



Department
for Education

Accelerated Degrees: Annex C

**Response to the call for evidence on
accelerated courses and switching
university or degree**

December 2017

Summary

The Government aims to encourage more flexible provision of higher education in order to meet the diverse needs of students. We would like to see further opportunities for individuals to learn throughout their lives, supported by better information for students to allow them to make more informed choices on what, where and how they want to study.

To support this goal, the Government launched a call for evidence on 16 May 2016 to learn more about the demand for accelerated courses, and to help gauge student interest in opportunities for switching between universities and degree courses.¹ We sought to gain a better understanding of the barriers that currently prevent both from working effectively. The deadline for responses was 19 July 2016.

We received responses from 44 higher education providers, 24 other bodies and 4,500 students. Of the responses from students, over 3,000 were from those studying at the Open University, and 150 were from students at Queen's University Belfast. We published a summary of these responses on 20 December 2016.²

Accelerated courses

Responses to the call for evidence highlighted the benefits of accelerated courses, including reduced overall costs for students and taxpayers, increased value for money, and faster entry into the labour market for graduates. The responses also identified a number of barriers to wider take-up of accelerated courses.

Of providers who responded, 73% reported seeing a demand for accelerated courses from students or employers. Demand could be fuelled particularly by mature students who want to re-train and re-enter the workplace faster than a traditional course permits. In addition, a large number of providers reported that students on accelerated courses were more focused and motivated to complete their degrees than students on traditional undergraduate programmes.

Most accelerated provision is in vocational subjects such as business and law. While there were few examples of accelerated degree courses in STEM subjects, some providers said they would investigate shorter courses in some STEM subjects (subject to

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/accelerated-courses-and-switching-university-or-degree-call-for-evidence>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/accelerated-courses-and-switching-university-or-degree-call-for-evidence>

other regulatory requirements). Only 14% of providers who responded thought accelerated provision would be unsuitable for most of the subjects they offer.

Respondents noted the lack of a single agreed definition of an accelerated course. Constructive suggestions have been proposed for a definition that would encompass a variety of provision, offering legal and regulatory clarity without restricting innovation.

There is a lack of awareness among students of the possibility of taking an accelerated degree course. Only 4% of all students who responded to the call for evidence had actually studied on an accelerated course. Given the recognition of the demand expressed above, the Government recognises that providers would need to do more to promote accelerated courses, emphasising their benefits to prospective students. The Office for Students (OfS) would also play an important role in ensuring accurate information on all types of higher education provision is available to students.

Some respondents noted that students value the summer to undertake work experience, paid employment and other activities, which they would be unable to do if undertaking an accelerated course. The Government remains confident that accelerated courses would be less expensive for students, and offer the ability to enter the workplace sooner. These advantages would offset a student's being less able to work over the summer. A recently published literature review also found that many accelerated courses build in work placements, as well as using alternative forms of learning during the summer such as blended learning, which may still enable students to undertake paid employment.

Research intensive universities in particular highlighted the need for staff to undertake research or scholarly activity during the summer period, restricting their ability to continue teaching. In total, 30% of providers and other bodies who responded thought it would be difficult to secure staff outside of traditional university term time.

The evidence we received revealed concerns about standards and the quality of accelerated courses. Respondents highlighted the challenge of condensing necessary course requirements into a shorter time period, and expressed concern as to how accelerated qualifications would be viewed by the international HE community.

However, a recently published study of the academic literature relating to accelerated courses^{Error! Bookmark not defined.} also found no evidence that they were lower quality. Accelerated courses would be delivered by the same recognised institutions as their traditional counterparts and subject to the same oversight and quality assurance. Students would generally be undertaking similar work, with the same tutors.

Institutions cited the student tuition fee loan cap as a key barrier to the wider provision of accelerated courses. As it stands, accelerated courses are treated in the same way as all other programmes despite their increased intensity. Providers offering accelerated courses can only charge two years' worth of fees as opposed to three years for a traditional course resulting in the same qualification. Over a third of providers and other bodies who responded were concerned about the difficulty in covering costs.

The Government is committed to removing such barriers. This is why we introduced in the Higher Education and Research Act the power to allow the tuition fee cap to be raised for **accelerated courses only**. Raising this cap will remove a major barrier to accelerated courses, while ensuring that students taking these courses still pay no more for their qualification than those undertaking traditional three-year programmes.

The power in the Act provides a broad definition of an ‘accelerated course’ as a higher education course where the number of academic years applicable to the course is at least one fewer than would normally be the case for that course, or a course of equivalent content leading to the grant of the same or an equivalent academic award. The emphasis on equivalence to traditional courses and awards is intended to prevent potential abuse.

Removing the barriers

The Government proposes to raise the fee cap for accelerated courses, removing a key barrier to the wider availability of these programmes. Students on accelerated courses will still pay no more than others on traditional programmes – many will pay less – while also benefiting from being able to enter the workforce more quickly.

Switching university or degree

There are existing mechanisms to allow students to switch university or degree. Of providers who responded, 91% said they have a formal system in place to allow students to transfer between courses. This has not translated into high levels of student transfer. A small number of providers consistently facilitate numerous internal course transfers, whereas many others only have small numbers transferring. Similarly, while a few providers have significant numbers of students transferring in and out of their institutions, the majority rarely facilitate such transfers.

Students who had transferred course or institution reported a broadly positive experience, with only 15% of students who changed degree course and 23% of those changing provider having found the process ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’. Nevertheless, over a third of students who had transferred said that better administration would have improved the process, with 29% wanting better careers information to guide their choices.

Students who had transferred cited a wide variety of reasons for changing courses. After changing subject (79%), the next most common reason was teaching quality (38%). The Government believes that higher education represents a significant investment in an individual’s future. If a student is not satisfied with an aspect of this investment, such as teaching quality, they should be able to move in such a way that ensures their individual needs are met. Other reasons for transferring, such as location (21%), health (10%) and changing to part-time study (8%) show that the ability to switch is an important way to encourage flexibility in the face of an individual’s changing circumstances and needs.

Respondents identified a number of barriers to switching university or degree courses. Providers noted that degree courses differ in content between autonomous institutions and modules build on learning from previous levels. Specialist courses have prerequisites and there are differences in assessment methods that can make switching difficult. This contributes to an associated cost to accrediting previous learning and transfers. As course content and admissions are matters for autonomous providers, the Government will not be taking action in these areas.

The call for evidence also revealed certain financial barriers that can make transferring course or provider more difficult. Funding is awarded by academic year, which can make switching in-year challenging, while institutions often charge different fees. However, the current funding system has developed and adjusted to meet the needs of students and providers and its strength has been recognised by the OECD.

Significant barriers for students relate to awareness and perception. Of student respondents, 19.5% were unaware of the option to switch to another provider, while 13.3% were unaware they could switch degree. 60% of respondents (both those who had transferred and those who had not) said more information would help inform their decision. The responses also highlighted a common perception of a degree as a 'one-off' purchase, with logistical, financial and social factors contributing to the decision not to switch. Nearly a quarter of respondents believed it to be too difficult to switch provider.

This evidence has informed the Government's approach to credit transfer. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 gives the Office for Students the power to not only to monitor arrangements and up-take of transfer opportunities, but to encourage and promote awareness of them. The Government recognises that, as the evidence demonstrates, wider knowledge and appreciation of the benefits of student transfer will lead to wider provision and take-up of these options, contributing to greater flexibility for students and control over the way that they conduct their learning.

A duty to monitor. The power to promote

The Government has given the Office for Students (OfS) a duty to monitor the availability and take-up of arrangements for students to transfer between university or degree course, and the power to promote awareness of these options.



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