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The transition from Foundation Degrees to Bachelor Degrees: how an e-journal may help

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Approximately one third of the University of Plymouth's students study in colleges of Further Education that work in partnership, through the University of Plymouth Colleges faculty (UPC), to provide Higher Education (HE) courses. The majority of these courses are Foundation Degrees (FDs), designed to address local and regional needs for students who may otherwise be unlikely to attend higher education (HE), and also for employers who require the skills a FD provides as a qualification in its own right.

This is admirable and ethically sound with more 18-30 year olds entering HE than ever before. Many students therefore now seek employability skills and social mobility over and above 'self-actualisation', which arguably was the more traditional focus of HE. FDs clearly demonstrate a focus on these vocational and pragmatic needs, however there is another important side to a FD: the need for an academic approach.

Taking a literal definition, academic study is not driven by an immediate practical application, though its findings may provide exactly that, therefore the extent of its investigation is not restricted in the same way as investigation for an immediate (pragmatic) need. Whether this sounds like over-kill or whether you agree with the slightly pompous description of 'seeking a greater truth', an academic approach is important for two main reasons. As FDs align with HE levels 4 and 5, the same as the first two years of a Bachelor's degree, the first reason is that of quality assurance and a common currency. The second is more aspirational, as FDs generally offer an agreed top-up route allowing the option of progression to the final year of a Bachelor's degree and possibly further on to study at Masters and/or PhD level, as is often the case. Of key importance for this progression to level-6 and beyond is the development of undergraduate academic skills and attributes, culminating in a final year honours project which involves the *'whats, whys* and *hows'* of undertaking science through a self-led project.

The *'what'* of a BSc honours project is student-led, research-based work into a topic of specific interest employing 'scientific method' in a 'rigorous' fashion to reach a 'robust' conclusion.

The *'why'* of an honours project relates to the purpose of HE study, which involves more than just knowledge and is also about developing the way a student thinks (cognition). Cognitive processes, which should be applied to the knowledge of a topic, include progressively: *'remembering, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation* and *creation'* (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). All of these are clearly involved in the academic approach to undertaking an honours project. Happily, they are also clearly

present within varying levels of employee contribution to the workplace, especially with progression to positions of greater strategic responsibility (*well worth a read: Harvey et al, 1997 present three levels of contribution: 'adaptive', 'adaptable', 'transformative'*). Although obviously arguable, I feel this neatly illustrates the point that vocational, pragmatic purpose and academism are less opposites and more complimentary partners in the formulation of a 'complete graduate'.

The *'how'* of a BSc honours project is obviously to use scientific method, but all this is exhaustively conceptual in terms of how to reach a good standard of academic investigation. This is where 'The Plymouth Student Scientist' e-journal can step in. Although not including markers' feedback, what is published exemplify first class projects, evidencing different methods and approaches as well as good academic writing. What is offered to students progressing to a Bachelor's degree is the opportunity to engage, through personal reflection on what they read, within a community of good practice. This should help to demystify the research process through illustration of rigorous investigation and robust reporting. Consequently, 'The Plymouth Student Scientist' offers great potential for easing the transitions of progressing students and wholeheartedly gets my support as a tool worth investigating by students, both in our partnership and on campus.

Anderson, L. W. and Krathwohl, D. R. Eds. (2001). *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, Longman, New York

Harvey, L., Moon, S., Geall, V., (1997), *Graduates' Work: Organisation Change and Students Attributes*, Birmingham: Centre for Research into Quality, University of Central England in Birmingham, 132pp