

UALL award application by The Foundation Centre, Durham University, UK.

Application for consideration in Category 2 - Sustainability: this recognises creative Lifelong Learning initiatives with proven impact and sustainability.



Since 1992, the Foundation Centre (formerly the Centre for Lifelong Learning) at Durham University, UK has developed and delivered a unique adult and lifelong learning programme within the context of a prestigious research intensive university. The University is situated in a relatively deprived region of the North East of England and the Centre actively seeks to recruit potential students within the region. This presents many challenges relating to adult learning such as student expectations and comparisons with the wider student body. Our central interest is in transformative learning. Many of our adult learners come to us with only a utilitarian value of their chosen subject, and relatively limited views of how further study might open possibilities in their lives (Bourdieu's *habitus*). We aim to provide experience and opportunities for reflection which help such students transform both their views of their chosen subject, and perceptions of possibilities and opportunities in their lives. We do this through the subject, where our staff provide highly supported and creative teaching (and widely disseminated practices), and through opportunities for interaction between students and students, staff and students, and students with those who have progressed (via peer support). In this way, we believe we foster a culture of continuous learning and the development of new perspectives on the world.

To support these aims, the Foundation Centre undertakes a broad range of activities from initial engagement with potential learners through to completion of their degrees. To engage with potential lifelong learners these activities include:

- A programme of family learning roadshows which engage children and their parents in activities relating to different subjects. The communities are characterised with low percentage participation with Higher Education and the events raise awareness of the opportunities to return to education.
- Public engagement events such as "pop-up poetry" which engages the general public in poetry in unusual settings and science outreach events, presenting a range of activities including a recreation of Michael Faraday's original public engagement lectures.

Once a potential student has applied to join the programme they are invited to attend an open day and participate in activities which provide the opportunity to understand more about the structure and ethos of the programme. This initiative arose from research within the department to investigate the potential to develop a tool-kit to identify student potential. We are particularly interested in noting kinds of student attributes, often non-academic, which impede their success, and then in providing support, guidance, and instruction which develops habits of mind and ways of working which support progress. This provision is research-informed and has attracted interest from other universities. A preparation science course themed around “Energy” has also been developed to provide potential students with a flavour of what they can expect and to alleviate anxieties associated with returning to education (The course is available to enrol at https://openeducation.blackboard.com/mooc-catalog/courseDetails/view?course_id= 1780 1).

During the Foundation Year, a wide range of research and initiatives have been developed to support student progress. These include:

- Development of a peer mentoring scheme where students are supported by former Foundation students. The investigation into the effectiveness of the scheme finds that the support via the peer mentor scheme improved the students self-efficacy significantly. This successfully supported student transition from ‘Year 0’ to undergraduate.
- In science subjects, research within the department has focused on student understanding of scientific language. This has led to the development of a range of innovative language focused teaching strategies including the use of corpus linguistics.
- To reduce anxiety relating to practical science and to enhance conceptual understanding, the department has also focused on the development of virtual experiments.
- Delivery of wellness and mindfulness courses to students enhance student wellbeing.

Further details of the Centre’s scholarship can be obtained at <https://www.dur.ac.uk/foundation.centre/scholarship/>

The impact and sustainability of this lifelong learning programme has been demonstrated extensively on a sector wide and individual basis. Staff at the centre disseminate these innovative developments through a range of journal publications and conference presentations. We also recently published a book addressing important issues for lifelong learning based on the Centre’s sustained and extensive experience¹. Centre staff are also actively involved with a range of professional organisations such as the Foundation Year Network, Teaching Focused Academic Network and the Royal Society of Chemistry. Within these organisations, we seek to actively promote lifelong learning issues and also organise conferences for the sector. The significant contribution of the Foundation programme as an exemplar for the sector was highlighted by the Milburn report on social mobility².

Since its conception, the Foundation Centre has supported over 2000 students to continue their lifelong learning journey. There are many examples of the transformative impact this programme has had on individuals as illustrated by these two case studies:

- Adam left his job in sales at the age of 39 to pursue his interest in Archaeology by joining the Foundation Centre in 2013. Despite many setbacks and challenges on the way, he completed his degree this year and has also successfully applied for lottery funding for a major archaeology project which is now shortlisted for major national awards (<https://estonhillsproject.wordpress.com/>).
- John grew up in a socioeconomically deprived area of the North East of England. He joined the British Army straight from school, with only a handful of qualifications. After seeing active combat duties overseas, where he engaged with duties as a field hospital orderly, he returned to civilian life with an appreciation for the Medical profession, but without the traditional qualifications required for entry to medical school. The Foundation Centre was able to provide John with a preparatory academic programme, specifically designed for adult and non-traditional learners, which allowed him to access the medicine programme at Durham. After 6 years of study, not without its challenges, John graduated as a medical doctor. He has now returned to his home in County Durham and serves his community as their local GP.

Further examples of student profiles and achievements are available at:

<https://durhamuniversityfoundationcentre.wordpress.com/page/2/>

In conclusion, we feel that the sustained impact of the Foundation Centre within a unique and challenging context and over a prolonged period of time merits consideration for a UALL award.

References

¹Marshall, C. A., Nolan, S. J., & Newton, D. P. (2016). *Widening Participation, Higher Education and Non-Traditional Students*. Palgrave Macmillan.

²Milburn, A. (2013). *State of the Nation 2013: social mobility and child poverty in Great Britain*. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2013>