

POLICY RESPONSE

ACCELERATED COURSES AND SWITCHING UNIVERSITY OR DEGREE

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BIS call for evidence on accelerated courses

INTRODUCTION

The government has expressed a clear aim to encourage more flexible provision to meet students' diverse needs. Modern universities have been at the forefront of providing flexible provision to widen opportunities to students from all backgrounds. Accelerated degrees are one form of flexible provision, but there are many other forms that are available and that may better extend opportunity to a wider range of students, including older learners, those wishing to study part-time, and those wanting to study for a degree while in employment. Modern universities are interested in different forms of provision that support and extend opportunities to new learners, and that take a learner-centred approach – and so they obviously have a willingness to adapt and plan different pathways.

MillionPlus supports any attempts to ensure degree provision is flexible and varied enough to adapt to the needs and demands of learners, particularly those with commitments outside of their university education. Investing in accelerated degrees and making it easier to switch courses or universities while holding on to credit already earned is likely to have a positive impact. However, it is important that the government supports and invests in all forms of flexible provision, rather than focusing on one type of course. It is also important that the government investigates and understands the barriers created by the current funding system, especially around the maximum fee that can be charged each year and the levels of support available to students. These barriers need to be addressed in order for flexible provision to be fully in the reach of all students that wish to benefit from it.

DEMAND FOR ACCELERATED DEGREES

Flexible provision in the form of accelerated degree courses (e.g. studying for a 3-year degree over two years in England) has been limited. The Higher Education Funding Council for England conducted a series of pilots to investigate the feasibility and demand for 3-year degrees studied over two years and, some universities have continued to offer that provision.¹ The number of universities, courses and students involved were very small, and that has changed little in the time since those pilots were introduced.

However since the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots, there has not been a significant expansion of accelerated provision, and the sector in general is perhaps somewhat cautious about accelerated degrees. They are considered very niche, have limited awareness and demand, and operate with a model that is not transferable to the rest of the university experience.

¹ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/data/Year/2011/Flexible,Learning,Pathfinders,key,statistics,2008-09/Title,93167,en.html>

COSTS INVOLVED IN OFFERING ACCELERATED DEGREES

MillionPlus recognises that cost is an issue for institutions with accelerated degrees. Funding is considered by many to be insufficient for accelerated provision to be fully cost-effective for all courses. Currently, in England, a university can only charge a maximum of two years of tuition fee even if the costs of the accelerated degrees are closer to 2.5 or 2.75 times the cost of a three year degree. This is in part based on the definition of a student year of study but also because the initial investment cost is significant. It requires investment in different working patterns, different curriculum and modules, and different student support arrangements (including ability to transfer to standard length programmes).

Cost is also an issue for students as, on accelerated degrees, they may have a higher cost of living and fewer opportunities to work alongside their studies in each year. In addition there is a strong demand for three year 'traditional' programmes (even if credit-based) from students, and strong support from staff who feel three years is required to cover the programme content and allow for revisiting key aspects.

OTHER FORMS OF FLEXIBLE PROVISION

Flexibility is considered important and modern universities offer flexibility in their provision. However, though the government has expressed a specific interest in accelerated provision, it is important to note that there are many different ways of offering flexible provision that meet the different needs and demands of learners. These include: rolling starts (e.g. January and April enrolments); part-time study; employer sponsored degrees; higher level apprenticeships.

The proposals set out in the Higher Education and Research Bill do not do nearly enough to address the current problems faced by those who wish to have more flexible study arrangements, and in particular part-time students. This is a missed opportunity and one that the Bill should be trying to address. Understanding further the demand for accelerated degrees and for switching universities is going to be useful for the government, but a fundamental issue is the barrier caused by the current inflexibility of the funding and tuition fee regulations.

SUMMARY

Allowing for greater flexibility over how fees are paid (rather than only based on a year of tuition), or how much of a course of study for a degree has to be done in any given year would help more learners access higher education, whether on a part-time or accelerated basis, and would help to combat the continuing decline in part-time and older learners taking part in higher education. Greater flexibility could also enable more universities to consider offering accelerated degrees (e.g. three years of study undertaken in two years) as currently the costs outweigh what universities are legally allowed to charge undergraduate students. The Bill should be doing far more to address the challenges facing students wanting to undertake part-time study, and to introduce measures that should be adopted to ease access for greater flexibility of study.

The complexities and potential inefficiencies in the higher education funding system in England should be integral to any debate about the future of higher education in England. Creating a more flexible funding system, and a more holistic system of student support which encourages flexible routes of study, combined with a more coherent credit accumulation and transfer system would be needed to meet the government's aims of ensuring more flexible provision is available to a greater number of students.

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