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# STEM Foundation Programme Evaluation Report

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## About the programme

The foundation year programme at the University of Exeter (UoE) offers an alternative pathway to STEM undergraduate degree programmes for high potential students from widening participation backgrounds and who lack the formal mathematical qualifications required for direct entry.

The foundation programme has a duration of one year and enhances students' ability in Mathematics. There are six modules with 90 credits of core mathematics which get students up to A-level grade A standard and some aspects of the further mathematics curriculum but concentrating on developing core mathematical skills. The other 30 credits include key skills for university study and some content from other disciplines probably project based work so as not to overlap with content to be studied once they start year 1 of their full undergraduate programme as well as programming skills.

On successfully completing the foundation programme, students will initially be eligible to progress to a STEM undergraduate degree programme at the University of Exeter. The foundation pathway also offers students time to acclimatise to the University environment and academic practices and has approximately the same number of contact hours as the first year of a standard degree.

A key aim of the programme is to address gaps in mathematical preparedness while supporting students' academic transition and sense of belonging within a research-intensive university environment.

## The evaluation design

The evaluation was a mixed-methods design, drawing on focus groups (N=8) and questionnaire (N=25) feedback from students who had completed the foundation year.

Admissions and continuation figures were also used to monitor recruitment to the programme and progression into degree programmes.

The scope of the evaluation was to assess evidence of the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does the Foundation Programme facilitate progression into STEM degree programmes at the University of Exeter?

RQ2: To what extent are the anticipated benefits and outcomes outlined in the programme's theory of change achieved through participation in the Foundation Programme?

## Key findings

Admissions to the Programme:

- The foundation programme has a greater intake of widening participation eligible students than the undergraduate degree programmes it feeds, suggesting it is a successful tool for diversifying the intake and providing a credible option for high potential students who lack the A-level mathematics qualification to qualify for direct entry.
- The programme is successful in enabling under-represented students to access undergraduate level study in STEM at the University of Exeter but there is potential to increase this impact with focused efforts on recruitment.



Foundation Degree completion and onward progression to undergraduate degree programmes:

- 80% of foundation degree students progressed to undergraduate degree programmes.
- Continuation rates from first to second year for students who had completed the foundation route were 90%, which is comparable to what might be expected for students from IMD Quintile 1&2 backgrounds, and higher than subject sector rates for standard programmes.

Academic Preparedness and Sense of Belonging

- Students entering their degree programmes report feeling better prepared and more confident than they would have been through direct entry, with staff also noting strong academic performance among foundation year graduates.
- Students value the supportive learning environment, and the opportunity to become more familiar with the campus and academic systems. It enables students to develop a sense of belonging in a new environment and reduces anxiety and stress moving into year 1 of the degree programme.
- The benefits of the foundation route should be communicated so that it is regarded with the same level of esteem as direct entry.
- Attending the University helped challenge previous perceptions that Exeter was only for a narrow group of 'privileged' students, revealing a more diverse and inclusive community than they had expected.

Foundation degree student feedback

- Participant feedback indicated that the foundation programme fulfilled its aim to effectively provide critical academic and pastoral preparation for undergraduate study.
- Participants reported that the programme upskilled in mathematics whilst also provided the time, space and support to adjust to the Higher Education environment and academic requirements including getting individual learning plans and support in place for future study.
- Small class sizes and a structured curriculum contribute positively to students' confidence, mathematical skills, and sense of belonging as it allows for a safe space to ask questions and make mistakes as they get to know lecturers and each other.

## Conclusion

Provisional evaluation evidence indicates that the programme is effective in upskilling students in mathematics, improving academic preparedness, and supporting progression into undergraduate study at a high tariff university. Students report high levels of satisfaction and confidence, with early progression and continuation rates comparable to, or exceeding, internal benchmarks for students from similar widening participation backgrounds.

Although applications and enrolments remain lower than initially projected, evidence suggests that enhanced communication of the programme's purpose, value and outcomes could increase its reach and impact. Overall, the findings support the programme's theory of change and demonstrate its value as a transformational pathway into STEM higher education.