagement, and social interaction.

While improvements in degree progression cannot be attributed solely to changes at Foundation level, since developments in parent degree programmes may also have



contributed, the evidence suggests that the Foundation experience placed students in a strong position for future success. Although the context is arts-focused, the findings are broadly relevant across disciplines.

## Literature review

Transition to higher education is widely recognised as a critical period that can significantly affect student retention, engagement, and success (Stuttard, 2007; Thomas, 2012).

Interventions that foster reflective practice, resilience, and self-regulation are associated with improved progression and adaptability, equipping students to manage the demands of degree study (Shor & Freire, 1987; Tangney, 2014).

Collaborative learning and team-based projects have been linked to stronger peer networks, increased engagement, and enhanced problem-solving skills (Belbin, 1993; de Bono, 1985; Cowan, 2015). Research on peer-to-peer learning further emphasises the importance of hidden relational behaviours that develop in trusted study groups, where mutual support, confidence-building, and the sharing of coping strategies contribute to long-term student success, even when such benefits are not immediately measurable (Devenish et al., 2009).

Alongside these pedagogic approaches, recent developments in relational and philosophical perspectives on education provide further insight into how belonging and engagement are fostered in higher education. Biesta (2013) critiques the dominance of constructivist and performative models of learning, arguing that teaching should be understood not merely as the facilitation of learning but as an encounter in which students can experience being taught. This involves exposure to new ideas, difficult knowledge, and forms of subjective truth that matter for one's life, positioning teaching as a relational and transformative act rather than an instrumental one. Biesta's emphasis on challenge, dialogue, and the teacher's active role in creating conditions for meaningful educational experience resonates strongly with pedagogic strategies designed to support transition and resilience in diverse cohorts.

Research on student belonging similarly foregrounds the importance of relationships, interaction, and everyday connections in shaping engagement and persistence. Felten et al. (2023) emphasise that learning institutions are fundamentally a relationship-rich environment, where day-to-day conversations with peers, staff, and faculty, particularly within the classroom, play a crucial role in helping students thrive. In particular, 'new



majority students, including those from marginalised or non-traditional backgrounds, benefit significantly from intentional opportunities to build these relationships and connect with the people and programmes designed to support their wellbeing and academic success (Felten et al., 2023, pp. 3-4). Such insights underline the importance of designing learning environments that promote community, visibility, and a sense of not being academically or personally on one's own.

The interventions implemented in this Foundation programme included a reflective Personal Development Planning (PDP) module, collaborative group projects, and adaptive, interdisciplinary curriculum adjustments, which directly apply these principles.

Interdisciplinary engagement was particularly important in this context, as working across subject boundaries can broaden students' perspectives, support more flexible and complex problem-solving, and help them recognise that knowledge is not neatly divided in the ways academic structures often suggest (Lattuca, 2001). By creating structured opportunities for dialogue, shared inquiry, and cross-disciplinary engagement, the programme sought to cultivate belonging, relational learning, and resilience. These strategies aim to enhance continuation and degree progression while offering a holistic, evidence-informed approach to supporting diverse student cohorts as they transition into higher education.

### **Methods: case study approach**

This study employs a case study approach to explore the impact of curriculum and pedagogic redesign on student outcomes. Key interventions included:

- **Reflective PDP module:** transition from skills-based to reflective focus, including ethics, learning styles, neurodiversity, team-working, and resilience.
- **Group work integration:** collaborative projects across modules, including group critiques using the 'six thinking hats' method (de Bono, 1985), shared research projects, joint inquiry, and mini projects.
- **Interdisciplinary cohorts:** combined cohort classes (e.g., Fashion, Photography, Visual Communication and Make-up and Hair Design) to foster community and peer learning.
- **Sense of belonging:** encouraging use of degree-level spaces to reinforce connection with the broader school and future progression. Working together across disciplines



and in group activities also strengthened peer relationships and a sense of belonging, helping students build supportive networks and mutual understanding.

- **Essay module:** structured development of writing, research, and analytical skills to prepare students for degree expectations.
- **Online learning completion tracking:** 'completion' button to track tasks and provide students with a sense of achievement.
- **Foundation course leader forum:** a cross-university platform for sharing good practice and addressing challenges.
- **Adaptive curriculum:** minor adjustments to curriculum content to reflect cohort composition without over-specialising.

To operationalise these interventions, a range of structured collaborative and inquiry-based activities were embedded across the programme. Joint inquiry tasks included interdisciplinary group projects, such as developing a concept for a new drink in a 'Dragons' Den'-style challenge designed to place all students on an equal footing by asking them to work outside their subject area. Students also engaged in shared reading exercises, working through academic texts collectively to normalise challenge, exchange coping strategies, and build confidence in tackling unfamiliar material.

Reflective and dialogic practice was further supported through ethics-based discussions in art and design, which encouraged students to consider multiple viewpoints and learn from one another through an ethos of respecting each other and there being no wrong answers. Opportunities to widen peer networks were embedded throughout the year, including mixing PDP groups from different pathways, undertaking psychogeographical fieldwork tasks in small interdisciplinary teams, and participating in extracurricular workshops alongside degree-level students. A focus on belonging was strengthened by scheduling independent study sessions in degree-pathway studios and by facilitating open conversations around sensory and learning needs, where both students and staff shared experiences to foster trust, reduce stigma, and model professional vulnerability. Group critiques also incorporated de Bono's (1985) *Six Thinking Hats* framework, which supported students in developing structured feedback skills while receiving a wider range of constructive perspectives from their peers. These activities collectively aimed to create an environment where students could take



intellectual risks, build relationships, and experience a sense of community and ownership within the school.

### **Data sources:**

- Student outcomes (Foundation pass rates, progression to degree, withdrawal, and transfer data) over four academic years (2021–25).
- Qualitative observations of student engagement, participation in group activities, and reflective outputs. These observations were informal and unstructured, consistent with practitioner enquiry approaches in which the aim is to generate contextual insights into learner behaviour rather than produce systematically coded qualitative datasets.

## **Results**

**Table 1. Student outcomes (2021–25) \*\***

<b>Overall Trends (2021–25)</b>	<b>2021–22</b>	<b>2022–23</b>	<b>2023–24</b>	<b>2024–25</b>
<b>Foundation Pass Rate</b>	80%	78.9%	85.2%	100%
<b>Progression to Degree (of passers)</b>	85%	87%	87%	92%*
<b>Currently Studying/ Completed</b>	50% (completed or continuing)	53% (continuing)	87% (continuing)	92% (continuing)
<b>Withdrawn/ Transferred</b>	45%	33%	13%	8%

\*Progression figure is based on current enrolment/continuing students and transfers, as these students have not yet completed their degrees.

\*\*Given known limitations in institutional recording of Foundation-level progression, these data have been triangulated with programme-level records and staff knowledge to provide the most reliable account possible.

### **Overall trends commentary (2021–25)**

Across the four cohorts from 2021–25, there is a clear positive trajectory in foundation pass rates and student progression. Foundation pass rates have steadily increased from 80% in 2021–22 to a full 100% in 2024–25, reflecting the impact of targeted curriculum



enhancements, improved student support, and more reflective, skills-based approaches to learning.

Progression to degree courses for those who pass foundation has remained strong, averaging around 87% for earlier cohorts, and rising to approximately 92% for the most recent 2024–25 cohort, who are mostly still enrolled. The proportion of students continuing or completing their studies has also improved, from 50% in 2021–22 to 92% in 2024–25, indicating that changes to teaching strategies, group work, the PDP module, and fostering a sense of belonging are supporting sustained engagement.

Withdrawal and transfer rates have correspondingly decreased, from 45% in 2021–22 to 8% in the most recent cohort, showing that students are increasingly supported to remain on their chosen pathways or make informed transitions when necessary. These trends suggest that structured reflection, collaborative learning, targeted skills development, and enhanced support mechanisms positively influence both retention and progression, providing a strong foundation for future academic success.

### ***Key observations:***

- **PDP and reflection:** students demonstrated increased self-awareness, resilience, and reflective practice, contributing to improved engagement and reduced withdrawal. These skills, while not always directly practical for their future courses, helped students become more adaptable for degree-level study and potential future employment.
- **Collaborative learning:** group work fostered peer support, mutual learning, and problem-solving skills. Students reported feeling part of a community, which was linked to higher continuation rates.
- **Sense of belonging:** access to degree-level spaces reinforced students' connection to the school and future degree pathways.
- **Adaptive curriculum:** adjusting module content to reflect cohort composition while maintaining interdisciplinary exposure allowed students to see relevance to their interests without limiting broader learning.



## Discussion

The findings presented here build on existing research that emphasises the importance of reflective, collaborative, and community-based approaches during the transition to higher education (Cowan, 2015; Thomas, 2012), demonstrating how these principles can be practically applied within a Foundation context.

The analysis of four years of Foundation student outcomes indicates that the combination of a reflective Personal Development Planning (PDP) module, structured collaborative activities, and the promotion of a sense of belonging has had a measurable positive effect on student progression and continuation. The PDP module, which focuses on critical reflection, team working, learning styles and resilience rather than purely technical skills, appears to have enhanced students' self-awareness and capacity to navigate the challenges of higher education. This aligns with previous research suggesting that reflective and dialogical learning can foster self-regulation and empower students to take ownership of their educational journeys (Shor & Freire, 1987; Tangney, 2014).

Increased group work across modules not only enabled students to develop practical skills collaboratively but also contributed to the formation of a supportive peer community. The use of interdisciplinary cohorts, combining students from different subject areas, further strengthened this sense of community, allowing students to learn from each other's approaches and perspectives. These findings support Cowan's (2015) assertion that collaborative and team-based learning environments enhance engagement and peer networks, contributing to improved confidence and academic persistence. In gathering feedback from students on the embedding of group work across the programme, ethical approval was granted by the University, and informed consent was obtained for the use of anonymised student feedback in publication. One student reflected that becoming more open about their needs during the year helped them feel 'included, confident, and connected', noting that this shift enabled them to participate more fully in class discussions and build meaningful friendships. They described initially trying to 'hide' aspects of themselves but explained that supportive teaching practices and open conversations within the group helped them realise 'others wouldn't judge me', ultimately allowing them to engage more authentically with peers.



The interventions also highlight the importance of creating a sense of belonging through access to degree-level spaces and integration into the broader school environment. Students who likely felt connected to the wider academic community demonstrated higher engagement and lower withdrawal rates, supporting earlier findings that institutional belonging and positive staff-student relationships are central to retention and success (Stuttard, 2007; Thomas, 2012). The adaptive curriculum, tailored each year to reflect the cohort's composition while maintaining interdisciplinary exposure, also allowed students to see the relevance of their work to their intended degree pathways without over-specialising. Overall, the findings indicate that holistic approaches combining reflective practice, collaborative learning, and community-building can improve both measurable outcomes and student experience. While most literature focuses on discipline-specific interventions, this case study demonstrates the potential of these strategies to be applied across a range of disciplines, particularly for diverse student cohorts in Foundation or Year 0 programmes.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This case study demonstrates that integrating reflective learning, collaborative activities, and community-focused strategies within Foundation programmes can positively influence both academic outcomes and students' sense of belonging. The observed improvements in pass rates, degree progression, and continuation suggest that targeted curriculum interventions can help address the challenges faced by students entering higher education from diverse academic, social, and personal backgrounds, including those affected by post-COVID shifts in learning patterns. This aligns with wider findings that reflective, collaborative, and belonging-focused pedagogies can enhance self-regulation, resilience, and engagement (Tangney, 2014; Thomas, 2012), reinforcing their value in supporting transitions into higher education.

While the findings provide evidence of what has worked in this particular context, it is important to note that these should be regarded as recommendations rather than prescriptive solutions. Different courses, student cohorts, and institutional contexts may require adaptation, and getting to know students as individuals, understanding their needs, aspirations, and potential barriers, remains a key component of successful intervention.

Although the outcome data indicate clear improvements across the four cohorts, the study is limited by its primarily quantitative focus and by the nature of the case study design. It is



therefore not possible to attribute these successes solely to the interventions described, as wider institutional developments, cohort characteristics, or external factors may also have contributed. The qualitative insights drawn from practitioner observation and informal student feedback provide useful context but do not constitute systematic qualitative data. Further research incorporating interviews, focus groups, or reflective student narratives would offer a richer understanding of how students experienced the interventions, and would strengthen claims about belonging, confidence, and engagement.

The suggested strategies include:

- **Embedding reflective modules** across disciplines to encourage resilience, self-awareness, and critical thinking, with sessions on ethics, team working, and reflective practice.
- **Structuring collaborative projects** that foster peer networks, mutual learning, and a sense of community through group critiques, problem-solving exercises, and interdisciplinary activities.
- **Enhancing a sense of belonging** by providing access to degree-level facilities and integrating Foundation students with parent courses, reinforcing connections to future academic pathways.
- **Implementing simple tracking tools**, such as online completion markers or progress dashboards, to monitor engagement, task completion, and early signs of disengagement.
- **Adapting curriculum flexibly** to meet the specific needs of each cohort while maintaining broad learning outcomes, ensuring relevance to individual student interests without limiting interdisciplinary exposure.
- **Supporting experiential skill-building**, through practical tasks, portfolio development, and experimentation, to foster transferable skills that prepare students for degree study and potential future employment.

Future research could explore the application of these interventions across disciplines, examining their long-term impacts on degree completion, postgraduate progression, and career outcomes. By providing a flexible and evidence-informed framework, this case study offers guidance for enhancing Foundation-level education and supporting successful



transitions into higher education, while recognising the importance of tailoring approaches to individual students and course contexts.

## Disclosure statement

The authors used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: ChatGPT 5.2. The use of ChatGPT 5.2 was limited to the editorial stage to improve the clarity of the final manuscript. No generative AI tools were used to create any research content, analysis or findings. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article and have complied with the JLDHE's principles of AI use.

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