



Findings from the Call for Evidence on Accelerated Courses and Switching University or Degree

The Government's aim, through a range of reforms to higher education, is to encourage more flexible provision to meet students' diverse needs. We would like to see more opportunities for individuals to learn throughout their lives, supported by better information for students, allowing them to make more informed choices on what, where and how they want to study.

In order to understand the need for greater flexible learning opportunities and the ways in which Government could best support higher education providers to meet that need, in May 2016 we put out a call for evidence¹. This invited views on students switching between universities or degree courses and accelerated courses (for example, delivering a three year degree course in two years).

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. This statement summarises the key findings.

Key findings

Switching University or Degree

- While 91% of providers who responded said they have a formal credit transfer system in place between the courses they offered, that did not necessarily result in high levels of students transferring between them
- 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 had 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, including changing subject (79%), teaching quality (38%), location (21%), health reasons (10%) and changing to part-time (8%).

Barriers to switching university or degree course were identified as:

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

- Student awareness – 19.5% of respondents were unaware of the option to switch to another provider. 13.3% of respondents were unaware they could switch degree. 60% of respondents (both those who had transferred and those who had not) said more information would help their decision
- Student/provider perceptions – there is a perception that a degree is a one-off purchase and logistical, financial and social factors contribute to the decision not to switch. 22% of respondents believed it to be too difficult to switch provider. Large numbers of transfers are seen by some to threaten provider prestige and ability to recruit students
- Differences between degree courses – providers noted that 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
- Administration costs for providers – providers highlighted the cost to accrediting previous learning and transfers, and the increased difficulty in budgeting and planning resources
- Funding rules – funding is awarded by academic year which makes switching in-year challenging. Higher education institutions also charge different fees.

Accelerated Courses

- There is no single agreed definition of an accelerated degree course
- Constructive suggestions have been proposed for a definition that would encompass a variety of provision, offering legal and regulatory clarity without restricting innovation
- 73% of providers who responded reported seeing a demand from students or employers, stating that demand could be fuelled by mature students who want to retrain and re-enter the workplace faster than a traditional degree permits
- Alternative providers, small and specialist providers, and post-92 universities are more likely to offer accelerated degree courses and to expand their provision of these degrees, though some more research-intensive providers were positive about the opportunities involved. Only 14% of providers who responded thought it would be unsuitable for most of the subjects they offer
- A large number of providers report that students on accelerated degree courses are more focused and motivated to complete their degrees than students on traditional undergraduate degree programmes
- While there are few examples of accelerated degree courses in STEM subjects, some providers have said they will investigate shorter courses in some STEM subjects (subject to other regulatory requirements)
- Benefits of accelerated degree courses include reduced overall costs for students and taxpayers, increased value for money for students, and faster entry into the labour market
- Subjects such as law, business and management are particularly suited to accelerated degrees.

Barriers to implementing accelerated courses were identified as:

- Student awareness – 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

- Suitability – accelerated degrees are less suitable for courses where length of study is important to meet external regulatory requirements and placements are a vital part of learning, for example nursing, teacher training, courses with lab time, and architecture
- Concerns about standards and quality – respondents highlighted the challenge of condensing the necessary course requirements into a shorter period, and expressed concern as to how accelerated degrees would be viewed by the international HE community
- Finance – numerous institutions cited the student tuition fee loan cap, which treats accelerated degrees the same way as all other degree programmes despite their increased intensity. 36% of providers and other bodies who responded were concerned about the difficulty in covering costs
- Staff research activity – 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. 30% of providers and other bodies who responded thought it would be difficult to secure staff outside term time
- Students' use of summer vacations – some respondents noted that students value this time to undertake work experience, paid employment and/or other activities.

© Crown copyright 2016

Reference: DFE-00352-2016