

Cracks in our foundations: evaluating foundation years as a tool for access and success

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Higher Education Policy Institute

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About the author

Josh joined HEPI in July 2023 as Policy Manager, having been a HEPI intern in 2022. Since joining he has written on a wide variety of topics, including the cost-of-living crisis, student debating unions and students' use of generative AI. Prior to joining HEPI, Josh was a Maths and Politics teacher in London and subsequently went on to complete a master's degree at the University of Oxford.

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Executive summary

Based on original data acquired for this publication and other recently published sources, this HEPI Report holds a lens to ‘foundation years’, short one-year courses which prepare students for degree study. These courses are designed to increase access to higher education but were targeted by the Government crackdown on ‘low-quality’ degrees in England in 2023.

We find that:

- Foundation years have grown explosively in recent years. **Eight times as many students – more than 69,000 – took foundation year courses in 2021/22 as took them a decade earlier in 2011/12.**
- **More than half of those on foundation year courses (51%) study Business and Management**, a subject only studied by 13% of first-year undergraduates.
- Foundation years are a powerful tool for access. **Nearly three-in-10 students who take them have no qualifications at all** and just under two-thirds (64%) are mature students.
- However, nearly three-quarters (73%) of foundation year students study at low-tariff institutions while **only one-in-25 (4%) study at high-tariff institutions.**
- **Less than three-quarters (74%) of students continue in higher education after completing their foundation year.** This is much lower than the 91% of full-time undergraduates who continue in higher education after their first year. But students from deprived areas and with disabilities have just as high a chance of continuing as other students.
- **Some institutions may be using foundation years to inflate their tariff scores artificially.** However, we find no evidence of institutions ‘encouraging’ students to take foundation years.

We also examine government policy in England, which from 2025 will reduce the maximum fee that ‘classroom-based’ courses like Business and Social Sciences can charge. We find that:

- Once the policy takes effect, many of the affected courses may no longer be financially viable. **However, the only classroom-based**

course which could still be viable is Business – the course being targeted by the crackdown.

- **The Department for Education is right to move quickly to protect quality.** However, the fee reduction may make the quality of some courses worse and fail to address problems with other courses.
- We therefore recommend a modified approach. **All foundation years should be able to charge the same fee.** But to ensure every student receives an outstanding education, the Office for Students should set targets which are particular to foundation year courses **and withdraw student finance from foundation years which fail to meet these targets.**

Introduction

According to the Government, a foundation year is:

an additional year of study at the beginning of a higher education course that is designed to prepare students for undergraduate degree-level study.¹

Foundation years are different from foundation degrees, which are standalone degree courses designed to boost workplace skills.² Foundation years in the UK are often 'integrated' with honours programmes at Level 6. Students who pass their foundation year do not usually receive a standalone qualification, but instead progress to a full degree course. Like those on full degrees, foundation year students get access to maintenance support and, in the UK nations which have tuition fees, tuition fee loans.

Proponents of foundation years say they are a tool to boost access to higher education, access meaning the creation of equal opportunities to enter and complete higher education regardless of a student's economic and social background.³ In a blog for HEPI, the former Vice-Chancellor at Sheffield Hallam University, Professor Sir Chris Husbands, suggests one aim of foundation years is to:

provide a route to success for students who would otherwise not access opportunities.⁴

He argues that foundation years are for those who want to study in higher education but lack the skills, do not meet the entry requirements or have not studied the necessary prior subjects. By taking an extra year of study, foundation years may allow students to close the gap with their peers on key metrics, such as their performance on the course, their likelihood of completing it and their progression onto employment or further study after graduating.

By contrast, opponents argue some foundation years are low-quality or unnecessary, in that many students taking them could proceed immediately to a degree course. By collating together new data on foundation years, this report explores the merits of these two competing arguments.

It is helpful to consider foundation year courses alongside the Access to Higher Education Diploma (the 'Access' course). Access courses are

standalone Level 3 qualifications available in a range of subjects. Both Access courses and foundation years are designed to support students to enter higher education. Until recently, Access courses were more popular than foundation years: today, foundation years are much more popular. This did not stop the authors of the *Review of post-18 education and funding*, chaired by Sir Philip Augar, from expressing a preference for Access courses.⁵

This report proposes that foundation years and Access courses can be evaluated with the same two questions:

- i. Are the courses themselves **accessed** by those who typically struggle to enter higher education?
- ii. Do the courses enable those who take them to **succeed** in higher education and beyond?

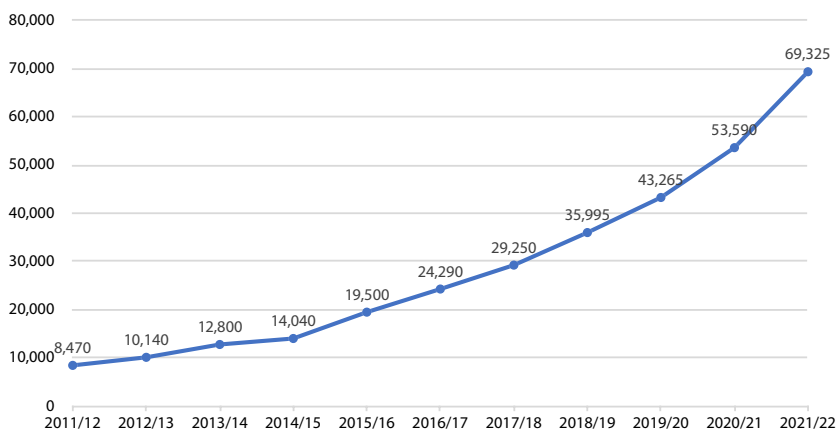
This report aims to answer whether foundation years meet these twin aims of access and success. It also explores whether government policy helps them to do so and, if not, how an alternative policy might do so better.

The report has four parts. Chapter 1 provides some background to foundation years and government policy in England. Chapter 2 evaluates foundation years in line with the above questions. Chapter 3 evaluates government policy, particularly the financial viability of running foundation year courses. Finally, Chapter 4 presents a policy alternative: equalising the maximum fee for all foundation years but withdrawing student finance from those determined to be 'low-quality', so that foundation years can be an accessible and effective route into higher education.

1. Background to foundation years

Since 2011/12, when only 8,470 students were studying foundation years, the courses have grown explosively. In 2021/22, the most recent year for which data are available, 69,325 students entered foundation years. The number of courses has also increased from 678 courses at 52 providers in 2011/12 to 3,717 courses hosted by 105 providers in 2021/22.⁶ Today it is possible to study a foundation year at a wide range of institutions and on a diverse set of courses, from Education at Swansea University to Music Production at Staffordshire University and Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Cambridge.⁷

Figure 1: Entrants to foundation years, 2011/12 – 2021/22⁸



In the same period, the number of entrants to Access courses has decreased from nearly 37,000 to around 23,000, a reduction of more than a third (36%).⁹

This rise began at a time of increasing concern about access for some student demographics. The number of part-time mature students (then a clear majority of mature students) declined significantly between 2008/09, when mature student entrants to higher education peaked, and 2016/17.¹⁰ This decline may have been accelerated by the raising of tuition fees to £9,000 in 2012, the year which saw the largest decline in mature entrants. At the time, it was hoped that by providing an additional year of study

and allowing students to adjust to an academic environment, foundation years could be a pathway for mature students and others who faced disadvantages in accessing higher education to return in large numbers.¹¹

Today, foundation years are taken in a range of subjects. Figure 2 shows the top five subjects studied by those on foundation years, Access courses and first-year undergraduate degrees. The most popular foundation years are in Business and Management, taken by 36,000 students (51%). A further 7,000 students (10%) take Social Sciences courses.¹² By contrast, Access courses are even more unbalanced, with 61% of those who take them doing so in fields related to Medicine.¹³

Figure 2: The top five subjects studied on each course type. All data are from 2021/22, the most recent year for which they are available¹⁴

Foundation years	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Business and Management (51%) 2. Social Sciences (10%) 3. Subjects allied to Medicine (6%) 4. Engineering and Technology (6%) 5. Design, and Creative and Performing Arts (4%)
Access courses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Subjects allied to Medicine (61%) 2. Science and Mathematics (12%) 3. Social Sciences (12%) 4. Business, Administration and Law (6%) 5. Arts, Media and Publishing (3%)
First-year undergraduates	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Subjects allied to Medicine (15%) 2. Business and Management (13%) 3. Social Sciences (12%) 4. Design, and Creative and Performing Arts (10%) 5. Biological and Sport Sciences (6%)

Many foundation year courses are targeted explicitly at international students and claim to prepare them for full degree study in the UK. At Queen Mary University of London, students on the International Foundation Year study English, a module on study skills and other modules of their choice.¹⁵ They are often targeted at students who lack the course requirements and may allow progression to a wider range of degrees: students who pass the University of Salford’s International Foundation Year, for example, can progress to ‘almost any’ of their undergraduate courses.¹⁶ Like undergraduate courses in England and Wales, institutions can charge international students any price: Salford’s costs £13,750 and Queen Mary’s £21,200.

However, concerns have been raised about the quality of these courses. An article in the *Sunday Times* in January 2024 suggested that some international Foundation Years at Russell Group universities had lower grade requirements than the courses available to home students. It also found suggestions from recruiters that students were not being rigorously assessed.¹⁷ In response, the Russell Group argued that the article conflated entry requirements for foundation years with those of full degree courses and that the application process was ‘equitable and consistent’ for domestic and international students.¹⁸ Others in the sector asserted the value of foundation years as ‘bridging’ courses for students from diverse educational backgrounds.¹⁹

HEPI has also purchased data from the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) on where foundation years were being provided. We find that more than half (58%) of foundation year students study in just three regions (London, the South East and the East of England). A negligible number take them in Scotland, perhaps because undergraduate degrees there are normally four years.

Figure 3: Foundation year provision by region in 2020/21, the most recent year for which complete data are available²⁰

Region	Number of students	Proportion of total
London	12,216	19.4%
South East	12,031	19.1%

East of England	11,936	19.0%
North West	5,246	8.3%
West Midlands	5,196	8.3%
Yorkshire and The Humber	5,139	8.2%
East Midlands	3,206	5.1%
North East	2,797	4.4%
South West	2,734	4.3%
Wales	2,341	3.7%
Scotland	90	0.1%

As the vast majority (96%) of UK foundation year students study in England, this paper primarily focuses on English policy, though there may also be lessons here for other nations.

Criticism

In remarks to the House of Lords in July 2023, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Education, Baroness Barran, argued:

*Recently we have seen an explosion in the growth of [foundation years], but limited evidence that they are in the best interests of students.*²¹

The 2019 *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (the Augar Review) may be the best summary of concerns about foundation years. There it is written:

*It is hard not to conclude that universities are using foundation years to create four-year degrees in order to entice students who do not otherwise meet their standard entry criteria. Most recruiters to these programmes are medium or lower entry tariff institutions, typically universities with a high proportion of students from poorer backgrounds. These students are obliged to take out an additional fourth year of higher and non-cancellable fee loans. We question whether this is in their best interests.*²²

In addition to the charges levelled above, the authors of the *Review* raise other concerns. They note the most popular foundation year courses, such as Business or Social Sciences, often have ‘no special entry requirements’ anyway. The implication is that a foundation year may be unnecessary for these courses.

The authors recommend that all funding for foundation years be withdrawn. Instead, students should be encouraged to take Access courses, which higher education institutions should work with colleges to provide. Since the publication of the *Review*, the view that many foundation years are ‘not necessary’ has been adopted by policymakers in England.²³

Government policy in England

Responding to the concerns outlined above, the Department for Education announced a new policy in July 2023 whereby from 2025 some foundation years will only be able to charge a maximum fee of £5,760, reduced from £9,250. This cost is in line with Access courses. Whether a foundation year is affected depends on what Office for Students (OfS) ‘price group’ it sits in. The price group system categorises courses and awards additional funding based on the expected cost of course delivery.

Figure 4: Office for Students Price Groups²⁴

Price Group	Cost	Example courses
A	Very high	Clinical years of study for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science
B	High	Laboratory-based Science, Engineering and Technology subjects. Midwifery and other allied health courses
C1.1	Intermediate	Computing and Information Technology, Archaeology, Nursing
C1.2	Intermediate	Performing and Creative Arts, Media Studies
C2	Intermediate	Other subjects with a laboratory, studio or fieldwork element, such as Geography, Mathematics, Languages or Psychology
D	Low	Classroom-based subjects such as Humanities, Business, Social Sciences

The affected foundation years are those in Office for Students (OfS) price group D, known as 'classroom-based' courses. These courses are relatively cheap to run compared to clinical or laboratory-based courses like Medicine, Engineering or the Natural Sciences. Courses likely to be affected include Social Sciences, Humanities and Business.

2. Evaluating foundation years

Foundation years can be evaluated by answering two questions:

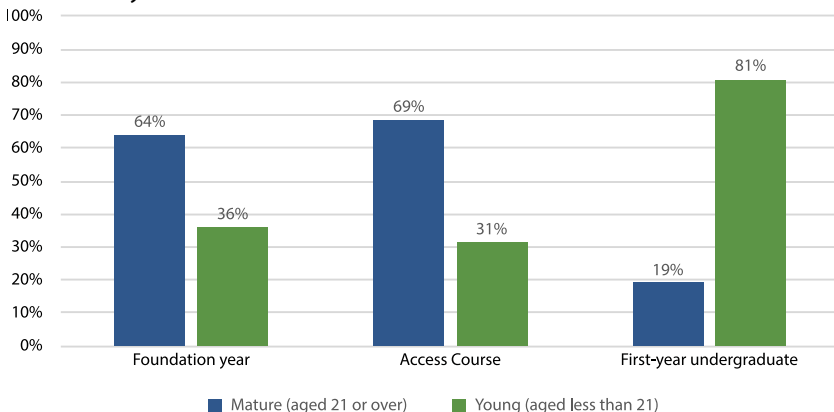
- i. Are foundation years **accessed** by groups under-represented in higher education?
- ii. Do foundation years enable those who take them to **succeed** in higher education and beyond?

Additionally, concerns have been raised by the Department for Education that students are being pushed into foundation years unnecessarily and that they are being used to boost institutions' finances at students' expense.

Access

Access to higher education is not equal. Those who receive Free School Meals, young males, people aged 21 or older, White people and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are among the groups disproportionately unlikely to enter higher education. High-tariff institutions are even more exclusive, with particularly low rates of participation among Black people, disadvantaged people and those with special educational needs (SEN).²⁵

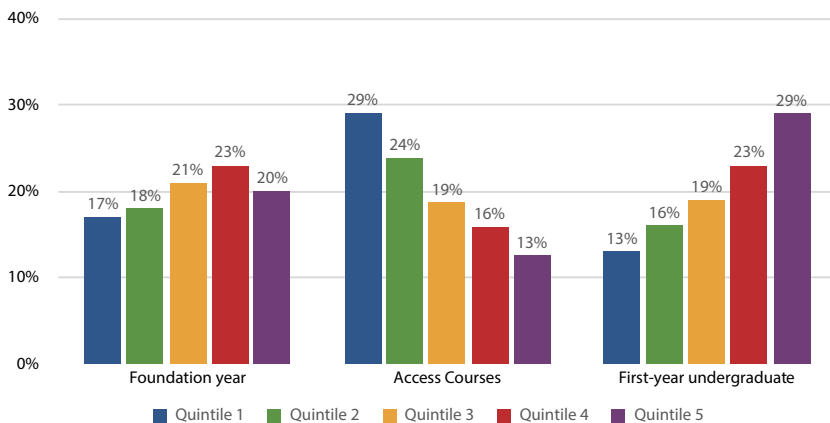
Figure 5: Foundation year participation by age, 2021/22 (Access courses 2017/18).²⁶ 'First-year undergraduate' also includes those who took a foundation year



The data from the Department for Education contrasts the composition of foundation year cohorts with those in their first year of an undergraduate degree. Strikingly, nearly two-thirds of foundation year students (64%) are 'mature' (aged 21 or over) compared to only a fifth (19%) of all first-year undergraduates. However, this is still slightly lower than the percentage of Access course students who are mature (69%).

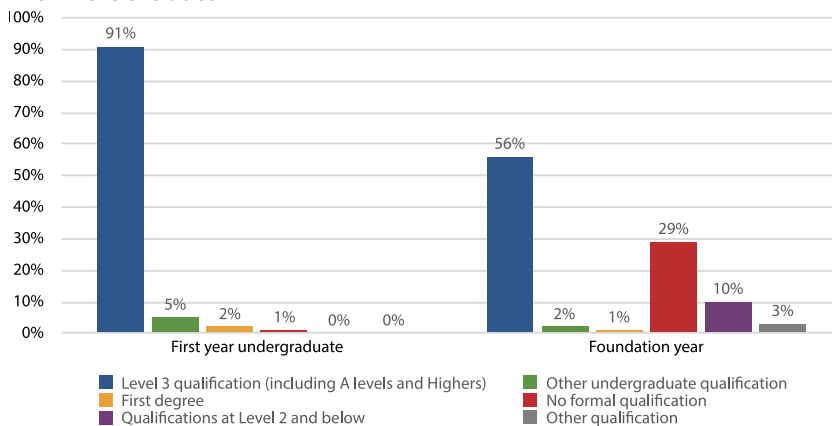
Foundation years tend to attract more students from POLAR quintiles 1, 2 and 3 than undergraduate degrees overall. POLAR classifies areas in the UK by the proportion of young people who enter higher education. The most deprived quintile, quintile 1, has the lowest entry rate while 5 has the highest. Foundation years are the most balanced in the areas they draw from, but the Access route brings in more students from the most deprived quintiles.

Figure 6: Proportion of entrants by POLAR quintile, 2021/22 (Access courses 2017/18)²⁷



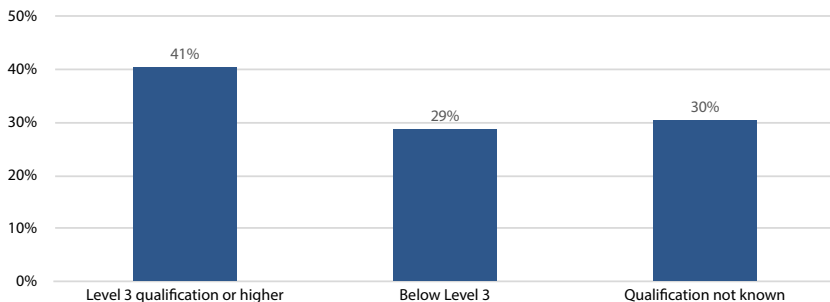
Foundation years include a particularly high number of entrants without a Level 3 qualification. While virtually all those who enter degree-level study directly (98%) have a qualification at this Level or higher, only three-fifths (59%) of foundation year students hold a qualification at Level 3 or higher and three-in-10 (29%) hold no qualification at all.

Figure 7: Proportion of entrants by highest qualification, 2021/22.²⁸ Those holding a postgraduate qualification or whose highest qualification is not known are excluded



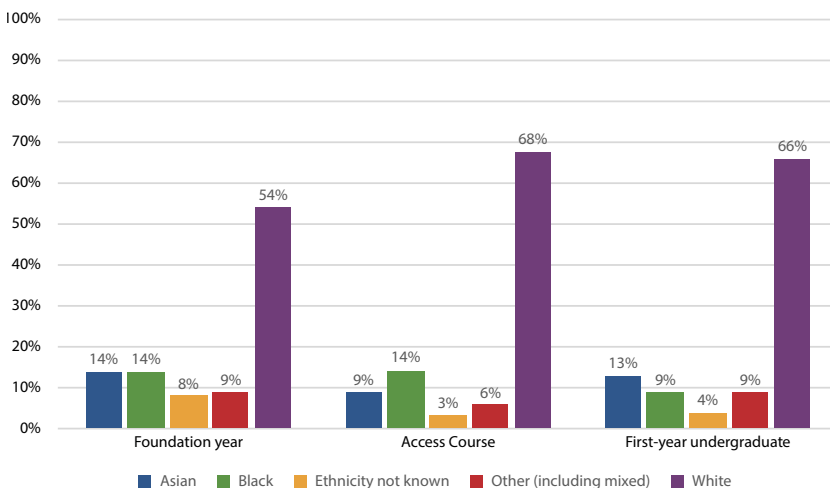
By comparison, only 41% of those on Access courses hold a qualification at Level 3 or higher, even lower than for foundation years, though the qualifications of many students are not known.

Figure 8: Proportion of entrants to Access courses by highest qualification, 2017/18²⁹



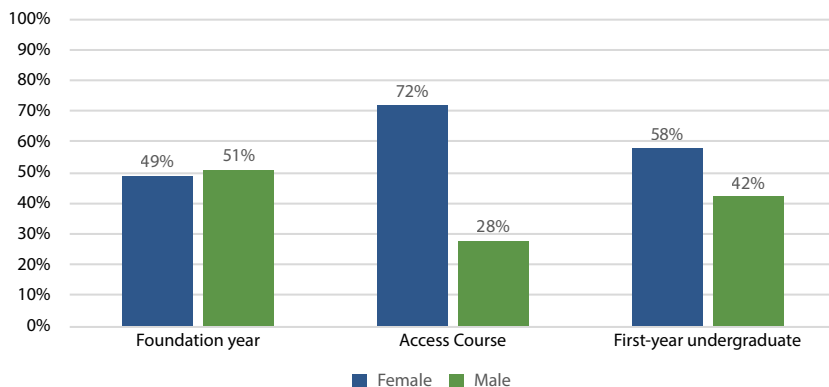
Foundation years are more ethnically diverse than undergraduate courses. Data from the Department for Education shows that 14% of those studying on foundation years are Black, compared to 9% of first-year undergraduates, while only 54% are White, against 66% of first-year undergraduates. However, this makes foundation years even less reflective of the ethnic makeup of the UK, where 82% of the population is White, than undergraduate courses.³⁰

Figure 9: Proportion of entrants by ethnicity, 2021/22 (Access courses 2017/18)³¹



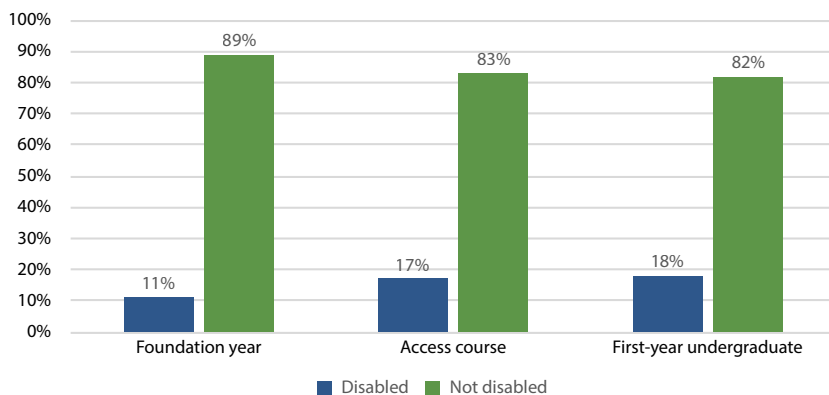
In gender terms, foundation years are more balanced than undergraduate courses, with men making up a slight majority (51%) of those on foundation year courses but a minority (42%) of those in their first year of a degree course. By comparison, Access courses are overwhelmingly (72%) female. This might be explained by the high proportion of Access course students on subjects allied to Medicine, such as Nursing, which are dominated by women.³²

Figure 10: Proportion of entrants by gender, 2021/22 (Access courses by sex, 2017/18)³³



However, only 11% of those on a foundation year have a disability, compared with 18% of first-year undergraduates.

Figure 11: Proportion of entrants by disability, 2021/22 (Access course 2017/18)³⁴

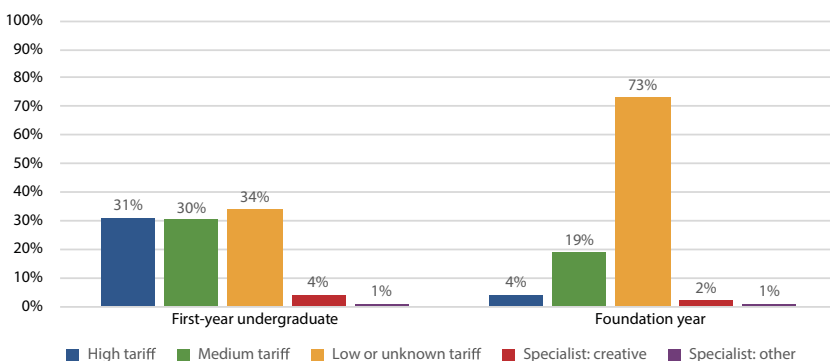


These data suggest that foundation years are a powerful, if imperfect, tool for increasing access. On most of the above metrics, foundation years have a higher proportion of entrants from under-represented groups than first-year undergraduate courses. In some areas, such as including mature

students and those without a Level 3 qualification, Access courses perform proportionally better. In other areas, such as including male students, foundation years do best. Both therefore appear to play important roles in increasing the accessibility of higher education.

Foundation years at Oxford and Cambridge have attracted some press attention.³⁵ But most foundation years are not at 'high-tariff' institutions with higher entry requirements: a majority (73%) of foundation year students are studying at less selective 'low-tariff' providers. Only a tiny proportion (4%) study at the most selective institutions. This compares with a roughly even split between the three tariff categories (low, medium and high) at undergraduate level.

Figure 12: proportion of students by provider tariff, 2021/22.³⁶ Large and small Level 4/5 institutions and those with no typology are excluded



Success

The central promise of the foundation year is to prepare students for a full degree course. It is difficult to measure directly whether students acquire study skills or become accustomed to academic environments through their foundation years. However, it is possible to assess how many progress to full degree courses, complete those courses and progress to employment or further study.

The Office for Students' (OfS) B3 framework uses three indicators to evaluate the quality of a provider and course.³⁷

- **Continuation:** the proportion of students who continue their studies from their first to their second year or leave with a qualification, even one lower than the qualification they originally signed up for. For foundation year students, continuation is the proportion moving from their foundation year to the first year of their full degree course. 'Non-continuation', or more colloquially the 'drop-out rate', is the proportion of foundation year students who do not proceed immediately, if ever, to a full degree.³⁸
- **Completion:** the proportion of students who complete their degree course, or the degree course the foundation year is integrated with, within a certain period.³⁹ In the Department for Education data below, this period is six years for those who take foundation years and five years for those who do not.⁴⁰
- **Progression:** the proportion of those who graduated with a qualification who are in employment or further study 15 months after graduation.⁴¹

This section considers how foundation years are performing on these three metrics, starting with continuation, as a way of determining more generally whether foundation years effectively prepare students for further study.

Note that those taking foundation years generally begin with fewer qualifications than those entering degree study directly. They may be expected to perform less well and drop out more often. Nonetheless, the purpose of a foundation year is to bring their students to a similar level as their peers as if they had met the original entry requirements for the course. Even if parity is unlikely, it is therefore important to hold foundation year courses to a high standard.

The Office for Students defines 'continuation' as a student either moving into their next year of study or qualifying with an award a year after they started. For foundation year students, continuation is the proportion of those who started a foundation year who move to the first year of a full degree course the following year or, in a small number of cases, receive a standalone qualification at the end of the foundation year. Those who leave higher education or are 'dormant' are not considered to have continued.

We draw on original data on continuation rates purchased for this report from HESA. As a key goal of a foundation year is for students to progress onto degree-level study, continuation is a good measure to evaluate them by. We use the latest continuation data from 2020/21 when 62,932 students were recorded to be studying foundation year courses.

Using this definition, we find a 74% continuation rate in 2020/21. This is sharply lower than the continuation rate for all full-time undergraduates, which is 91%.⁴²

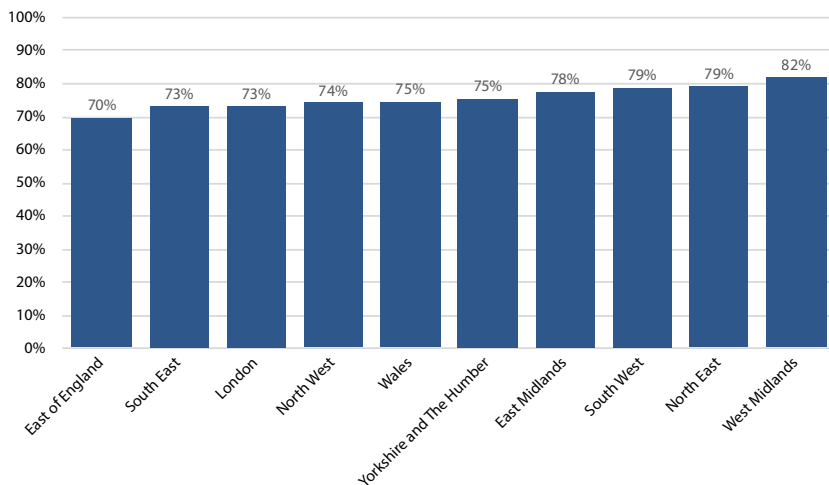
Figure 13: Student outcomes a year after starting a foundation year⁴³

Status	Number	Percentage
Continuing at provider	43,943	69.8%
Gained intended award or higher	56	0.1%
Gained other award	2,698	4.3%
<i>Continuation</i>	<i>46,697</i>	<i>74.2%</i>
Dormant or writing-up	4,367	6.9%
Left with no award	11,868	18.9%
<i>Total</i>	<i>62,932</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

Even students who gain an ‘other award’ may still be of concern, as the category consists of those who received a lower qualification than they were projected to receive by their institution.⁴⁴ And the purpose of a foundation year is not to receive a stand-alone qualification but rather to move to a degree course.

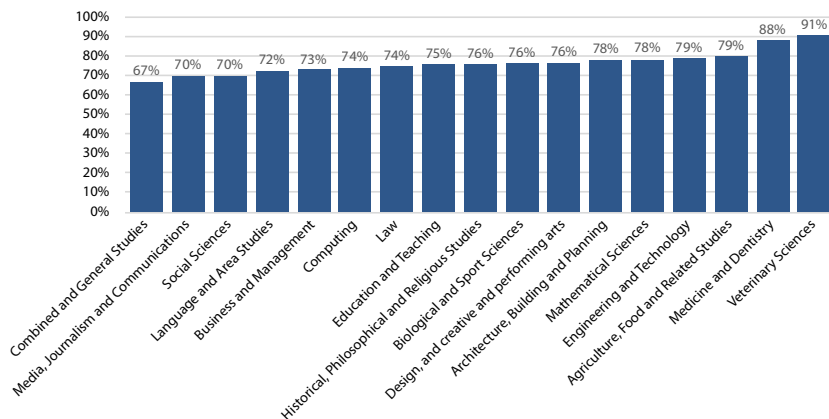
The three regions which offer the most foundation year courses – the East and South East of England, and London – have the worst continuation rates. Continuation rates are highest at providers in the West Midlands, 12 percentage points higher than in the East of England.

Figure 14: Continuation rates by region, 2020/21. Scotland is excluded as student numbers are very low⁴⁵



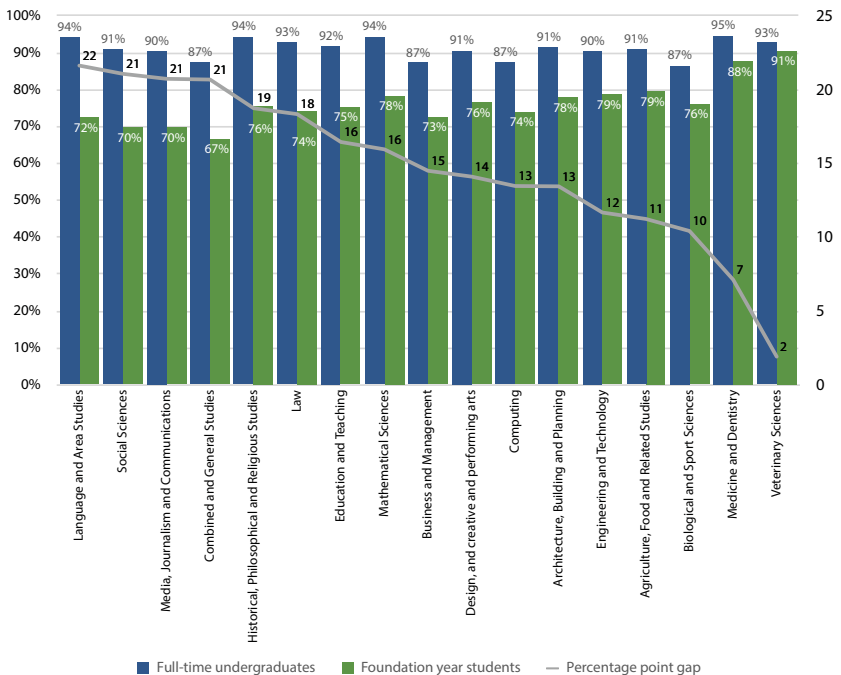
At the subject level, the poorest performers are Combined and General Studies, Media, Journalism and Communications and Social Sciences. A third (33%) of those on Combined and General Studies courses do not progress to degree-level study.

Figure 15: Continuation rates by subject area, 2020/21⁴⁶



We compared foundation year continuation data with rates for full-time undergraduates and measured the gap. HESA classifies a foundation year as the first year of a four-year degree, so these data compare those moving from their foundation year to the first year of a full degree with those moving from the first to the second year of a full degree. By this metric, the poorest performer is Language and Area Studies, which has a 22-percentage point gap. Social Sciences and Media, Journalism and Communication courses also have larger gaps. By contrast, students on a Veterinary Sciences foundation year have about the same continuation rates as those who enter the course directly.

Figure 16: Difference in continuation rates between full-time undergraduates and foundation year students by subject area, 2020/21, where a direct equivalent exists. Bars in descending order of difference. Full-time undergraduates includes those who took a foundation year⁴⁷

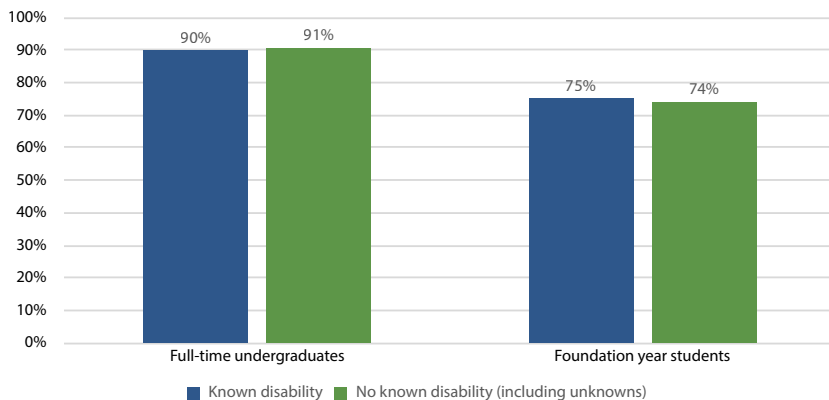


Notably, the subjects performing poorest will typically fall into Office for Students price groups C and D.⁴⁸ Perhaps surprisingly as they have been singled out for criticism by the Department for Education, in terms of their continuation rates, Business and Management courses sit around the lower middle of the pack. These data suggest other courses may be more deserving of criticism.

The most important question is whether foundation years are working for the groups they were intended to support, such as mature students, students with disabilities and those from more deprived areas.

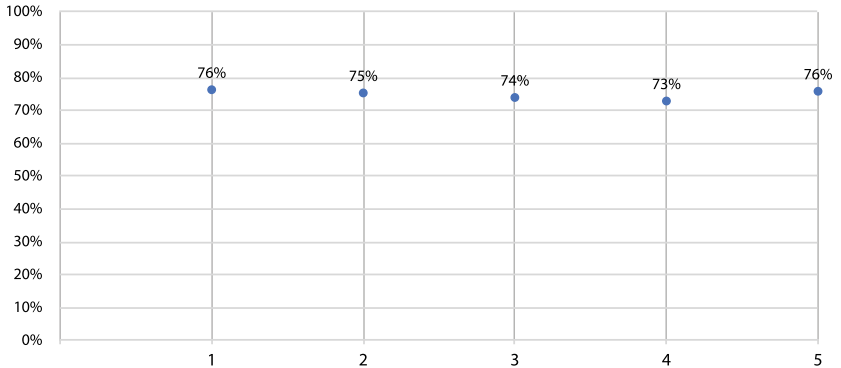
An important finding is that protected characteristics, such as disability, ethnicity and age are not strong determinants of success in foundation year courses. Those with disabilities have roughly equal continuation rates to those who do not have a disability.

Figure 17: Continuation rates by disability status, 2020/21. Full-time undergraduates includes those who took a foundation year⁴⁹



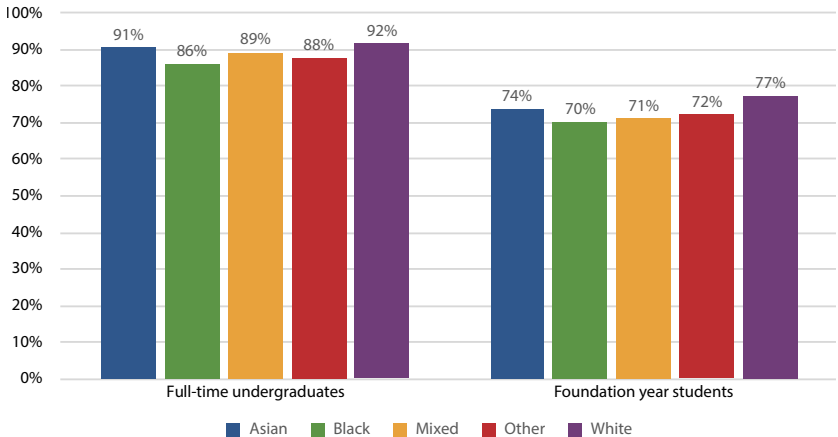
Those from the local areas with the least participation in higher education (quintile 1) have the highest continuation of all groups (76%), but the differences are quite small.

Figure 18: Continuation rates by POLAR quintile, 2020/21⁵⁰



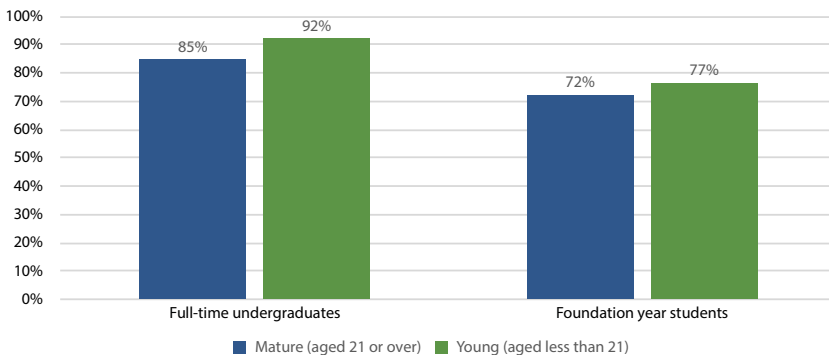
Other indicators are less positive. The continuation gap between Black and White students at undergraduate level is mirrored in foundation years.

Figure 19: Continuation rates by ethnicity, 2020/21⁵¹



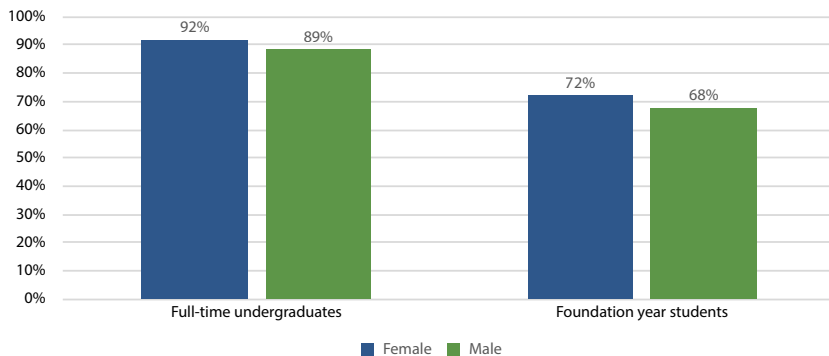
The gap between mature and young students on undergraduate courses (eight percentage points) is similar to the gap for those on foundation years (five percentage points).

Figure 20: Continuation rates by mature status, 2020/21⁵²



And the percentage-point gap between male and female students is about the same for both course types.

Figure 21: Continuation rates by sex, 2020/21⁵³

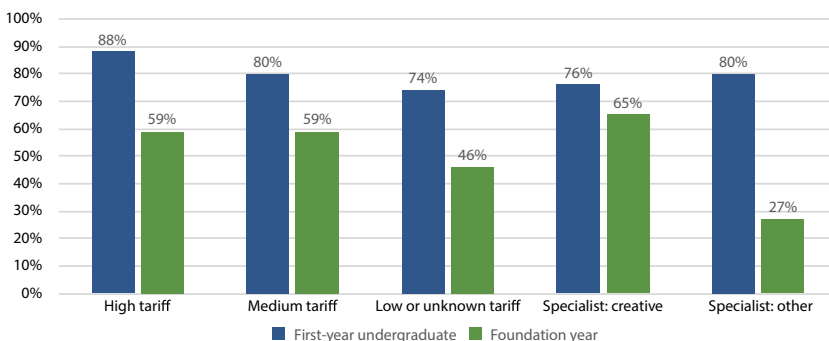


However, foundation years outperform Access courses on continuation. Data from the Quality Assurance Agency from 2023 show that while 43,420 students entered Access courses in 2020/21, only 23,290 students with Access diplomas entered higher education the following year. This suggests an approximate continuation rate of around 54%. This is considerably lower than the rate of 74% for foundation years and is almost certainly an overestimate, as some students entering in 2021/22 will have completed Access courses before 2020/21 and left a gap before starting

in higher education.⁵⁴ However, Access courses arguably face a greater challenge, having taken on a higher proportion of students without a Level 3 qualification.⁵⁵

All considered, foundation year continuation rates appear to outperform similar rates for Access courses. Foundation years are not significantly more or less equitable than undergraduate rates, as those who are under-represented in higher education do not generally perform better on foundation years than on undergraduate courses. But the continuation rates for foundation years are consistently lower, with the difference rising to 15 percentage points for disabled students and 21 percentage points for male students. These are significant differences, suggesting there is more to do for foundation years to close the gap.

Figure 22: Completion rates by provider tariff, 2021/22⁵⁶

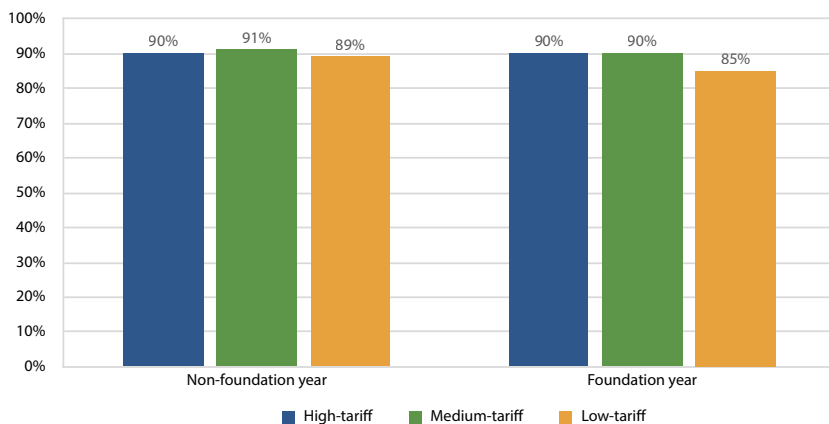


Data from the Department for Education compare completion rates for those who take a foundation year with all first-year undergraduates. This is the proportion who receive a degree qualification within six years of starting a foundation year or five of starting a full degree course. The data show a 27-percentage point gap in completion rates between foundation year students and full-time undergraduates up to 2021/22. This rises to a 29-point gap at high-tariff institutions, where foundation year students are a third less likely to receive a degree qualification in the given period. At low-tariff institutions – which take a large majority of foundation year students – completion rates are less than 50%. Creative institutions do better (though they take far fewer students).

These data should be interpreted cautiously, however, as they describe students from up to six years ago when the number studying foundation year courses was much smaller.⁵⁷

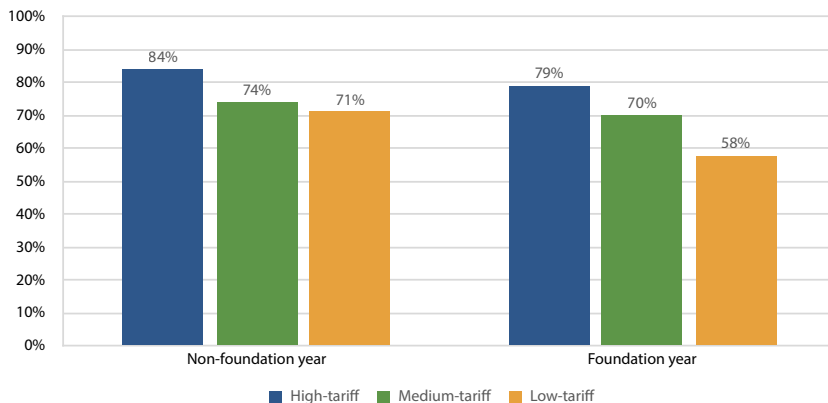
Finally, the progression rates for foundation year courses initially appear impressive. Here, students who originally took a foundation year and subsequently earned a degree are compared with those who earned a degree but did not take a foundation year. For high- and medium-tariff institutions, there is no great difference between progression for those who took foundation years and those who did not. Even for low-tariff institutions, the difference remains relatively small (85%, down from 89%).

Figure 23: Progression to employment or further study by institutional tariff, 2020/21⁵⁸



But a difference appears when looking at progression into highly-skilled employment – ‘professional’ or ‘managerial’ work. At low-tariff institutions, where most foundation year students study, progression to highly-skilled employment is 13 percentage points lower among those who took foundation years compared to those who did not.

Figure 24: Progression to highly-skilled employment by institutional tariff, 2020/21⁵⁹



There also appears to be a considerable 'foundation year earnings penalty', with those who took a foundation year earning nearly £4,000 less than those who did not five years after graduation.⁶⁰ But as these data are from 2013/14, it remains unclear whether the earnings penalty persists, has worsened, or has improved.

Given the educational background of foundation year students, some differences might be expected and understandable. However, more work is needed to ensure foundation years deliver excellent outcomes for the greatest number of students.

Misuse by institutions

In July 2023, the Department for Education made two sets of claims against the quality of foundation years. First, it argued that institutions actively push students to take a foundation year when they would fare perfectly well in the full degree course:

*Research shows that too many people are encouraged to take a foundation year in some subjects like business where it is not necessary.*⁶¹

This claim is tested in a report by IFF Research, *Understanding the costs of Foundation Years study*, which was published by the Department for

Education alongside the July 2023 announcement.⁶² Based on interviews with 23 institutions, the report discusses some ways institutions use foundation years. On students being ‘encouraged’, it is written:

HEPs [Higher Education Providers] were careful to note that they did not seek to push students onto FYs [Foundation Years] through recruitment, but rather ensured students had the agency to choose for themselves whether the FY route or the direct-entry UG [undergraduate] route was more appropriate for their circumstances. For example, if a student did not meet entry requirements for entry at Year 1 of an undergraduate course, they would rarely be directed to the FY route, except in a minority of borderline cases.

Instead, most institutions stressed the value of foundation years as a tool for access and, by ensuring students are properly prepared for their courses, reducing drop-out rates. There is therefore no compelling evidence of this practice here, nor in any other document published at the same time by the Department for Education. However, the report covers less than a quarter of foundation year providers, so the practice may occur elsewhere.

Secondly, Secretary of State for Education Gillian Keegan MP argued that foundation years are used to supplement institutions’ finances inappropriately:

We want to ensure that foundation years are not used to add to the bottom line of institutions at the expense of those who study them.⁶³

Similarly, in the *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, it is written:

It is hard not to conclude that universities are using foundation years to create four-year degrees in order to entice students who do not otherwise meet their standard entry criteria.⁶⁴

Unlike the first claim, there is evidence of these practices in the IFF Research report:

Some HEPs felt that FYs provide a ‘sense of security’ both in terms of supporting the financial sustainability of running UG degree courses with low student numbers, and for mitigating fluctuating enrolment in other areas of the HEP.

A minority view was that [foundation year] provision supported the increase in student numbers without incurring a dip in overall average entry tariffs.⁶⁵

The report suggests that by putting students on foundation years, some institutions have kept their tariff requirements high while continuing to enrol more students.

It is not unusual for institutions to use fees from some students to cross-subsidise others; for example, fees from international students regularly top-up loss-making provision for domestic undergraduate students and cross-subsidise research.⁶⁶ However, using foundation years to inflate entry tariffs goes beyond these other practices and is clearly of concern.

In summary, there are many areas where foundation year providers can claim success. Foundation years have a good record on access, particularly among those with few qualifications, and many courses have high continuation rates. When compared with Access diplomas, foundation years are slightly less accessible but a higher proportion of those who take them enter degree-level study. Concerns about misuse appear somewhat misplaced, with no clear evidence that students are being encouraged to take foundation years, but there are reports that institutions are using foundation years to inflate their tariff scores. Chapter 3 considers the role of government policy in helping institutions achieve their goals in this area.

3. Government policy in England

The new policy announced by the Department for Education in 2023 is to reduce the maximum fee that ‘classroom-based’ foundation years can charge. In doing so, the Department for Education may hope to make them less financially viable so students switch to Access courses or enrol directly on a degree course. Early reports from providers appear to show that the viability of some foundation years is threatened.⁶⁷

The IFF Research report lists projected costs for foundation years in different subject areas. These are compared with the potential maximum fee that institutions may charge for these courses under the new policy.

Figure 25: Cost for foundation year courses by subject area, based on estimates submitted by 14 institutions⁶⁸

Subject	Maximum cost per FTE student	Minimum cost per FTE student	Potential new maximum fee
Biological Mathematical & Physical Sciences	£16,400	£7,452	£9,250
Engineering & Technology	£15,800	£7,239	£9,250
Medicine, Dentistry & Health	£15,600	£7,744	£9,250
Design, Creative & Performing Arts	£13,200	£9,419	£9,250
Architecture & Planning	£12,047	£8,199	£9,250
Education	£11,600	£9,032	£9,250
Administrative & Business Studies	£12,800	£5,186	£5,760
Humanities & Language-based studies & Archaeology	£12,407	£6,526	£5,760 (Humanities) £9,250 (Languages, Archaeology)
Social Studies	£12,300	£6,486	£5,760

Some courses receive extra funding from the Office for Students, but only those in group B, the top three above – lab-based Science courses, Engineering and Technology, and courses linked to Medicine – receive a significant amount (about £1,700).⁶⁹ There are no foundation years in price group A. The remaining courses may only receive up to £300 and may receive much less or – for those in group D – nothing.

Though classroom-based courses are among the cheapest to run, the new maximum fee of £5,760 is below the minimum cost for both Social Studies and Humanities courses, suggesting all these courses will be loss-making. For the most expensive Business, Social Studies and Humanities courses, unless efforts are taken to reduce cost, the loss will be up to £7,040. Ironically, the only classroom-based category not necessarily loss-making will be Business courses – the courses named by the Department for Education as being the target of the clampdown.

Additionally, the original £9,250 maximum fee still sits at or near the bottom of the price range for courses in other price groups. Assuming the figures are accurate, this suggests many of these courses will also be financially unviable. Accounting for the OfS subsidy, Biology and Physical Sciences courses could still make losses of over £5,400 per student per year. This is a serious threat to their ongoing viability and even more concerning if they have been identified as ‘strategically important’.

Even Philip Augar, who called for foundation years to be defunded, acknowledges:

*It does not look reasonable ... to expect any subject to be taught to a high standard for under £7,500 per year.*⁷⁰

The cost of running a high-quality course has likely increased since 2019, when the Augar Review was published. It therefore seems likely that the policy will make the affected foundation year courses less financially viable.

Institutions may respond in several ways to this policy.

First, they may cut low-quality courses as intended, which may be the courses in price group D affected by the policy. However, providing a high-quality course is likely to be costly. Secondly, therefore, they may cut

higher-quality but pricier courses to save money while allowing cheaper but lower-quality courses to continue.

Thirdly, institutions may seek to recoup costs by reducing the quality of their programmes. Biology students may be given less access to laboratories, Engineering students lower quality equipment and students on all courses fewer teaching hours and less feedback. And fourthly, institutions may *increase* their intake of foundation year students without spending more. To get more 'bang' for their 'buck', they might increase class sizes and spread the same staff and resources across more students.

There may be some cost savings to be made; for example, foundation year students may benefit less from research-informed teaching and more from consolidating the basics. However, if enacted to a significant extent, these responses are likely to negatively affect student outcomes.

Concerningly, the Department for Education has told us almost nothing about how it expects institutions to respond to the fee cut. The closest it comes is in the *Equality Analysis* of the policy, which states:

If providers respond to the reduced fee and loan limits by reducing the availability or quality of foundation years in classroom-based subjects, this will also particularly affect mature students, since they are overrepresented on these courses.⁷¹

However, the report leaves unanswered the question of whether providers will reduce the availability or quality of foundation years. If they do, fewer students may have the chance to benefit fully from higher education.

A key problem is that the policy does not target low-quality courses. The data in Chapter 2 show that price group is a poor proxy for course quality. The poorest-performing subject by continuation rate compared to its undergraduate equivalent is Language and Area Studies, which falls in price group C. By the same metric, Business courses from group D perform better than Law and Mathematical Sciences. This policy therefore risks reducing the viability of excellent courses in price group D while failing to address quality issues in other price groups.

Lastly, we should ask whether a wholesale switch from foundation years to Access courses is likely or desirable. Augar and his colleagues suggest it is:

The taxpayer is entitled to ask why universities are not collaborating with FECs [Further Education Colleges] on enrolling these students onto Access Diplomas with lower fees, more advantageous loan terms, and a standalone qualification, or, if necessary, running such courses themselves, as a few universities already do.⁷²

By contrast, the results in Chapter 2 suggest that Access courses and foundation years have complementary strengths, with Access courses having a higher intake from students without prior qualifications but foundation years sending more students onto full degree courses. Additionally, Access courses may be more expensive for the state, as the Advanced Learner Loan to which those on the Access diploma are entitled is, unlike an undergraduate loan, usually written off once the student completes a higher education course.⁷³ Rather than one being clearly preferable to the other, therefore, they may both have value for different reasons.

In summary, the Department for Education policy looks to put some foundation years under threat – and not necessarily the ones intended. If institutions want to continue running foundation year courses, they must find ways of reducing costs, which could threaten quality. As the policy is not carefully targeted, excellent courses may be cut while low-quality courses continue to operate. An adjusted approach is needed. This approach is developed in Chapter 4.

4. Conclusion – an alternative approach

Foundation years have enormous potential for expanding **access** to the opportunities of higher education. They make degree-level study accessible to those lacking a qualification at Level 3, which is essentially mandatory for those entering directly (except perhaps for study at The Open University, where most courses have no entry requirements). They outperform Access courses in the proportion of students who move into degree-level study, though Access courses perform better at including those with fewer qualifications. But as the number of foundation year courses has grown, we are entitled to ask whether they reliably create the conditions for students to **succeed** in higher education.

Not all foundation years are born equal. Some courses, like those in Veterinary Sciences, give their students excellent opportunities for progression to degree-level study. Others, like some in Combined and General Studies, have very high drop-out rates. The Department for Education is right to act quickly to guarantee every foundation year student is given an education worth their time and money.

However, moving with speed has come at the cost of a fully nuanced approach. Funding has been reduced for courses in just one Office for Students price group, but there are likely to be pockets of high- and low-quality in all groups. By lowering fees, the Department for Education must acknowledge the risk that institutions might reduce course quality, pack classrooms with more students or cut high-quality courses. A strategy is needed which protects pockets of excellence while preventing institutions from using foundation years inappropriately, such as to inflate their tariff ratings, by taking students on a foundation year who could enter the full degree course immediately.

If we value degrees in Business, Social Studies and Humanities, we should accept that foundation years in these subjects can be valuable if they successfully contribute to equalising access to such courses. **The Department for Education should therefore restore the maximum fee and loan available for all foundation year courses to £9,250 per year.**

However, action should be taken against courses where the quality of provision falls short. **The Office for Students should withdraw student finance from courses deemed to deliver poor outcomes for their students.** (It has the power to do so under section 16 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, ‘Suspension of registration’, which includes, among other powers, the ability to withdraw student support.⁷⁴) Institutions would be free to continue delivering such courses, preserving institutional autonomy, but would have to cover the full cost themselves. This creates a strong incentive for institutions to ensure their foundation years meet the quality bar.

The Office for Students may continue to measure quality against the metrics of continuation, completion and progression, but at present, degrees with a foundation year are subject to the same thresholds as other undergraduate degrees. **The OfS should set different thresholds for foundation year courses,** as it already does for undergraduate courses with a postgraduate component. These might be lower than for equivalent courses without a foundation year, as many foundation year students are less qualified than those who go straight to degree-level study. This is consistent with its current approach for, for example, part-time students.⁷⁵ But to ensure high standards, the thresholds may rise over time. To gain a full understanding of the institutional context, the OfS should also consider evidence from an institution and students themselves.

There are additional challenges and costs of supporting foundation year students, who are on average less qualified, older and from more disadvantaged backgrounds than undergraduate students. **In recognition of these challenges, the Office for Students should also provide additional grant funding for foundation years.** Shutting down some courses should make some funding available, but the Government may need to find extra funding for this measure. However, the grant should only go to excellent courses. In addition to having student finance withdrawn, institutions should also be obliged to repay their grant for courses which do not reach the required quality standard.

In the meantime, the Department for Education should also empower students to make informed choices about foundation year study. **It should**

publish HESA data on foundation years, with a breakdown by provider and subject, on an annual basis.

Finally, the primary responsibility for excellent foundation year provision sits with institutions. Providers of foundation years should:

- **Ensure the supply of foundation year courses is closely aligned to the demand for such courses.** Business courses may be comparatively cheaper to run and avoiding ‘subject-specific requirements’ may attract students more easily, but a lack of availability of other courses may lead students to study Business when they would rather take a different subject. Institutions might consider increasing the availability of courses undersupplied relative to undergraduate demand, especially those not covered significantly by Access courses, such as Law and Design, Creative and Performing Arts.
- **Offer Access courses or collaborate with Further Education Colleges to offer them,** where Access courses may be more effective at preparing students for higher education.
- **In medium-tariff and particularly high-tariff institutions where only a small proportion of foundation year students study, carefully consider the potential for foundation years to increase access** and launch more foundation year courses where they may be effective at doing so.
- Regularly review the quality of their foundation year provision and **take decisive action, including pausing or cutting courses,** when a course does not consistently deliver excellent outcomes.

Naturally, the findings of this paper are backward-looking. The foundation years of the future may be very different from those of today. In some ways, such as those described above, that would be welcome. A renewed focus on quality and the student experience will allow the greatest number of foundation year students to benefit from everything higher education has to offer.

Annex – International students studying foundation years

Since the majority of this report was written, particular concerns have been raised about so-called ‘international foundation years’ targeted at international students.⁷⁶ Relatively little is known about how international students use foundation year courses, however. For example, publicly available data released by the Department for Education only covers UK-domiciled students at English higher education institutions.⁷⁷ This Annex is therefore designed to offer a brief glimpse into foundation year study by international students.

Methods

All the data in this Annex are previously unpublished and were purchased from HESA for this report.⁷⁸ Note that these data describe only integrated foundation years, those which are part of a standard full-time undergraduate degree programme. (These are the courses referred to by the *Sunday Times*.⁷⁹) Other international students study standalone qualifications at Level 3 which are also designed to prepare them for degree-level study: these courses are not discussed here.

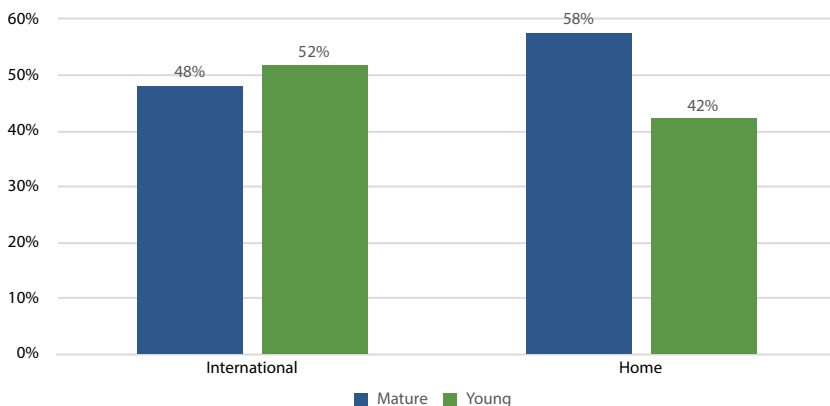
A student is described as an ‘international student’, meaning they are not domiciled in the UK, if data have been collected neither for their neighbourhood marker nor their ethnicity, as these data are only collected for UK-domiciled students. It is possible that data may not have been collected for another reason – for example, they were not provided by an institution or a record was lost. However, having taken guidance from HESA, we believe the number of students whose data are missing is negligible and the vast majority of students described by these data will be international students.

Findings

We estimate that of the almost 63,000 students studying an integrated foundation year in 2020/21, no more than one-in-seven students is an international student (around 8,900 or 14%) and the remainder (around 54,100 or 86%) are home students. This means that a significant majority of those on integrated foundation year courses are home students.

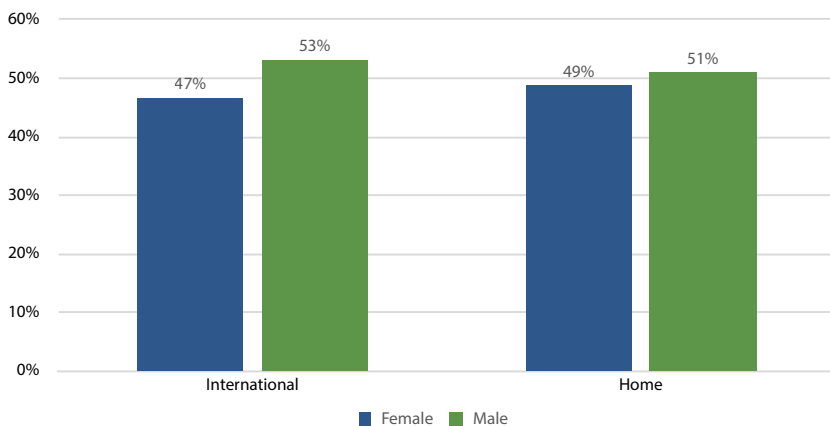
Looking at the characteristics of these students, we find that international students are younger. More than half (52%) are under 21, compared with just 42% of home students.

Figure A1: student age, by domicile (international or home). Source: HESA



The balance of sexes is similar, with a slightly higher proportion of male students.

Figure A2: student sex, by domicile (international or home). Source: HESA



However, international foundation year students study in different regions. A majority (60%) is concentrated in just two regions, London and the East of England. Unlike home students, only a small proportion study in the South East and Yorkshire. But it is the East Midlands where the highest proportion of those studying are international – 29%, or three-in-10. A further 23% of those studying in London and 22% of those studying in the East of England are international students.

Figure A3: region of study, as a proportion of students by domicile (international or home) who study there. Source: HESA

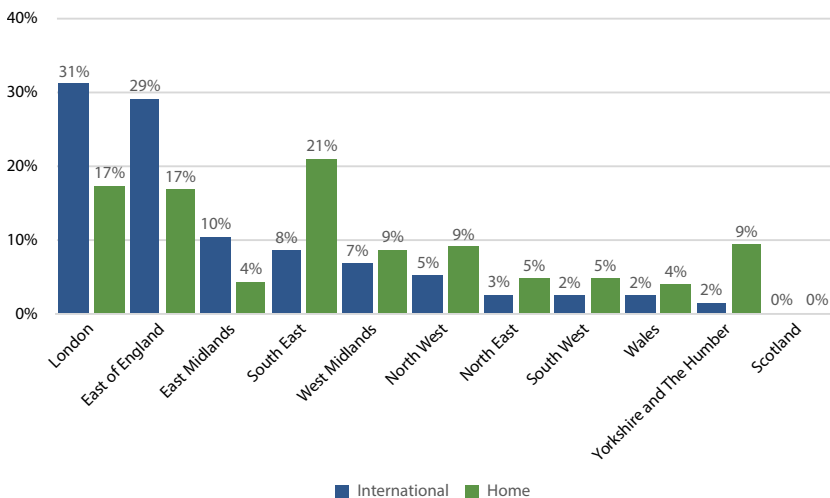


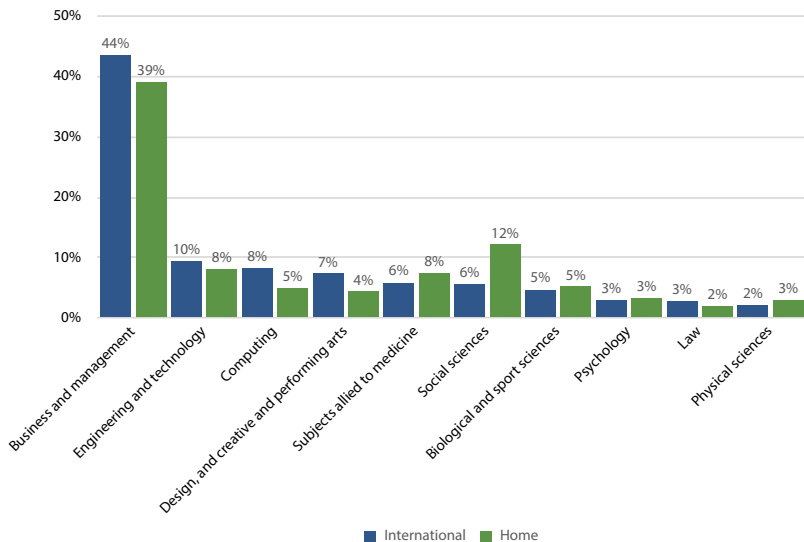
Figure A4: regions ranked by proportion of foundation year students in that region domiciled overseas. Scotland is excluded due to low numbers. Source: HESA

Region	Proportion international
East Midlands	29%
London	22%
East of England	22%
West Midlands	12%

Wales	9%
North West of England	9%
South West of England	8%
North East of England	8%
South East of England	6%
Yorkshire and the Humber	3%
UK	14%

Generally speaking, international students study similar subjects to home students. However, there are two major exceptions. First, international students study Business at an even higher rate (44%) than home students (39%). Secondly, they are much less likely to study Social Sciences (6%) than home students (12%).

Figure A5: 10 most popular subjects of study for international students, as a proportion of the students by domicile (international or home) who study them. Source: HESA



Similarly, we can also look at foundation year courses where the highest and lowest proportions of students are international. On courses in Design, and Creative and Performing Arts, more than one-fifth of students (22%) is international. Of students studying courses in Computing and in Media, more than one-fifth are also international. By contrast, foundation years in Education have just 3% of their students from overseas.

Figure A6: subjects ranked by proportion of foundation year students studying that subject who are not UK-domiciled. Source: HESA

Highest proportion of international students	Lowest proportion of international students
1. Design, and Creative and Performing Arts (22%)	1. Education and Teaching (3%)
2. Computing (21%)	2. Veterinary Sciences (4%)
3. Media, Journalism and Communications (20%)	3. Mathematical Sciences (5%)
4. Language and Area Studies (19%)	4. Geography, Earth and Environmental Studies (5%)
5. Law (19%)	5. Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies (5%)

We also find that international students appear to have slightly poorer continuation rates than home students. Only around seven-in-10 international students (71%) continue in higher education, compared to three-quarters of home students (75%).

Figure A7: Student outcomes a year after beginning their foundation year, by domicile (international or home). Source: HESA

Status	International students	Home students
Continuing at provider	67%	71%
Gained intended award or higher	0%	0%

Gained other award	4%	4%
<i>Continuation</i>	71%	75%
Dormant or writing-up	7%	7%
Left with no award	22%	18%
<i>Total</i>	<i>(100%)</i>	<i>(100%)</i>

In summary, the number of international foundation year students on integrated courses is quite small, with a large majority of students domiciled in the UK. Those from overseas are slightly younger than home students and are concentrated in London and the East of England, with an outsize presence in the East Midlands. They tend to study Business and STEM subjects. Finally, they have slightly higher drop-out rates than home students – but the differences are not very large.

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Short, preparatory ‘foundation year’ courses have exploded in popularity in recent years, but they have drawn criticism from policymakers. Like Access diplomas, they serve to support people from all backgrounds to enter higher education.

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