

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

DfE consultation on accelerated degrees

February 2018

Are there any other technical features of accelerated degree courses that we should take into account for the purpose of new fee arrangements?

If the new drive to promote and encourage accelerated degrees has been influenced by a desire to offer a study route for those less able to commit to a full three years of study, then extra considerations must be made. In the consultation document, it is stated that "Accelerated degrees particularly appeal to students who may not otherwise have chosen to pursue higher education, such as mature students who want to retrain and enter the workplace more quickly than a traditional course would permit."

MillionPlus welcomes the consideration of mature students within this approach, whose numbers have been in considerable decline in England for some time. However, if accelerated degrees are to be successful in appealing to mature students in the future, then there must be assurances that that support mechanisms for mature students will be upheld throughout the full study period.

Mature students often have existing commitments upon entry into university that can create challenges during the learning experience. Many mature students receive specific support from their institution due to circumstance, either academic or financial. One example of this is that mature students are much more likely to have caring responsibilities than their younger counterparts. This brings with it a level of commitment in terms of time and money.

The consultation document suggests that most universities that introduce new accelerated degrees will focus most of the new provision in the summer term. This would present some issues for those potential mature students who have caring responsibilities for young children with long extended holidays in the summer. Many universities provide support for students with caring responsibilities during the standard academic year (Autumn to Spring), through the provision of free/affordable childcare on campus or through extra financial support.

It is vital, therefore, that there is some kind of guarantee that support mechanisms such as these are upheld throughout the year for those are studying accelerated degrees. If not, MillionPlus would seriously question the appeal of accelerated to mature students (a stated intention of the, Jo Johnson MP, former universities minister and the Department for Education).

This principle also applies to the rest of the student population. It is equally important that universities ensure that support mechanisms are also extended throughout the summer for disabled students, and those with mental health issues so as not to create any barriers to entry on to accelerated degrees. This requires clear assurance from providers, which can be strongly influenced by the Office for Students.

Do you agree that an annual fee cap set initially at the standard rate plus a 20% uplift is the right amount to incentivise wider provision of accelerated degrees?

Provision of accelerated degrees will be dependent on universities being reassured that this kind of provision is financially viable. In modern universities, there is a national contract limiting the number of teaching hours

that are permitted each academic year. Universities will have to assess whether or not the costs of the increase in teaching intensity required by accelerated degrees can be off-set by a 20% increase in tuition fees. This process will have to be carried out in line with the aforementioned national contract. No modelling has been done on this so far. The uplift that has been proposed assumes that accelerated degrees will be cheaper to deliver for universities. But as no modelling has been done on this to date, MillionPlus does not believe this assumption is evidence-based.

Secondly, universities will have to make a judgment on the potential demand from students for accelerated degrees to ensure that provision is financially sustainable, and does that it does not lead to negative impacts on other elements of university business. The consultation document indicates that universities would be expected to fit in the additional teaching time for accelerated degrees into the summer period. Many universities use campus facilities for a wide range of activities during the summer period which help them strengthen networks with partners and businesses, enhance their research and generate revenue. There will have to be considerable advantage in accelerated degrees for them to forego these benefits. However, increasing the fee cap by any more than 20% is likely to undermine the appeal of accelerated degrees to students (which after all, is the reason they are being promoted).

[Do you agree that a 20% reduction overall for students, in tuition fee and maintenance loans, would incentivise wider take-up of accelerated degrees by students?](#)

No, we do not believe that a 20% reduction in tuition fee and maintenance loans will incentivise a wider take-up across all sections of the population. Mature students, for example, who have been designated as a key target group for accelerated degrees in the consultation document, have been shown to be more debt-averse than their younger counterparts. With this in mind, a move to offer a reduced overall "debt" from the Student Loans Company would seem a good way of offering an alternative study option to mature students.

However, it is also possible that some mature students, who are more debt-averse, will be put off by the increase of 20% on the annual "ticket price" of the tuition fee. This is because any raise in the level of financial commitment required for one year of study (through a tuition fee loan) raises the stakes for students studying accelerated degrees. There is greater risk involved, since students who only complete one term, semester or year of study will have more to "pay back", with nothing to show for it.

One possible solution to this problem would be to restructure the funding system so that students are able to take tuition fee loans for shorter periods of time than one year. This would allow greater flexibility for students, particularly those that are from low participation areas/demographic groups. This flexibility should encompass better access to part-time study as well as to accelerated degrees, and enable students to switch between modes easily. It would also arguably be a cost-saving exercise for both the student loans company and students, by minimising the amount of debt that is taken out unnecessarily to engage in study. Students that do not progress or complete their degrees would not be burdened with the full-year of financial commitments.

Another issue with the levels of student finance that are being proposed in this consultation document is that there is an uneven distribution of incentive across different socioeconomic groups. Table 1 shows that under the proposals, the less maintenance loan a student takes out, the greater the relative saving in taking out an accelerated degree. In other words, students taking the full means tested maintenance loans (i.e. from lower socioeconomic groups) will have less incentive to take up accelerated degrees. Accelerated degrees are being promoted to provide a route for those that do not have the luxury of studying for three years. The structure of maintenance loans that has been proposed can be seen to run contrary to this stated ambition.

One concrete solution to this problem would be to restore maintenance grants for those students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. This would also help create more fairness in the system by ensuring that those from lower socioeconomic groupings do not graduate with higher levels of student debt simply based on their postcode or family income.

Do you agree that a 20% increase in loan cap rates per annum is the right value to incentivise wider uptake of accelerated degrees at Approved providers?

We refer to answer to question 2 here.

Do you agree that accelerated degree fees should be treated in the same way as other higher course fees for the purpose of access funding?

Yes.

Are there any additional practical considerations we should take into account as we develop our final regulations to support accelerated degree course provision?

In the consultation document, Jo Johnson, the former universities minister states:

“Our aspiration is for the number of students enrolled on accelerated degree courses to build over the next decade to around 5% of the total undergraduate population, and for an additional 100,000 students to have studied on this basis over that period. The result will be a true transformation in the landscape of English higher education and graduate employment.”

MillionPlus believes this to be an extremely ambitious target and questions whether the new drive for accelerated degrees will provoke the “substantive transformation” that has been predicted. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, large-scale take-up of accelerated degrees is dependent on demand from students. We acknowledge that accelerated degrees will offer a constructive alternative for some students who are less able to commit to 3 years’ worth of study. However, MillionPlus is yet to see any evidence to suggest there is the demand amongst students (or potential students) to meet the projections that are outlined in the quote above.

This is because we know that many undergraduates thrive in having the full three years to study. This gives students the time to acclimatise to higher education initially, and then explore different academic pathways before finding an area of specialisation. More and more degrees today are interdisciplinary, requiring a broad approach where students need time to carve out their own niche in a discipline. Many degrees, particularly at modern universities, also consist of a mix of academic and vocational study, and students often need time to strike a balance in developing the right level of each set of skills to suit their own personal ambitions or goals. To give but one example, any degree relating to digital skills will cover a wide range of different areas and skill sets, from more STEM based knowledge to the creative arts. Accelerated degrees offer a quicker route to completion, but this is likely to comprise of a more linear structure due to the level of intensity of study.

In addition to this, feedback from MillionPlus member universities suggests that many students, particularly mature students, are looking for greater flexibility in their degree. Adult learners, for example, often have existing commitments that have to be managed alongside study. Our members report that many of their mature students work in the summer as a means to support themselves financially throughout their study period. It is unlikely, therefore the more rigid and more intense form of study offered through an accelerated degree will be attractive to many mature students. On this basis, we would question the assertion made by

the Jo Johnson, the former Universities Minister, that accelerated degrees will “particularly appeal” to mature students and those who have not taken the “traditional” A Level route.

There are other important factors to consider with regards to mature students here. If the provision of accelerated degrees is unevenly distributed across the country, this could negatively affect the take up of accelerated degrees amongst adult learners. Many mature students are anchored in their local region, and this locality shapes their choice of institution. Consequently, if there is not a “local offer” of an accelerated degree in their region, then this will limit their appeal.

It should also be noted that part-time students are those that have been most affected by the changes to fees and funding in England since 2012. Accelerated degrees are not viable for those looking to study part-time. If accelerated degrees are to be understood as a response to the increased financial burden of taking a degree, they do little to address those that have lost out the most from recent funding reforms. MillionPlus has highlighted these potential barriers to take up so as to illustrate why we believe the projections quoted above might need to be reconsidered. It would be unwise, therefore, to base any wider forecasts on the skills gap, social mobility or productivity gain on these assumptions.

There are international comparability considerations to be taken into account. As a member of the Bologna Process, the UK benefits from a framework that serves to establish rules of comparison between higher education of different levels and duration. The effect of Brexit may cause issues for accelerated degrees in the future as there may be an issue of international recognition in terms of EU. For example, it may be that a graduate attempting to work overseas after studying an accelerated degree will not be able to get recognition based on fact it was a two-year programme.

Based on the policies set out in this document, do you agree that an accelerated degree has any specific merit in current or future potential employees? If your answer is ‘agree’, please set out any advantages you consider an accelerated degree-qualified graduate might have as an employee over their standard three-year degree equivalent.

We do not see any specific merit of an accelerated degrees from the perspective of employers. Accelerated degrees are an initiative that seeks to enhance the options for learners rather than future potential employers. This may have a positive knock-on effect on the economy with more people reaching skilled employment at a quicker rate, if successful. And there is a benefit for existing employers who are looking to encourage their employees to up-skill or retrain, since they will have to release them for shorter periods of time through accelerated degrees.

However, accelerated degrees will be accredited in much the same manner as three-year full-time degrees, and their value, once realised, will be of equal weight to those with equal attainment. There should therefore not be any distinction made between the merit or quality of an accelerated degree compared to one completed in three years, assuming parity of attainment.