



Accelerated courses and switching university or degree

1. The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union and professional association for academics, lecturers, trainers, researchers and academic-related staff working in higher, further and adult education throughout the UK. We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to this consultation.
2. UCU has serious concerns about accelerated courses in the higher education sector. We welcome the principle of developing and enhancing a credit transfer system, however have concerns about the marketised approach that this consultation document proposes.

Accelerated degree courses

3. UCU welcomes the principle of flexible learning and has long-championed the need for more support for part-time students. We believe that this consultation, however, fails to sufficiently address the learning from previous attempts at implementing accelerated courses, including the Flowers Report in 1993; the 2006 Higher Education Funding Council for England initiated pilot study on flexible learning; and the 2010 policy statement on higher education (*Higher Ambitions*). Despite each of these attempts, there has been no expansion in this type of provision. We set out the reasons why below. We also remain concerned that previous attempts to put forward a 'flexible' learning agenda have been driven by economic rather than educational objectives.
4. There is an educational risk that fast track programmes will make it harder for students to combine study with periods of reflection, critical thinking and a 'deep approach' to learning. These degrees are therefore likely to reduce to quality of the student experience.
5. Accelerated degrees result in reduced opportunities for students to engage in part-time employment over the course of their studies. This limitation is particularly acute for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to need to seek employment in order to fund themselves through university. A further risk is that students undertake part or even full-time study whilst undertaking accelerated degree studies, thereby compromising the outcome of their degree qualification.
6. The lack of holiday time factored into these degrees also means that they could prove difficult for student parents; those with caring responsibilities; and students whose disabilities mean that they might benefit from low-intensity study. For this reason, there is a risk that take-up of these courses could have strong socio-economic stratification and that students from less advantaged backgrounds might have lower attainment on these courses.
7. Many lecturers undertake scholarly activity and continuing professional development during the holiday period and there is a risk that contractual arrangements to support accelerated courses cause the time and funding that support these activities to be lost. There are

practical workload considerations for teaching staff also. The immediate concern will be the potential for unacceptable increases in annual teaching hours. Ignoring the importance of this risks a direct and negative impact on quality.

8. Fast-track degrees are likely to drive negative working conditions for staff since they encourage employers to offer casualised terms and conditions on summer 'semesters' through short-term and precarious contracts. At UCU, we are clear that high quality education and fair working conditions depend on contracts that give staff stability and continuity of employment. Casualisation is bad for staff and bad for education.
9. Several institutions hold summer schools and widening participation activities during the summer period. There is an unacceptable risk that this provision could be compromised in the move to greater provision of accelerated degree courses.

Credit transfer system

10. The real value in a well-implemented credit transfer scheme is the way in which it could support widening participation efforts by providing greater flexibility, in particular, to part-time and mature students. This added flexibility could also work to support reducing the often high rates of attrition amongst these student groups. Any new developments should ensure that the relevant framework is easy to understand, fair and transparent. It is imperative that the scheme is universal to give students the best opportunity to transfer to the institution that most suits their needs.
11. UCU believes that some of the language employed in this consultation document is unhelpful in that it encourages students to see higher education as a transactional process whereby if they are dissatisfied with their 'value for money' interpretations, they should simply chop and change institution – ignoring the destabilising impact that this might have on their educational experience and outcomes.
12. It is noteworthy that this proposal is being put forward alongside proposed regulatory changes that could see new and inexperienced for-profit organisations joining the sector and then leaving again due to poor quality provision or financial instability.
13. UCU has called for the Higher Education and Research Bill to be scrapped and has consistently warned against the expansion of private providers in the higher education sector. An unacceptable risk of the proposed system is that it would make it easier for new private providers without a track-record in the sector to obtain degree-awarding powers. This is plainly at odds with the primacy of academic quality and is unacceptable given that students will have already commenced their studies in these institutions. We are concerned that this will leave too few protections for students at these institutions. Credit transfer agreements in such situations make practical sense, however, there is a risk that these students could be unfairly penalised by institutions who then perceive these students to have received poorer quality teaching.
14. The suggestion that students should decide whether or not to change course or institution by using the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is flawed and neither promotes a good teaching and learning environment nor the best outcomes for students. The TEF is

largely based on a flawed set of proxy measures which do not measure teaching quality, and the attempt to introduce more market mechanisms to drive institutional behaviour is destabilising to the sector. The most common reasons why students transfer courses or institutions are personal reasons or the decision that their initial course choice was not the right one. It is rare for the decision to change course to be let by a perception about low quality teaching.

15. A key barrier to the credit transfer system being used more extensively is the divisive role of competition for undergraduate places. Institutions are under financial pressure to increase student numbers in order to secure the funding that follows each student place. The nature of the funding methodology means that reductions in student numbers have the potential to threaten the viability of courses and in some cases departments. It is also fair to say that unhelpful categorisations of institutions as 'high and low' status may also limit the universal implementation of a switching mechanism.
16. It is right that there no perceived deficit in relation to student retention measures should be inferred from students who transfer their credit and continue their studies elsewhere. The consultation suggests that transfer would not be counted as a 'drop out' if students begin their new course the following year for full time students or in either of the following two years for full time students. UCU believes that the two year rule should apply to both full and part-time students to support students who leave their studies on medical or maternity grounds.
17. There will, quite naturally be differences in continuity and overlap of curriculum across institutions and courses. A viable credit transfer system would also need to have a proposed methodology to address cases where students may not have all the pre-requisite elements needed to successfully join an existing cohort of students.
18. It should be recognised that the practical opportunities to switch between providers may be limited for students in geographical regions where there is little or no choice of higher education providers and/or for students who have caring responsibilities or financial constraints which limit their ability to travel.
19. At present student loan arrangements present a practical barrier to students and institutions using credit transfer systems more widely. Negotiations around the amount of fee charged by institution in particular for students leaving part-way through the year can be quite problematic for both parties. This is in-part due to the term 1 – 25%; term 2 – 25%, term 3 – 50% chunk payments for fees from the Student Loans Company. The payment structure means that where students leave at the end of the second term, the institution must enter into protracted negotiations to recoup the pro-rata cost.

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