



Department  
for Education

# Accelerated degrees in Higher Education

Literature review

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Social Science in Government

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## List of acronyms

ACPU	Association of Catalan Public Universities
AIRS	Accelerated and Intensive Routes to HE
AOC	Association of Colleges
APEL	Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning
ARC	Aimhigher Research and Consultancy
BEI	British Education Index
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CLEP	College-Level Examination Programme
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (now DfE)
EADTU	European Association of Distance Teaching Universities
EAY	Extended Academic Year
EC	European Commission
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
EU	European Union
EUA	European Universities Association
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institute
ICT	Information and communications technology
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MOOC	Massive Open Online Courses
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OER	Open Educational Resources
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
REA	Rapid Evidence Assessment
SALT	Suggestive Accelerated Learning and Teaching
TNE	Trans-National Education
UCAS	Undergraduate Courses At University And College
UCU	University and College Union
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
UUK	Universities UK

## Executive summary

This Rapid Evidence Assessment literature review explores the evidence and current thinking about undergraduate accelerated degrees as an alternative and flexible mode of study.

### Understanding the evidence base

The review indicated that the volume of literature on accelerated degrees is small. Even in the USA, where there is a greater prevalence and history of accelerated programmes, studies have been modest and narrow in focus. The work in the UK has tended to be linked closely to various initiatives or experiments with accelerated degree programmes. The literature that does exist tends to sit within two distinct narratives: accelerated learning as a form of flexible learning – one that delivers flexibility in pace, delivering student choice, widening participation and aiding lifelong learning (key higher education policy goals); and accelerated degrees as a way to bring about efficiencies and reorganise the academic year. There is another strand of literature, which falls outside of the scope this review, found mainly in the USA. This refers to accelerated learning as a methodology or philosophical approach, a new instructional approach.

There are several challenges in identifying evidence relating to accelerated study at degree level:

- a) no consistent terminology;
- b) conflation of acceleration with intensification (a difference in learning approach/methodology);
- c) acceleration can also apply to other levels of education; and
- d) some courses appear accelerated because they allow for alternative entry points/exemptions from part of the course.

In addition, there currently are no standard ways to identify accelerated degrees in the UK national datasets or to identify accelerated degrees in UK national course search tools, both of which make large scale monitoring and evaluation difficult.

Over the years there have been a number of key developments for accelerated degrees: Accelerated and Intensive Routes to HE (AIRS) from 1992 to 1995; Extended Academic Year pilots (EAY) from 1995 to 1998; and the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots from 2005 to 2010. These were all funded through special initiative funding and provide the majority of the evidence on accelerated degrees in the UK. There has been very little UK based evidence since these programmes finished. This is despite government's continued (if not renewed) interest in accelerated degrees. They have been explicitly mentioned in HEFCE Grant Letters (2009, 2010), the OFFA and HEFCE national strategy for access and student success (2014) and the Conservative Party Manifesto (2015).

## Defining accelerated degrees

Accelerated degrees are one form of flexibility and these are often offered alongside or are built upon other flexibilities, notably: modular study, full- or part-time study, and blended learning. Our working definition of accelerated degrees is taken from HEFCE and involves a number of elements:

- they are structured differently to traditional degrees;
- they deliver the same number of credits (360) as a three-year degree;
- they offer the same number of teaching weeks as a three-year degree, but they are scheduled so they are (or can) be completed in a shorter period. They reduce the overall duration of the course by utilising the traditional summer holiday for teaching and learning; and,
- they effectively reduce full-time study time to two years and part-time study to four years.

The dominant UK model is three 15-week teaching blocks per year, delivering 180 credits per year. However, there are variants in accelerated degrees in how they are structured across the academic year, their use of weekend or evening provision, their relationship to traditional degree programmes (run alongside or in isolation) and their use of other flexibilities such as distance and/or eLearning and range of modules offered. In addition, some models refer to the number of teaching hours, but these tend to move towards intensive forms of acceleration which is more common in the USA.

The limited market research into the demand for accelerated degrees in the UK has largely concluded that the market is niche; currently offered by a modest number of modern universities with a focus on widening participation and a more innovative approach to delivery and private universities not restricted by the tuition fee cap; in a limited number of generally vocational subjects; and taken up by mature students who may be more able, motivated and proactive learners looking for a different kind of HE experience. Accelerated degrees tend to run alongside parent programmes that use a traditional format and pace, and they are not designed to replace traditional degree programmes. This limited market has been linked to little awareness among potential students and their advisors about flexibility of pace, concerns about their value in the market place, and the hegemony of the three-year full-time degree. However, the market for accelerated learning appears more buoyant overseas and has been linked to the growing adult learner market.

## Concerns, criticisms and challenges

There are a number of criticisms levelled at accelerated degrees (and indeed with flexible learning more broadly) and these, along with negative perceptions and concerns that stakeholders have, can all inhibit take-up. These can be felt at sector/policy level, at institutional level, at student level and by employers.

- Common negative perceptions or misconceptions about accelerated degrees are that they are of lower quality, offering lower quality teaching and learning, looser quality assurance and lower outcomes (and this is not helped by their niche position in the sector); and that they do not fit with the Bologna Process of harmonisation of higher

education qualifications and standards across Europe. However, the evidence suggests these challenges can be dismissed.

- Barriers for institutions, creating reluctance to develop this form of provision, include: perceptions that they are more costly to develop and deliver and do not fit well within the current funding system (which is predicated on a three-year full-time delivery model); staff concerns about increased workload, lack of time for preparation and wider activities, and worries about contracts; adaptations required to institutional processes (which will be resource intensive); and perceived lack of demand. Again there is evidence to challenge some of these perceptions; and also ideas and suggestions across the sector on how to overcome some of these issues.
- Barriers for students (often cited by staff/other stakeholders and commentators rather than students themselves) are: a lack of awareness of flexible study options, coupled with the strong cultural norm of the three-year full-time Bachelor's degree; concerns about having a less satisfying and more limited student experience; perceptions that it would involve a heavy workload with less time for reflection and deep learning, and lead to lower outcomes; and higher living costs per year (to cover the longer period studying) coupled with less time to do paid work alongside their studies. Again there is evidence that suggests satisfaction and learning outcomes are the same if not better for accelerated degrees/courses/programmes. However, this may be driven by the characteristics, preferences and motivations of the kinds of students attracted to accelerated study.
- Concerns or issues for employers (although again from wider stakeholders not necessarily the employers themselves) are also quality related, and that employers may place less value in these qualifications when recruiting; and additionally that employers lack awareness about accelerated degrees. Real research evidence on employer perspectives is limited. It suggests employers are not concerned about accelerated degrees or duration of course, but are instead more concerned about outcomes and outputs of study.

## **Potential benefits to accelerated degrees**

Institutional involvement in accelerated degrees may be driven by desires to widen participation in HE in accordance with their mission and values; to meet student demands and employer needs, potentially open up new markets and create a marketing advantage; and to achieve greater efficiencies and bring financial gains. The strength of these drivers appears weak as is the evidence of positive and sustainable impacts for institutions.

There is a scarcity of literature that captures the benefits of accelerated study, particularly of robust studies of accelerated degrees that make comparisons between the outcomes of students on accelerated programmes compared with those on traditional programmes. This reflects the historically low level of engagement with accelerated degrees in higher education in the UK. The literature that exists does suggest that accelerated degrees are seen to offer a range of benefits for students. These include:

- cost saving for students as they only need to cover two years of fees and living costs and can earn an extra year of income from entering the labour market a year earlier (highlighted by most institutions that offer accelerated degrees);
- better learning outcomes (satisfaction, grades, skill development, employment rates and career development); and,
- the potential to stand out from the crowd, and signal certain skills and attributes such as commitment, time management and working under pressure.

These benefits are divined from studies with students, perceptions of staff and analysis of student data.

## Moving forward

There are currently just a few institutions in the UK that have offered and still continue to offer accelerated degrees across a number of disciplines; and these tend to be the institutions that have been involved in the various funded initiatives. However, there appear to be a small number of institutions entering the market trying out new accelerated programmes. There appears to be little sharing of practice, but there is the potential to learn much from the early adopters and sustained deliverers about how to provide accelerated degrees, and do it well. Aspects that appear to be important and require careful consideration in the design of accelerated degrees are: marketing and market research; working with prospective students; programme design; senior level buy-in; staff buy-in and support; effective student support (including building and supporting peer cohorts); and effective administration systems. Additionally, institutions may want to consider taking a different pedagogical approach.

In addition, the literature identifies a number of other potential areas for action to encourage institutions to offer accelerated degrees (increase supply) and encourage potential students to take-up accelerated study (increase demand):

- To agree a common terminology for this type of provision and a definition of a 'standard' accelerated degree (in the UK context).
- Promotion of positive messages about the quality and value of accelerated degrees and evidence of their benefits, through national and local campaigns aimed at potential students and their advisors and employers.
- Monitor information about the real costs of accelerated degrees over the life of the programme – to both institutions and students.
- Continued monitoring of the profile of students on accelerated degrees to understand their experiences and outcomes compared to the experiences and outcomes of those on traditional length programmes. Also to undertake monitoring of students on accelerated degrees over time to test whether a change in the profile of participants and/or the volume of students and programmes impacts negatively on experiences and outcomes. This could be enhanced through changes to national data systems to allow for accelerated degrees to be identified in a standard way.



- Monitoring staff experiences and feedback to identify problems and concerns, to recognise these concerns and work with staff to involve them in the development of programmes.
- Change the funding system for HE programmes, to consider: credit-based funding; removing the tuition cap for accelerated degrees; and additional and sustained central funding.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned by the Higher Education Directorate of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), now part of the Department for Education (DfE), to undertake a literature review. This aimed to provide the Department with a comprehensive picture of the existing evidence base on accelerated degrees as a non-traditional and flexible mode of study delivery in Higher Education (HE).

### Research background

Over past 20 years HE has changed radically in a number of key ways:

- in the way it is funded, moving towards a student loan-backed system with repayment thresholds based on graduate earnings;
- in the volume and profile of those participating in HE, both increasing and widening participation; and
- in the way it is delivered, in terms of study mode, speed of delivery and place of delivery.

All of these factors are inter-related as students are making investment decisions about HE and so want more choice about how, what and where they learn; and as the sector copes with a larger and more diverse group of students yet still needs to deliver a satisfying and beneficial experience (against an increasing array of key performance indicators (KPIs)). The traditional image of HE taking place in large lecture halls, small seminar rooms and laboratories, in a small number of institutions and with programmes in the main spread over three years (with students devoting all their time to their studies or being a student, for 30 weeks in each year) and leading to a Bachelor's degree, is now being challenged.

The policy drive in higher education for many years and across various administrations has been for diversity in delivery, and increased student choice. We now have workplace or work-based learning, HE in FE, privately funded (for-profit) providers, Trans-National Education (TNE), distance learning and eLearning (from MOOCs, which tend to be free of charge, through to more blended learning), part-time study, sub-degree or other undergraduate qualifications, higher level and degree apprenticeships, and accelerated degrees. These are all forms for increasing flexibility in HE, providing flexibility in how, where, when and at what pace learning occurs (Outram, 2011).

Some of these alternative methods of study, learning delivery and engagement are faring better than others. There are significant concerns in the sector about the health of part-time study. For example, the recent UUK report (2015) exploring patterns and trends in HE reports that part-time student numbers continue to fall and now make up just 25 per cent of the student body, and the numbers taking other undergraduate programmes also continues to fall. The Department is particularly interested in accelerated degrees (a particular focus of the Government's manifesto), the take-up and contexts for these forms of flexible delivery, the attitudes to these, and the issues involved in offering them. It

should be noted that these are not exclusive forms of flexible delivery and indeed accelerated degrees could be delivered using other flexibilities including blended learning.

## Research aims

The main aim of the research was to use a rapid evidence assessment methodology to identify and review literature in order to provide DfE with the most up-to-date research and current thinking on accelerated degrees as an alternative mode of study in HE that enables a more flexible institutional delivery system. More specifically the research aimed to identify the literature relating to:

- Accelerated or compressed modes of delivery – to set this within the range and nature of different non-traditional modes of study, to understand its intended goals, the extent to which accelerated degrees are offered and taken up, and the contexts in which they operate (to understand potential for transfer and scalability).
- The student experience and outcomes of accelerated degrees as an alternative mode of study – to explore the student perspective of this study mode, to understand their preferences for and views on accelerated degrees, their experiences of accelerated degrees, and outcomes achieved.
- Employer perspectives on accelerated degrees as an alternative mode of study – to explore employer views of study modes, to understand their preferences for and views on alternative modes of study (both in terms of continuing professional development of their staff, and in assessing suitability of candidates in recruitment), and their engagement with accelerated degrees.
- Good practice to identify HEIs regarded as offering good practices in accelerated degrees. This would help with the second stage of the project (reported separately) to undertake case study research with key stakeholders in a small number of HEIs in order to explore the real and current issues, benefits and challenges, in providing accelerated degrees as an alternative mode of study.

The review sought to identify overarching studies comparing modes of study/learning delivery, studies focusing solely on accelerated degree study, studies from across the sector or set within individual institutions, and research studies from the UK and overseas. It also sought to identify literature that captured a range of perspectives: HE, student, and employer. It was agreed with DfE that if a large volume of material was identified, papers relating to the UK context (for transferability) and material relating to accelerated degrees (to align with the Department's primary interest) would be prioritised.

## Methodology

### Rapid Evidence Assessment literature review

A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) approach was taken to conduct the literature search and review. This approach allows a 'map' of the literature to be undertaken with limited time resource. Rapid evidence assessments: identify relevant materials by constraining the research questions and the search process (with variants agreed at the outset), but

allow for grey as well as published policy and academic sources to be included; use a gradual and iterative sift process to narrow materials down to a manageable shortlist of sufficient quality and relevance; and then use a standardised approach to extract relevant evidence from the key materials and provide a simple quality assessment. For REAs to work effectively, there needs to be a realistic approach to scale (i.e. limit the search to key databases, websites and publications); an appropriate search process; and to apply sifting to an initial abstract-based assessment against a set of robust and transparent criteria to determine relevance in order to ensure that only the most relevant, informative studies are reviewed in full. This then focuses researcher time on extracting key information from the 'best' examples of evidence. Development of the search parameters and sift criteria are governed by an analytical framework derived from the research objectives and questions.

## **Literature search**

At the start of the project, the search process was agreed with the Department. This included: a) the core research questions and the analytic framework; b) the scope and boundaries of the project as the existing evidence base on flexible learning and alternative/non-traditional study is large; and c) the search locations/key sources and search terms. This ensured the review would remain focused on the key aims of the Department (as noted above).

### **Core research questions and analytic framework**

The Department confirmed that their primary focus was accelerated/compressed degrees as an alternative mode of study. They were particularly interested in the perspectives of: i) employers; ii) students, and iii) institutions; and were less interested in the pedagogy of compressed/accelerated degrees, and the detailed aspects of setting up a programme. The key areas of focus were agreed as:

1. The take-up of accelerated degrees
2. Delivery and operation of accelerated degrees
3. Barriers and challenges for accelerated degrees, and
4. Benefits to accelerated degrees.

These were developed further to form the analytic framework guiding the research, see Table 1.

**Table 1: Analytic framework**

	<b>Research theme</b>	<b>Questions and issues</b>	<b>Cross-cutting themes</b>
1	Take-up (demand and supply)	<p><b>What is the extent of accelerated degree programmes in the sector?</b></p> <p>How prevalent are accelerated degrees? What types of institutions offer accelerated degrees? Which subject areas offer accelerated degrees? Which students take-up or are attracted to accelerated degrees? Any trends or changes over time? What other options are there for alternative study modes? By what other methods can degrees be delivered (including blended learning, part-time learning and distance learning)? What is the extent of flexible delivery modes (particularly accelerated degrees) of study in other countries?</p>	Are there differences in the attitudes, experiences and perceptions of: i) institutions, ii) students, and iii) employers?
2	Delivery and operation (practical application)	<p><b>How do accelerated degrees compare to traditional modes of delivery? Are there any examples of good practice?</b></p> <p>What motivates institutions to offer accelerated degrees? How do accelerated degrees work? What does a good accelerated degree programme look like? What exemplifies good practice? How do you do it well? Where are the examples of good practice? Which institutions do it well? What is the spread of good practice?</p>	
3	Barriers and challenges	<p><b>What are the issues stopping an expansion of alternative modes of study, particularly accelerated degrees?</b></p> <p>What are the concerns expressed around accelerated degrees? What are the factors and issues that inhibit expansion of accelerated degrees, and how do they affect perceptions and actions in the sector? What would promote or inhibit the transfer of good practices to other parts of the sector? How are accelerated degrees perceived in relation to traditional study delivery?</p>	
4	Benefits	<p><b>What benefits do accelerated degrees offer – to institutions, students and employers?</b></p> <p>What are the real and perceived benefits to accelerated degrees to institutions? What are the real and perceived benefits to accelerated degrees to students? How are accelerated degrees (and alternative/non-traditional) modes of study viewed? What are the experiences and outcomes for students from accelerated degree programmes? How could accelerated degrees be encouraged, developed, promoted and shared?</p>	

Source: IES, 2016

## Scope and search

The search was limited to evidence readily accessible online since the vast majority of publications are now routinely made available online. It was initially limited to material published from 2010 onwards (in the past five/six years), as the pace of change in the HE sector has been particularly rapid in this period. However, key developments in policy and practice around accelerated degrees took place before 2010, such as the HEFCE Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots which were introduced in 2005/06, so some older papers were included from this key period. The search prioritised English language articles and UK based/focused materials, plus materials from countries with comparable approaches to HE (Europe, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and USA).

The search focused on a restricted number of relevant databases and on key sector and research focused websites. Databases and meta-trawlers searched were: Google Scholar, SCOPUS, Science Direct, JSTOR, British Education Index (BEI), and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) in the USA. Other search locations included: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Universities UK (UUK); as well as BIS, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and European bodies such as OECD, EC and Cedefop.

A filter term was applied to all searches of 'Higher Education' to ensure the search located materials relating to HE rather than other phases of learning, and thus develop the evidence base specific to the sector. A primary set of search terms were then used to identify core material relating to accelerated study – accelerated, compressed, fast-track, 2 year – and searches were also undertaken to identify additional materials relating to blended learning. Then combinations of key secondary search terms were used:

- *Alternative plus delivery, mode or study;*
- *Flexible plus delivery, learning or study;*
- *Blended plus learning;*
- *Study plus delivery or mode; and*
- *Non-traditional plus delivery, study or mode.*

A tertiary set of search terms were used to identify materials relating to employer attitudes, experiences and demand; and student attitudes, experiences and satisfaction.

The initial search identified 1,293 papers: 383 from BEI; 293 from Google Scholar; 231 from Science Direct; and 174 from SCOPUS. Smaller numbers were identified from JSTOR (70), Web of Science (5) and ERIC (74).

Key details of all identified materials were stored in an EndNote database: author, year, title, publication, given keywords, abstract, URL and search source. This is a flexible database designed to manage bibliographic references. It allows for a wide range of search options, has various import or export facilities which facilitates references to be directly imported from databases, allows for the categorisation of references (e.g. into

types of papers, categories of quality weighting) and addition of researchers own key words, and offers viewing filters.

## Sift approach

The search process produced a long list of materials. To narrow these down to produce a shortlist of approximately 50 papers, a clear set of criteria for inclusion was developed and agreed with the Department. These criteria were applied initially to the titles of the materials and, as the sift process progressed, then applied to the abstracts. In essence the sift process involved a number of iterative steps applying a successive set of inclusion or exclusion criteria. At each stage the materials excluded were recorded in separate bibliographic 'libraries' (so could be retrieved at a later stage if necessary).

Stage one: The papers were checked for duplicates. Duplicate references can occur as multiple search locations and search terms are used, so the same paper can be identified from different sites.

Stage two: The papers were then sifted using title and abstract. The sift criteria adopted were:

- Date – removing material published before 2010 as the Department was keen to understand the latest thinking.
- Geography – removing material with a known research focus in a country deemed to have a non-comparable or transferable HE system (so excluding countries other than: UK, Canada, USA, Australia, NZ, European states).
- Relevance – removing material clearly irrelevant to the research topic.

The material was doubled sifted, so the references were sifted twice, but by different members of the research team. This double sift reduced the material by two-thirds, to achieve a list of 345 articles.

Stage three: This next stage involved using the abstracts to prioritise the materials of greatest relevance to the four core research themes, a 'select in' approach. This was to ensure that only the best materials moved forward to full review. Each paper was assessed and the highest priority papers were those deemed to be related to:

- Accelerated, fast-track, two-year or compressed degrees
- Flexible or alternative study based in the UK (any UK nation)
- Student and/or employer perspectives.

This provided a **final shortlist of 55 papers**. This was slightly higher than estimated. The full papers were then retrieved ready for full review.

## Review and analysis

The final stage involved full review and extraction of relevant findings and conclusions. During this stage, the papers were also assessed for methodological quality alongside focus, perspective and coverage. Papers were assessed as highest quality (++) where the methodology was explicit, appropriate and robust; papers with less detailed methodologies or more niche approaches yet still providing relevant findings were assessed as acceptable quality (+); and papers with limited explanation of approach and/or comment or think pieces with little supporting evidence were deemed of lower quality (-). This essentially provides a weight for each paper which can be used to gauge the relative confidence that a reader may have in each study. However, it should be noted that a (-) rating did not preclude the paper from inclusion, but rather indicated interesting findings that were either not of complete relevance to the research questions, or were less methodologically robust. Nevertheless, they highlighted current thinking and provided context to the report as a whole

A standardised pro-forma structured around the key research questions and the analytic framework was used to extract evidence from the materials and record the assessed quality of the materials. This ensured consistency of approach in reviewing the literature and extraction of evidence across the research team.

The extracted evidence was then synthesised against the review questions in order to outline the current thinking and landscape with regards to accelerated degrees as an alternative mode of learning delivery. The synthesis process also allowed for areas where the evidence or commentary was weak, limited or outdated to be identified, highlighting areas which could require further dedicated research.

It should be noted that during full review some papers, particularly those relating to accelerated degrees or learning, were found to be outside of the main focus for the review. These papers tended to: lack comparison to traditional programmes or were too narrow in scope i.e. relating to just one aspect of the accelerated experience or outcome such as computer literacy; or related to acceleration in other contexts (secondary or tertiary education, postgraduate education, or programmes aimed at graduates); or acceleration learning techniques as an educational methodology or approach. To replace some of these papers a backwards and forwards citation search was undertaken. A citation search was undertaken to identify key materials that the authors of relevant papers used in this review drew from; similarly, some of the early papers relating to the key initiatives or experiments with accelerated degrees in the UK were investigated to identify more recent material that have cited these sources. Again, once these were identified they were assessed for relevance and quality and evidence was extracted using the same proforma.

## Report structure

This report draws together and synthesises the available evidence from the review of current literature on accelerated degrees with some contextual findings on other flexible delivery modes such as blended learning and wider debates about flexible learning and alternative modes of study.

- Chapter 2 introduces the flexible learning debate and identifies where accelerated degrees are cited in the literature and in policy, it also introduces other (often



companion) forms of flexible provision that have received greater attention in recent years.

- Chapter 3 explores the prevalence of accelerated degrees in the UK and overseas, and looks at the market for accelerated degrees including the institutions providing these courses, the subjects that have been accelerated and the types of students attracted to accelerated degrees. It also notes the difficulties encountered when looking for evidence about accelerated degrees.
- Chapter 4 covers delivery and operational issues, including institutional drivers to offer accelerated degrees, how accelerated degrees work in practice, and considerations for institutions when designing accelerated programmes.
- Chapter 5 examines the concerns stakeholders have about accelerated degrees as an alternative and flexible study mode, as these can act as factors inhibiting take-up. These potential barriers can be felt at sector level, institution level and individual student level.
- Chapter 6 focuses on the real and perceived benefits of accelerated degrees and finishes with some suggestions for encouraging greater provision and greater take-up of accelerated degrees.

## Chapter 2: Positioning accelerated degrees

This chapter introduces the flexible learning debate and alternative study modes, and identifies where accelerated degrees are cited in the literature. It then outlines where accelerated degrees are situated in government and HE sector policy, and how this has developed over time.

In reviewing the literature on accelerated degrees, it became evident that the volume of material was small. Indeed, Wlodkowski (2003) writing about accelerated learning in the USA, where there is greater prevalence and history of accelerated programmes than in the UK, noted that the studies in the field were modest and many were unpublished or doctoral dissertations. Our search revealed that the literature was found in two key places. It was found primarily in discussions about flexible learning provision which in turn was part of the literature relating to student choice, lifelong learning and widening participation (or adult education in the USA) – all key policy themes in HE over the past 20 years. It was also found in the literature relating to the organisation of the academic year, a much smaller body of work primarily focused on internal arrangements of HEIs to offer ‘year round’ study and to produce efficiencies in the use of resources.

There was also a body of (overlapping) literature relating to Accelerated Learning within the field of training and development as a methodology or philosophical approach rather than a process or an organising or structuring of learning. Much of this work stems from the USA and was developed from the work of Georgi Lozanov and the theory of ‘suggestology’ or ‘Suggestopedia’, and is sometimes referred to as Suggestive Accelerated Learning and Teaching or SALT. This body of literature refers not to acceleration or shortening of the duration of the learning process, but to a special area of learning or instructional approach that is based on a demechanised philosophy of learning and/or that uses knowledge about the workings of the brain and applies it to classroom practice (Imel, 2002; Tatum, 2010; Serdyukov, 2008; Muetz & Frush, 2007; Boyd, 2004). This literature was not considered to be the focus of this current review.

### Accelerated degrees as flexible learning or provision

*‘Paths beckon towards educational provision that is less bounded by timeframes, less located in particular places and with more open relationships between teacher and taught’ (Barnett, 2014, p.24)*

The literature indicates an increasing interest in and pressure towards flexibility in HE as the sector grows with increasing and widening of participation and provision, and as central funding shrinks. Flexibility has been the focus of a key programme of study, and suite of reports, by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) who recognise it to be a topical theme. They argue it has been driven by multiple stakeholders – students, teachers, institutional leaders and managers, employers, national bodies and government – but caution that these stakeholders may have conflicting viewpoints and agendas (Barnett, 2014). Through their work, the HEA define flexibility in broad terms as *‘the transition away from a traditional production-led model to a more dynamic and responsive model of learning, a model in which the processes of learning and the associated institutional structures are driven by the requirements and preferences of learners or sponsors of learning’* (Tallantyre, 2013, p.4). With a strong focus on the learner this cites flexibility

within debates around enhancing student choice and student experiences: *'at the heart of the flexible learning agenda is the notion of student choice in how, when, where, what and at what pace they learn'* (Barnett, 2014, p.26).

The HEA programme asserts that flexibility is important for HE, as it has the potential to not only enhance student learning, but also widen opportunities for participation in HE and develop graduates who are equipped to contribute to a fast-changing world. This therefore also cites flexibility within debates around widening participation (Barnett, 2014, see also Osbourne & Young, 2006, who define flexible provision as that concerned with making the curriculum more accessible through changes in its structure, and in form, place and timing of delivery, p6). Work undertaken for OFFA and HEFCE to inform the national strategy for access and student success by the Aimhigher Research and Consultancy (ARC) Network also locates flexible provision within the widening participation narrative, as a way to increase student diversity. This study reviewed the research literature into widening participation and looked at flexible provision as a mechanism for widening participation (Moore et al, 2013).

Flexibility, however, is a multifaceted concept with inter-connected aspects or manifestations and is thus a disputed term. Indeed, the HEA programme of work defines four 'levels' of flexibility, three 'concepts' of flexibility, and also several 'dimensions' of flexibility. These dimensions of flexibility include: pace, place and mode. Flexibility in place includes work-based learning, but also private provision, HE in further education and trans-national education. Flexibility in mode includes distance learning, e-learning and blended learning. However, it is flexibility in pace, which is of key interest to this review, and this includes accelerated and de-accelerated degrees but also part-time learning, Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL), and modularity and credit frameworks (Tallantyre, 2013). Similarly the Arc Network report (Moore et al, 2013) points to flexibility in modes of study, in time and place and through different media, and notes how flexible provision, sometimes referred to as alternative provision to mainstream traditional full-time campus based HE, implies 'elasticity of timetable and length of study' as well as different admissions, curricula and delivery structures, and different locations for study (Moore et al, 2013). They also add foundation degrees as another structural form of flexible learning. Discussions of flexibility in HE are a not new topic but, until recently, this has tended to be synonymous with part-time study and with e-learning, both of which have a large literature, leaving little room for exploration of other forms of flexibility. This means there has been little commentary and research in the UK specifically focused on flexibility in pace and on accelerated degrees. There are dangers that – with the recent dramatic fall in part-time student numbers (see UUK, 2015), and similarly with the recent policy focus on higher level and degree apprenticeships – accelerated degrees will fail to garner much attention as an alternative form of flexibility.

## **Accelerated degrees and the organisation of the academic year**

There is some literature which looks at how universities could make better use of the structure of the academic year, and stems largely from efficiency drives but also notions of flexibility (and future proofing). Some of the material here are individual HEI internal discussion and policy documents. In the UK this literature has tended to focus on moves to semesterisation (shifting from three terms to two semesters) and changing the lengths and dates for semesters within the existing parameters of the academic year, but in the 1990s the Flowers Committee report did look at extending the academic year into the summer

period in the UK. In other countries, particularly the USA in the 1960s and 1970s and more recently in Australia, discussions have more explicitly linked reorganisation of the academic year to 'trimester' and 'year-round' teaching. This offers the potential for summer teaching sessions (or winter in the case of Australia) and accelerated degrees, fits with modular approaches, and also offers the potential for entry and exit at multiple points. Baldwin and McInnis (2002) undertook a review of the literature and found moves to extend the academic year were driven by the desire to achieve greater efficiency in the use of expensive infrastructure and ease crowding during the regular academic year, and also to meet a perceived demand from students for flexibility in their study schedules. Whereas Collins et al (2013) also writing in Australia noted how extending the academic year had once been seen as a method to allow failing students to repeat units, but that it is now seen as a marketing tool to attract more students. Baldwin and McInnis recognised that summer sessions had not been a significant part of mainstream HE in the UK, but had been gaining interest although for a niche market of students and institutions.

## Key developments and policy for accelerated degrees

*'Flexibility is one of the most fashionable words in higher education in the '90s'* (Sims and Woodrow, 1996)

As Barnett (2014) notes, in his meta-paper drawing on the suite of research undertaken by the HEA on flexibility in HE, flexibility is not new. Indeed, thoughts of how best to utilise the academic year had been a consideration for the higher education sector across the globe for some time. There are discussions dating back to the end of the Second World War with returning service personnel being offered two-year degree courses (HEFCE, 2011); and then bursts of debate in the 1960s and 1970s.

More recent key developments for accelerated study included the 1991 White Paper 'Higher Education: A New Framework' which encouraged a review of traditional three/four-year degree courses and called for the development of different, flexible approaches and better use of buildings and equipment. This was set against an increasing interest in efficiency gains in HE and ideas about 'economies of time' (HEFCE, 1999). This then led to the enquiry in 1993 to examine the organisation of the academic year and to challenge the 'no teaching in the summer' tradition (known as the Flowers Committee Report). This recommended that universities consider extending the teaching year by using the summer period (Fallows & Symon, 1999), although the committee recommended that accelerated programmes should be specially designed and use new teaching methods rather than just schedule current courses over three terms a year (a similar finding to a review commissioned in Australia by Richmond and Warren Piper, 1991 reported in Baldwin and McInnis, 2002).

This push from policy led to the Accelerated and Intensive Routes to HE (AIRS) which ran from 1992 to 1995. The AIRS initiative typically involved a 45 week teaching year, with a term scheduled during the summer vacation and other holiday periods reduced, which enabled students to complete courses in a year less than usual. It was an initiative to help widen access and increase participation among under-represented groups. Eleven AIRS courses, typically completed in two years, were piloted in 10 HEIs. Again key evidence on the success, benefits and challenges of such programmes was provided by the evaluation report of the pilots (Sims & Woodrow, 1996; Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). Notably, after the

funding only half of the providers intended to carry on with the programmes and none intended to increase their intake.

Another key programme was the Academic Year Pilots or Extended Year Pilots (EAY). This programme was funded by HEFCE from 1995 to 1998 to test the feasibility of a third semester during the summer period, and to investigate the costs, benefits and implications of an extended academic year. In England, this involved La Sainte Union College of HE (now part of the University of Southampton); and the University of Luton (now University of Bedfordshire), where it built on the year-round learning already offered in nursing study. The EAY programme also involved institutions in Scotland: the University of Paisley, the University of Stirling and Robert Gordon University; and the University of Ulster. A key piece of evidence from this programme was an evaluation conducted by the University of Luton (Fallows & Symons, 1999) plus an evaluation undertaken by SQW for HEFCE in 1999.

Flexibility was a key theme of the HE white paper published in 2003 (DfES, 2003) and was linked to expansion of HE and to lifelong learning, the continual development of skills throughout life. The government felt that in order to continue to expand HE, it needed to be opened up to different learners and different learning, with new qualifications such as Foundation Degrees and improved choices for flexible study including part-time study, e-learning and compressed two-year honours degrees:

*'further possible flexible form of provision is the compressed two-year honours degree, with a different pattern of terms and shorter holidays. This may suit those who would have difficulty spending a full three years in full-time education, but who have the enthusiasm and the drive to complete a higher education degree. The Flowers report considered the extension of the teaching year by using the summer as a third semester. This would allow students to complete degrees over two years, and also allow more flexible work patterns. Again, funding patterns do not currently support this sort of provision particularly well, but we will establish a pilot to encourage institutions to try out two-year honours degrees, and evaluate them carefully' (The Future of Higher Education, DfES, 2003, p65).*

In response to this, HEFCE funded (via the Strategic Development Fund) a pilot and evaluation programme of two-year honours degrees as models of flexible provision in eight higher education institutions. The programme known as the 'Flexible Learning Pathfinder' ran from 2005 to 2010, and within the period was extended to pilot other forms of flexible delivery alongside the accelerated honours degrees, including four-year 'extended' degrees (intensive part-time degrees), accelerated foundation degrees, blended learning delivery, work-related learning, and continuing professional development. Each of the pathfinder institutions received a minimum of £250,000 development funding; and towards the end of the programme, in 2008/09 there were 390 students enrolled on 20 accelerated degree courses. At the end of the pilot period, development funding came to an end, but it was hoped that if flexible provision were felt to be viable, it would be sustainable and institutions would continue to offer and increase it. Key evidence from this programme came from the interim evaluation in 2009 and the final evaluation in 2011 (reported in Outram, 2011), and from individual institutional evaluations (such as Davies et al, 2009; Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008); and these reports have been used heavily to provide evidence about accelerated degrees in the UK. This can make interpreting the literature on accelerated degrees difficult as numerous papers actually refer to the same evaluation.

In the late 2000s, attention again turned to flexible study. Flexible study was mentioned in the policy paper Higher Ambitions (BIS, 2009a) in the context of widening opportunities. The Grant Letter to HEFCE in 2009 on the priorities and finances for the 2010/11 academic year set out the Government's commitment to variety in undergraduate provision, as part of goals to widen access to higher education. In this letter, BIS asked the Council to consider whether further models for different modes of provision were needed, particularly whether provision should become available throughout the year:

*'We want to see more programmes that are taken flexibly and part-time and that a learner can access with ease alongside their other commitments. We also wish to see more programmes, such as foundation and fast-track degrees, that can be completed full-time in two years. The underlying theme is providing for diversity. Over the next spending review period, we will want some shift away from full-time three year places and towards a wider variety of provision. I would like you to assess current trends in demand; to lead a debate on how diverse provision can be encouraged; and to give me initial advice by summer 2010' (BIS, 2009, paragraph 4)*

In response to the 2009 Grant Letter, HEFCE undertook research for BIS in 2010 to explore and provide advice on the options and challenges for diverse provision in HE – specifically to assess current trends in demand and provide advice on how diverse provision could be encouraged. The study explored foundation degrees, accelerated degrees and part-time provision, and drew heavily on the findings of the Flexible Learning Pathfinders programme (HEFCE, 2011).

Two year degrees were again mentioned in the 2010 HEFCE Grant letter for the 2011/12 academic year (from the newly formed coalition government). Here two year degrees, as a form of flexible and innovative provision, were regarded as a way for HEIs to be responsive to the changing demands of students and employers for high level skills and employability.

Flexible provision, and accelerated degrees as one manifestation of this, continues to be topical and important to debates about the future direction of the sector. Flexible provision is an important strand of the sector's current national strategy for access and student success, specifically as part of the strategy for improving access to HE. The strategy recognises the importance of flexible provision and study options to meet the diverse needs of potential HE learners and their sponsors, and OFFA and HEFCE pledge to support the development of flexible and inclusive study options, and also to develop their knowledge of economic and market conditions for flexible study (OFFA & HEFCE, 2014). Most recently the current Government in their election manifesto stressed their ambition to ensure universities deliver value for money to students which included encouraging universities to offer more two-year courses (The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015, p35). However, there was no mention of this in the recent higher education green paper (Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice, 2015, BIS)

## **Other forms of flexible provision**

*'Accelerated learning and fast-track progression can be seen as just one aspect of a much larger series of changes within higher education that are providing flexible and distributed learning' (McCaig et al, 2007)*

As the policy and research literature indicates, flexibility in HE and flexible provision is much broader than accelerated study, and covers a wide range of alternatives to the traditional full-time three-year campus based programme. A key form of flexible provision that has a wide body of literature is that of e-learning and blended learning, and more recently, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have added to the flexibility of HE provision.

As a result of technological innovations in the last two decades, notably digital technology (as well as the ubiquitous Internet), the UK and indeed EU's HE landscape is undergoing significant change in terms of both pedagogy and modes of delivery. Indeed, a profound change in HE concerns the use of new delivery options, either through the expansion of traditional distance learning with digital technology, or the offer of teaching alternatives such as MOOCs and Open Educational Resources (OER) (European Commission, 2013a, 2013b and 2015c; HLG on the Modernisation of HE, 2014).

## Blended learning

Blended learning appears to have evolved from distance learning and is synonymous with a student-centred learning approach. It has been brought about by changes in technology allowing new delivery options and (personalised) ways of learning particularly more online learning, and new ways of assessment. It combines elements of traditional pedagogy with ICT to allow for cost-efficiency and reach, opening HE study to new markets (Kinash et al, 2015). An EU-wide review of new modes of learning and teaching used by HEIs, identified blended learning as one of three models. Here, conventional HEIs offer programmes and courses on campus that make use of online technologies and pedagogies within courses and programmes (HLG on the Modernisation of HE, 2014). Similarly, Garrison and Vaughan (2007) note how *'the blended learning approach embraces the traditional values of face-to-face teaching and integrates the best practices of online learning. This approach has proven to both enhance and expand the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning in higher education across disciplines'*. Dzuiban (2004) also emphasises the hybrid approach of blended learning, and how it is a combination of learning modalities involving face-to-face instruction and Web-based learning delivery, and leverages the strengths of each so that when implemented effectively, *'a blended learning program can make better use of instructional resources and facilities, and increase class availability thus speeding up the pathway to graduation for students'* (Dzuiban et al, 2004). Research has indicated that students can have a positive attitude to ICT-based learning, but still have a preference for instruction and lectures (Osgerby, 2013). A blended approach combining online and face-to-face instruction thus enables a diversification of communication channels and delivery of materials, can enable ease of study, but also reduce isolation that can accompany distance and/or online study, and improve student motivation and engagement and the efficacy of learning (Hampel & de los Arcos, 2013; Bradford, 2011; European Commission, 2013a, 2013b).

There is mixed evidence on the ubiquity of eLearning and blended learning across the sector. In the wider European Community including the UK, there appears to be a concerted effort to promote and support various forms of distance learning including eLearning and blended learning as a way to modernise education. However, there are concerns that HEIs are not ready for this mixed provision, and that blended learning is still considered somewhat new and thus requiring further impact assessment and research (HLG on the Modernisation of HE, 2014; European Commission, 2013a, 2013b). Although most European HEIs are reported to provide regular online learning, it was found that

relatively few HEIs have mainstreamed e-learning, while for many ‘blended learning may just be synonymous with conventional classroom learning, sprinkled with a bit of ICT’ (EUA, 2014). Research has indicated there are marked differences, on how and to what extent individual HEIs approach and implement e-learning and/or blended learning. The reasons for this are not clear, but they may be related to HEI’s (i) specific profile and mission; (ii) available resources and access to additional funding; (iii) focus on certain subject areas; (iv) type/profile of students; (v) stage of experience in e-learning and degree of technology adoption; (vi) staff’s attitudes, openness and particular skills in relation to e-learning (EUA, 2014).

Similarly, although Blass et al (2010) envisioned a future for the UK HE sector, with newer universities offering diverse study options and blended learning becoming commonplace to support multi-site teaching, this may yet be somewhat far off. Indeed, the UUK report (2012) *Futures for Higher Education: Analysing Trends* reported that:

*‘The role of technology in the delivery of teaching has long been discussed, but has had only limited impact on mainstream usage to date... early predictions that online provision would claim a high proportion of market share have not yet been borne out.’*

The report found more online provision for short stand-alone modules, heavily biased towards business oriented provision, and in transnational education (TNE) delivery.

## **Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)**

MOOCs are part of the move towards Open Educational Resources (OER) and are a newer type of provision for HE which some HEIs use as part of their blended learning. They have been defined as:

*‘online courses designed for large numbers of participants, that can be accessed by anyone anywhere as long as they have an internet connection, are open to everyone without entry qualifications, and offer a full/complete course experience online for free’ (EADTU, 2015; Jansen et al, 2015).*

Since first making headlines in 2011 they have experienced a massive expansion at the same time as being heavily debated across the world. MOOCs originated in North America, while their rise to prominence was largely driven by service providers such as Udacity, Coursera and EdX. In the EU, MOOC-related activity started in earnest in 2013, when the pan-European initiative OpenupEd and different (regional) MOOC platforms became available (e.g., the UK’s FutureLearn, Germany’s Iversity France’s FUN Spain’s UNEDcoma and Miriada X; EADTU, 2015; Jansen et al, 2015). At the same time, the European Commission launched in September 2013 the ‘Opening Up Education’ initiative whose main aim was to stimulate ways of learning and teaching through ICTs and digital content, mainly through the development and availability of OER, including MOOCs (European Commission, 2013a and 2013b). Analysis indicates that there are more than 3,000 MOOCs globally, of which more than 1,500 have been produced by European HEIs or other organisations; and the MOOC field is clearly dominated by HEIs from Western and Southern Europe (European Commission, 2015c). They are viewed by the European Commission as a part of a wave of innovations which affect both pedagogy and modes of delivery in HE; and new types of short, focused online courses are emerging. Many HEIs are getting involved in MOOCs and are driven by desires to enhance their international



visibility and reputation (especially among European HEIs), to increase student recruitment and reach new target groups, to offer greater flexibility for their current students, and for innovation (rather than to reduce costs or increase incomes, EUA, 2014; EADTU, 2015; Jansen et al, 2015).

## Chapter 3: Take-up of accelerated degrees

This chapter examines the extent/prevalence of accelerated degrees in the UK and overseas, and looks at the coverage of accelerated degrees in terms of the types of institutions offering accelerated degrees, the subjects that can be accelerated and the types of students who are attracted to and take-up accelerated degrees.

### Understanding the market

*'Accelerated learning occurs in many formats, at many levels and in many countries'*  
(McCaig et al, 2007)

Understanding the extent and nature of provision and take-up of accelerated degrees and potential demand for accelerated degrees (essentially the market for accelerated study) appears to be difficult. However, understanding the market is regarded as a key to success for accelerated programmes (Baldwin and McInnis, 2002) and this appears as a recommendation and action from recent policy (OFFA/HEFCE, 2014).

There has been relatively little market research into the demand for accelerated degrees in the UK, and instead demand appears to have been largely inferred through take-up of programmes. The work that has explored demand in the UK includes a large qualitative study by SQW/TNS for HEFCE published in 2006; a review of literature, secondary data and fieldwork with employers, professional bodies and HEIs by McCaig et al in 2007; research undertaken by participating institutions in the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot (e.g. Davies et al, 2009; Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008, but much of this not published); plus analysis of take-up using data from these pilot initiatives. These market research studies are useful and insightful, but can produce conflicting conclusions. Davies et al (2009) note it can be difficult to interpret results from studies which tend to be small in scale and relate to a *'product which is largely unfamiliar to the individuals whose views are being solicited'* (p31).

The work that has been undertaken in the UK has largely concluded that the market for accelerated degrees has been regarded as niche, that the number of institutions and students involved is small, and that accelerated degrees are not designed to replace existing traditional degree programmes, but instead to add to the options available to students. However, it is agreed that there is very limited awareness of accelerated study which can dampen demand.

The SQW/TNS research (2006) found very little evidence on the demand for accelerated degrees nor indeed existence of provision, little awareness of flexibility of pace and very limited interest in accelerated two-year degrees among potential and current students. Work by Davies et al, (2009) also noted problems recruiting to pilot accelerated degrees at the University of Northampton (one of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots). Similarly, the HEFCE report to BIS (2011) looking at diverse provision and again drawing on the findings from the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots (where there was limited take-up) concluded that there is little unmet demand from students, accelerated degrees were not regarded a replacement for three year degrees and that accelerated degrees were likely to remain a niche market, perhaps consisting largely of newer universities offering vocational subjects to older students. Although HEFCE did acknowledge that low take-up of

accelerated degrees could be, in part, due to a lack of information about this alternative form of study. This same report indicated the numbers of students involved that they could identify were small: with 390 students enrolled on 20 accelerated programmes in 2008/09 across the pilot institutions. Other providers could offer students accelerated degrees, but HEFCE did not collect data on this through their usual mechanisms (institutions annual monitoring returns), and the lack of specific monitoring of accelerated programmes continues to date. The University and College Union (UCU) in their policy statement also reported scepticism about whether there was demand for a two-year degree, and were concerned that the flexible learning agenda of government was 'driven by economic rather than simply educational objectives' (UCU, 2010).

However, work by McCaig et al (2007) undertaken earlier on in the process of designing and developing the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots found an interest in fast-track degrees among existing students in four universities surveyed. Market research conducted at the University of Plymouth with a small group of current and potential students led researchers to conclude there was a demand for fast-track programmes – more so among current students than potential students - although a significant marketing campaign would be required both nationally and locally to ensure a good take-up (Rodway-Dyer, 2008). Similarly work by Outram (2011) at the end of the pilots noted that anecdotal evidence of switching from traditional to accelerated programmes suggested there could be a wider market for accelerated degrees if there were greater awareness and that changes to higher education funding could stimulate demand:

*'The provision of more flexible forms of delivery may increase as higher education institutions seek new ways of providing cost-effective, high quality learning. In the case of accelerated programmes, their future would seem to be poised to either remain at the level of small-scale 'niche' initiatives or to be adopted more strategically by an institution or institutions that see such engagement as a vision for the future. If demand for higher education places falls off as a result of the increase in fees, institutions may look for new ways of attracting students. If the total fees for an accelerated degree remain lower than the cost of a traditional degree, students may be attracted to them to in order to reduce debt' (Outram, 2011, p37)*

The market for accelerated learning appears much more buoyant overseas, particularly in the USA where it has been linked to the large and growing adult learner market (Marques, 2012; Tatum, 2010; Wlodkowski, 2003). Accelerated programmes in the USA have been heralded as one of the 'fastest-growing transformations in higher education' (Marques, 2012, p101), but again are one of a number of flexible or non-traditional learning formats which also include online and blended learning (Muetz & Frush, 2007).

What is lacking, particularly in the UK, but also in other countries (Wlodkowski, 2003), is an understanding of the potential to expand accelerated degrees to traditional HE students – those 18 year olds leaving school or college and with limited work experience – as an alternative to the traditional HE study model. Similarly, as most of the market research in the UK to-date took place before the changes in the student finance system (notably increases in undergraduate tuition fees, removal of the Maintenance Grant, and extension of student loans for tuition fees to many part-time students all introduced since 2012/13<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> These changes were introduced as part of the government's plan to reform the HE sector in order to ensure financial

and the removal of caps on student places in England, there is a need to understand how this current context has impacted upon potential student demand in both the mature student market and the traditional student market.

## What are accelerated degrees?

*'it is evident from the literature there is an absence of consistent terminology and a shared conceptual understanding of the accelerated mode of study'* (Collins et al, 2013).

A review of the literature indicates several challenges that make it difficult to search for, and also home in on, evidence relating to accelerated study at degree level.

Firstly, there is no consistent terminology for accelerated degrees. They are variously referred to as accelerated, fast-track and two-year degrees (probably the most commonly used terms in the UK); and also compressed, time-compressed, condensed, and intensive degrees or programmes. 'Intensive' however, appears to be a contentious term as some commentators, particularly in the USA, maintain there are distinct differences between accelerated and intensive learning: both have shorter duration than traditional courses, but intensive courses are more likely to involve different instructional techniques and models of learning (and a shift towards andragogy – the teaching of adults rather than pedagogy – the teaching of children) with the aim to increase the productivity of learning:

*'whereas accelerated learning pursues only the goal of compressing the duration of the course by shortening the course format through scheduling that is a quantitative change, intensive learning also attempts to achieve greater efficiency of learning through both compressing instructional time and applying effective instructional tools and strategies ... both quantitative and qualitative change'* (Serdyukov, 2008).

*'There is a general misnomer that accelerated courses are normal courses squeezed in a compact format which basically entails that there is no change in approach. Just an increase of speed with the same structure. ...the most essential strategy in these courses is to shift from lecturing to facilitating. In other words, engaging in an accelerated course format requires a paradigm shift for instructors as well as students'* (Marques, 2012, p103)

The confused use of terminology and particularly conflation of acceleration with intensification in the USA literature can make it difficult to interpret and distil relevant aspects of research findings and their applicability to the UK context. For example, it can be difficult to disentangle evidence relating to the outcomes of programmes – and understanding whether these are attributable to acceleration/change in duration (of key interest to the Department) or intensification/change in learning approach.

Secondly, accelerated as a term in the HE context can also apply to sub-degree programmes, postgraduate degree programmes, and short-courses (often professional development); and indeed there appears to be more of history (and perhaps acceptance) of fast-track or compressed study at these levels. McCaig et al (2007) note how in the USA

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stability and increase efficiency at a time of national public spending cuts; whilst also placing more control in the hands of students. It forms part of a trend initiated in the 1990s of a graduate shift from the state towards individual beneficiaries i.e. students contributing to the costs of HE delivery coupled with targeted support for those with low incomes or at risk of financial hardship.

accelerated courses are often short-cycle courses taken over weekends and blocks of time to suit the needs of mature, professional individuals with wider commitments; although the country also has a history spanning over 25 years of accelerated degrees. Similarly, Tatum (2010) in a literature review of accelerated learning (mainly in the USA) reports on a wide range of work which has evaluated short accelerated courses within wider (often degree) programmes, rather than evaluated whole accelerated degrees. Also, much of the research in wider Europe focuses on acceleration of sub-degree programmes, referring to short-cycle programmes as intermediate qualifications *within* the first-cycle of HE (Bachelor's degree). These have tended to be vocational in focus and act to prepare students for employment or to progress to a full Bachelor's award (Slantcheva-Durst, 2010, 2015; QAA, 2014). The issue in Europe is further confused given that the English model for Bachelor's degree study of three-years full-time study is already shorter than the four years of study in many European states (Dunkel, 2009; JISC Info NET, 2007). Also acceleration is found in other education contexts such as tertiary education (see Wilkins et al, 2010, for research on accelerated A-level study programmes).

Thirdly, as noted above, acceleration in the educational context can also refer to a type of learning methodology involving brain-based techniques, philosophical approaches to intelligence, and classroom dynamics (which is outside the scope of this review). This is more common in corporate training rather than higher education.

Finally, some degree programmes appear to be accelerated because they accept individuals with higher qualifications than required for standard entry, and this provides them with exemption from parts of the programme (via Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning or APEL in the UK) and thus progress more quickly than their peers. An example is the group of second degree programmes aimed at graduates to retrain (such as nurses, McCaig, 2007). However, these are arguably not true accelerated programmes, just standard programmes with an alternative entry point. The equivalent in the USA appears to be 'degree completion' programmes which are designed for non-traditional students to account for credits previous earned and then complete at an accelerated pace or flexible schedule; with prior experience assessed via the College-Level Examination Programme or CLEP and use of portfolios (Rood, 2011; Wikipedia<sup>2</sup>, 2016).

Accelerated degrees are regarded as a form of flexible provision, but not an exclusive form of flexible provision, as accelerated programmes can coincide with (or indeed build from and are enabled by) other forms of flexibility – including mode of study, size of study elements and place of study. Accelerated degrees can be taken in full-time or part-time study mode, they often involve some degree of distance or e-learning they can involve varied start dates, and generally involve modular study; but are full degree-level programmes rather than sub-degree or short cycle programmes.

All these issues indicate the importance of identifying or developing a clear definition of what we mean – in the context of this review – by accelerated degrees. The HEFCE definition appears to be the clearest definition, and most closely aligns with the Department's interpretation of accelerated degrees.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Degree\\_completion\\_program](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Degree_completion_program), retrieved April 2016

HEFCE defines accelerated degrees in relation to standard programmes. They note how flexible provision courses, including accelerated degrees, are structured differently to a standard, campus-based full-time model. Accelerated degrees are expected to cover the same curriculum and content, and to deliver the same number of credits (360) as a three-year degree. They just reduce (or compress) the duration of the course as they are delivered over three semesters a year instead of two, or four terms instead of three, by utilising the traditional summer holiday period for teaching and learning (HEFCE, 2011; OFFA/HEFCE, 2014). The academic year is extended and teaching takes place year round which allows for a full-time course to be effectively reduced to two years and a part-time course to four years (see also Chapter 4: Delivery and operation for a discussion of the types of accelerated delivery).

Similar definitions can be found in the USA literature:

*'a specially organised short-term course in which the same learning outcomes can be achieved in the same number of class hours as in a traditional course but delivered in a shorter course duration...It does not necessarily imply the use of special accelerated techniques. It is usually taught in longer and more frequent sessions... Also called a compressed course (the major characteristics signify a quantitative change)' (Serdyukov, 2008).*

## Who offers accelerated degrees?

It is difficult to identify the full extent of provision in the UK HE sector, including the number and range of institutions offering accelerated, compressed or fast-track degrees, as there is no standard way to refer to and therefore identify and document accelerated degrees. Similarly, course finding applications/tools available on the internet (such as the UCAS search tool) rarely allow one to search by duration of programme. The key sources of national level statistical data on HE students and HE institutions are UCAS and HEFCE and they do not collect data to identify and analyse the extent of accelerated programmes. UCAS do not have course length in their analytical data so cannot undertake any monitoring. Similarly, whilst HEFCE collected data on the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots as a special initiative there is no standard way of identifying and recording accelerated provision in the data they collect. It would require bringing together a large number of variables with no guarantee of being able to differentiate accelerated provision from top-up courses or other shorter courses.

## Which countries?

The literature, however, does indicate that provision in the UK is not widespread – neither across the sector nor within individual institutions. Other countries such as USA, Australia and New Zealand have far more accelerated programmes on offer (McCaig et al, 2007; Wlodkowski, 2003; Muetz & Frush, 2007); and countries such as Puerto Rico, Philippines, Ireland, and Germany are noted in the literature as 'early contenders' in accelerated learning (Marques, 2012). McCaig et al (2007) note that accelerated learning occurs in many countries and in many formats, but is generally more prevalent in countries where students pay tuition fees, which is a relatively more recent situation in the UK<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> And there are differences within the UK in terms of when fees were introduced and amounts of fees charged.

Widespread provision of accelerated courses in the USA has been linked to the growing adult education market in order to fit with their needs to save time and expense, and their 'hectic lifestyles'; and also to fit with institutions' needs to reduce the costs of education provision (cost efficiency drives) and to compete for students (increase market share, see Chapter 4). Figures cited in the literature – although several years old now – are that: 217 out of 424 colleges and universities surveyed were offering intensive formats (not necessarily whole programmes, Marques, 2012 citing Daniel, 2000); as many as 800 colleges and universities in the USA are offering accelerated courses (again not necessarily whole programmes), and some colleges have totally accelerated curricula (Serdyukov, 2008 citing Council for Accelerated Programmes data from 2006). Also that 89 per cent of colleges are running a year-round operation to carry out accelerated programmes (again Serdyukov, 2008, citing figures from the Association of Colleges (AoC) for 2007).

### Which universities?

In the UK there is an almost exclusive bias in accelerated degrees towards new universities. These are universities that are most concerned with teaching rather than research, recruiting rather than selecting institutions, and are those with a more pronounced widening participation ethos. Davies et al (2009) evaluating the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots noted:

*'There is an inverse relationship between overall ease of undergraduate recruitment and institutional interest in Fast-track degrees. However, it is also clear that this inverse relationship is a produce of current structures of government subsidy (through HEFCE) and tuition fees' (Davies et al, 2009, p 40)*

Million+ and NUS (2012) note that modern universities offer a range of flexible study options to students with non-traditional qualifications '*reflecting openness to alternative pathways to higher education, widening participation admission strategies and a real commitment to social mobility*' (p12). HEFCE (2011) posits that these institutions may be more willing to try out innovative forms of provision and an example of the University of Plymouth's Corporate Plan would substantiate this. The plan commits the university to widening access, the design of innovative courses and increasing the flexibility of the institution's programme in mode, place, time and access (Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008). Accelerated degrees are also offered by private institutions. Indeed, a number of institutions in the private sector offer accelerated degrees and have a history of doing so, most notably the University of Buckingham. The University's website notes how they pioneered the two-year honours degree and have offered accelerated degrees since their inception in 1976.

It is noticeable that participation in the pilot programmes funded by HEFCE including AIRS (see above) in the 1990s and the Flexible Learning Pathfinders in the 2000s was limited to university colleges and newer universities, generally those offering a wider range of flexible provision and institutions that placed high importance on student choice. The Pathfinder pilot institutions were: University of Derby, Leeds Metropolitan University, University of Northampton, Staffordshire University, and the Medway Partnership of the University of Kent, University of Greenwich and Canterbury Christ Church University (initial phase); and Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Gloucestershire and Plymouth University. The bias was also noted in the earlier Flowers Committee report, where it was suggested that not all institutions would want to offer accelerated degrees, particularly

research intensive institutions; and only a small minority of undergraduate students would want them (Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). Similarly, a literature review in Australia identified that trends in the early 2000s towards 'trimesterisation' and teaching throughout the year were largely of piecemeal adoption – with initiatives taken by departments or faculties within some institutions (Baldwin & McInnis, 2002).

An online search (March 2016) by the research team indicates that some form of accelerated degree level programmes (whether full or part-time) are offered at the following English universities: Anglia Ruskin, Bedfordshire, Birmingham City, Chester (Warrington School of Management), City, Derby, Gloucestershire (working with South Gloucestershire and Stroud College), Greenwich, Hertfordshire, Kingston, Leeds Beckett, Leeds Trinity, Manchester Metropolitan (working with CIMA), Middlesex, Newman, Northampton, Northumbria, Plymouth (with Greenwich School of Management), Salford (from 2016), Southampton Solent, St Mark and St John, and Staffordshire. In addition, accelerated degree programmes are offered in the Universities of Abertay, and Queen Margaret, Edinburgh in Scotland<sup>4</sup> and Glyndwr in Wales. This corroborates and updates the literature, highlighting that provision of accelerated degrees is limited to new(er) universities.

Feedback to the research team provided by the Head of Policy and Research at MillionPlus (the mission group representing modern universities) outlines their views on accelerate degrees.

MillionPlus recognise that accelerated provision appears to be limited to modern universities as is the case for the whole sector. Modern universities are interested in different forms of provision that support their 'raison d'être' - to extend opportunities and take a learner-centred approach – and so they obviously have a willingness to adapt and plan different pathways. However, little has happened since the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots, 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.

MillionPlus recognise that cost is an issue for institutions with accelerated degrees. Funding is felt to be limited (e.g. a maximum of two years of tuition fee even if costs are more akin to 2.5 or 2.75 the cost of a three-year degree) and based on a certain definition of a student year of study, but the investment cost is not inconsequential: requiring investment in different working patterns, different curriculum and modules, and different student support arrangements (including ability to transfer to standard programmes). Cost is also an issue for students as, on accelerated degrees, they will have a higher cost of living and less opportunity 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 (see also Chapter 5).

Flexibility is considered important and most MillionPlus institutions offer flexibility in their provision, however, the feeling is that there are different ways (other than accelerated

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<sup>4</sup> Although in Scotland, accelerated degrees would take three years instead of four years.



degrees) to offer flexibility such as rolling starts, part-time study, employer sponsored degrees and higher level apprenticeships.

Feedback from the Russell Group (the mission group representing research-led universities) in 2010 in response to a speech by the (then) Minister for Business on higher education reform, indicates that they felt two-year accelerated degrees, while appropriate for some courses, *'are unlikely to work well for many of the courses offered by Russell Group universities, which are academically intensive and in many cases laboratory-based'*. They also note concerns about using the summer period for accelerated degrees as this time is generally used by academic staff for research (Russell Group, 2010).

### In which subjects?

The literature indicates that accelerated degrees also seem to be limited to certain types of programmes or subjects. HEFCE (2011) noted how accelerated degrees might not be appropriate subjects where knowledge acquisition is cumulative and where learning cannot be broken down into modules that can be organised according to students' choices (such as sciences). This is corroborated by feedback noted above from the Russell Group and also from the Institute of Physics (reported in McCaig et al, 2007):

*'The Institute does not believe that the compressed 2-year honours degree proposal will be appropriate for physics. Physics is a hierarchical subject where advanced teaching builds on traditional 3-4 year degrees, providing sufficient time for the difficult physical concepts to be introduced and re-visited as the student progresses in maturity'* (McCaig et al, 2007, p27).

HEFCE also reported that accelerated degrees might not be appropriate for subjects where the summer period is an important time for 'practice' such as creative writing or sports-related subjects; or subjects where during the summer period it is expected that students prepare for the coming year or write dissertations (HEFCE, 2011)

Similarly evidence from across the EU is that shorter 'accelerated' programmes are more popular among certain types of disciplines (Outram, 2011). The types of courses piloted by the Flexible Learning Pathfinder institutions tended to be vocational in orientation, often entailing professional study, and in subjects such as business (accounting for the largest number of students), law (accounting for the second largest number of students, and where demand appeared buoyant<sup>5</sup>), accounting and finance, and hospitality/tourism. Wlodkowski (2003) posits that business management programmes are a popular form of accelerated degree in the USA because the adult market for business courses is large, and the business curriculum is relatively uncomplicated so can be broken into modules. Other popular subjects for acceleration in the USA include teacher education, nursing and computer science (Marques, 2012).

In England other, more academic, programmes were trialled as part of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots such as English and Philosophy, but these were found to be unsuitable for accelerated delivery or delivery over the summer period or were not

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<sup>5</sup>For instance, Staffordshire University was heavily oversubscribed with applications for its law course, but had to limit its intake due to a Law Society stipulation as a condition of its recognition of the law degree (HEFCE, 2011)

attractive to students, did not meet recruitment targets, and so were subsequently dropped (HEFCE 2011; Outram, 2011). Nursing however, appears to be an interesting case, as it has, in effect, been leading the field with regards to accelerated study and there is a small and separate body of literature relating to nursing programmes. This largely stems in the UK from retaining year-round teaching schedules when nursing education moved into HE from being governed by the NHS (Fallows & Symon, 1999), but also moves in the USA to respond to shortages of qualified nurses with the development of accelerated second degrees for existing graduates (McCaig et al, 2007). Another interesting case is presented by the feasibility study of establishing a two-year honours degree in biological monitoring and ecological surveying at the University of Plymouth. The University felt there was a mismatch between the academic year and the biological/ecological field season, and that in order to give students sufficient fieldwork experience in the UK (something valued by employers) fieldwork would need to be conducted during the growing season between May and September, thus providing opportunities to offer a fast-track intensive honours degree with strong fieldwork ethos (Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008). However, it is unclear whether the programme was developed and maintained.

Again an online search (March 2016) by the research team found current or recently offered undergraduate accelerated degree programmes in a wide variety of subject areas, but these still tended to be vocationally focused. Most commonly courses were offered in: business, management and leadership; law; accounting and finance; hospitality management; education; and IT and digital media. Accelerated courses were also offered in: marketing, advertising and PR; nursing; music; journalism; sports science; and some sciences (biological rather than physical sciences). Some of these included significant built-in work experience, and so involve three-year accelerated study as opposed to four-year study.

## Who studies accelerated degrees?

The literature focused on the UK indicates that it is only a small sub-group of potential HE students who would be attracted to accelerated study and indeed study on accelerated degree programmes: these are generally:

- Mature students with some work experience, and possibly some prior experience of HE, who are looking to improve their employability and/or change career, and return the labour market quickly (HEFCE, 2011, Davies et al, 2009). Indeed flexible study options are one of the most important factors determining mature students choice of HE (Million+/NUS, 2012).
- International students (Baldwin and McInnis, 2002).
- More able, more motivated, proactive learners and high achieving students who could cope with the pace of learning (Dutch research identified in McCaig et al, 2007; USA research reported in Wlodkowski, 2003, and in Marques, 2012; Outram, 2011; Australian research in Collins et al, 2013).
- Late starters or developers on the academic front (ie with lower GCSE grades, Davies et al, 2009).

The various initiatives in the UK with accelerated degrees have indeed been aimed at and taken up by older students. The AIRS evaluation noted how AIRs courses were specifically aimed at employees looking to improve their career prospects, women looking to re-enter the labour market, mature students with on the job experience, and people facing redundancy or major career change (Sims & Woodrow, 1996). AIRS participants were indeed mature age students and their courses were considered most suited to mature aged students who were highly motivated wishing to return to education and build on work experience, and those used to taking only a short summer break (rather than younger undergraduates, Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). Similarly, the Extended Academic Year experiment, which almost exclusively involved part-time provision, was largely taken up by mature individuals (26 and older) and also women (HEFCE, 1999).

The Flexible Learning Pathfinder accelerated degrees also seemed to be targeted towards and designed for mature students, those who may want to change or progress in their career (McCaig et al, 2007). HEFCE noted how anecdotal evidence from the Flexible Learning Pathfinders suggested that accelerated degrees may appeal, in particular, to students who are particularly confident of their abilities (HEFCE, 2011). More robust evidence was gathered from the interim evaluation of the Flexible Learning Pathfinders (for the 2008/09 year). This found that of the 390 students on full-time two-year accelerated honours first degree programmes, the majority were mature (63 per cent, though still early in their career i.e. 21 to 30), male (51 per cent), and UK-domiciled (77 per cent); and a large proportion (42 per cent) entered with A-level or equivalent qualifications (HEFCE, 2011, 2011a).

It is perhaps also worth noting that accelerated provision in the USA is common, but that the vast majority of these courses are designed to serve working adult students, and thus form an important part of adult learning, and the growing market for adult education in the USA. Research in the USA suggests that adults may perceive accelerated degrees as more appropriate for them than traditional courses which are arguably designed for young students (Wlodkowski, 2003). Indeed, a figure quoted in the literature is that 13 per cent of adult students, those over 25, studying for degrees are enrolled in accelerated programmes (as at 2003) and this was predicted to rise to 25 per cent within 10 years (Wlodkowski, 2003; also reported in McCaig et al, 2007).

However, the number of students undertaking accelerated degrees in the UK is low (where they can be identified) and they are not necessarily from key target widening participation groups or those for whom HE is difficult to access. Most of the students are mature, and widening participation policy in more recent years has shifted to focus on individuals from low participation neighbourhoods, those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and young white males from lower socio-economic backgrounds (BIS, 2015). Yet much of the impetus behind encouraging accelerated degree provision was to help widen participation, reduce social exclusion and increase social mobility. Davies et al (2009) notes that this notion assumes that students from lower social class groups would be more likely to suffer from debt aversion and have weaker access to capital, so find the reduced financial commitment with fast-track degrees attractive; and that students from lower social class groups would place less emphasis on the social aspects of HE ('consumption benefits'), but conclude evidence to support these assumptions is thin.

In terms of widening participation, the evaluation of the Extended Academic Year programme found no real evidence that social exclusion from HE was reduced

(HEFCE, 1999). The Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots found that although mature students were substantially over-represented on accelerated programmes compared to three year programmes, as were those from minority ethnic backgrounds (41 per cent); they were no more likely to have come from neighbourhoods with low participation in HE (41 per cent), and were less likely to report themselves as disabled (six per cent) when compared to adjusted<sup>6</sup> figures for the population on three-year courses. Thus HEFCE concluded that the evidence regarding the contribution of accelerated degrees towards widening participation is complicated, and at best indirect as they attract older students who are more likely to display widening participation characteristics (HEFCE, 2011a; HEFCE, 2011). Similarly, a review of the literature relating to widening participation in HE reported that the characteristics of students attracted to flexible provision including, but not limited to accelerated learning may often overlap with those of students targeted under widening participation policy. (Moore et al, 2013). More recently, the OFFA and HEFCE National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education (2014) acknowledge that 'it is difficult to assess whether the flexible study options offered by HE providers are adequate for the diverse needs of potential HE learners'.

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<sup>6</sup> Figures were adjusted to allow for comparisons, adjustments were made for age (as older students are more likely to come from lower-participation neighbourhoods and to enter higher education without A-levels, regardless of whether they are following an accelerated route), subject and institution.

## Chapter 4: Delivery and operation

This chapter explores institutional motivations or drivers to offer accelerated degrees. It then looks at how accelerated degrees work in comparison to traditional study modes/methods and the types of accelerated programmes before moving on highlight issues that need to be considered in the design of accelerated programmes (many of which seek to address potential barriers which are discussed in the following chapter).

### Institutional motivations to offer accelerated study

Before looking at how accelerated degrees work in practice it is interesting to understand the potential benefits and thus drivers for institutions to offer these types of programmes. As noted in Chapter 3, few HEIs in the UK offer accelerated degrees and these tend to be newer or modern universities.

A literature review in the USA notes how accelerated learning can bring institutional benefits such as financial gains, meeting student demands, and greater compatibility with overseas calendars (Marques, 2012). The literature in the UK tends to identify institutional drivers to accelerated degrees as: a) responding to policy desires to widen participation which fits with institutional mission; and b) to meet student and employer needs (respond to the market) and open up new markets. However, the strength of these drivers appears weak, as is the evidence of positive impacts for institutions.

### Responding to policy and mission

*'We are keen to see institutions encourage wider access by responding to the different needs and circumstances of potential students. This includes offering flexible routes into higher education, and innovative and responsive ways of studying – for example, two-year accelerated honours degrees' (OFFA website<sup>7</sup>, 2016)*

As noted earlier (Chapter 2) there has been a significant level of interest from government over the years in flexible provision and also accelerated degrees as one form of flexibility. This has led to several waves of funded initiatives, the most recent of which was the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots. Here institutions were able to bid for seed funding to support the development and delivery of accelerated degrees which may have encouraged some to explore this form of flexibility. However, for some institutions these accelerated degree programmes did not continue (much) beyond the funding period.

Arguably much of the policy interest in accelerated learning and a greater variety in provision - shifting away from full-time three year degrees - has been driven by desires to widen participation in HE to under-represented groups, which is often a goal of individual universities, and also to respond the needs of employers for employable graduates and skilled employees, and to provide value for money (HEFCE, 2011). Indeed, the characteristics of students attracted to flexible provision are those some universities hope to target with their widening participation policies (Moore et al, 2013) so developing

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance-and-useful-information/accelerated-degreesflexible-provision/> (retrieved April 2016)

accelerated learning can fit with their missions. The evaluation of the Extended Academic Year (EAY) experiment found some hints that access was improved with the new provision (although this was almost exclusively part-time) particularly among mature and female students, but no real evidence that social exclusion from HE was reduced (HEFCE, 1999). Similarly, in their evaluation of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots, Davies et al (2009) noted how senior staff can associate accelerated degrees with widening participation, as well as widening recruitment through increased flexibilities. However, their evidence did not suggest that accelerated degrees did widen participation, beyond mature students. Also Moore et al (2013) note how institutions have experimented with short-cycle, accelerated or decelerated degrees and weekend and summer programmes, but felt these were rarely underpinned by a strong widening participation logic.

### **Responding to the mature student market**

Perhaps a stronger motivation for offering accelerated degrees and other flexibilities, such as HE in FE, part-time study and evening and weekend courses as well as summer programmes, is to provide students with greater choice and thus respond to and open up new markets. A Million+/NUS study (2012) found that one of the most important factors in determining mature students' choices of university or college was the availability of flexible study options (alongside contents of the course, and proximity of the institution to their home). Institutions may seek to provide HE that responds to the realities of students' lives, many of whom do not transition directly from school or college to university, have non-traditional qualifications, have wider commitments and who work whilst studying. Indeed, the HEA work on flexibility in HE in the UK, asserts that moves towards greater flexibility are being conditioned by, amongst other factors, what they refer to as the marketisation of HE – the deliberate creation of markets, the increase in private providers and the emergence of students as consumers with heightened expectations particularly as they are paying a substantial level of fee. However, institutions are responding differently to these drivers and thus developing different forms and profiles of flexibility (Barnett, 2014), and it would appear that acceleration is not common.

Accelerated degrees could provide institutions with a marketing advantage: a way for universities to compete for students (Serdyukov, 2008) and attract new students (HEFCE, 2011). Evaluators of the Extended Academic Year (EAY) experiment in the UK felt accelerated programmes as a flexible offering could offer institutions a marketing advantage and a way to differentiate themselves in the marketplace (HEFCE, 1999). However, research on the Flexible Learning Pathfinders highlights a market where demand outstrips supply – where institutions can recruit to target on standard courses – *'they have less motivation to try out innovative, and more risky, provision'* such as accelerated degrees. Also some of the pathfinders commented that they suspect that rather than reaching out to a new market, accelerated degrees attract students who would otherwise have undertaken three-year degrees at the same institution (HEFCE, 2011).

However, in the USA, the literature indicates that there is a large market for accelerated or intensive study, which has developed in response to the needs of non-traditional students, generally adult learners. The numbers of mature students/working adult learners has grown substantially and these students want to upgrade their skills and complete their studies as quickly as possible to save time and expense; and want programmes that fit with their fast pace of life, and their work, family and social responsibilities. These working adults may not be able to afford long-term full-time learning, and cost and time efficiency may be a decisive factor in choosing a course and staying on a course (Tatum, 2010;

Serdyukov, 2008). This has seen many institutions including traditional institutions moving into accelerated learning to serve this market (Marques, 2012).

Similarly, work in Australia recognises the change in the profile of HE students, with higher numbers of mature-age students who want flexibility of study to balance work, study and home life as well as cost efficiency. Collins et al (2013) exploring an accelerated programme for pre-service teachers at the University of Canberra notes how *'new paradigms for tertiary education delivery, such as intensive delivery modes providing the flexibility for accelerated course completion and depletion'* have emerged, and that these have been driven, at least in part, by market demands and changing student demands and expectations (Collins et al, 2013, p1).

### **Responding to pressures to reduce costs**

Another potential motivator is potential cost savings, although the evidence here is weak. One study in the UK indicated there could be cost advantages to the institutions in providing accelerated degrees, but this notes how institutions would need a supporting infrastructure and a change in working practices which would in turn be costly. The research was undertaken at a time when fees were low and the authors felt accelerated degrees could only be financially feasible for institutions if annual fees were raised significantly (SQW/TNS, 2006). John Denham speaking at the Royal Society of Arts in 2014<sup>8</sup> on the cost of higher education calculated that a two year intensive degree of 39 weeks study a year would cost 20 per cent less to deliver than a three year degree (but the supporting evidence was not provided). However, much of the UK research evidence, particularly that concerned with the most recent initiatives in accelerated degrees, suggests that accelerated degrees are more costly to deliver than traditional programmes (see Chapter 5).

Cost saving as a driver for accelerated degrees or at least accelerated courses is more strongly advocated in the literature in the USA, but again with little evidence of financial calculations. Here institutions can view accelerated degrees as a cost-effective instructional approach, a way to both deal with the escalating costs of education and decrease their expenditures whilst also striving to increase enrolment:

*'Raising the efficiency of education at all levels has become a critical goal because society needs more and more qualified specialists with advanced college degrees prepared in a short time... Accelerated Learning systems can potentially hold both college expenses and student tuition fees within mutually acceptable ranges which may help to increase enrolment'* (Serdyukov, 2008).

However, the context in the USA is somewhat different to the English context which has had until recently caps on student numbers and continues to have a cap on annual fees that can be charged to undergraduate students regardless of whether an accelerated or traditional programme. Collins et al (2013) in Australia also noted how extending the academic year could be driven by desires to achieve financial benefits for the university

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<sup>8</sup> <https://johndenham.wordpress.com/articles-speeches-and-essays/rsa-lecture-the-cost-of-higher-education/>

## How do they work?

In the UK there appear to be three key variants to accelerated degrees: a) how they are structured across the academic year; b) how they relate to other standard courses; and c) how they are delivered (notably extent of other flexibilities utilised and offered).

### How they are structured across the academic year?

In general, accelerated programmes offer the same number of teaching weeks as regular courses, but are scheduled so they are completed in a shorter period. Most accelerated undergraduate degrees are made possible by using the traditional summer holiday period as a third Semester or fourth term. This approach essentially extends the teaching year by 10 weeks. Davies et al (2009) describe the approach at the University of Staffordshire – where students study three rather than two semesters, and complete modules during the summer that students on the traditional three-year degree would be taking the following year. Rodway-Dyer et al (2008) describe a similar structure for their proposed programme at the University of Plymouth. This was planned to have a three term year, making use of the existing spring and autumn terms but add another term in the summer. McCaig et al (2007) note how accelerated undergraduate degrees can either involve a full third semester across the summer (referred to as ‘trimesterisation’, and common in Australia and New Zealand) or elongating the existing semesters in autumn and spring with a shorter summer session. Collins et al (2013) describe an accelerated programme for pre-service teachers at the University of Canberra which involved a new winter term as an additional teaching period to provide greater flexibility around timetabling and accelerated course completion (allowing Bachelor degree course completion in three and a half years instead of four).

Baldwin and McInnis (2002), writing in Australia, also differentiate between approaches to scheduling programmes across the year. One approach, which they felt was fairly uncommon, was scheduling programmes equally across the three semesters, so the summer teaching period is equivalent to the other semesters. The more common approach however, was developing a summer school programme within existing calendars, which they referred to as the American ‘summer session model’. They note how the summer session model is the most attractive and efficient option, as it offers students the potential to accelerate their learning by taking electives, does not risk financial losses for institutions by attempting to offer a full programme equal to other terms, and does not require major changes to the academic calendar. Collins et al (2013) in Australia note how, although the additional summer session (the ‘winter term’) can enable learners to complete their degree sooner, it can also be used to spread study across a longer period rather than compress it. A key issue discussed in the work of Baldwin and McInnis in looking at trends in Australia, such as whether the summer semester is different from or the same as the other semesters; for different students, for different courses (modules) and for different modes of study such as distance mode.

Tatum (2010) and Serdyukov (2008) writing in the USA note how accelerated (and potentially intensive) scheduling – although largely of courses rather than entire programmes – can involve summer semesters and weekend provision and provision during regular terms alongside regular courses. Tatum notes how summer schools are embedded between Spring and Fall (Autumn) semesters to offer accelerated classes to special groups of learners (2010).



## Relationship to wider provision

In terms of their relationship to wider provision, accelerated programmes can either run in isolation and/or only as fast-track options, or they can run alongside traditional three-year programmes. The latter is most common in the UK. Indeed, the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot programmes in England tended to have three-year (traditional) counterparts or parent programmes, and thus followed the same curricula and core modules, but with generally less choice of optional modules because of timetabling constraints. These programmes were often small in scale. Where run alongside, fast-track students separate from their peers on the standard three-year programme to pursue modules over the summer (McCaig et al, 2007), but do form a cohesive fast-track group of students studying together which is important for retention. Also when run alongside traditional or 'parent' programmes, students can more easily transfer onto the corresponding faster or slower track (see below).

## How are they delivered and what other flexibilities are involved?

Outram (2011) refers to this as social organisation of learning. Delivery of fast-track or accelerated programmes, when running alongside traditional programmes, follow the same delivery mode and pattern as the traditional course, but can differ in approach with the summer session. Some accelerated programmes combine face to face learning with distance learning through the summer session (such as the proposed accelerated degree at the University of Plymouth, Rodway-Dyer, 2008). This is essentially blended learning, which is another form of flexible learning. Other accelerated programmes provide only distance learning in the summer session.

Most programmes involve modularisation, but some programmes in other countries (e.g. Norway, Australia and New Zealand) can be fully modularised allowing students to take more modules per year than the norm, and thus timetable permitting, dictate the duration of their degrees (McCaig et al, 2007). Some programmes, particularly in the USA can involve condensed periods of study including weekend, evening classes and workplace programmes (Wlodkowski, 2003). Outram (2011) notes additional dimensions of flexibility, which can be combined with accelerated study to allow for different variants, such as flexible start and end times; flexible moments of assessment; tailored sequencing of modules and topics covered, but concludes that in the UK there is limited adoption of models that introduce significant flexibility into the student learning experience.

## The dominant UK model

Accelerated undergraduate degrees as they are conceived in the UK are expected to have the same number of teaching weeks as a conventional degree, but to be delivered in two years rather than in three years (or three years rather than four years in Scotland). HEFCE note that the general structure of the academic year for accelerated degrees is therefore three 15-week teaching blocks (totalling 45 weeks) per year with a total of 90 weeks for the whole degree. This is the same total as for most conventional three-year degrees, where there are 30 teaching weeks per year over three years. The 'acceleration' therefore is not in the length of the course in weeks but in years of study. Accelerated degrees also give the same credits (360) as the traditional degree, but deliver 180 per year rather than 120 (HEFCE 2011).

Some models refer to the number of teaching hours rather than teaching weeks, and these models tend to move towards 'intensive' forms of acceleration rather than the UK model of

acceleration. For example, Tatum (2010) notes how accelerated education in the USA can mean shortening the duration of a course without changing the number of contact hours in the classroom, but that it can also mean compressing the duration whilst also reducing the contact hours which he refers to as 'intensive' learning. Serdyukov (2008) notes how intensive learning leads to cost saving and a reduction of the overall duration of the learning process, but also crucially time saving as the fewer hours are spent studying/teaching.

McCaig et al (2007), in their extensive review of accelerated degrees, found a greater degree of variability in their structure than suggested by HEFCE (2011). They noted the elements of variability led them to identify 13 different types of accelerated programmes (in the UK and beyond), although admittedly not all of these were at undergraduate level. However, they also noted how many programmes share similar elements, highlighting how the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot programmes operating in the late 2000s tended to: a) be part of wider plans for flexible provision and often built on existing flexibilities such as modularisation or credit transfer; and b) adapt existing programmes and modules rather than developing new and different provision.

## Considerations in design

The accelerated degree initiatives including the earlier Extended Academic Year (EAY) pilots as well as the more recent Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots were concerned with exploring the practical and logistical challenges with running accelerated degree courses and particularly operating across the summer. These can therefore provide insights into considerations for the design and delivery of accelerated degrees and start to identify areas for good practice (HEFCE, 1999; McCaig et al, 2007; Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008). Similarly, the work of the HEA in the UK has identified a number of practical enablers, which are often the converse of the barriers, for flexible learning more broadly (Tallantyre, 2013). Whilst work in the USA and Australia has also identified learning points for designing accelerated learning (Wlodkowski, 2003; Collins et al, 2013; Baldwin & McInnis, 2002).

These can be grouped into the following areas.

- **Marketing and market research:** Strong and targeted marketing is required to reach out to the student market and raise awareness. Marketing messages can include the unique selling points of accelerated degrees, case studies of students, and alumni testimony which can help to tap into or increase demand for accelerated degrees (Tallantyre, 2013). Activities here can also include building effective relationships with schools, colleges and careers advisers, as well as employers, professional bodies and sector skills bodies to raise awareness, and be aware of and ready to counter any potentially negative perceptions (Tallantyre, 2013). Market research is also required, and Collins et al (2013) note the importance of reviewing market demands and student experiences in planning and revising accelerated programmes. Rigorous monitoring and collecting of robust evidence of academic standards, learning outcomes, student satisfaction, student destinations and career development is also an important aspect for marketing and market research, and can help to counter negative perceptions of the quality of accelerated degrees (Tallantyre, 2013; Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). Similarly, Baldwin and McInnis (2002) note the key to success of accelerated programmes is to

identify demand from the groups most likely to be interested, and then careful differentiation of student client groups and their diverse motives, interests and needs.

- **Working with prospective students:** This goes beyond marketing and involves communication with and potentially screening of prospective students to ensure they are clear about the nature of study and amount of effort and commitment required (Tallantyre, 2013; McCaig et al, 2007; Lee and Horsfall, 2010; Collins et al, 2013). This can also involve good guidance and advice particularly around course selection and sequencing in very flexible programmes (Wlodkowski, 2003); and support to switch between learning pathways/modes if appropriate (see below).
- **Programme design:** Many of the programmes described involved modular learning. Work on the design of a Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot at the University of Plymouth noted how there was to be a clear hierarchy of modules taken as the programme progressed, this was an issue raised by McCaig et al (2007) and also Baldwin and McInnis (2002) who noted that consideration should be given to the nature of learning in different disciplines, particularly the extent to which knowledge and skills must be developed sequentially (and thus requiring sequential learning structures). The Plymouth feasibility study also aimed to share modules across programmes for cost sharing, in order to limit the cost of summer teaching and the number of staff to be deployed (Rodway-Dyer, 2008). Some of the literature noted how students could switch or transfer from traditional study mode to accelerated mode or vice versa, this is another level of flexibility that institutions can offer. Switching appears to allow more able students to accelerate their studies, or, for those who are struggling, to decelerate their studies and return to a more traditional study pattern. Thus clear transfer routes and appropriate transfer points to and from existing three-year programmes are also important, particularly for students who wish subsequently transfer to the three-year route<sup>9</sup> (Rodway-Dyer, 2008; McCaig et al, 2007; Davies et al, 2009). However, switching can make evaluation of programmes difficult as students may not remain on the same track throughout their studies. Other aspects for consideration in programme design are: exploiting commonalities with existing provision; module credit rating, assessment timing strategy and sound assessment practices, extent and nature of work placement activity; and potential for a different start date rather than the traditional September start (Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008, Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). The importance of the timing of assessment was also noted by Lee and Horsfall (2010) in their research at one Australian university. Students suggested that assessment needed to be planned more carefully to suit the accelerated timeframe, particularly aligning assessment tasks with class work and pacing tasks so that they were not overlapping or concentrated at the end of the term.

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<sup>9</sup> For example the University of Abertay in Scotland, offers students on relevant courses the fast-track option at the beginning of their second year. If students choose to do so they then move onto the accelerated programme at the end of their second year – taking on additional term and then three terms in their third (and final year). (<http://www.abertay.ac.uk/discover/news/news-archive/2014/name,26674,en.html>, accessed November 2016)

- **Senior level support buy-in:** Support from senior management is important to provide strategic overview and clear institutional commitment, and ensure coherence with mission and strategy (Tallantyre, 2013; SQW/TNS, 2006).
- **Staff buy-in and support:** Working to support staff, recognising their concerns and enabling them to feel confident about accelerated degrees is also important. This requires reviewing staff workloads and well-being, protecting staff research opportunities, providing training and development where appropriate, and utilising the strengths and talents of existing staff – both academic and professional support staff in designing programmes (Collins et al, 2013; SQW/TNS, 2006; Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). Tallantyre (2013) recommends developing communities of practice, discipline buddies and faculty champions. Work here might also require development of new or hybrid staff contracts and effective staff workload planning – recognising the range of responsibilities involved with accelerated degrees and the development time required. Indeed, allowing appropriate lead time to prepare for new teaching periods was mentioned in several papers (Tallantyre, 2013; Collins et al, 2013).
- **Effective student support:** Support for students on accelerated degrees may be different to that required by students on traditional programmes, not least because this may be needed outside of traditional timetabling. Students on these programmes have a different profile and may be learning in a different way. Support includes tutorial support, peer support, advice and guidance, careful timetabling (spacing out of deadlines) as and financial support (McCaig et al, 2007). McCaig et al (2007) found that student support ensured students could cope with the potential added pressure of accelerated programmes. Wlodkowski (2003) noted how peer support is seen as particularly important for retention: *‘Deepening positive involvement with peers and faculty continues to encourage adult students to persist... peer cohorts and support programmes have been instrumental in significantly improving retention in schools with accelerated programmes’* (Wlodkowski, 2003, p11). This was also reflected in Baldwin and McInnis’s (2002) and Lee and Horsfall (2010) in Australia. Baldwin and McInnis felt extending the teaching period needed to be underpinned by a series of principles including social interaction supported in all teaching periods and cohort formation supported by administrative structures. Similarly, Lee and Horsfall reported that close and supportive peer relationships were important to motivation and learning. Team cohesiveness was important. Students needed to have close relationships with fellow students during accelerated courses and they formed a sense of responsibility to their peers and to the learning itself; students tended to feel it was easier to develop friendships/peer support in the accelerated format.
- **Effective administrative systems:** Accelerated degree programmes need additional administrative support for new systems such as different fee structures, operation of credits and APEL, and tracking students; and also for keeping usual systems such as ICT, timetabling and room allocation, and quality control in operation throughout the summer period (Collins et al, 2013; SQW/TNS, 2006).
- **Potentially a different pedagogical approach.** The ideas here tend to come from the literature in the USA and Australia, and are related to the intensification rather than just acceleration of programmes. Wlodkowski (2003) in the USA suggests factors that could

be considered in the design of effective accelerated programmes are: a) instructor enthusiasm and expertise; b) active learning; c) classroom interaction; d) good course organisation; e) student input; f) collegial classroom atmosphere; and g) a relaxed learning environment. Collins et al (2013) in their literature review also note ideas for restructuring content and processes to fit into reduced time frames. Suggestions included: involving enthusiastic, knowledgeable and experienced teachers; outcome based rather than content delivery approaches; engaging and creative active learning techniques; a focus on depth rather breadth of content; relaxed and comfortable classroom environment; and sufficient and timely feedback.

Another enabler noted by Tallantyre (2013) goes beyond the individual institution and relates to the **funding system**. Tallantyre notes how mainstream funding mechanisms need to incentivise flexible learning through the use of credit based funding rather than year based funding; and changes to student support mechanisms (such as extending eligibility to the student loan for tuition fees to part-time students) could help to break the hegemony of traditional study model. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

Tallantyre (2013) reporting on the HEA summit on flexible learning noted how all stakeholders including potential students need to be better informed about what flexible learning is, including accelerated degrees, and how it can be done well. This indicates a need to share and celebrate good practice. Indeed, a recommendation from the summit was that a guide for institutions setting out good practice principles and practical advice for developing flexible learning including accelerated learning was produced (Recommendation 7). Yet at present there appears to be little sharing of good practice across the sector, and indeed very little interest in this form of flexibility from large parts of the sector; and limited sharing of practice is also found in the USA despite the rapid expansion of accelerated programmes (Marques, 2012).

## Chapter 5: Barriers and challenges

This chapter explores the concerns about accelerated degrees as a flexible and/or alternative study mode, factors inhibiting take-up, and the negative perceptions of accelerated degrees.

Much of the literature relating to accelerated degrees or flexible learning more broadly focuses on the concerns about alternatives to traditional study modes, and the perceived barriers and challenges for stakeholders in engaging with accelerated study; although some of this work then provides evidence to contradict negative perceptions. What is clear, however, is that there are numerous perceived barriers and these can be felt at sector/policy level, at institutional level, at student level and also by employers. For example, work by the HEA identified a number of barriers to flexible learning, including accelerated degrees, as: false perceptions of quality and of demand for flexible learning; concerns about 'brand; the apparent hegemony of full-time undergraduate study; lack of buy-in from wider sector and HEI senior management, and contradiction to institutional mission; clashing staff cultures and narrow employment contracts; and inflexible funding systems and unrealistic costing and pricing systems (Tallantyre, 2013). Another example is the UCU policy paper on two-year degrees written in 2010 which generally paints a negative picture *'that there are significant educational and employment-related problems with two-year 'fast-track' undergraduate degrees'*. This raises concerns about working conditions of staff, compatibility with the Bologna process, students' experiences and learning, the potential for really widening participation, the size of the market, and the financial viability for providers (UCU, 2010). These themes are explored below.

### General concerns

#### Quality

The literature indicates that concerns around quality of accelerated degrees relate to the potential for lower standards or looser quality assurance, lower quality of teaching and learning, and reduced quality of outputs/outcomes (see also below).

HEFCE note how there have been concerns expressed in the media that accelerated degrees would lead to a lower quality of outcomes (2011). The work of the HEA highlights the dangers to standards and quality of the (broader) flexibility agenda. Although generally positive about flexibility, the HEA research and commentary suggests that too much flexibility can lead to a lack of internal integrity and fragmentation, and could risk lowering standards and falling quality. This was also raised by Baldwin and McInnis (2002) in relation to acceleration and modularisation and the proliferation of short courses in Australia to allow students more choice, particularly in humanities and social sciences. This led to concerns about the fragmentation of the undergraduate curriculum, lack of coherence to learning experiences and a move away from planned sequential courses that build upon one another. The HEA go on to acknowledge concerns that increased flexibility could damage reputations and 'brand' for individual institutions, but also for UK HE, and so concerns about brand, image and fit with institutional mission could act as a barrier to flexible learning (Tallantyre, 2013; Barnett, 2014).

McCaig et al (2007) in their extensive review of accelerated degrees, which involved data analysis from accelerated programmes and interviews with HE staff, employers and

professional bodies, also note that one of the major issues raised by accelerated degrees in the UK are concerns around quality, particularly standards, substance and rigour. They note how degrees that are part of the national accreditation framework are defined in terms of level of learning outcomes and number of estimated learning hours to achieve them. The concern then for accelerated degrees is how well the notional number of learning hours can be accommodated, and there are issues for assuring the quality of a programme that purports to achieve the same learning outcomes, but in a shorter period of time.

A literature review in the USA notes how accelerated learning (including intensive learning formats so moving beyond our perspective of acceleration) elicits an interesting dynamic, that students tend to love them, but that faculty have mixed feelings and are concerned about their validity. Faculty are worried about: lowering academic standards to meet time constraints; lack of clarity on how to structure these courses; the unsuitability of some topics for accelerated formats; narrower margin of error requiring regular monitoring of instruction and outcomes; and screening of suitable students prior to enrolment (Marques, 2012).

Wlodkowski (2003) also writing about accelerated (and potentially intensive) learning in the USA noted how critics question how well instructors can cover the appropriate amount of content in a shortened period of time, and that courses can be too compressed to produce consistent educational value – these critics have referred to universities using accelerated formats as ‘McEducation’. He identifies four barometers of quality that can be applied to accelerated learning, which indicate the importance of collecting outcomes data and feedback from participants (students and staff):

- Accreditation – whether learning is accredited by official accrediting bodies and meets acceptable academic standards;
- Learning – whether learning is achieved;
- Student attitudes – whether students have positive attitudes to their programmes, and report satisfaction; and
- Alumni attitudes – their hindsight viewpoints on the value of their studies for employment.

Interestingly a study by Collins et al (2013) of pre-service teachers in the University of Canberra on accelerated programmes, found that these students had high expectations and were aware of the study requirements and expectations from academic staff and were willing to overload their study to complete sooner, but in turn expected that standards may be softened in assessments to compensate.

However, perceptions of lower quality or standards appear to have been unfounded. Wlodkowski (2003) found initial evidence against each of his four barometers that accelerated programmes perform well, but acknowledges this could relate to the characteristics of the students that self-select onto these programmes. HEFCE (2011) note how accelerated degrees are subject to the same quality assurance processes as other provision, including the audit of the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Similarly, research undertaken by McCaig and colleagues (2007)

found no significant concerns about quality and standards among the stakeholders they consulted, as they felt assured that accelerated degree programmes have the same validation processes as standard degrees. The researchers gathered views on quality and validation from professional bodies, sector skills councils and graduate recruiter representatives thus covering a range of professions. They found that in general these organisations supported the principle of acceleration as long as standards were not compromised, recognised there was a demand for accelerated learning (the exception was the Institute of Physics which did not countenance fast-track degrees), and recognised accelerated programmes as part of their accreditation qualifying process, thus did not feel that quality assurance was an issue (see also Barriers for Students). HEFCE (2011) also report findings from the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots and the AIRS pilot and conclude there is no evidence of lower quality outcomes from accelerated degrees.

## **Bologna process**

Another issue of interest for policy and across the sector is a consideration of how accelerated degrees fit into the Bologna process and into the European qualifications framework, and whether these programmes are perceived to differ from the shorter diploma level (or short cycle) courses.

Short or short-cycle programmes, defined as less than three years, have been the subject of discussion since the beginning of the Bologna Process (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). This process was launched in 1999, and is currently implemented in 48 states, including the UK. In general, the Bologna Process sought to introduce a more comparable, compatible and coherent system for European HE, including academic degrees that are easily recognisable and comparable; easier recognition of qualifications and periods of study; Europe-wide co-operation to strengthen HE-related quality assurance; and to promote the mobility of students, teachers and researchers across Europe (European Commission, 2015a). One of its major changes and best-known outcomes was the introduction of the three-cycle degree system (Bachelor's/Master's/Doctorate), adopted by all HEIs across the EU since 2010; plus the introduction of the credit system, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), to promote student mobility and/or lifelong learning. These cycles are defined by the Qualifications Framework and credit system, and the First Cycle typically involves 180–240 ECTS credits, and comprises a minimum of three years study for a Bachelor's degree. This first cycle represented a major change for some countries, such as Germany and Italy whose HE system has traditionally involved lengthier degrees designed to prepare students for academic work or very specific professions. For such countries complying with the new degree structure resulted in shorter, compressed Bachelor's degrees involving either simply making the programme shorter or compressing the same amount of learning into a tighter timeframe (EUA, 2010; Enders et al, 2011; Curaj et al, 2012; Dunkel, 2009; JISC Info NET, 2007). This has led to concerns about: curricula becoming more rigid and compressed with less space for creativity and innovation (EUA, 2010); employability, with concern over their academic content and adequacy, as well as their ability to actually equip students with the skills and knowledge required by the labour market; and greater stress and less flexibility for students with work and family obligations (ACUP, 2015). Acceptance by all of the shorter Bachelor's degree has been problematic (EUA, 2010; ACUP, 2015).

The Bologna Process's first-cycle of HE can also include short-cycle qualifications that comprise less than 180 credits – typically 120 credits – and lead to a degree recognised at



a lower level than a Bachelor's degree (e.g. Foundation Degree); although this can be 'topped up' to a full degree with additional study. These short cycle programmes are, in the main, regarded as providing intermediate qualifications, but have increased in popularity since 2003. They are seen as a way to: provide flexible pathways into and within HE, improve efficiency of public finances, and improve student retention and completion rates (Kirsch et al, 2011; Slantcheva-Durst, 2015; QAA, 2014; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015; European Commission, 2015b; ACUP, 2015). In general, most countries still express the workload related to the short-cycle HE in years and recognise that this typically involves two-year full-time study. There is a great deal of variation in short-cycle qualifications and they are situated differently in national education systems and qualifications frameworks which gives rise to comparability and equivalence issues.

Given the concerns around compression of Bachelor's degrees to three years and the proliferation of two-year short-cycle sub-degree programmes in Europe, accelerated first cycle degrees taking two years could conceivably be challenging, and commentators have noted that it is not clear how these are Bologna compliant (Sweeny, 2010).

This issue is echoed in the UK literature relating to the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots, as these took place within the Bologna Process timeframe. McCaig et al (2007) in their review of accelerated degrees also noted how the UK standard three-year programme is already considered short in the European context, as the norm in many European countries has been for four-year undergraduate programmes. Thus accelerated programmes in an even shorter time span may raise concerns and issues around acceptability of the qualification (also noted by Sims and Woodrow, 1996, in their evaluation of the earlier AIRS initiative). Davies et al (2009) also note the concerns related to the Bologna process, that fast-track degrees may appear to be out of line with the wider context for Higher Education. Outram (2011) in his final evaluation of the HEFCE funded Flexible Learning Pathfinder projects noted the concerns about the status of accelerated programmes in relation to harmonisation of provision across Europe. Also the University and College Union (UCU) policy paper on accelerated degrees notes that *'significant expansion of two-year honours degrees is also likely to be incompatible with the UK's commitments under the Bologna Process'* (UCU, 2010). HEFCE (2011) also notes the Bologna Process defines first cycle (Bachelor's) degrees as lasting for three years and this has often been cited by institutions as a barrier to the uptake of accelerated degrees by students. They note that institutions are concerned that prospective students may worry about the acceptability of accelerated degrees to European institutions and employers, and that they could be viewed as 'lightweight', given that some countries have significantly reduced the length of first degrees to comply with the Bologna norm.

However, McCaig et al (2007) argue that fast-track degrees do not contravene the principles of the Bologna Declaration and instead that they support the Bologna process objectives of a common system for credit rating of courses for lifelong learning by emphasising hours of learning rather than time period over which these hours are accumulated. More specifically, accelerated degrees (at least within the Flexible Learning Pathfinders pilots) actively deliver on action line 3 (establishment of a system of credits), 4 (promotion of mobility) and 7 (focus on lifelong learning and social cohesion and equal opportunities) – particularly as most are dependent on a system of transferable credit. Also HEFCE note how there were only a few instances in the early days of the Flexible Learning Pathfinders of European students not taking up places on accelerated degrees

because of the worry about recognition, and as the programmes bedded in there were significant numbers of EU and overseas students on many of the pathfinders' accelerated programmes (HEFCE, 2011). Outram (2011) concluded that action is needed to demonstrate that accelerated degrees do not contradict the Bologna Process expectations and do deliver the same outcomes and achievements for students as traditional degrees, which would counter concerns about the acceptability of accelerated degrees.

## **Barriers for institutions and staff**

Research on the accelerated degree initiatives (e.g. EAY, AIRS and Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots) highlights the practical and logistical challenges for institutions with running accelerated degree courses in the UK and in operating across the summer. These issues are often echoed in the wider literature from the USA and Australia where accelerated courses and programmes are common. This notes how accelerated programmes can present challenges as they can upset the status quo, redefine academic structures including the number of instruction hours, and the need for faculty tenure; and how they tend to suffer from substandard treatment in academe (Marques, 2012).

The key areas of challenge for institutions are centred on: finance (a particular issue in the UK); staff and resourcing; institutional processes and administration; and size of the market.

## **Costs**

Costs and financial sustainability of flexible study and accelerated degrees in particular are a common theme in the literature as a barrier; and, despite some research indicating that acceleration could potentially produce cost savings for institutions (SQW/TNS, 2006; Serdyukov, 2008; Collins et al, 2013; John Denham, 2014 see above; Foster et al, 2011), the majority of those researching or commenting on accelerated degrees assert that they are more costly to deliver than traditional programmes. This is particularly problematic in the UK context where, at least currently, fees for undergraduate programmes are capped per year – they are not linked to credits accumulated or to delivery of the whole course. However, it should be noted that much of the research which identifies cost as an issue was undertaken before the increase in full-time fees which from September 2012 can rise to a maximum of £9,000 per year. Thus the problem with costs appears to be two-fold: firstly, accelerated degrees are considered to be more costly to deliver; and secondly, the funding system for HE in England is felt to restrain the ability of institutions to recoup these additional costs.

### **Too costly to develop and deliver?**

Cost was a critical factor noted in the final evaluation report of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots (Outram, 2011) and work by Foster et al (2011); and accelerated programmes (under the funding system in operation at that time) were perceived as uneconomical to develop and run. Indeed, HEFCE (2011) noted how all of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot institutions cited cost as the main disincentive for offering accelerated degrees. Similarly, the earlier EAY experiment found with they were more costly to deliver (HEFCE, 1999); and the SQW/TNS report (2006) on demand for flexible HE identified the higher institutional costs associated with student support and IT systems as a barrier to flexibility including accelerated degrees.

HEFCE felt there was insufficient evidence on the actual costs of accelerated degrees – the start-up costs and the running costs, so they commissioned additional research. This study (Foster et al, 2011) used quantitative data from the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots to establish the actual cost for three-year programmes and estimate relative additional costs for delivering two-year programmes; along with qualitative feedback on impacts on course costs and scenario modelling. It conceived accelerated programmes as having three phases: a) planning and development (policy and principles, structure and design and market research); b) investment for maintenance (marketing and promotion, administration, estates and facilities, student support); and c) delivery and operations (academic activities, institutional administration such as timetabling, estates and facilities and student support). They found that accelerated two-year degrees resulted in cost pressures mainly due to the additional third semester delivery costs, and indeed that the delivery and operations phase was the most significant area overall in terms of cost impact. Whereas cost pressures on indirect costs such as estates, IT, library and central services were seen as marginal. They calculated that although large-scale adoption of accelerated degrees could present cost savings to institutions (of up to 26 per cent due to absorption of indirect costs and increased throughput of students), it would require a change in institutional procedures, processes and perceptions – all of which are currently aligned with the three-year model. They also found the strongly held views that accelerated degrees were not cost effective. They concluded:

*‘there is some evidence that a growth in two-year accelerated honours degrees would generate potentially significant one-off costs to re-engineer administrative systems and processes to make them fit for purpose. Indeed the proposal that teaching should continue for the twelve-week summer period was strongly rejected as unsustainable and is a long-term potential major cost impact on academic contact time’ (p31)*

### **A problem of the funding system?**

However, it is the funding system that is felt to dampen institutions’ enthusiasm for accelerated degrees and damage the financial sustainability of existing accelerated programmes. Also, it is asserted that accelerated degree initiatives would not have been possible without seed funding from HEFCE, and from the goodwill of staff (academic and administrative), both of which were unsustainable (HEFCE, 2011; Foster et al, 2011). The Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot institutions received a minimum grant of £250,000 each which represented approximately 25 per cent of their core funding allocation for the year (HEFCE, 2011)

Tallantyre (2013) reporting on the HEA summit exploring flexible learning notes how the general funding for teaching can inhibit flexibility and that funding for undergraduate study needs rethinking and that it should not be time based, but instead should be credit based. She also noted that another barrier to flexible learning is unrealistic costing and pricing systems. The SQW/TNS (2006) report also felt that the funding environment did not support the additional costs involved in flexible learning. Davies et al (2009) exploring the viability of accelerated degrees in the UK at the end of the 2000’s felt the policy push to accelerated learning expected there to be a long term viable basis for such programmes, but there had been no real detailed financial analysis (e.g. actual revenues and costs of operating fast-track programmes) to make such judgements. The Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots had suggested the funding regime in place provided insufficient incentives for HEIs, despite a 25 per cent subsidy from HEFCE. The authors concluded that with

caps on student recruitment in England which were in place at the time of their study, it would not be financially viable for a university to offer fast-track places.

*'Senior members of staff in each of the institutions participating in this study expressed deep concerns about the implications of the current funding model for sustaining the financial viability of Fast-Track degrees. It is a fairly straightforward matter to read the current distribution of net financial benefits of Fast-Track degrees as unbalanced. Students are financially much better off... in the longer-term, there is a benefit for government finances because the government contribution to the cost of a degree is reduced by one sixth... in the meantime the net benefit for HEIs depends heavily on: (1) whether students recruited on a Fast-Track degree would otherwise have enrolled on a three year degree; and (2) the number of students they attract to each Fast-Track degree' (p40)*

HEFCE (2011) too noted how the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot institutions felt their courses would not be financially viable without the start-up funding from HEFCE's Strategic Development Fund, but that this was still not enough, and that some expressed concern about the sustainability of the provision when their development funding came to an end:

*'The general view of the pilot institutions seems to be that this [the grant] is inadequate, and that it would be more appropriate for accelerated degrees to receive three years' worth of standard HEFCE funding over two years (in effect, a premium of 50 per cent)' (HEFCE, 2011)*

Foster et al (2011) in their research into the costs of accelerated degrees concluded that the three-year model appears to underpin the operations of some higher education institutions, and that this is reinforced by the funding provided by HEFCE: *'There was, however, a clear view from some institutions that the perceived nature of the funding provision tended to make institutions risk-averse'*. Although they felt some of these issues would be less relevant in the future when funding could come primarily from student fees (Foster et al, 2011).

The wider HE sector stakeholders were also concerned about costs and the impact of the funding system. UCU in their policy statement on accelerated degrees (written in response to the Government's Higher Ambitions paper) note *'we are sceptical about the financial viability of the current two-year degree programmes. Recent initiatives (for example, the HEFCE 'flexible learning pathfinders') are dependent upon additional public funding'* (UCU, 2010). Whereas Million+ and the NUS noted:

*'That the current full-time and part-time fee regulations prevent universities from charging fees on a pro-rata basis will act as a barrier to the promotion of flexible learning opportunities that would benefit students including in respect of accelerated degrees. If the Government and Funding Council offered a more flexible funding package to institutions in England, the quid pro quo is likely to be that institutions would offer more flexible learning opportunities to students. (Million+/NUS, 2012, p40)*

The difficulties presented by the funding system have also been recognised by government. The HE white paper in the mid-2000s (The Future of Higher Education, DfES, 2003) recognised that funding patterns did not support compressed two-year degrees. John Denham speaking at the Royal Society of Arts in 2014 on the cost of higher

education, talked about how the ‘current financial rules’ make it hard for public universities to offer two-year degrees even though there could be an untapped market.

### **Ideas to overcome cost barriers**

Some of the literature does present ideas to overcome cost concerns and these tend to involve: charging additional fees and/or changing the basis for fee charges, gaining additional central funding support, allowing institutions to recruit without limits on student numbers, and looking for cost efficiencies within institutions.

The SQW/TNS report (2006) felt accelerated degrees could only be financially feasible for institutions if annual fees were raised significantly. Similarly, Outram (2011), writing about the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots, suggested that enabling institutions to charge fees according to credits rather than by year could help encourage institutions to develop accelerated programmes (also noted in Foster et al, 2011). However, he acknowledged that an increase in fees alone (which were later introduced in 2012/13) was not felt sufficient to create sustainable flexible learning provision. Davies et al (2009) felt that financial viability would be improved if: caps on student recruitment were removed, at least for accelerated courses (which is now the case in England<sup>10</sup>); and universities could charge higher maximum fees for accelerated programmes than for traditional programmes. They noted how charging higher fees would reflect the fact that the financial benefits to accelerated degrees accrue mostly for students rather than institutions, however, students would need to be willing to pay extra for accelerated degrees so they perhaps should be advocated as a premier route. Also, financial viability and attraction for institutions would still depend on institutions’ abilities to attract new students rather than those substituting traditional study for accelerated study. Foster et al (2011) suggested that assistance with development costs – the cost of realigning processes and systems, to make them more appropriate for accelerated honours degrees and other forms of flexible learning – could encourage some institutions to reconsider their negative position on the cost effectiveness of accelerated degrees (targeted funding as a way to encourage more diverse provision was also note by HEFCE, 2011). However, financial viability would depend on institutions’ abilities to increase numbers so they could deliver more with the same level of resource.

Outram (2011) also suggest sharing the delivery of modules across schools, faculties or partner institutions (which appears rare) or sharing across programmes (more common) to help to achieve economies of scale and share the expense of their creation; but acknowledges that this would require some element of cultural and institutional change (a shift to holistic, whole-campus approach to delivering flexible learning and a shift in values).

### **Staff attitudes, contracts and workload**

Another often mentioned barrier for institutional involvement in accelerated degrees are staff concerns. The challenges tend to relate to resourcing teaching activity during an additional summer term, and can be grouped into the following inter-related areas: a) lack of time for staff to undertake wider activities; b) increased workflow and work pressures; c)

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<sup>10</sup> There is still a control on student numbers in Scotland for fully-funded places for Scottish domiciled and EU students, and in certain subject areas (medicine and dentistry, nursing, midwifery and teaching). In Wales and Northern Ireland, funding for subsidised tuition fee costs is limited which can impact on numbers of places for home-domiciled students.

lack of staff; d) narrow employment contracts and entrenched working patterns, creating restrictions; and e) generally negative attitudes.

Fallows and Symon (1999) in their evaluation of EAY pilots concluded:

*'the three-year experiment has highlighted the fact that a significant proportion of the academic staff have fears that the extension of teaching into the summer months will impose unacceptable workload burdens. It is widely believed that this will lead to a diminution of time available for research, publication and general academic updating. Any shift to year-round teaching will require a significant culture change amongst the academic staff that will only be achieved through careful human relations (p22).*

Fallows and Symon (1999) found that the staff actually involved in EAY pilot did not experience any difficulties with reduced time to deliver content or undertake student assessment, but did find research and scholarly activity suffered owing to the loss of the summer break for teaching and so were concerned that any extension to the EAY pilot would increase workloads. This was also noted by HEFCE in their report on the EAY pilot (HEFCE, 1999). Similarly, Baldwin and McInnis (2002) commenting on the AIRS programmes reported how these encountered staff reluctance and apprehension. Staff were concerned that such programmes would lead to cuts in funding and a division in the sector with non-research universities being the sole providers of the two-year track

The loss of research time was noted by Baldwin and McInnis (2002) as a challenge for year-round teaching in the USA and Australia. This was also recently echoed in a policy statement by the UCU:

*'Additional teaching requirements in the summer are likely to have a detrimental impact on staff workloads. For the majority of academics, postgraduate teaching and supervision, updating courses and reading lists for the next academic year, and dealing with relentless bureaucracy. Recent studies by UCU of occupational stress in HE have consistently shown workloads of 50 plus hours a week for full-time academic staff' (UCU, 2010)*

Davies et al (2009) in their largely positive report, also note how demands on teaching staff can act as a limiting factor for the expansion of accelerated degrees. Similarly, McCaig and colleagues (2007) in their comprehensive review of accelerated degrees, noted how staffing issues, particularly relating to the availability and expertise of staff, could be problematic for institutions. This was something shared by the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot institutions. Difficulties identified here were: adapting staff levels quickly to allow for new developments, freeing staff up from other duties, and noting how staff may have training needs. They also noted how accelerated degrees could require culture change, notably: changes to staff working practices for year-long working, addressing entrenched working practices (not working weekends or during the summer period), and responding to worries about workflow. In one institution this led to the revision of the academic calendar to allow for weekend and block provision and summer working. Foster et al (2011) in their review of the costs of accelerated degrees acknowledged that delivery of these programmes often depended on the enthusiasm or goodwill of staff, who established 'workarounds' to enable the degrees to function; and that the administrative staff in academic schools and faculties also undertook a considerable amount of additional work; something that is not perhaps sustainable beyond the short-term.

Similarly, HEFCE reflect how in the early days of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots, there were concerns about staffing, particularly in relation to staff contracts and working practices. However, they report that staff could be receptive to pedagogic change and changing working practices particularly if they are involved in the development of new approaches; and changing practices can also offer staff flexibility to take breaks for research outside of the traditional holiday time (HEFCE, 2011). Recent work by the HEA also highlights how staff structures and staff attitudes can be a barrier to flexible learning, particularly lack of buy-in from staff in HEIs, clashing staff cultures and narrow employment contracts (Tallantyre, 2013).

These concerns are also found in the wider literature, beyond the UK experience. Baldwin and McInnis (2002) writing in Australia, highlight challenges for extending the teaching year as: staff concerns about tight schedules, loss of quieter period for administration and maintenance, worries about loss of time for research/pursue own academic interests (especially for early and mid-career academics), and extra workloads. Although they note how this tends not to be an issue in the USA as this would count as additional/extra employment beyond their standard nine month contracts. They felt that these concerns could indirectly affect recruitment and potentially lead to a shift towards teaching only positions to staff the accelerated programmes (Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). Whereas Lee and Horsfall (2010), also in Australia, reported faculty concerns with an accelerated term that they had insufficient time to prepare courses, a process they noted would normally occur between semesters.

Johnson and Rose (2015), writing in the USA, undertook qualitative research with faculty members to gain their perspectives from working both in accelerated and traditional learning formats. They found staff felt lonely and isolated from the rest of the university community when teaching accelerated courses (working when campus offices were closed and/or when others were not working), and they felt out of sync with their colleagues and as if they neither belonged to the institution nor their department. The authors report a sense of loss and marginalisation, and lack of connection to the university; as well as collegial disapproval and little administrative support. However, they also reported how staff found teaching accelerated courses a rewarding experience that gave them new perspectives (and chance to reflect) on their work as teachers and on their material, leading them to place more emphasis on the students' role in the learning process. Wlodkowski's (2003) writing about accelerated learning in the USA also noted how accelerated programmes can rely on affiliate or adjunct faculty. While there appears to be little evidence on this type of practice in the UK, it has been raised by the UCU:

*'as a trade union we continue to have concerns about the employment consequences of 'fast-track' degrees, including the employment of casual staff to teach on 'third semesters'.* (UCU, 2010)

## **Adaptations to Institutional processes**

The adaptations required to institutional working practices and processes are also noted in the literature as a potential barrier for institutions to offering accelerated degrees, as they can incur costs, expend resources and challenge the status quo. Much of the feedback here comes from the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot activity and relates to discussions around the potential to expand provision.

McCaig et al, 2007 noted how the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots recognised the need for institutional processes to be adapted, but this was challenging and needed to be achieved without losing quality. These were wide ranging, and areas for change or adaptation included: administrative systems (e.g. for different fee payment, for APEL, for tracking students etc.), ICT infrastructures and technical support, pricing models, assessment regulations, staff contracts and working patterns. Baldwin and McInnis (2002) also highlighted the importance of tighter schedules for assessment, finalisation of results and enrolments. Similarly, Outram (2011) in his final evaluation of Flexible Learning Pathfinder projects, reported that for effective adoption and delivery of accelerated degrees, changes would need to be made to institutional processes and systems, and that this would need not just institutional support, but wider sector level support. He concluded that the pilot provision was designed to fit around existing institutional administrative and academic processes and culture so was only sustainable because it was small scale; thus larger scale provision would require changes to institutional processes to allow for year-round delivery which Foster et al (2011) reported could represent a significant cost.

Foster et al (2011) also noted how student support needed to be maintained during the summer months; they recognised that IT and library services do now tend to function normally during the summer months, but felt these would need to expand to support larger numbers of students. Institutions would also need to provide facilities (estates and facilities), and teaching and examination spaces that would support year round operations and dual cohorts of students. This could prove challenging as the summer months are often used for essential maintenance and refurbishment work on university buildings, or the institutions make use of university buildings and facilities for alternative income generation e.g. running conferences and short courses (Foster et al, 2011; HEFCE, 1999).

### Too niche

As noted above (Chapter 3), the general consensus in the literature is that the market for accelerated degrees in the UK is, or at least has been, small and niche; with a bias towards new universities and more vocational/professionally oriented subjects, and these programmes are more attractive to mature students who are perhaps looking for a different HE experience and able to cope with a more rigorous workload (Baldwin and McInnis, 2002, SQW/TNS, 2006; McCaig et al, 2007; Davies et al, 2009; HEFCE, 2011; UCU, 2010). Although some felt that this small (limited) market was sustainable (Outram, 2011), the perceived lack of demand could act as a strong barrier or disincentive for new institutions to provide accelerated degrees or for existing providers to offer more accelerated degrees – particularly in the context where demand for HE outstrips supply (HEFCE, 2011). HEA note how the apparent hegemony of full-time undergraduate study also acts as a barrier to all forms of flexible learning (Tallantyre, 2013). This was also a finding of the IES research into the market for part-time HE (Pollard et al, 2012). It can be difficult to get potential students to think about alternative ways to study in HE, and would therefore require a cultural shift in the way people think about routes to HE (HEFCE, 2011).

Davies et al (2009) interviewed staff across three institutions offering accelerated degrees and found staff were anxious about the perceived market value of fast-track degrees (see also below, Barrier for Students), and felt there was a danger that accelerated degrees would fail to get established in the sector. They note how, at the time of their study, fast-track degrees were only offered at teaching intensive universities, as these institutions face greater incentives to explore innovative undergraduate programmes, and as research



intensive institutions could be concerned about the impact of additional staff workload during summer months on research activity.

*'There are, therefore, reasons for expecting Fast-Track degrees to remain exclusive to 'teaching intensive' universities. Given the association between the perceptions of 'quality of degree' and 'research intensity' this might limit the scope for Fast-Track degrees to establish their credentials in the eyes of students' (Davies et al, 2009, p39)*

However, they felt there was an opportunity to market fast-track degrees as a superior or premier route within the teaching intensive sector, as these programmes are associated with high outcomes, could allow students to differentiate themselves by their aptitude and commitment to learning and are (referring to work by McCaig et al, 2007) not perceived negatively by employers (Davies et al, 2009).

HEFCE (2011) also felt there was potential for growth within the niche which would be aided by a centrally coordinated information campaign as many students do not know this route exists. They concluded:

*'although we could, within limits, encourage institutions to provide more diverse forms of provision, the real challenge will be changing the demands and expectations of students, many of whom see a full-time, first degree programme as the natural progression from school or college. This change might be encouraged by appropriate financial incentives (for instance, changes to the student support regulations). But it would also require the sort of cultural shift that comes about slowly, and which it is difficult for policy-makers to prompt (HEFCE, 2011, p7)*

A related issue is the degree to which accelerated degrees can attract new learners, who would not otherwise engage in HE, rather than just encourage those predisposed to HE to switch from traditional programmes to accelerated programmes; HEFCE refer to this as the displacement effect (HEFCE, 1999). Again there are concerns about the ability of accelerated degrees to develop a new market rather than encourage a shift in the existing market.

## **Barriers for students**

Research not only indicates barriers for institutions in developing and offering accelerated degrees, but also potential barriers for students in taking up accelerated degrees. The key barriers are: a lack of awareness and the strong cultural norm of three-year full-time degrees; a perceived limited and less satisfying student experience; 'cramming' which is felt to lead to lower outcomes; and greater costs (per year of study).

### **Lack of awareness**

Linked to the general perception that the market for accelerated degrees was small, was an acknowledgement that there was limited awareness among potential and also current HE students of this type of study, and a strong cultural norm that a Bachelor's degree takes three years full-time; and these could act as a barrier to take-up of accelerated degrees.

The SQW/TNS (2006) report on demand for flexible learning found a lack of awareness about accelerated degrees. Their focus groups with year 12 students and current HE students found a three-year degree was considered the norm and students were surprised that there were alternatives; they had poor awareness of the flexibility in pace offered in some institutions and the existence of blended modes. The authors felt the quality of advice and guidance about HE opportunities was inadequate. Similarly research on the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots in the 2000s found limited take-up and felt this could be, in part, due to a lack of information about this option. Outram (2011) in his final evaluation of the pilot projects noted how to support further initiatives with accelerated learning there needed to be a publicity campaign so that potential students, their families, HE staff, employers and professional bodies could understand what accelerated degrees really are and what they are not (i.e. not intensive programmes with shortened study time), and to emphasise the high standards of these programmes. Outram felt that raising awareness could have a positive impact on demand. This was also reflected in the HEFCE report to BIS on diverse provision. In this report HEFCE concluded there could be a wider market for accelerated degrees, but that this would require more central publicity and awareness-raising rather than the limited and local marketing that tended to be the case:

*'The only publicity for these degrees at present (other than in the press and in Ministerial speeches) seems to be on institutions' web-sites and through other marketing events they run, but this may not reach all the students who might wish to take advantage of the benefits of this provision' (HEFCE, 2011, p24).*

More recently the HEA summit on flexible learning reported how all stakeholders including potential students need to be better informed about what flexible learning is, and it was suggested that a guide should be produced for students setting out options for flexible learning and case study examples, and also endorsements from employers (Tallantyre, 2013).

### **Potential for lower satisfaction and a different student experience**

Higher education is purported to offer students not only increased employability, but also social experiences, 'life beyond the classroom' (Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). These social experiences are sometimes referred to as consumption benefits. There are concerns that with accelerated study, these consumption benefits may be reduced (Davies et al, 2009), and students will have a much more limited and less satisfying HE experience. Indeed, a study of students on accelerated programmes at the University of Staffordshire found these students did spend much less time socialising and instead spent more time attending lectures, in independent learning and travelling to university (Davies et al, 2009). Baldwin and McInnis (2002) writing in Australia about accelerated degrees raise the importance of the social experience of HE. They note how student success is dependent on other factors besides classroom instruction such as: social experiences, extent and content of interactions with staff and peers, integration into campus life, engagement with studies and a supportive, but also challenging, climate. They conclude that the social dimensions of learning are important especially for young full-time time undergraduates; but do also acknowledge that the relationship between HE and students is changing, with more students having a more instrumental view of HE, and less attachment and commitment to a range of aspects of university life.

The main concerns outlined in the literature about student experiences, from staff and the students themselves relate to:

- Lower satisfaction due to time conflicts between job and/or family and studies (Wlodkowski, 2003, in the USA), time required for study which could impact on personal circumstances causing financial hardship (see below), high stress, and pressures on personal relationships (Sims & Woodrow, 1996), and less time for socialising (Carroll, 2006, reported in McCaig, 2007).
- Fewer opportunities to interact with other students, and build networks and friendships because accelerated students may be starting and studying at different times from their peers (Sims & Woodrow, 1996; Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008). Student cohorts are argued by Baldwin and McInnis (2002) to be important, they can reduce the sense of isolation and alienation; and *'belonging to a group is a vital ingredient to student engagement'*; and were reported by Lee and Horsfall (2010) to be important to motivation and learning.
- Limited real choice of modules due to resource and timetabling constraints of institutions (Sims & Woodrow, 1996; McCaig, 2007).
- Lack of opportunities to gain work experience/undertake internships during the summer break or undertake temporary work whilst studying (Sims & Woodrow, 1996; Fallows & Symon, 1999; Baldwin & McInnis, 2002, citing the Flowers Committee report findings; SQW/TNS, 2006; Davies et al, 2009). This was something raised in the press by the NUS who were concerned that with accelerated study, students would not be able to undertake part-time paid work, which for some was an essential means to manage study costs.
- Less opportunity to engage in wider activities. Staff surveyed as part of Fallows and Symons evaluation of the Extended Academic Year pilot at the University of Luton were concerned about the impact of summer teaching on students. They were worried that EAY may diminish the overall educational experience – with less chance to experience the world during the summer and reduced opportunity for other academic activity such as preparatory reading (Fallows & Symon, 1999). The HEA work on flexibility questions whether students' desire for greater flexibility to meet their wants comes at the expense of their educational needs and their broader developmental interests (Barnett, 2014).

The research findings here are somewhat confusing and contradictory. This may be in part due to the different profile, motivations and preferences of students on accelerated programmes. Indeed, Fallows and Symons evaluation of the Extended Academic Year pilot at the University of Luton noted how staff were concerned about the impact of summer teaching on students, but seemed to be addressing their negative comments on the student experience solely within the context of traditional, immediately post-school, 18-year-old entrants rather than the actual participants in the pilot programmes.

HEFCE analysis of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder programmes (HEFCE, 2011a) found that students on accelerated programmes compared with those on standard programmes had lower satisfaction scores for their course in the National Student Survey (74 per cent compared with 81 per cent). However, work by Fallows and Symon (1999) focusing on the University of Luton found a higher degree of satisfaction with the perceived quality of the course among students in the Extended Academic Year pilot. Evaluation of the Flexible

Learning Pathfinders pilots conducted by HEA (Outram, 2011) found positive attitudes to compressed degrees, although the author acknowledged that accelerated degrees were more attractive to certain types of students who were perhaps looking for a different HE experience and were able to cope with a more rigorous workload. Similarly, analysis of satisfaction among students participating in the earlier AIRs programmes (which were largely part-time) found students were more satisfied with their courses – specifically in terms of the level of support and resources provided – than those on equivalent three-year courses (McCaig, 2007).

Work in Australia found students on accelerated learning reported positive experiences, a higher proportion felt more confident than felt less confident in their knowledge of material on an accelerated term than on a regular term (Lee & Horsfall, 2010), and there was a substantial self-reported increase in effort and motivation. However, the authors reported that team cohesiveness was important, students needed to have close relationships with fellow students during accelerated courses. Similarly research in the USA (Hicks, 2014) found students following an accelerated course format reported positive experiences.

Other findings were that although accelerated degrees were developed to allow flexibility in the pace of learning, once embarked on programmes, students often had little flexibility to vary pace, but this did not appear to concern students (Outram, 2011; McCaig et al, 2007). Also that there appeared to be no real difference in the level of part-time work undertaken during the summer period between those on accelerated programmes and those on traditional programmes (Davies et al, 2009).

### **Heavy workload, less time for reflection and lower outcomes**

The most commonly cited concern for and among students in the literature relates to the heavy workload associated with compression of programme length and the reduced time allowed for true reflection which was felt could lead to lower outcomes and increased drop-out.

The evaluation report (Sims & Woodrow, 1996) of the early AIRS initiatives with accelerated degrees found slightly higher withdrawal and transfer rates to standard duration programmes, and concerns about completion rates especially for Engineering and STEM programmes, which interestingly were subjects not found in later trials with accelerated degrees. The authors argued that this indicated a need for a more rigorous selection procedure to accelerated programmes. Their work also found students felt they had limited time and space to consolidate and reflect on their studies which, at that time was a concern also raised by professional bodies; and limited time to complete assignments which meant they were not able to reach their highest potential. McCaig et al, (2007) noted how concerns about quality of accelerated degrees could relate to students' ability to handle the additional workload of an accelerated programme and their relative outcomes. They report the student perspective from research with student participants of the Accelerated Learning Pathfinder programme, mid-way through the pilot. This found that students were indeed concerned about workload, covering work in a rushed way, the amount of information they needed to absorb when only having short break, and having too little time for reflection and in-depth study (McCaig et al, 2007; Wlodkowski, 2003 in the USA; see also Baldwin & McInnis, 2002 in Australia). This was echoed in the work of Rodway-Dyer et al (2008) who found potential students (rather than current university students) were unsure about two-year degrees (as an alternative to the traditional three-

year course), and their main concerns related to the workload being compressed into two years and losing their summer break.

The issue about condensed study is often referred to as 'cramming'. It has been argued that an undergraduate degree programme requires three years to allow for maturation, and that holiday periods allow time for reflection and the thinking essential to developing maturity. Thus accelerated programmes could lead to cramming with students adopting a 'surface' (memorising) approach to learning and resulting in lower quality of outcomes (discussed in HEFCE 2011; see also Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). This is an issue raised by the University and Colleges Union (UCU, 2010, and also noted in McCaig et al, 2007), although their statement was not accompanied by any evidence:

*'We are concerned about the potential for two-year degree programmes to encourage 'cramming to complete the course'. Fast track programmes will make it harder for students to combine study with periods of reflection, critical thinking and a 'deep approach' to learning. We have already seen a significant expansion in the numbers of universities having to put on 'remedial' English and Maths classes in the first year of a three-year undergraduate degree. A major expansion of accelerated degrees is likely to aggravate these trends.'* (UCU, 2010)

Interestingly, cramming was also a concern among EU member states when some countries had to comply with the new structures setting out that Bachelor's level qualifications (first cycle, see above) took three years. Curricular design aimed at complying with the new degree structure, in many cases, resulted in compressed Bachelor's degrees. As has been pointed out, following the Bologna Process, *'the primary worries are that curricula are becoming more rigid and compressed with less space for creativity and innovation, and in this respect there were frequent complaints that too many units of former longer degrees are being crammed into first-cycle programmes'* (EUA, 2010).

The research evidence however, indicates that there is no evidence of surface learning, less reflection or lower outcomes. Work by Fallows and Symon (1999) focusing on the University of Luton found better performance by students in the Extended Academic Year pilot, but they attributed this to smaller group sizes and higher motivation of students. McCaig and colleagues found that institutions reported the pressure felt by students was not necessarily greater than felt by those on standard programmes, nor the outcomes any lower; as institutions provided adequate student support and systems in place to transfer to the standard programme, if students found the workload too heavy. Also instead of having lower outcomes, participants had higher attendance, were more likely to submit work for assessment, and were more engaged in student life (indicated by acting as representatives on university committees) (McCaig et al, 2007). Similarly, the work of Davies and colleagues (2009) at the University of Staffordshire found first year accelerated degree students were more interested in their course and less likely to adopt a surface approach than their three-year degree peers (but the difference disappeared by the final year of study). They also found that students on fast-track degrees outperformed those on traditional programmes, although they acknowledged this could be due to selection effects of more highly motivated students selecting the fast-track option and university staff selecting the more able students for the accelerated mode. The final evaluation of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots across the participating institutions concluded there was evidence that the achievements of accelerated degree students are comparable to those

of students on conventional programmes; and in some cases, results and achievements have been outstanding (Outram, 2011; HEFCE 2011). In addition, research into outcomes finds similar employment rates. For example, research on the AIRS initiative found the same proportion of accelerated course graduates in employment as those on standard duration courses, but did find a higher unemployment rate (almost double the national rate) (Sims & Woodrow, 1996).

Wlodkowski (2003) researching accelerated learning in the USA (not all of this full degree programmes) found evidence that time was only a modest predictor of achievement and other stronger factors were student capability, quality of instruction, and personal motivation. Further research suggests learners retain knowledge better without long gaps between study and application of knowledge, and that accelerated or intensive knowledge can stimulate deeper and more thorough understanding particularly among highly able students (Seamon, 2004, reported in McCaig et al, 2007). Also work in the USA using the National Survey of Student Engagement in one university, found students on accelerated degree programmes were either no less likely to report engagement indicators or actually more likely to report engagement outcomes compared to students on traditional degree programmes, particularly relating to critical thinking and oral and written communication – key outcomes for employers. However, the authors felt this could be due to accelerated students' life-stage rather than the delivery mode which made a difference (Rawls & Hammons, 2012). Also a small-scale study in the USA (Hicks, 2014) comparing an accelerated course format with a traditional course format for students on a Bachelor's degree in Criminal justice, found students rated their accelerated coursework as intellectually stimulating, relevant, and useful; and reported that the course provided enough time to allow for proper study and reflection. The author concluded that: *'accelerated formats have been found to offer high-quality instruction in a convenient, user-friendly package'* (Hicks, 2014, p.81).

## Costs

One of the often cited benefits for accelerated degrees is the potential to reduce study costs (see Chapter 6 below), however, there is some literature that indicates concerns among stakeholders that students studying or considering studying on accelerated programmes can incur greater costs in the short-term (although benefiting from reduced costs in the longer term). It is argued that students could face increased living costs per year and no opportunities to work, and so would need higher student loans and maintenance grants to compensate (Rodway-Dyer, 2008), and different, perhaps costly, housing arrangements over summer (Rodway-Dyer, 2008). Also for those students with family commitments, studying over a longer period in the year could cause greater financial strain with higher costs of childcare (Collins et al, 2013).

## Issues for employers

A key potential barrier for students to taking up accelerated degrees are concerns about lower employability, and accelerated degrees having less value in the graduate market. For example, the evaluation report (Sims & Woodrow, 1996) of the AIRs initiative found students were concerned that employers may not be adequately informed about the AIR course, were worried about employer scepticism, and so were unsure whether the accelerated course would improve or impede their employment prospects. Students were also concerned about the absence of professional recognition for their course, which could

adversely affect career prospects. The authors felt that professional bodies appeared to be reserving judgement on accelerated courses, and some had negative perceptions based on inaccurate information (i.e. fewer weeks of study than traditional duration programmes). Similarly, market research by participating institutions in the Flexible Learning Pathfinders pilots highlighted that students were concerned that employers would not value two-year degrees as much as three-year programmes (McCaig et al, 2007; Davies et al, 2009).

This concern therefore relates to employers' perceptions of and attitudes towards accelerated degrees, and the impact this has on students, as employers' views on the quality of programmes are important to students. Unfortunately, the lack of the employer perspective is notable in the literature on accelerated degrees, and where primary research has been undertaken this has tended to focus on students and HE staff rather than gather feedback from employers and their attitudes to and acceptance or otherwise of accelerated degrees. This is despite the assertion that government encouragement of accelerated degrees and other more flexible provision is to meet the needs of employers for employable graduates and skilled employees (HEFCE, 2011); and despite the apparent interest from employers in flexible study methods to help them to quickly plug skills gaps. The National Strategy for Access and Student Success notes:

*'Partnerships between HE providers and employers can create pathways for mature students to enter HE, with a corresponding benefit to businesses in creating better-educated, more highly qualified staff. In its Ambition 2020 report, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) argues that addressing the skills gap in the workforce will require a focus on the adult workforce, and the development of innovative and flexible provision which meets the needs of employers and their staff. The recent CBI report 'Tomorrow's growth' says surveys have shown an increasing interest from businesses in working more closely with universities and colleges to deliver more flexible options including higher-level apprenticeships and co-designed courses' (OFFA/HEFCE, 2014, p42)*

The two key studies capturing employer feedback are the work of McCaig et al (2007) in the UK and by Rood (2011) in the USA.

The qualitative work by McCaig et al (2007) investigated how employers and professional bodies viewed the quality and standards of accelerated learning programmes. They undertook fieldwork with representatives from professional bodies covering a range of professions, employer groups, Heads of Quality in four of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot institutions and two additional HEIs to gather views about quality and validation issues. They found that students' concerns were unfounded, and that employers would value accelerated degrees and traditional degrees equally, and they did not identify significant concerns about quality and standards for accelerated degrees. They found most of the consulted professional bodies accredit or recognise accelerated programmes of study or support the principle of acceleration of at least part of their qualifying processes. Many recognised demand for accelerated programmes of study. Most did not see quality assurance as an issue as accelerated courses were assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency (using the same procedures such as validation and review that apply to traditional degrees) or professional bodies own arrangements. Some felt that standards and outputs were more significant than the duration of the course. Similarly, Sector Skills Councils felt employers would be more concerned with the outcomes and outputs of study rather than the length/duration.

They argued that accelerated degrees and further development in this area of flexible provision will make HE more responsive to employer as well as to student needs, and they can provide a quicker route to employment in sectors where there are skills shortages. However, they felt there was a need to market the usefulness for employment of accelerated degrees to students (rather than to employers).

Quantitative research in the USA exploring employer attitudes by Rood (2011), aimed to explore employer perceptions of accelerated versus traditionally obtained Bachelor's degrees in hiring decisions. His key research question was: do employers view graduates of traditional four-year programmes (in the USA) more favourably than graduates of accelerated degree programmes (other factors being equal)? The author was concerned that how courses are delivered may matter to employers and could devalue an accelerated degree. However, his conclusions were similar to that of McCaig et al (2007) in that employers are not concerned about accelerated study, and traditional programmes are not preferred above accelerated programmes.

Rood's study involved surveying a random sample of businesses in Western New York, and responses were gained from 250 employers. It explored degree of preference for traditional versus accelerated programmes in general, in screening decisions during recruitment and in actual hiring decisions (derived from a number of items and using scenarios). Qualitative feedback showed how employers felt experience was more important to them than academic credentials and the survey findings revealed that on average, employers are indifferent to one degree type versus the other. However, familiarity with accelerated degree programme graduates increased preference for accelerated degree holders (or reduced the indifference between the two types of programme graduates). Other findings were: a general preference for traditional degree study among those with higher levels of education, but this did not translate into a bias in the actual hiring decision; and a more open attitude among employers in the wholesale sector compared to manufacturing, technical or retail industries (Rood, 2011). Rood (2011) also cites the work of Adams and DeFleur (2006) and Mandemach and Dennis (2008) which explored the attitudes of employers of online degree programmes and found scepticism from employers about the acceptability of online delivery and the absence classroom interaction.



## Chapter 6: Benefits

This chapter focuses on the real and perceived benefits of accelerated degrees, positive perceptions of accelerated degrees, positive experiences of and outcomes from accelerated degrees, and means to encourage greater take-up.

There is a scarcity of literature that captures the benefits of accelerated study, and particularly of robust studies of the effectiveness of accelerated degrees that make comparisons between the outcomes of students on accelerated programmes compared with those on traditional programmes. This reflects the historically low level of engagement with accelerated degrees in higher education in the UK. Work in the USA and to some extent Australia is more advanced, but again this has been criticised for failing to take account of the different populations or selection effect of those choosing accelerated rather than traditional degrees. It also fails to look at longer term rather than just immediate outcomes, and take account of subject differences and different learning approaches (timing of class, class size, teaching style etc.). The evaluation work in the USA also appears to confuse acceleration and intensification – seemingly very different approaches – and focus on accelerated courses rather than whole programmes which makes it difficult to identify the true benefits of accelerated degrees (Serdyukov, 2008; Marques, 2012).

The literature that does exist suggests that accelerated degrees are seen to offer a range of benefits: they allow individuals to move more quickly to the labour market; they can act as a way to widen participation and to increase qualifications in the labour force; they provide students with more choice and thus convenience; and can reduce the costs of study. These benefits have been used to promote accelerated degrees to the sector and as a justification for policy interest (see Chapter 4).

### Financial benefits

The literature on accelerated learning features finance as a strong potential motivator for students to be interested in and take-up accelerated study. Accelerated study allows for reduced overall fee costs (in many cases where tuition fee costs per year are fixed) and reduced living costs as students are studying for less time over the duration of a degree programme. They also lead to lower opportunity costs as students are away from the workplace for less time. Essentially students accrue two years of student debt rather than three, have to cover their maintenance costs for two years rather than three, and can also enter the job market a year earlier – potentially earning a year's salary during the time it would have taken them to obtain a conventional three-year degree (HEFCE, 2011).

However, as noted in Chapter 5, there are some interesting counter arguments, particularly in relation to maintenance or living costs. Firstly, a student on an accelerated programme may have to pay more living costs per year as they will be studying for more weeks in the year<sup>11</sup> (for example they will need to cover the costs of their accommodation for longer in the year), and secondly if they are studying for more weeks in the year they

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<sup>11</sup> Students on courses where the academic year exceeds the standard 30 weeks may be eligible for a Long Courses Loan. However, it is only available to students with a low household income (Long Courses Loan 2015/16, Student Finance England; [http://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/media/2572/sfe\\_long\\_course\\_loan\\_1516\\_d.pdf](http://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/media/2572/sfe_long_course_loan_1516_d.pdf)). Maintenance loans are not available at all for those already qualified to degree level.

will have less time to undertake paid work and thus accrue more debt (as they cannot offset this against earnings). Yet the literature does indicate that overall, studying for two years rather than three does lead to savings because of the way in which the fee regime operates with a set fee per year not per degree programme. Work by Davies et al (2009) explored the extent of the potential savings and estimated this to be £20,000 for students studying fast-track undergraduate degrees at publicly funded HEIs. They calculated this figure by adding the standard tuition fee to the average new graduate salary (which were at that time £3,225 for fees and between £16,000 and £17,000 for new graduate salary), but they did acknowledge there is no data on the actual salary difference arising from accelerated degrees. The authors also posited that an increase in tuition fees for undergraduate study would increase the incentive for students to enrol on fast-track degrees. However, HEFCE (2011) are more circumspect. In their report on diverse provision they note:

*'These benefits may, or may not, be diluted by the impact of any changes following the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance. In a variable fee environment, some institutions might choose to charge higher fees for their accelerated degrees. This, in fact, is Davies' recommendation: he suggests that institutions need to charge an additional 25-50 per cent in order to cover their costs. This might make accelerated degrees less financially attractive to students, although any increase in fees would need to be offset against the benefits of entering the job market a year earlier. It should be noted, though, that this rationale may be less compelling while there is a shortage of graduate jobs'. (HEFCE, 2011, p24)*

However, there has been no new research into the demand for accelerated degrees in England since the change in fees introduced in 2012/13. The University of Buckingham also highlight the potential cost savings of accelerated degrees. Their website suggests that their two-year honours degrees offer value for money compared to traditional three-year degrees, despite higher tuition costs (of between £12,000 and £13,000 a year, as tuition and living costs are accrued for two rather than three years. They estimate a saving of just under £10,000. Davies et al (2009) looked at how universities in the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots were marketing these programmes, particularly the benefits that were highlighted on these University websites. They found that almost all referred to the lower costs and also quicker entry to the graduate job market.

Davies et al (2009) looked at how universities in the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots were marketing these programmes, particularly the benefits that were highlighted on these University websites. They found that almost all referred to the lower costs as well as quicker entry to the graduate job market. This would indicate an assumption that an accelerated degree is attractive to students as it saves both time and money, however, little research has been undertaken to gather students' actual views (McCaig et al, 2007). Research with student participants of the Accelerated Learning Pathfinder programmes undertaken mid-way through the pilot by the participating institutions indicated that financial considerations, particularly reduced costs, were indeed a key draw for students. Other attractions were providing evidence to employers that students had commitment and the ability to work hard, and faster entry into a profession (McCaig et al, 2007). Indeed, research with a small number of current and potential university students at one of the Pathfinder institutions found that although cost savings were seen as an important attraction factor, it was the work focus of the two-year programme that was most important

– giving them better career prospects, standing out from the crowd and creating employment contacts (Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008).

### **Faster movement into work**

*'Accelerated degrees present a way for people already in work or returning to work to up-skill to degree level while taking the minimum of time away from their employment – perhaps as an alternative to part-time study' (HEFCE, 2011, p27)*

Another potential motivator or perceived benefit to accelerated degrees indicated by the literature is their efficiency, in that they can be completed in a faster time than a 'traditional' first degree programme. This is reported to be a motivator for students (generally mature students) who may be looking to re-enter the labour market quickly; and also for employers, who may be looking to address skills issues and find faster pathways into professions (CBI, 2013; UKCES, 2009).

McCaig et al (2007) noted how accelerated degrees such as those piloted in the Flexible Learning Pathfinder programme were predicated on there being demand from employers and professional bodies for faster routes into various professions, as well as demand from mature students for more flexible ways of attaining qualifications more quickly. Programmes therefore tend to attract those wanting to change careers and re-enter the labour market as quickly as possible. Early indications mid-way through the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots did indeed suggest that one of the main benefits to students of accelerated degrees was being able to enter work sooner, essentially a year early. Similarly, Sector Skills Councils interviewed as part of the research felt accelerated degrees were a way to address skills shortages. Employers generally saw no distinction between accelerated and three-year degrees and some felt completion of an accelerated degree would set an applicant apart from others, as evidence of hard work, determination and achievement (also noted in HEFCE, 2011).

Market research conducted at the University of Plymouth found that 50 per cent of the small group of current university students (N=56) they surveyed expressed an interest in a two-year honours degree. These students were attracted primarily by perceived better career prospects and standing out from the crowd. The work-based learning aspect that could create employment contacts followed by saving a years' fees (thus reducing costs and debt). However, getting to the job market earlier was much less important (Rodway-Dyer et al, 2008).

A literature review in the USA notes how the most obvious advantage of accelerated learning is faster pace towards degree completion, but that it also comes with a more *'to the point approach'* and *'greater attunement into real-world preparedness'* (Marques, 2012, p105).

### **Better learning outcomes**

Despite concerns about students having to cram and thus not have time for reflection and maturity, research indicates that accelerated degrees (or at least accelerated courses within degree programmes) can lead to better outcomes. Yet the literature does indicate that this could be due to the different characteristics and motivations of accelerated learners and/or the smaller group size and greater group cohesiveness in accelerated programmes. This perhaps raises questions: firstly, about the transferability of the benefits

of accelerated degrees to wider groups of students than those currently engaged in these programmes; and secondly, whether expansion of programmes would increase the size of groups and reduce the positive cohort effect.

The evaluation report of the Accelerated and Intensive Routes to higher education pilot in the 1990s found a number of positive outcomes:

- The pass rates for first year AIR students were consistently high and comparable to those on standard duration programmes.
- There were higher student satisfaction rates for AIR students, particularly as it enabled them to return to work more quickly and could study at a steady pace, and there were higher satisfaction scores for support and resources than found for those on standard courses (with reasonable facilities provided during the summer recess).
- The same proportion of accelerated course graduates were in employment as those on standard duration courses and a similar proportion went on to postgraduate study as those on standard duration courses so it is a reasonable route to postgraduate study. However, unemployment rates were found to be higher (at almost double the national rate).
- Most students felt the accelerated course had a positive effect on their career development, personal skills (e.g. ability to prioritise and organise tasks, and time management) and confidence (Sims & Woodrow, 1996).

The evaluation of the Extended Academic Year experiment at the University of Luton noted how the accelerated students had marginally higher grades and a higher degree of satisfaction with the quality of their course than students studying in the mainstream academic year, despite being subject to the same assessment procedures and indicators. The authors attributed this to motivation and cohort effects:

*'In the absence of other evidence to the contrary, this is attributed to the smaller group sizes for the EAY modules that contributed to the development of greater individual motivation. Furthermore, it was observed that the participants gained benefit from belonging to a group which was clearly being given special opportunities'. (Fallows and Symon, 1999, p.220)*

More recently the work of Davies et al (2009), which compared the outcomes of students on fast-track degrees to those on equivalent traditional programmes at the University of Staffordshire (one of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot HEIs), found students on the fast-track programmes outperformed those on traditional programmes by an average of two-thirds of a degree classification. This is despite lower GCSE grades and the difference remains even when controlling for age and movement between fast-track and traditional programmes. These greater outcomes persisted across years of study and subjects of study. The authors noted that the latter finding could therefore negate concerns that acceleration is not appropriate for more traditionally academic subjects. However, they acknowledged the greater performance could be due to selection effects: that more highly motivated students selected the fast-track option and university staff selected (via interviews) the more able students for the accelerated mode. The greater performance

could also be compounded by peer effects, with students having higher expectations for their own performance. The authors found the start of their programmes, fast-track students were more interested in their course and less likely to adopt a surface only approach to their learning than those on equivalent traditional programmes, but the gap disappears towards the end of programmes. They concluded that this 'signalling' effect, i.e. that students on fast-track degrees are more motivated and gain better outcomes, should have a positive effect on the market value of accelerated degrees. Similarly, drawing on feedback from the Flexible Learning Pathfinders, McCaig et al (2007) reported that instead of having lower outcomes, students on accelerated degrees compared to those on standard programmes had higher attendance, were more likely to submit work for assessment, and were more engaged in student life (indicated by acting as representatives on university committees); and Outram (2011) concluded that achievements were at least comparable, and in some cases, results and achievements were higher for those on accelerated degrees.

However, HEFCE analysing data from across the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots found lower satisfaction with course among students on accelerated degrees than those on standard programmes. Commenting on findings, they also noted how they could not draw any conclusions about the employment rates of accelerated degree graduates as the survey data was limited (only 35 graduates from accelerated degrees responded to the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education – DLHE – survey in 2008-09) (HEFCE 2011, 2011a).

Findings of more positive outcomes for accelerated learning are also noted in the USA, although as noted earlier, it is difficult here to disentangle acceleration effects from intensification effects.

A study in one institution in the USA using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), as an indicator for student learning, compared the engagement and outcomes of final year undergraduate students on traditional and accelerated degrees (30 compared with 137 individuals). The accelerated students differed from the traditional students in that they were older, had to have at least five years of work experience as a requirement for the course and mainly studied in the evenings. The results indicated that for the majority of indicators, students on accelerated study programmes were no different to those on traditional programmes. They were equally likely to report engaging in such behaviours as discussing ideas with faculty members and others outside of class, putting together concepts from different courses for assignments and class discussions, and using information technology and computers for academic work. However, for other items, accelerated degree students' reported more engagement in the measured activities: more likely to ask questions in class, work on assignments requiring the integration of ideas from various sources, analyse and synthesise ideas, apply theories and concepts to the real world, work with others effectively, and include diverse perspectives in their discussions and assignments. The researchers felt this was linked to students' life stage and the cognitive processes found in middle to later adulthood, with more and varied life experiences and exposure to the world of work. They also found accelerated learners had more positive outcomes in relation to critical thinking, and oral and written communication. The authors note this was an important finding to counter criticisms of accelerated programmes lacking academic substance, rigour and insufficient time for learning and concluded: *'the findings suggest that students in such programmes do seem to participate in their education, engage in behaviours designed to achieve critical learning outcomes,*

*and are involved with experiences where they gain valuable skills and outcomes'* (Rawls & Hammons, 2012).

A literature review by Tatum in the USA looked at multiple dimensions of effectiveness across a range of studies and concluded that:

*'when comparisons are made with more traditional forms of education (e.g. semester and quarter systems) very few studies report superior outcomes for the traditional method. The most common finding is that there is no difference between the two approaches to higher education. Quite frequently the literature shows that the accelerated format produces better learning and achievement than the traditional format... there is a growing body of evidence that students like and prefer the accelerated, intense pace better than extended schedules, even though it is stressful and highly demanding of students' time'* (Tatum, 2010, p43).

However, Tatum does acknowledge that these positive outcomes are probably due to the kinds of students attracted to accelerated study, who tend to be older and highly motivated. It is also worth noting that the financial system in the USA for funding higher education and supporting students is very different to the situation in England and other UK countries.

Additionally, a literature review by Marques (2012) in the USA, identifies the advantages of accelerated courses (although this includes intensified as well as just accelerated learning). Marques notes how these courses can be rewarding and powerful learning experiences for students and faculty, and can lead to similar or even better learning outcomes. Again it is acknowledged that this is due to the characteristics of the students and the work they put in (mental investment, commitment and zero absence), and also the cohort effect which is argued to be an important factor for retention on accelerated courses (Marques, 2012).

Similarly work by Lee and Horsfall (2010) in Australia capturing faculty and student perspectives on experiences of both 12-week semester long courses and six-week accelerated courses also found benefits in the accelerated format. Students reported how they felt more focused and immersed in the learning experience which led them to feel more motivated and more confident. The authors felt this was due to the learning process itself – an intensified, active learning cycle of theory, practice, and feedback; and also a stronger social learning experience derived from peer support, guidance and feedback. Baldwin and McInnis (2002) also noted how the social dimension of learning was an important factor in student success.

### **Other benefits**

These include the skills gained or signalled through accelerated study such as time management, efficiency, working under pressure and prioritising, which can allow students to stand out from the crowd (McCaig et al, 2007; Rodway-Dyer, 2008); the smaller group size and more casual approach available to learning in some accelerated programmes (Australian research in McCaig et al, 2007); and the ability to tailor the pace of study programmes and time to complete the qualification (speed up but also slow down, Collins et al, 2013; but Outram (2011) noted that in the UK, once on an accelerated programme there is little scope in pace).

## Encouraging take-up

Some of the research focused on accelerated degrees or flexible provision more broadly provides suggestions for encouraging greater provision and take-up of accelerated degrees. Whereas other research that sets out the barriers for accelerated degrees can provide ideas of areas to challenge and to make changes; and similarly research that highlights the benefits for accelerated degrees indicates aspects to highlight to the potential market.

The HEA summit on flexible learning made a number of recommendations in relation to accelerated programmes. It recommended that:

- Mainstream funding mechanisms should be changed so that they could incentivise flexible learning, thus funding for undergraduate study should not be time-based but credit based (recommendation 2).
- Models should be produced to clarify how the student support system would work for students on accelerated programmes (recommendation 5).
- Evidence is collected on the nature of the student experience of those on flexible learning programmes (recommendation 6), as all stakeholders including potential students need to be better informed about what flexible learning is and how it can be done well. The report suggests that a guide is produced for students setting out options for flexible learning and case study examples (and endorsements from employers); and a guide for institutions setting out good practice principles and practical advice for developing flexible learning (recommendation 7).
- Senior managers reward and recognise staff (academic and professional) involved in flexible learning programmes, and review their role and workload implications (Tallantyre, 2013).

Outram (2011) in his final evaluation of the HEFCE funded Flexible Learning Pathfinder projects outlined a number of actions that he felt might be taken to support the development of accelerated degrees: 1) publicity; 2) change of funding structures; 3) changes to institutional processes and systems; 4) demonstration that accelerated degrees do not contradict the Bologna Process expectations and deliver the same outcomes and achievements for students as traditional degrees; and 5) need for organisation development from the wider sector to support new forms of delivery.

HEFCE (2011) also highlight the importance of appropriate financial incentives and wider sector support, and suggest providing additional funding for accelerated degrees. They noted that this could be achieved 'naturally' if HE funding moved to funding on the basis of credit, or funds could be provided through a (increased) targeted allocation, or additional development funding could be provided to help institutions start up accelerated programmes. However, they acknowledge that changes to funding 'will be challenging during a period of highly restricted public spending'. A further suggestion is for institutions to be able to charge higher fees for accelerated degrees to reflect the higher costs of development and delivery, although this could discourage some students. HEFCE also highlight the importance of raising awareness and countering negative perceptions (often

promulgated by the media), and note how demand from students might be increased with better information.

In addition, this review has also indicated four areas for activity to encourage institutions (stimulate supply) and potential students (stimulate demand): quality; finance; market; and staff.

**Quality:** Concerns about quality and the student experience need to be addressed. Accelerated degrees are subject to the same quality assessment procedures as standard programmes and there are indications that they achieve the same if not better satisfaction and learning outcomes and destinations. These positive messages then need to be highlighted to all stakeholders including potential students, their parents and advisers, and employers; this could help to increase and broaden demand. However, outcomes data should continue to be collected and analysed – particularly if provision expands – and this could be supported by changes to national data collection so that accelerated programmes can be easily identified. The literature indicates that enhanced outcomes may be driven by the nature and profile of those attracted to accelerated study and selected for accelerated courses (e.g. through interviews) – so if the profile of participants change, there is a need to monitor how outcomes may be affected to test whether accelerated programmes benefit all types of students. Similarly, enhanced outcomes may result from small group size, perceived special treatment, strong peer bonds and possibly different teaching and learning approaches. Again there is a need to monitor outcome and experiences if the accelerated model deviates from this pattern, to test whether accelerated programmes can be scaled up with no loss of benefits to participants.

**Finance:** Finance is an issue for institutions and for students. Accelerated degrees can be cheaper in the long run for students which can act as a key draw, but in the short-term students can incur financial pressures which perhaps could be alleviated by changes to student finance. More and better information about the real costs per year and over the lifetime of an accelerated degree would also help students make informed decisions. There are suggestions that accelerated degrees should be charged at a higher rate than standard/traditional programmes and then marketed as a premier route; but this should be market-tested to see what impact it would have on demand, and which groups of potential students would be most affected. There is a perception that accelerated degrees are more costly to deliver for institutions – high development costs and additional teaching and support costs to deliver through the summer period – and so institutions need to charge more to recoup their costs. Alternatively, institutions could attract more sustained additional central funding (e.g. from HEFCE) which would indicate government and sector level commitment to this alternative form of flexible provision, a move which is currently seen with degree apprenticeships. There is some indication that in the long run institutions can achieve savings, partly due to a higher throughput of students, however, savings will depend on a higher demand from students. Perhaps then the costing work undertaken in 2011 should be revisited under the new financial regime.

**Market:** The market for accelerated degrees in the UK is considered niche – for mature students, studying humanities or social sciences, and in modern universities who already offer a range of flexibilities. Yet it is acknowledged that there is a large-scale lack of awareness among potential students and their supporters and advisers. Action needed here is two-fold: firstly, market research with potential students to explore potential for take-up in this current context of higher fees and uncapped recruitment (in England). This



needs to be undertaken with the younger 'traditional' HE student market to see if accelerated degrees could be expanded to this largely untouched market; and with the adult learner market (including those with no previous HE experience and those with HE qualifications but wishing to retrain) to see if the adult market can grow as it has in the USA and Australia; and also with employers. This could form part of wider work to assess potential attractiveness of different forms of HE provision and price sensitivity. To date there has been only limited small scale market research – often with current HE students as they are easiest to engage in such research – and almost nothing involving employers. Secondly there is a need for a strong information and marketing activity both locally by institutions and nationally by sector bodies. This needs to let stakeholders know what is meant by acceleration of degrees in the UK (same number of teaching weeks spread over a more condensed period), to explain how they work in practice, to highlight potential benefits but also outline the commitment required. It would also help to determine a common terminology in the sector, make accelerated degrees more visible and allow for potential students to be able to use duration as a search criterion when researching potential options. If new models of accelerated degrees emerge – such as the intense programmes offered in the USA – these too need to be explained (and also monitored separately to understand their take-up and impacts).

**Staff:** A key issue for institutions is staff reluctance, and this appears common. Staff can be concerned for the impact that accelerated degree provision and year-round teaching in particular could have on their roles, workloads and contracts. Staff involved in delivering accelerated degrees can find the experience rewarding, but also isolating and hard work and some early initiatives relied on the good will and enthusiasm of a subset of academics and professional support staff which is unsustainable in the longer term. All staff need to be informed about the aims for accelerated degrees, reassured that there will be effective workload planning and that their own workload will be unaffected (or at least any increases will be acknowledged and rewarded), reassured that their opportunities to engage in wider activities will be unaffected, be given appropriate preparation and assessment time (and support); and (where appropriate) be involved in the development of accelerated programmes. Staff experiences and feedback need to be collected to identify any further problems in delivery and administration of programmes and issues for potential expansion to new subject areas, new student groups and larger numbers.

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