

## **Degrees with Foundation Years at the University of Sheffield's Department for Lifelong Learning**

In response to the rapid decline in part-time and mature student numbers, the University of Sheffield's Department for Lifelong Learning (DLL) was relaunched in 2014, refocusing its offer upon full and part-time degrees with a foundation year targeted at mature students with 'non-standard' entry qualifications. Successful completion of DLL's foundation year guarantees progression to higher degree level study within other academic departments across the University.

Now in their third year, the new programmes have recruited extremely strongly, welcoming 25 full-time students in 2014, 60 in 2015, and 106 in 2016. Whilst DLL has run a successful part-time Foundation Programme since 1976, this programme did not offer guaranteed progression to full-time degrees at the University, with the result that progression within the University was extremely limited. The new offer has therefore opened up many more opportunities for non-traditional mature applicants across four different faculties and enabled many more students to progress. Whilst the great majority of students opt to study full-time, part-time pathways remain a critical part of DLL and the University's strategy. Indeed, the success of the full-time offer has underwritten the continued success of DLL's part-time foundation programme despite the hostile external climate.

The DLL foundation year equips students, who may not have done any formal study for many years, with the confidence and skills to thrive in their chosen degree subject. Individual degree pathways sit within a carefully constructed whole programme framework. This provides a mix of core skills, interdisciplinary and subject-specific modules which together develop students abilities to enquire, analyse and think critically about their chosen subject whilst simultaneously building familiarity and confidence within a University setting. Entering their first year in full-time academic departments, students are thus very well equipped to be effective self-directed learners, giving them a real 'head start' over many of their younger peers.

The use of online and flipped learning on DLL's programmes has grown considerably in the past year and continues to be a strategic focus for 2017. This approach is of particular benefit to mature learners returning to study, offering greater flexibility in how they engage with materials and developing key transferable skills and digital agility. Examples include the use of QR codes to run in-class quizzes, the use of screencasts to enable students to access materials designed to consolidate their understanding, and the use of google forms to encourage interactions between classes .

Degrees with foundation years are not new or unique to the University of Sheffield. What marks the University's offer out as distinctive is the very specific emphasis placed upon mature students, and in particular on those for whom University has not previously been a possibility. Over a third of new UG entrants in 2016 were from Low Participation Neighbourhoods, with almost two thirds coming from the local area, and over 40% declaring disabilities - far outstripping the University's performance against these benchmarks for younger students. DLL's restructure has enabled the department to invest in a new team of specialist tutors and welfare staff who tailor the programme and support to the needs of these students. To cite just one student testimony amongst many: "... you get treated as

though they really care about you as an individual and it's nice as coming back as a mature student you can feel unimportant, so that level of care and support is really, really nice.”

The success of the new model is already turning heads across the institution. A growing number of current and former DLL students are taking an active role in academic departments and on the Students' Union Mature Students Committee, building an increasingly strong and vibrant mature student community. As a result academic departments are starting to actively seek partnerships with DLL where previously we had to work much harder to build bridges.

In the first two years of operation, DLL has supported more mature students to progress to full-time degree level study in other academic departments at the University than its part-time foundation programme was able to achieve in the previous decade. The successful pilot year in 14/15 involved ten departments, primarily in the Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences. In 16/17, we now work with sixteen departments, including an increasing number in the Faculty of Pure Science, with a total offer of 23 separate degrees and more in the planning for 17/18.

**Willy Kitchen and Sarah Hale (Sheffield)**