

**Four key words:**

Capability

Foundation degrees

Vocational learners

Curriculum

**Capability, practical intelligence and the first year Foundation degree curriculum:  
lighting the blue touch paper**

The rapid expansion in Britain of vocationally-orientated Foundation degrees, since their introduction in 2001, means a new group of graduates is entering employment across sectors as diverse as creative industries, engineering and social care. Yet provisional progression and completion statistics suggest this group of predominantly experienced, part-time, employed learners take longer to complete their studies and remain in low-paid employment even after graduating (HEFCE, 2007). The human and economic cost of attrition makes it imperative to understand how the curriculum can engage and support the experienced worker entering Higher Education. Whilst the dual status (of worker and learner) is undoubtedly stressful, we suggest there is an under-exploited opportunity during the first year to facilitate successful transition; by understanding, valuing and utilising the practical intelligence of such students, described by Sternberg and Grigorenko (2000) as 'the capacity to behave effectively in everyday life'.

Drawing upon theoretical constructs and research with health and social care graduates, this paper proposes an approach to the first year curriculum which is designed to respect and engage with Foundation degree students' (typically) extensive practical knowledge and high degree of motivation. By seeking to systematically discover how each theorises about self (Yorke and Knight, 2004), it is possible to appreciate the strengths of practical intelligence and in doing so, to challenge the insidious 'deficit' model (Marteanu, Sowden & Armstrong, 2008). Indeed, we suggest that the situational and dispositional factors characterising Foundation degree learners create a flammable mixture which may be ignited or doused early in the learning journey.

We will not propose a simple 'skills-based' approach though, as it is critical that thinking, reasoning and judgement deepens practical intelligence for adaptable,

capable practitioners to develop (Fraser and Greenhalgh, 2001). Instead, we relate emergent themes from interviews to the work of Yorke and Knight (2004), proposing students' self-theories as a starting point for successful lifelong engagement with academic study within Higher Education. This longer term commitment is essential to all health and social care careers in which practitioners require ongoing development to be evidenced.

#### References:

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