

The Class Politics of Foundation Years

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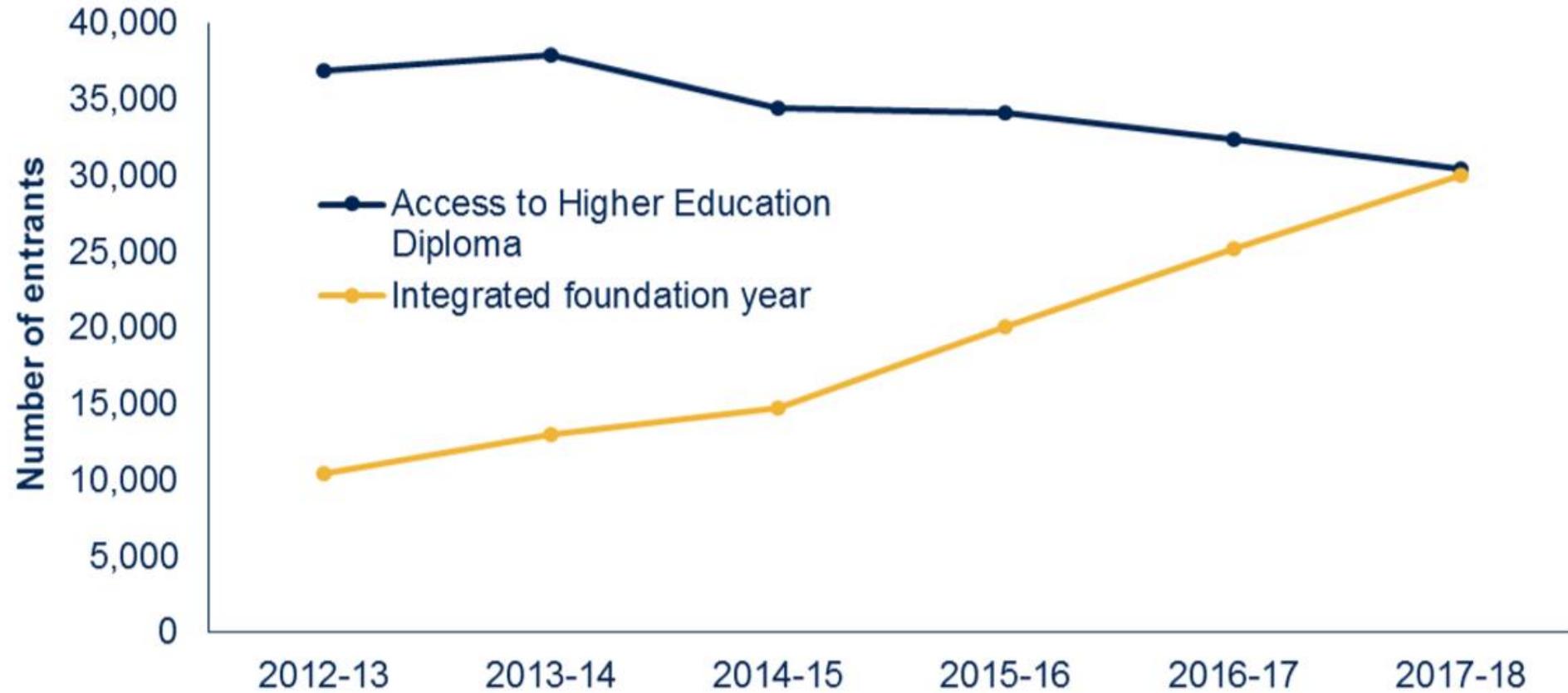
Class matters at University

- Class is a source of (dis)advantage in access to, experience of, and outcomes from higher education
 - Which is not explicitly acknowledged in widening participation criteria

Class matters for Foundation Years

- Not all – or even most – Foundation Year students are working class
- But it's a significant and growing route into HE for working class students
 - Particularly in light of the decline in Access provision
- And it is significant for those students

Figure 1: Numbers of UK entrants to Access and integrated foundation year courses in England between 2012-13 and 2017-18



(Finlayson/OfS 2019:6)

How being working class affects students

- Economically
 - Resources; environment; paid work
- Socially
 - Less time for social activities; less value placed on them; don't form (or exploit) networks
- Culturally
 - Access to and familiarity with cultural knowledge and experience
 - Tastes and dispositions - 'one instinctively knows when something is right'
 - Knowing how to behave – 'embodied cultural capital'

But what do we think we're doing about it?

- I interviewed eight foundation year practitioners
 - All involved in programme/module design and/or leadership as well as teaching and pastoral roles
- At four different English HEIs
 - Traditional/elite (Russell Group)
 - Redbrick (Russell Group)
 - Plate Glass
 - New (post-post-92)
- So most definitely not representative or definitive ...
- ... But the beginnings of some interesting narratives

Three tentative narratives about foundation years and working class students

- A narrative of **assimilation**
- A narrative of **challenge**
- A narrative of **subversion**

‘You are a full university member regardless of class’ – a narrative of assimilation

‘... we very deliberately had our interview meal as a formal meal ... in the poshest room ... what I was saying was, “you have access to this” and giving them experience of it...’

‘For a good number of them ... they have never been to the theatre before, let alone to see a Shakespeare play many of them won’t have been to an art gallery, let alone an art gallery like the Tate Modern.’

‘I take the perspective that all our students have the potential to do equally well, and it’s not about seeing their class as a problem, it’s about seeing it as causing barriers that we have to help them remove so that they can achieve their potential.’

‘The hierarchy and ideas of the university are the problem’ – a narrative of challenge

‘We take them on a trip to Oxford – that’s not a kind of *Brideshead Revisited*, this could be you as well, it’s ... who are these people who go to Oxford? Do you go to Oxford? Why not?’

‘... the big thing the foundation year gives them is the belief that they have a right to be at university ... and that they’re not thick, and that the reason they haven’t done well so far is ... often for reasons outside of their control.’

‘So I would want to think about that differently and actually not think about the class of the students being the problem but actually the hierarchy and ideas of the university being the problem’

This institution 'builds its ivory walls very high,
and my job is to dig tunnels underneath them'
– a narrative of subversion

'They've never ... learnt how to handle all the forks and knives and all the other rubbish.'

'You don't have to be *that* clever [to be here], but you do have to be able to survive here ... can you exist in a world where there is a kind of bizarre competition ... where people are judging you on certain characteristics that you never even knew existed?'

'... because if we don't prepare them, then I feel like we're throwing them in to the lions.'

‘... they’re going to be leaps and bounds ahead of the other students ...’ – Foundation Years as conferring advantage

‘Probably the biggest advantage is that ... they understand how everything works’

‘[conventional] students talk about the shame [of seeking help] ... You don’t tend to get that on the foundation year. And they’re carrying that through.’

‘...people who are President ... of their student association ... which you wouldn’t normally do in the first year.’

‘They do tend to do better than our direct entry students and we quite explicitly tell them that’s what we expect to see.’

What do we think we're doing?

- Providing cultural capital
 - In the form of experiences, knowledge and skills
- Social and extra-curricular opportunities
- Experience of university life
- Contact with support services and willingness to use them
- And thus a head start on Level 1 entry students
- Less prominence given to economic factors
 - Maybe because there's less we can do about that?
- Surprisingly little emphasis on academic/study skills
 - And even less on subject knowledge

So, what are we doing? Unintended consequences and the class politics of foundation years

- Social mobility for some – but at whose expense?
- Who gets ‘leaps and bounds ahead’?
- Not changing the system – maybe even reinforcing it
- Throwing them to the lions?

And why do we keep doing it?

– the political is personal too

‘... it’s about social mobility, fair access, and providing opportunities for people who would otherwise not – and I mean this in the access to social justice sense – be able to get themselves into an institution that would otherwise exclude them.’

‘... you see someone, you know they’ve got three kids, they’re a single mum, they’ve been crying in your office because their ex-partner’s a bastard ... and then you see them getting their degree, and they’re there with their kids, and, oh my god, I’m such a mess I can hardly go to graduation...’

The *Journal of the Foundation Year Network*

<https://jfyn.co.uk>

A peer-reviewed online journal founded in 2018 to share research and good practice related to all aspects of foundation years, and to support the objects of the Foundation Year Network, which are: to represent, promote and support good practice in foundation year provision, the academic and scholarly activities of foundation year practitioners, continuing professional development opportunities for foundation year practitioners, and diversity of provision for entry into higher education.

['The Class Politics of Foundation Years'](#) *JFYN* vol. 3, December 2020

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