

Teaching the Rules of the Game: The Purposes and Principles of UK Foundation Programmes. An Interview with Steve Leech

Enseñando las Reglas del Juego: Los Propósitos y Principios de los Programas 'Foundation' en el Reino Unido. Una Entrevista con Steve Leech

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Abstract

This article examines the objectives and principles of UK university foundation programmes, with a particular focus on Durham University's Foundation Programme. Through an in-depth interview with Steve Leech, Head of Academic Transitions at Durham, the article explores how foundation years provide a route into higher education for students from under-represented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. It highlights the multiple roles of foundation programmes in promoting social justice while also meeting institutional and governmental goals for widening participation in higher education. Leech outlines four pillars – epistemological maturity, metacognition, self-regulation, and self-efficacy – which underpin the programme's approach to preparing students to succeed at university. The article also discusses the challenges facing foundation programmes in a market-driven educational landscape, while reaffirming their transformative potential for students. Durham's programme is presented as a case study of how foundation programmes can empower learners by explicitly teaching the "rules of the game" in higher education.

Keywords

Foundation Programmes, Widening Participation, Access to Higher Education, Social Justice in Education

Resumen

Este artículo examina los objetivos y principios de los programas 'foundation' en el Reino Unido, prestando especial atención al Programa Foundation de la Universidad de Durham. A través de una entrevista en profundidad con Steve Leech, Director de Transiciones Académicas en Durham, el artículo examina cómo ofrecen tales programas una vía de acceso a la educación superior para estudiantes que provienen de grupos subrepresentados y de contextos desfavorecidos. Subraya los múltiples roles que juegan estos programas, promoviendo la justicia social mientras cumplen objetivos institucionales y gubernamentales relacionados con la ampliación de la participación en la educación superior. Leech expone cuatro pilares – la madurez epistemológica, la metacognición, la autorregulación y la autoeficacia – que sirven de apoyo al programa mientras prepara a los alumnos para tener éxito en sus estudios universitarios. El artículo también analiza los desafíos a los que se enfrentan estos programas en un panorama educativo orientado al mercado, al tiempo que reafirma su potencial transformador para los estudiantes. El programa de Durham se presenta como un estudio de caso, que demuestra cómo pueden estos programas empoderar al alumnado, enseñándoles de manera explícita las "reglas del juego" en la educación superior.

Palabras clave

Programas Foundation, Ampliación de la participación, Acceso a la Educación Superior, Justicia social en la educación

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1. Introduction

Foundation programmes are run by universities across the UK to provide a pathway into higher education for students who do not meet institutional requirements for direct entry to a degree programme. These programmes have their origins in the UK's lifelong learning movement, beginning after World War I with the Ministry of Reconstruction's '1919 Report' which stressed the social purpose of adult education and called upon universities to play a greater role in its delivery. The report asserted that adult education:

must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there, nor as a thing which concerns only a short span of early manhood [sic], but that adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong (quoted in FETL, 2018: p.4).

As Leech (2024) explains, this ideal was reinforced after World War II with the 1944 Education Act's emphasis on vocational training for young people and adults and gained further traction with the 1963 Robbins Report, which called upon universities to provide HE courses to 'all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment'. This project was driven forward by Harold Wilson'sⁱ government between 1964 and 1970 with the expansion of university adult education and the establishment of the Open University in 1969. In the 1970s, FE colleges began to offer 'Access to HE' programmes for students who lacked traditional qualifications, while higher-tariff universities began to run their own in-house access programmes, which came to be called 'foundation years'. The ideal articulated in the 1919 Report has thus continued to inform the work of foundation programmes and practitioners until the present day, even as political currents have shifted from one decade to the next.

The following interview was carried out at Durham University in June 2024 with one such practitioner: Durham's Head of Academic Transitions, Steve Leech. Durham University's Foundation Programme was established in 1992 and Leech has been involved with it for more than 25 years, first as a student in 1998/99, later as a lecturer from 2002 to 2019, and as its Director and line manager since 2019. He is therefore one of the people most responsible for shaping the programme, and is uniquely well-placed to explain both its daily operation and its underlying principles. Leech's position as a leading member of the UK's Foundation Year Networkⁱⁱ also equips him with valuable insights into how such programmes are run across the UK Higher Education sector.

Durham University was established in 1832 in the North East of England, in the small, historic cathedral city of Durham (population 50,510 – Office for National Statistics, 2023). It is the third-oldest legally-recognised university in England after Oxford and Cambridge (*An Act [...] Learning 1832*). The university's distinguished history and sterling academic reputation attract applicants who have achieved excellent school exam results. Accordingly, entrance

requirements for its degree courses are stringent. This means that most students come to Durham from neighbourhoods in which very high proportions of the population attend higher education, having gone to the best-performing schools in the country. Most of Durham's students therefore come from backgrounds of relative privilege (Durham University, 2020).

As set out in its Access and Participation Plan 2020/21 to 2024/25 (Durham University, 2020), Durham has made efforts in recent years to attract applicants from a more educationally and socioeconomically diverse range of backgrounds. In this context, the Foundation Programme serves both as a mechanism to introduce more diversity into the student population, and as a means of easing the transition from school to a degree-level course at Durham for students who might otherwise feel ill-equipped for this due to their previous educational experiences, or due to a sense of not 'fitting in' socially with their more privileged peers.

The Foundation Programme is therefore designed to serve under-represented groups from non-traditional university backgrounds, often referred to as 'Widening Participation' or WP students. In many cases, they will be the first in their families to go to university ('first-generation scholars'). They are admitted to the Programme if they are judged to have the potential to meet Durham University's entry requirements, although due to educational disadvantage or disruption they do not have the qualifications required to access the university directly. Foundation students pay the same yearly fee as undergraduates (currently £9250) and have access to the same university resources, facilities and extra-curricular opportunities as any other students (Durham University, 2025). A number of scholarships are available to support eligible applicants.

The Programme is delivered to around 100 students in total per year, with roughly equal numbers in each of four 'hubs' corresponding to the four discipline groups (or Faculties) found in the University as a whole: Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Economics, and Science. Students study modules focusing on core cross-cutting academic skills as well as on content specific to their discipline or discipline group. Students need to pass each module to earn the 120 credits required to enter Year 1 of their undergraduate degree. Leech provides further details about the Programme modules during the interview.

Those who reach the standard required by the end of their year on Foundation Programme are granted entry to their chosen undergraduate course without needing to make a further application. Those narrowly missing this standard are supported to make applications to other universities with lower entry requirements if they wish.

In describing the principles underpinning the Foundation Programme, Leech touches on a number of themes which merit further exploration. These include the development of

students' epistemological maturity, discussed for example by Baxter Magolda (1992), as well as skills and habits of mind such as metacognition (Chick *et al.*, 2009; McCormick *et al.*, 2013), self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2010) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). In its focus on developing epistemological maturity, the Foundation Programme pushes students to operate at the higher levels of cognitive activity set out in Blooms' Taxonomy (Bloom *et al.*, 1956), and is guided particularly by the updated version created by Anderson, Krathwohl and Bloom (Krathwohl, 2002).

To make a successful transition from secondary education into HE, students also need to habituate themselves to a social constructivist model of learning, informed by the thinking of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky in the 1930s. The Foundation Programme therefore engages students in processes by which they can construct knowledge for themselves. At the same time, it attempts to bring about a conscious awareness in students that knowledge is constructed, and that it therefore can (and should) be both deconstructed and critically questioned.

Finally, Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social and cultural capital, along with Freire's (1972) account of the ways in which the traditional educational model can disempower students, together serve to illuminate Foundation students' circumstances and underpin all of the work the Programme does to support their transition to higher education.

2. Interview

LP: Could you tell me about your own background as an academic who specialises in foundation programmes?

SL: Sure. I went to university as a mature student, having completed compulsory secondary education, and become disenchanted with education. I believed that I didn't need a piece of paper to tell me what I was able to do. So consequently, I didn't go on to study A levelsⁱⁱⁱ. I went into the workplace and quickly discovered that the piece of paper wasn't actually for me. It was to tell other people what I could do, so I found I was stuck in a dead-end set of jobs, so I thought 'I need to go and get some form of higher education' and so I joined the foundation year programme at Durham University as a mature student. And then I went on to study anthropology at Durham, went into a post-grad, became a research assistant, was offered some work teaching for the anthropology department, and then was approached by the foundation programme that had taught me to come and see if I wanted to teach others.

So about 20-something years ago I started teaching on Foundation, and I ended up running the programme that taught me and got me into uni.

LP: In your view, what's the purpose of foundation programmes in general?

SL: That depends on who you ask and where you are. From a national point of view, from a government-policy, higher-education-sector-in-the-UK position, foundation years are an access provision. By that, I mean they are a mechanism for supporting certain groups or parts of the population to enter higher education. And there is a goal in the UK of increasing higher education participation. The benchmark was 50% of young people going into higher education and foundation years were one mechanism, one part of that provision. It was an ambition set out by Tony Blair^{iv}, I think, some time back. And it was a socioeconomic goal. Britain's manufacturing industries and its production had subsided, and the government believed that the future of the UK would be based on a knowledge economy. So, highly trained, high-performing individuals that probably had university-level education. And to be able to meet that socioeconomic target, they wanted more and more people to go into university.

There had been, before that, a kind of more egalitarian notion about making higher education available for all. Harold Wilson, for example, had notions around egalitarian access to higher education, that higher education should be available for everyone who had the capacity to engage with it and to benefit from it. So there is on one hand, this egalitarian notion that it should be available for all. On the other hand, there's an economic push that it should be adopted by as many as possible in order to produce a highly-skilled workforce, to support the economy. So in that respect, foundation programmes are a way of getting more of the population who wouldn't otherwise have an opportunity to get into a university to get a degree, to become an economic unit, to benefit the country. So that's the government position.

Institutionally, depending on what university you're at, reasons for foundation and other access routes vary. There's the social justice position of 'This is an institution which is particularly high-tariff, its population doesn't represent the general population, so we want, from a social justice position, to diversify our intake, give opportunities to those who wouldn't have it'. These are the most selective institutions in the country, and the UK's education system has quite a well-established hierarchy of institutions. And those at the upper end of that hierarchy tend to have much higher requirements for students entering. And because of the way that our compulsory education years - that's the standard from age 4 through to 18 - are structured, a much higher proportion of the top grades that are achieved by children in the UK are achieved in independent, paid-for schooling than in the broader national school sector. So that tends to mean that the students who are going into the highly-competitive, top-league universities are more likely to come from socio-economically or educationally advantaged backgrounds. As an illustration of that, 7% of UK children go to what we refer to as fee-paying private schools. At Durham, which is a

high-tariff institution in the UK, about 40% of its students are from the 7% of independent schools.

There are issues in the system that mean that students from different backgrounds are likely to end up having different experiences in higher education. So at this one end, you've got a very 'social conscience' reason. At the other end, you've got a government-enforced one, which is from a purely economic position, because a foundation year allows you to take a broad range of students. Let's, for example, say you think that students need to have achieved three Cs at A level to access your course. That means that for the students with three Cs and upwards, you are in competition with all the other universities, to get those three-C students. If you have a foundation year, you can keep the same headline three-Cs entry, but increase the range of students that you're recruiting from down to three Ds, or even lower, because you're offering them an additional year of activity to bring them up to the three Cs. So you can control your numbers as you expand the community, or the marketplace, that you can recruit from. And that allows you to balance your numbers for any particular academic year. If you are recruiting extremely well from your original target market, you take fewer foundation students. If you're doing badly, you take more foundation students. In that respect, you can balance your student numbers and maintain the economic model of your university. So you keep your student fees.

And then there's something in between: the place of the government, the Office for Students, which used to be just a watchdog in that it didn't have any powers to actually influence or intervene. But it's increasingly been given powers to make changes, to insist on changes. Access to fees for students is controlled by the government, so there are maximum ranges of fees that a university can charge. If you want to charge the maximum possible fee, which is £9250 per undergraduate student per year, you have to meet some conditions of registration with the Office for Students. One of those conditions is that you demonstrate that you are making your university accessible to as broad range of people as possible, so you have to engage in a series of activities, in an approach to education that makes your university accessible. To do that, part of the process is that you spell out what you're doing in an Access and Participation Plan, which is a significant document of about 50 or 60,000 words that you submit, telling the Office for Students all of the things that you're doing to make your university accessible. It has to be accepted by the Office for Students. And if it is, then you're allowed to charge the higher fees.

So you have compulsion. You have the benefit of an economic balancing system. You have the benefit of a social responsibility. You also have a stick that's being beaten at you, about making sure you diversify. So you've got lots of extrinsic and intrinsic pressures on why you would have a foundation year, and a foundation year is a really good strategic response to all these pressures because it allows you to meet the government

compulsion. It allows you to support the ethical notion of wider participation. It allows you to have an economic balancing mechanism, and it allows you to do it all in-house. You as the institution have control over your foundation year because foundation years have no national body that controls them, they are the product of each and every university. The standards are assessed and maintained by the individual university, so there's no national curriculum. Universities decide what they teach, how they teach, who they teach it to, and that basically means that you've got this thing, a foundation year, which serves all kinds of strategic purposes, and to which you can make relatively quick changes to adjust to the pressures in your circumstances.

LP: Is there anything specific you would want to add, about the purpose of Durham University's foundation programme more specifically?

SL: I think this is an important point: there may be different motivations or different values of foundation years to different people. But among the people who work on Foundation, I don't think I've ever met a person who actually works on delivering Foundation who doesn't believe in the power of education to be transformative in the lives of individuals. They're part of Foundation because they want to provide opportunities for people to access education. So I think that, amongst practitioners, is the universal characteristic. And I think that exists at Durham. That's certainly been the philosophy that I've experienced on Durham's foundation programme. We are there because we believe in the transformative quality of education, and we want that to be available to the people who want it. But having said that, it does serve these other purposes too.

LP: Apart from this transformative potential of education, what would you say are the principles or the philosophy underpinning Durham's foundation programme?

SL: There are many. I have four base pillars that I think are important. And they're pedagogic. But there are a lot of things that swirl around them as well. So, let's see how this goes.

Epistemological maturity is the first one. The UK education system at present, and I'm making generalisations, tends to be quite instrumental in its approach to teaching, and it is pressured into this because of all kinds of constraints around resource and the nature of the national curriculum and the way that we conceive of what knowledge is, or what education is. It tends to favour an education system where you have a canon of reference knowledge which you transmit to your students, and then you measure their learning by having them transmit it back to you. And it's about how closely what they transmit back to you meets the expectation that you had when you transmitted it to them in the first place. In my day, it would have been referred to as a kind of Confucian education system. There is a more knowledgeable other who gives you information

which you accept entirely, almost without question, and your learning gain is what you can remember and reply.

But when you get to university, we don't value remembering and regurgitation. What we value, or at least what we say we value, are things called critical thinking and a capacity to engage with knowledge, understand it, question it, approach it from different angles, or apply different theoretical perspectives and come up with something new. Not just tell us back what we've told you. So we have an entire educational experience that our students go through that teaches them that learning looks like *this*, the strategies to show that you've learned look like *this*. We then say 'Well done. Congratulations. Here are your A level grades. You've done really well'. Now they go to university, where we say 'Actually everything that you've just done, we don't want you to do it like that anymore'. But we also *don't* tell them that, very often. Because I don't think that necessarily everyone who's involved in higher education has thought about it in the same way. So our students arrive at university having been taught that education looks like one thing, that learning looks like one thing. Then they arrive and we expect them to do something different. So the first job I think we have is to try and help them understand that. And with epistemological maturity, we go back to thinking about what knowledge is, how knowledge is constructed, where does it come from, who decided what knowledge was.

What we do with this knowledge once we have it? How do we engage with it, then how do we apply it and how do we communicate it? These are the fundamental principles, the building blocks of what higher education is. But the first step is to go down to the basics and start again and say 'Perhaps during your A levels, knowledge was dates, relationships, places. I'm not interested in that anymore. That's what Google is for. I'm not interested in developing a canon of reference knowledge in a student. I don't care how much they can remember. What I'm really interested in is what can they do when they are presented with novel knowledge, novel information. So in a lot of ways, what we actually teach on the programme is not about the reference information. It's about the skills of how you use the reference information. So in that respect, it doesn't matter if I'm talking to a student who's going on to study sociology or a student who's going on to study computer science. The discipline knowledge, the reference knowledge can be the same thing because it's the processes that we're teaching. What it's about, the subject, is actually almost irrelevant.

The next pillar is metacognition. Metacognition refers to the capacity to understand that learning is a process in which you are engaged and which you have control over, that you are able to step back from what you are doing and perceive not just the task in the essence of doing it, but also the task within context, in relation to you or the world around you. There are students who find themselves in university having never actively engaged in a choice to go to university. This is a good example of where we lost that meta level of

cognition. If you are in and you are doing it, you're so busy doing it that you can't recognise what you're doing. Metacognition is about trying to have students understand that they can take a step back and think about 'What is learning? How does learning work? How do I engage with learning? Are there other ways of engaging with learning?' And if you start recognising that actually we're talking about a process, and the process has many different aspects to it over which you can exert control, then you can start thinking about things like what works best, what works well and what works less well. Because you can say, 'I approached this topic or this essay and I approached it in this way'. Having done so, and stepping back from the process, 'Did the way I approached that essay have an influence on the outcome of that essay, and the mark I received, and the feedback I got?' And if you can get to that point, you can say, 'Well, what if I chose a different way of doing that essay? I didn't do a lot of planning for that one. What if I engaged in an essay-planning process before I began writing my essay? What if I adopted a conclusion-led approach to writing an essay? What if I mapped it, mapped out five paragraphs?' It doesn't matter as long as you can recognise that you have done something. You had choices in the way you did it. You can then evaluate the relative effect of that and you can choose to do something different.

That's the importance of metacognition. And in turn that leads to self-regulation, which is the third pillar, which is, once you recognise and you're able to exert control over the fact that learning is a process, then you can make choices about how effective you are, not just in the pedagogic approach to learning, but also in your general approach to learning, education and to university. Because if you can regulate yourself and say, 'Well, I understand that I have a deadline, I know why that deadline is in place. I understand what is required to achieve it. And I have enough metacognitive understanding of my own position to say 'From that task I would like to achieve a First''. Then I can say 'Right, if that's my goal or my outcome, and I have a choice of processes and ways of getting to that outcome. which ones am I going to use in order to maximise my chances?' So I may choose not to go out tonight. I may actually choose to do some reading and to do something that will contribute to my long-term goal. And we refer to it in all kinds of different ways, like maturity, presence of mind, but really it's about understanding what it is that you're doing and why. And then exerting control over it to get the best outcome. So self-regulation to be able to determine a course of action that you're going to engage in.

The next cascade of that is self-efficacy, which is the fourth part of it. Self-efficacy refers to the notion that you have an understanding of your potential to be able to achieve a desired outcome. How effective am I doing X or Y or Z? Well, in order to have self-efficacy and understanding, you need to benchmark yourself and your behaviours against the anticipated outcomes, the expectations that others may have. That can only really come when you have understood what it is you were asked to do, what your response to that request or that task was, and you've engaged in the process of the task, and you go

one step further and you think about, well, 'What happened, what was the consequence of my series of choices? And if that's the consequence, and I want it to be different or the same next time, what am I going to do the same or different next time?' And a lack of self-efficacy, and uncertainty about how you are performing, is really dangerous and really destructive for students because there's a lot of anxiety about 'Am I good enough? Is this piece of work going to be good enough? Should I be here? Should I have made this choice, should I do something else?' And a lot of our first-year programmes don't give the student a mark until easily halfway through, perhaps even closer to the end of their degree. So if you don't have that kind of information, how can you know how you are performing in relation to the expectations of the degree? It takes a lot of self-awareness, a lot of metacognition and self-regulation to be able to do that. But once you are able to be honest with yourself, able to see how well your product is performing, whether that be great or well or poorly, actually understanding that you are performing poorly against an expectation, it's better to know than it is to not know.

Often you have these romantic notions of higher education, where university is a deep intellectual conversation in wood-panelled staff offices. And that may be the case for some, but for most it's not. For most, you're not going to have those deeply intellectual conversations and small-group meetings with your tutor. In some cases, for the academic staff member who will be marking your work, you will be one of a class of two hundred. So that person doesn't know where you're at. They don't know your personal strengths, your personal weaknesses in a way that you might hope that they do. A lot of it is down to you. And recognising that it's down to you is incredibly important. So I guess these four pillars in total are there to try and support this transition from a set of strategies, expectations, and beliefs about what education is that worked in secondary school, compulsory education, and re-orient them to the rules of the game in higher education. It's a different game, and fundamentally all we're trying to do is to teach people the rules of the game so that they can play it well.

LP: Could you tell me about the students on the programme? What backgrounds do they have, and what do you think they hope to gain from the foundation programme?

SL: Sure. Every student on Durham's foundation programme has to meet eligibility criteria, which basically is that they are from a group that is under-represented in UK higher education. Those groups essentially represent disadvantage, whether that be socioeconomic disadvantage or educational disadvantage. There tends to be a lot of overlap of groups, so educational disadvantage tends to coincide with socioeconomic disadvantage. Essentially, these are bright, capable human beings, for whom our education system in the UK has not allowed them to show how capable they are. Now whether that's because the system's let them down, because they've found it difficult to interact with that system, whether the system is measuring the kind of capacity that an individual has or

not, these are all good questions, but one way or another, we've got bright people who don't have the pieces of paper that they need to. And what we do is we open the door and we say 'We believe that you are capable. We can show you the rules of the game. And then we can let you go on and play that game well'.

LP: You've talked a lot about socioeconomic disadvantage and educational disadvantage among these students. Working with them myself, my impression is that quite often students see their disadvantage in much more individual and identity-related terms. So students will talk about, for example, being neurodiverse, having some form of disability. I don't hear students talking so much about their socioeconomic disadvantage. What would you want to say about that?

SL: That doesn't surprise me. To a certain extent, socioeconomic and educational disadvantage are slightly artificial concepts that we have layered on to people as a mechanism for identifying parts of our population, but also, you are blind to your own culture. So if you have grown up in a certain set of circumstances, you don't necessarily have a comparison point to say 'Oh, well, compared to them, I am disadvantaged'. It's just that is the way life is. So it's us externally saying 'Ah, I see that you have grown up in a household that is in the lowest quartile of household earnings in the UK. Therefore, statistically speaking, you are less likely to go to a university. Therefore, you are disadvantaged in that respect'. We're imposing that notion of disadvantage on them. It's quite possible that person does not perceive themselves as disadvantaged by that in any way whatsoever. So it doesn't surprise me that students don't talk about socioeconomic disadvantage in their own lives. They concentrate on the things that are absolutely personal to them. So you know, 'I found it difficult to concentrate in the classroom'. Or 'I found that, you know, it was looking after my brother or my sister or my mother or my aunt'. And going out to work or having to travel large distances, you know, those are the specific consequences of socioeconomic disadvantage. So I can understand on a personal level, that's what they relate to. They don't step back and say 'The reason I had to do all these things is because I didn't have the resources that someone else had, to get in a nanny or to drive to school or whatever'.

LP: My next question was about the modules which comprise the Foundation programme. Can you talk a little bit about those?

SL: Sure. The modules themselves are in one of three categories. There are lens modules, so these are modules that explore an area of the world in a way that's associated with your discipline area. So let's say that you wish to study English Literature. A lens module for you would be one that looked broadly across the Arts and Humanities. What kinds of knowledge does my discipline area engage with? How do people create the kinds of knowledge that my discipline area uses? How do they interrogate

the kinds of knowledge that my discipline area uses? So we might be talking about examples of English literature, or something like philosophy, something from the associated discipline group. And the purpose of these modules is to try and help students understand the perspective from which their discipline approaches and engages with knowledge.

We then have toolkit modules, which are about: 'If that's the kind of knowledge that we're dealing with, what do we do with it? Where do I find it?', so things like going to the library, accessing the services, accessing online journals, understanding the relative value of sources. But also then 'How do I interrogate it?', so critical thinking. 'What are the approaches that I can use to interrogate this information, this knowledge? Now I have found my knowledge, I've thought about it, what do I do with it in order to put it to my own use? How do I construct my own arguments? How do I use the knowledge I have as a reference point, as evidence, and then how do I communicate it?' So, 'I've got this information, I've had great thoughts. How do I now communicate those great thoughts?' So that's our toolkit module.

And then the third type is the project module, which brings these two elements together. So we ask every student on the programme, for 30 of the credits, so 1/4 of their programme, they do a piece of individual research. We ask them to go and take a topic, and look at it through the lens of their discipline, and employ the tools that we've given them to do some knowledge creation of their own. So the knowledge creation module is very much about following the process of knowledge construction. So we start with the body of what is already known, the body of knowledge, we ask them to access it, critically think about it, identify a question, a concern, a controversy, develop a thesis or a perspective, and then set out to bring together the information that they need to discuss that thoroughly. And then construct that into a report of some kind and give it back to us.

Now, everything we've been talking about comes from this notion that knowledge is constructed, that the choices people make during the process of constructing knowledge influence the outcome of that knowledge. So what questions you asked me today will influence what answers I give you. But you would then present that as a piece of knowledge. But when I come to consume that knowledge, I'm going to think about it critically. So I'm going to think about why you asked the questions you did, and what kind of answers you got, based on the questions you asked. If a student goes through the process of creating their own knowledge, the ambition is that that helps them to crystallise these notions of 'knowledge is constructed'. The knowledge I created depended on the choices that I made. It also gives them licence to be critical, because it means that they can approach any piece of knowledge they encounter knowing that it has been created by someone doing a process similar to the process they did, and that helps to crystallise the notion of criticality.

LP: Turning to the teaching side, do you think there's a particular approach which characterises the pedagogy of foundation year practitioners? Could you encapsulate it somehow?

SL: I think the 'rules of the game' notion is quite strong. I think Foundation tries to recognise that potential exists and people just need help unlocking that potential. And the most effective way to help people succeed is to teach them the rules of the game. I think the culture of higher education can sometimes serve to keep people out, to isolate people. I think that I also reflect on my own experience. And no one really explained the notion of knowledge to me, or the 'how it works'. There was this expectation that people would pick up the rules by osmosis, that by just being there you would work out how things worked. And whether that's because the people who were delivering the programmes were unaware that there were rules that weren't clear... You know, if you're part of a culture, you're blind to it. Or whether in some cases they have this notion that it's a rite of passage, that part of the process is working out the rules, I don't know. But actually the part that is incredibly powerful is when someone finally says, 'Well, you know what's going on there, don't you? So you know how that works?' 'No, I'm not really sure how it works'. 'Right. This is how it works'. And so the cynical bit of me can't help feeling sometimes 'Why didn't anyone say that? Did they want to keep it for themselves because they've worked it out and so they're progressing, good for them?'. And another bit of me goes back to Freire and the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. The idea of, 'Don't tell them. Only tell them what you want them to know'.

LP: Could you tell me about the results that the programme has achieved?

SL: I think it's worth saying that Foundation is a gateway. Our job is to find hidden talent, and to help realise and release that talent, which means that part of our job is taking risks. So during our recruitment process, we are very aware that there are some people who we take on to the programme who have a longer journey than others. That said, about 80% of the students who begin their foundation year successfully complete their foundation year and go on to degree study. The ones who don't, the problem doesn't tend to be their academic capacity. It tends to be the fact that they come from, or have, chaos, or chaotic aspects of their life. Or issues that they can't reconcile with university study, whether that be personal, physical, mental, social. Those that go on to their degree then end up, achieving statistically very similar outcomes to students who entered the university without a foundation year. About 60% of students who go to Durham obtain A*AA or higher at A level. Students who come through Foundation tend to have three Bs at the maximum. But that gap that you have on entry, by the time you've finished, if you came from the foundation programme, you are just as likely to exit your degree with a First or a 2:1. And in some subjects, foundation year students outperform standard entry students.

So our students are incredibly successful, but it's also the question of how you define success. Although 80% of the students get through Foundation, the 20% who don't, that might be a success for them, even though they didn't complete Foundation or go on to their degree. Sometimes the opportunity to get away from circumstances or see the world from a different perspective, to engage with the choice or with the process of thinking about: 'Is this the right thing for me, or is it not the right thing for me?' That can be a success in its own right. It doesn't count towards league tables, and it's not considered to be a success necessarily by the institution or by the government, but actually for those individuals it can be a success. There's a fair number of students who come through Foundation, who stay in touch or get back in touch. It's not uncommon for people to come two years or five years later, I'll get an e-mail or a phone call out of the blue and it will be a student who says 'I studied with you in year X. I didn't make it through because of this. But you showed me or gave me an opportunity to think about the world like this. And so I went on and did X. I went off to my local university and on the back of what I did with you, they gave me a chance. And now I've just completed at my local university with a degree'. Or 'I came to you and I wanted to do this. I realised that wasn't for me. And so I went off, and I did a different job altogether'.

LP: How do you think the Durham foundation programme may evolve in the future? And how do you think foundation years in general across the HE sector may evolve in the future in the UK?

SL: Foundation years are facing a period of significant difficulty at the moment. The HE sector in the UK is in a period of challenge itself. Successive UK governments have pushed to create a neoliberal, marketised higher education system. Most UK institutions have had to increase their international student numbers in order to cross-subsidise their home student numbers. The international market is now becoming more fragile, and in the meantime, foundation years are facing a significant drop in fees. That has led universities that are already under financial pressure to think 'Do we want to continue with foundation years?' And all of this means that the foundation year is in a kind of existential crisis.

Having said that, the older institutions, or the institutions that have had foundation years for a long time, have a fairly deep-rooted social justice element. Their foundation years have been used in a way that's less about profit. It's more about diversifying your student population, widening participation. Those institutions have affirmed their commitment to foundation years in lots of ways. Oxford and Cambridge have just launched foundation programmes for the first time. Long-standing programmes like Durham have said 'We were already making a loss. We're going to make a bigger loss, but we believe in the value of the programme and are committing to it'. Durham's Foundation is part of the university's contract with the government to say 'This is what we're doing to widen participation'.

So foundation years have value, but they are subject to politics, and market pressures, and all of those kinds of things.

LP: Alright. Well, thank you very much indeed for the time that you've given me this afternoon.

SL: Not at all.

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i UK Prime Minister (Labour) 1964-70 and 1974-1976

ii <https://foundationyear.ac.uk/>

iii A levels are UK qualifications normally studied by secondary school students aged 16-18, in Years 12-13, focused on academic subjects. Students normally study 3 A levels concurrently. The highest score they can attain for each A level is A*, followed by A, then B, then C. The results of the 3 A levels usually determine whether they obtain a place on their chosen course at their chosen university.

iv UK Prime Minister (Labour) 1997-2007

v First-Class Honours degree. This is the highest classification of undergraduate degree awarded in the UK, typically requiring an average mark of 70% or above. This is followed by a '2:1' – a Second-Class Honours degree, Upper Division, typically requiring an average mark of 60% or above. This is a minimum requirement for entry to many postgraduate courses.

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