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**Paper Title: Foundation Programs as a Preparation for University Study – The UNSW Experience
Presenter: Dr Roger Alexander, Director, UNSW Foundation Studies**

Abstract

International students intending to study at an Australian university may choose from a variety of entry pathways. Different pathways will suit different students and given this choice students (and their families) will decide which best suits their needs. Foundation programs provide specific benefits for international students. They are designed to meet the special needs of international students and the best programs focus on aligning students from a variety of educational cultures and traditions with the open and questioning educational culture in Australian universities. We have followed the university performance of UNSW Foundation Year graduates over a number of years and the data indicate that Foundation Year graduates perform exceptionally well in comparison to both other international students and, in many cases, local students.

Paper

Foundation Programs as a Preparation for University Study – The UNSW Experience

International students intending to study at an Australian university have a variety of entry pathways available to them. Different students will be better suited to one or another of these possible pathways depending on their interests, educational background, English language skills, family circumstances, chosen degree program and destination university. Figure 1 below shows a sample of available pathways.

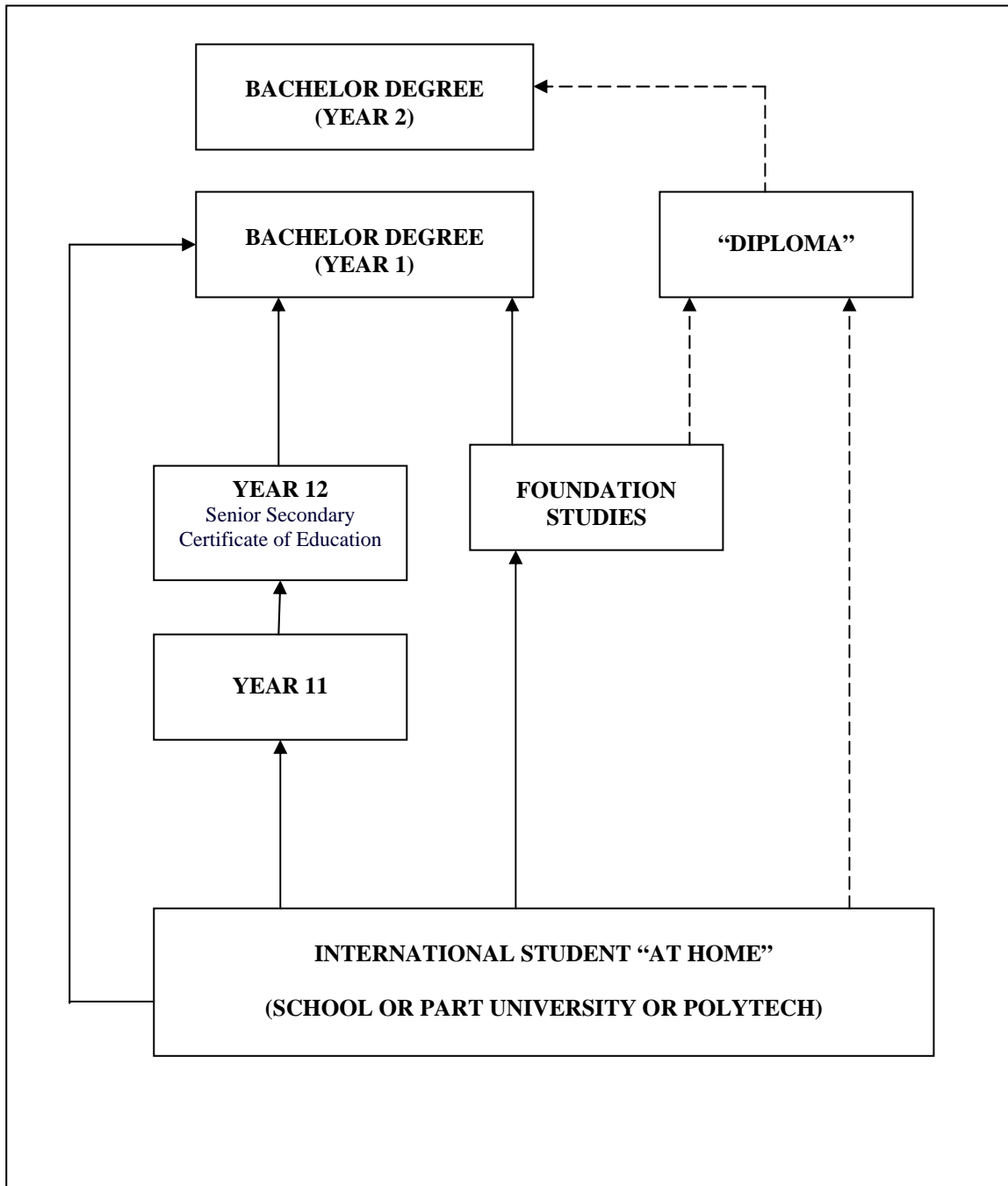


Figure 1

If we ask

“which pathway is best ?”

I don't believe there is an answer. Each entry route will suit some students more than others and given a choice of pathways international students (and their families) will decide where to spend their money (where and how to study).

If we ask

“do Foundation Programs provide a sound preparation for university study ?”

I believe the answer is a resounding “yes”. The weight of evidence over more than 15 years convinces me that Foundation programs provide an excellent academic and social preparation for Australian university study and are able to provide the support, care and guidance required by international students from a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds.

The curriculum, approaches to teaching and support services in Foundation programs are designed specifically to support international students and to prepare them for university study.

Before looking at our experiences in the UNSW Foundation Year it is instructive to look at the characteristics shared by all good Foundation programs in Australia.

We can identify three underlying characteristics:

1. Specifically International

All students in Foundation programs are international students and approaches to teaching and learning, student support services and pastoral care are focussed on the needs of international students.

2. Flexibility and Choice

Foundation programs offer a variety of course lengths and starting dates to suit students with different educational backgrounds and from countries with different academic calendars.

3. Close University Links

Foundation programs have close links with a university or universities and the curriculum is designed by (or in close collaboration with) university academics to incorporate the specific knowledge and skills identified as pre-requisites for university study.

In other words Foundation programs are completely designed around the pastoral and academic needs of international students and the student attributes identified by universities as providing the best preparation for degree study.

How do these general characteristics mould the organisation and delivery of Foundation programs? I will briefly describe our program at the University of New South Wales (UNSW Foundation Year) as an example. Other Foundation programs exhibit similar characteristics.

Specifically International:

- The pace, style and teaching philosophy are focused on supporting international students almost all of whom have English as a second (or third) language.
- Tutorial class sizes are limited to 20 students with our average class size in practice lying between 16 and 17.
- A team of full-time student counsellors provides academic and pastoral support to students, organises social gatherings and sporting activities.
- A full-time Student Welfare Officer arranges accommodation, ensures that the arrangements are suitable throughout the program and particularly ensures the welfare of our under-18 students.
- The use of English in the academic context is studied as a separate subject as part of the Foundation Year providing specific, focussed support to ESL speakers.
- A familiarisation with Australian society and culture is an integral part of the program.

Flexibility and Choice

- A variety of program types and lengths is available to suit students entering with different academic and/or English language backgrounds.
- Students may enter the program at various times throughout the year to suit their differing home-country academic calendars.
- Students may qualify to enter university in either Session 1 or Session 2 depending on their Foundation Year starting date.
- Students choose the “stream” of study that best suits their intended university degree.

Close University Links

- The curriculum is designed by (or in close collaboration with) university academics to incorporate the specific knowledge and skills identified as pre-requisites for university study.
- Specific streams of study (subject groupings) are specified by universities as appropriate to specific degree groupings.
- A subject in computer studies/computer literacy is compulsory.
- Students – and their parents – are secure in the knowledge that they will be accepted by the nominated university (or universities) provided they achieve the appropriate academic standard in the programme.
- AT UNSW Foundation Studies students study on the University campus and have full access to campus facilities.

- The teaching format is designed to familiarise students with the lecture/tutorial format commonly used in university courses and to develop the learning skills required by this style of teaching
- Academic quality is overseen by the UNSW Academic Board through the Pre University Education Committee.
- Independent Subject Consultants, normally drawn from academic staff at the University of New South Wales, preview examinations, review marked examination papers and monitor the curriculum and assessments standards.

Student Performance

How do we know that our Foundation Year is doing the job for which it was designed? We use two major measures:

1. Student feedback on their experiences in the Foundation Year
2. Student academic performance at university

As an example of student views of our Foundation Year I would like to highlight three students who performed exceptionally well at university in three quite distinct courses:

Cheryl Elvina Halim from Indonesia was a UNSW Foundation Year Student during 1996-1997. Cheryl was awarded the **UNSW University Medal in Chemical Engineering** in 2000.



"UNSW Foundation Year was the first educational institution I attended when I came to Australia. I started in the Science stream and have now graduated with a Bachelor of Engineering in Chemical Engineering. Foundation Year gave me a strong background for my university studies. It provided technical skills and as well worked on improving my communication skills. I met a lot of people there whom I still keep in touch with after so many years, although we are not studying in the same field. All of the lecturers in Foundation were very helpful and concerned with the progress of my classmates and myself, and most of us have gone on to do very well at university. The Foundation teachers helped me decide to take up Chemical Engineering as my course in university. I'm really glad I chose it. I've had the best time of my life here and I'm very honoured to have won the University Medal!"

Son Bao Pham (Sean) from Vietnam is a UNSW Foundation Year Graduate. Sean was awarded the **UNSW University Medal for Computer Science** in 2001 and is currently completing a PhD in Information Retrieval and Natural Language Processing at UNSW.



"Ever since I was very young I have been interested in computers and learning simple computer languages - this inspired me to study Computer Science at the University of New South Wales. I chose this university because of its excellent reputation for teaching and research. I enrolled in UNSW Foundation Year to help me learn how to study and cope at an Australian University. In Foundation Year, I found I could strengthen and build on what I knew, improve my English skills and adapt to my new learning environment. I also received a good solid basic grounding in what to expect when I eventually started my bachelor degree in Computer Science. In Foundation Studies I learnt critical thinking and study skills that have been very useful to me in my academic life. I really enjoyed my studies at Foundation Year. My teachers especially were very approachable so I could relax and ask questions. I thought it was great that the Student Advisers organised sporting events and excursions that helped me socialise with other students of all different nationalities. I still keep in touch with the friends I made through Foundation Studies."

Kwong Kar Yee (Cindy) from Hong Kong was a UNSW Foundation Year Student in 1999 – 2000. Cindy is studying the final year of her Bachelor of Commerce - Accounting & Finance degree at UNSW. In 2002 Cindy was the

- **Winner of the CPA Australia Prize for Year 1 Accounting**
- **Winner of the Institute of Chartered Accountants Prize for Year 1 Accounting**



"I enrolled in UNSW Foundation Year as I was convinced that it was the best pathway to UNSW, and it was. At UNSW Foundation Year, I received fundamental knowledge and gained the ability to stand firmly on my own in university. First of all, it helped me adapt to the Australian study environment and offered me the opportunity to improve my English skills. Secondly, the knowledge I gained in Foundation Year gave me a competitive edge throughout my studies. The program is finely integrated with first year Commerce, so there is minimum pain during the transition from Foundation Year to university. Further, it encourages critical thinking, which is essential to successful learning. This is an asset I can build on. All in all, studying in UNSW Foundation Year was a valuable experience. It is definitely the doorstep to a bright future!"

Of course not all students win University Medals, and we need to look at broader measures of student performance to gauge the value of the Foundation Year. At UNSW we have monitored the aggregate university performance of our students over a number of years. A useful measure of student success in undergraduate study is the **Student Progress Rate (SPR)**. The SPR is calculated as the percentage of total attempted course load successfully completed in minimum time.

First year performance data for 1997 – 1999 and for 2002 comparing Foundation Year graduates with direct entry international students and local students are shown in Figure 2. (Data for the years 2000 and 2001 is unavailable because of UNSW student record system changes). Foundation Year graduates have outperformed both direct entry international students and local students in three of the four years for which we have data, and equalled the performance of direct entry international students in the fourth year. Whilst there is some variation in performance between individual faculties the data indicate that the UNSW Foundation Year is an excellent preparation for university study and provides international students with their best chance of success. Anecdotal evidence from other Foundation programs supports our conclusions.

**Summary Student Performance Across All Faculties
(1997, 1998, 1999, 2002)**

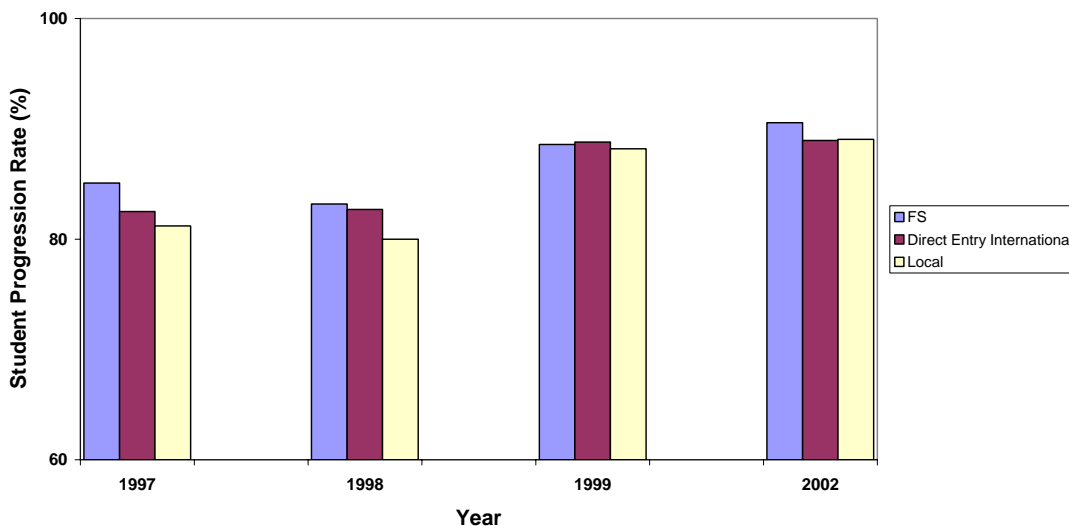


Figure 2

It is sometimes argued that some Foundation Year graduates have an “advantage” over other commencing students because of their familiarity with the University campus and the teaching methods used in the first year of Bachelor degree programs, and that this “advantage” will disappear in later years of the course. We have collected preliminary data over 2002 for Foundation Year graduates in the first year of their university course and for those who have progressed to the second year of their university course. These data are shown in Figure 3, and they clearly indicate that the superior completion rates displayed by Foundation Year graduates in their first year of university are continued on to the second year.

Summary Student Performance Across All Faculties - 2002

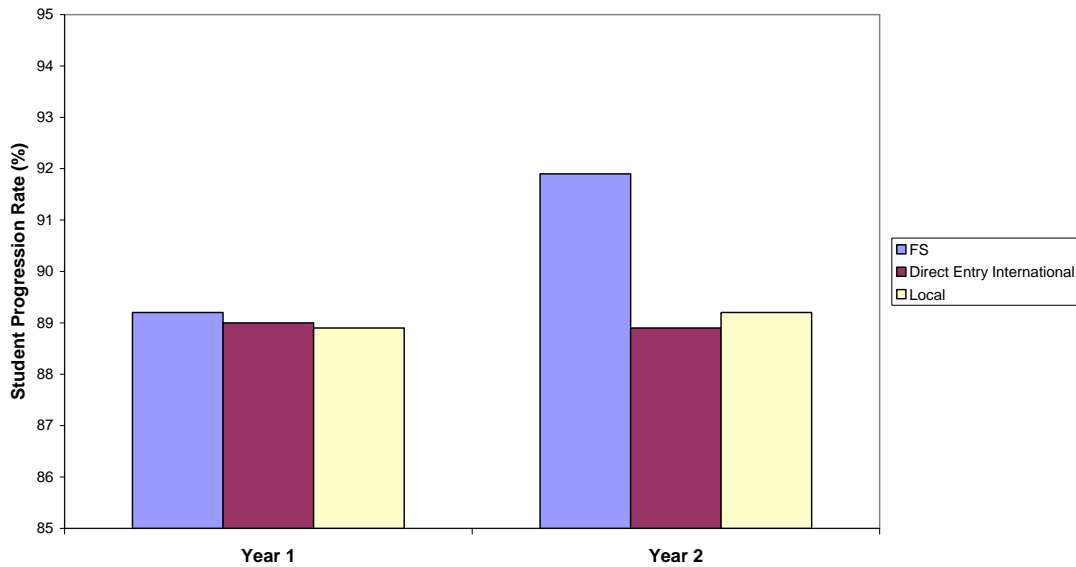


Figure 3

Both the qualitative data on student experiences in Foundation Year, and the quantitative data on subsequent student performance at university, confirm that Foundation programs are an excellent preparation for university study. Foundation programs have been designed around the needs of international students and have well-established systems and staff for the provision of academic support and pastoral care. At UNSW Foundation Studies we have established secure protocols to ensure the welfare of under-18 students and have successfully accommodated substantial numbers of younger students over the 15 years we have been in operation.

A Foundation program will not suit all international students and the availability of a variety of pathways to university study allows students and their families to choose the one that best suits them. Our experience, and the student performance data at UNSW, confirm that students who do choose a Foundation program enjoy the experience and are very well prepared for university study.