

## Accelerated Degrees in Education: a new Profile, Alternative Access to Teaching or part of a *Re-tooling* Process?

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**Abstract:** In the UK the provision of accelerated undergraduate programmes is responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse and career-focused student body and a flexible ever-changing labour market. These *fast track* degrees are particularly new and relevant in education, a field where recent developments in school autonomy and routes into teacher training have had direct consequences on the design and delivery of programmes and on the definition of professional profiles as well as implications for the future of education as a subject of study in universities.

This article portrays a small-scale research study about the views of the students undertaking a new 2-year accelerated degree (BA Hons) in one English university. Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach through surveys directed to the students at the beginning and end of the first academic year (2014-15).

Results revealed that the great majority of the students were not planning to attend this specific programme but have chosen it for its career options and for being a quicker and cheaper route to access a degree - with teaching being regarded as the ultimate career goal.

After one year of attending the programme, students reported gains in their knowledge and skills, recommended it (although being mainly theory-based and not having intensive teaching practice) and kept their intention to pursue a career in teaching.

Overall, the article addresses a gap in literature regarding the role of accelerated programmes in the context of education and starts the discussion about the (dis)association between the students' career routes and goals and the aims and implications of the provision of this new kind of programmes and the traditional teacher training offers in universities.

## Introduction

In the last decade a growing number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have become more responsive to employer and student needs with the provision of accelerated degrees designed not to replace existing traditional degree programmes but to add to the range of options to students, particularly mature students or those who have a specific need to graduate more rapidly. These accelerated degrees lead to a Bachelor's qualification and run for 1 year less than traditional routes without significant loss in content or having to increase the intensity of weekly study. This is often achieved by simply reducing student vacation periods (Foster, Hart & Lewis 2011). Overseas, mainly in the USA, Australia and some Asian countries, accelerated degrees are widespread and have been said to provide an efficient answer to students with the maturity, motivation and commitment to handle the additional workload and experience (McCaig et al 2007).

In England, over the past decade, successive governments have tried to encourage universities to offer 2-year honours degrees, aiming to boost numbers at university and ease the worsening burden of student debt (Smith 2006, Curtis 2009). At present, fast track degrees cover mainly the areas of business, engineering, law, computing, science and technology, art & design and, in some more limited cases, humanities. In education there is still a very limited offer available mainly due to the range of defined and recognised career routes in the field and the links to initial teacher training.

Our study was developed at institutional level to collect data about one recently created 2-year programme in education in an English university. It set out to explore the students' motivations, expectations and experiences while undertaking the degree programme. The programme was created in the intersection of two driving forces: an identified need for graduates to satisfy teacher supply - with substantial governmental efforts being put on teacher recruitment and retention - and a setting within which a (re)definition of education studies in education departments and of teacher training in universities is underway. This context brought additional interest to the already relevant and unexplored area of research into accelerated degrees (especially in education) and the unexpected results obtained by this study may be important, not only of these types of programmes, but in the wider context and trends in education/ teacher training in England in general.

The scarce literature about 2-year degrees has concentrated mainly on the issues of demand and provision (Foster et al 2011), students' profiles, skills and workload (Outram 2011), the adaptations needed at institutional level (Stockwell 2012) and the issues of quality, standards validation and review (McCaig et al 2007). Less attention has been given to students' motivations for enrolling and their perceptions about the experience of taking such a type of degree. Therefore, in the present study, we intended to answer the following research questions:

- What motivates students to choose this type of degrees?
- What is their perception about the experience after one year of attendance?

The study aimed to portray the experience of students attending one example of the few 2-year degrees in education. We believe our contribution can be of great interest not only to programme leaders, heads of department/ faculty management and policy makers involved in programme design, management and evaluation but also to educationalists and educational researchers developing work about education as a field of study and/or teacher training as a career.

We start by discussing the singularities of accelerated degrees in the UK as the framework for exploring the actual motivations and experiences of a group of students attending this type of *fast track* degrees. Ultimately, the intention is to try to find an answer to the underlying question portrayed in the title: can this accelerated degree be regarded as a new

educational profile, as an alternative route to teaching or as part of a re-tooling to rescue the university project?

### **Accelerated Degrees in the UK**

Although regarded as an innovation brought in the context of the Bologna Process and the concept of the European Higher Education Area (introduced in 1999), the notion of 'intensified' or 'accelerated' degrees has been around for some time. It builds on a history dating back to the 1970s in the UK with the Private University of Buckingham in England offering 2-year degrees. During the 1990s, the project *Accelerated and Intensive Routes* (AIRs) concentrated on extending learning on degree courses into the summer and operated in ten institutions throughout England. In the late 1990s, the *Extended Academic Year* experiment (EAY) involving 'year-round' learning was developed at the University of Luton with a particularly strong demand amongst those who were studying on a part-time basis.

In 2003, the New Labour Government White Paper, 'The Future of Higher Education' (DfES 2003, 64–65) highlighted the need for greater flexibility to meet the changing needs of students with a special emphasis being put on the promotion of widening participation to 'students from non-traditional backgrounds' and 'people with different demands and commitments'. Motivation for this came from two key and interrelated factors: 'financial pressure on students and rising levels of student debt' and the aim to 'increase participation towards 50% of those aged 18–30'. Student fees were introduced into the UK by a New Labour Government in September 1998. As a result of the establishment of devolved national administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, different arrangements now exist with regard to the charging of tuition fees in each of the countries of the United Kingdom. It was reasoned that in these new circumstances accelerated programmes might provide a means for more flexible opportunities at a lower cost to participants (McCaig et al 2007). From 2005 to 2010, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), through the Strategic Development Fund (SDF), provided support to eight institutions to pilot and evaluate flexible modes of delivery including 2-year accelerated Honours degrees called the *Flexible Learning Pathfinders* (FLP) with very positive outcomes regarding the quality of the degrees, students' attainment and satisfaction and recognition by employers (Outram 2011).

Students in England currently face fees of £9000 per year for tuition alone and so higher education institutions have responded by seeking new ways of providing cost-effective and high quality learning. Fast track programmes have become a potentially attractive option which in turn have created tensions around the issue of maintaining high standards on shorter degree programmes. As we will show, we found students on our study often making instrumental decisions based on cost and time out from the labour force, on widening access grounds and in the interests of maximising the use of university accommodation over the years of study. According to Davies et al (2012, 433), however, 'students might also be expected to weigh the attractiveness of the financial gain against any possible *quality shading*, and any risk that a fast-track degree would generate a lower graduate premium than a three-year degree'. In trying to tackle this issue, some universities have made public statements that not only publicized their offer but also tried to (re)assure potential students about the quality of these degrees. Some examples were published online by the research study – *Eurograduate*, conducted about the UK market for the accelerated degrees (Education Marketing Solutions 2013). These included Peter Houillon, CEO of Kaplan UK (a training institution offering 2- year accelerated business and law degrees in London in partnership with the University of the West of England) who stated that 'with support across the political spectrum, accelerated two-year degrees are an important way to expand opportunities to study for a higher education degree' and 'are an excellent option for many students who not only save on tuition fees and living expenses, but also start earning earlier'. Additionally, a need for the provision of information was recognised in a HEFCE's report (2011): 'One of the barriers to recruitment for accelerated degrees may be lack of

information. (...) 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' (Paragraph 99).

According to the research study mentioned earlier (Education Marketing Solutions 2013) there has been real interest among all age groups polled (between the ages of 16 and 21 and mature students), with interest highest among mature students. Half of the students surveyed (53%) cited lower costs as the main advantage of a two-year accelerated degree, with one quarter (26%) saying it would allow them to begin earning sooner. The primary disadvantage was a concern that the workload would be too heavy (38%) and one third said they would miss out on student life (32%). According to the data, concern about cost increased with age: among the students aged over 25, 84% were concerned with the cost of completing their degree and 69% cited cost as their primary reason for preferring a two-year accelerated degree.

In the UK, in the academic year 2015/16, there are around 40 accelerated degrees available (Unistats 2015): LLB (Hons) in Law, International Commercial Law, English/NI Law, BSc (Hons) in Economics, Marketing, Banking and Finance, Business Management, Accounting and Finance, Travel and Tourism, Events and Entertainment Management, Human Resources with Management, Oil and Gas Management, Enterprise and Small Business Development and BA (Hons) in Advertising, Journalism, Public Relations and Education.

In this first general approach to the context of accelerated degrees we have seen that, although not a new trend in the UK, these degrees have come to play a relevant role in the current Higher Education provision. Nevertheless, literature about this issue proved to be rare leaving a gap in research we intend to address concentrating on the specific area of education. Our underlying query was three-fold: are these accelerated degrees a new educational profile, an alternative route to access teaching or part of a re-tooling to rescue the university project?

### **An accelerated degree in the field of education: a new educational profile**

The fast-track degree under analysis is a 2-year BA (Hons) accelerated programme in the field of education first available in the academic year 2014/15 with 60 students enrolled. The degree includes a wide variety of courses within the areas of History and Politics, Philosophy, Contemporary Issues in Education and Psychology, among others, and does not include intensive teaching practice (students spend a total of 20 days in schools in order to reflect on practice as well as engage in school-based research). At the end of the two-year degree students can progress to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) via a Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) or an alternative route. They may also wish to become High Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) or seek to progress into further study at level 7, or follow a career working with children in a variety of fields within education and the community (health, education settings in museums, education publishing and journalism, social work, police). This accelerated degree runs within a Faculty which also offers the more traditional 3-year BA (Hons) in the same field of education which successful completion includes the award of Qualified Teacher Status (the qualification to teach in a maintained school or non-maintained special school in England).

Overall, the aims and structure of the programme evidence a more general and flexible approach to an education degree, not necessarily teaching oriented (there is no teaching practice) and so provides the opportunity for a wide variety of other career routes (education settings in museums, education publishing and journalism, social work, police). In theory, the students applying for this programme may well be looking for other career options (besides teaching) and expect to enter the labour market sooner than traditional degrees. However, was this the case with the students who first applied for the programme?

### **Accelerated degrees in education: an alternative route to access teaching**

Although not being the only career option available for the programme under analysis, teaching is one of the options and an area where significant changes are taking place. The debate about initial teacher education has been dominated over the last two decades by concerns about teacher supply. In England, teacher recruitment and retention numbers have begun to show a serious problem with about 40% of those who embark on a training course never becoming teachers, and of those who do become teachers, about 40% are no longer teaching 5 years later (Kyriacou and Kunc 2007).

Very recently, the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) census for the academic year 2014 to 2015 (DfE/ NCTL 2014) indicated that 32,543 new entrants had started, or expected to start, a primary or secondary initial teacher training programme in England with only 93% of the targeted places filled (compared to 95% in the previous year). Therefore, recruitment to initial teacher education has been high on the government's agenda. The idea has been to modernise the teaching profession in order to make it more attractive through advertising campaigns to overcome the poor professional image of teaching and a range of financial support schemes to counteract the economic difficulties facing some new entrants. Nevertheless, apprehension about standards in education has raised questions about the caliber of entrants to initial teacher education programmes. In order to potentially improve the quality of the teacher workforce the Conservative controlled coalition government (DfE 2010) introduced reforms to the provision of teacher training by undertaking a review of the basic skills tests for trainee teachers and a change to trainee funding criteria and bursaries. In addition, the framework for inspections of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) for Initial Teacher Training provision was also changed. The government also introduced new routes into teaching and made the system increasingly school led with the emphasis put on the role of partnerships to deal with the diversity of trainee's profiles, expectations and experiences.

Currently, around 30,000 new teachers are trained through an increasing variety of routes. There are currently two types of routes leading to qualification as a teacher in England - Qualified Teacher Status (QTS): school-based and university-based initial teacher training. University-based routes include the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and the Bachelor of Education (BEd). A BEd is a three- (or four) year undergraduate course leading to qualified teacher status (QTS). A PGCE is a one- year course taken after an undergraduate degree, which is typically led by a higher education institution (HEI). For both of these courses, students are placed in at least two schools for a minimum of 24 weeks in total. School-based routes include school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT), *Teach First*, *School Direct* (salaried and unsalaried) and *Troops to Teachers*. Allen et al (2014, p.1) in 2013-2014 have indicated that 'the majority of trainees for primary and secondary schools were trained through the HEI-led PGCE route (around 50% of trainees at primary and 60% of trainees at secondary level), BEd was the second most popular route for primary school trainees (30% training through this route), but trained a small percentage at secondary level (3%). *Teach First* trained around 10% of trainees at secondary level and *School Direct* salaried and unsalaried training around 20% of trainees at secondary level in 2013-14. According to the Initial Teacher Training census for the academic year 2014 to 2015 (DfE /NCTL 2014) 9,232 of new entrants were on the new *School Direct* programmes (fee and salaried), which was 28% of total new entrants. These employment-based routes tend to be, in fact, more likely chosen by mature potential teachers (less likely choosing a three- or four-year undergraduate degree programme) (Smithers et al 2012). The main differences between employment- and university-based teacher training are: the hours of practical experience in schools; how costs are borne between trainees, school budgets and central government; and

the type of schools that are available to train in (Allen et al 2014). In practice, those taking the undergraduate route into primary teaching in effect have one year less higher education than those following consecutive routes (undergraduate qualification and PGCE). In three years, undergraduate students have to be provided with personal and professional education, as well as practical training and experience in schools. This is highly challenging both for students themselves and also for those responsible for designing and teaching the programmes.

Based on the recommendations of the Carter review of Initial Teacher Training (Carter 2015, 64) commissioned by the Conservative controlled coalition government, “applicants must have access to clear information about routes into teaching and the range of courses available in order for them to be intelligent consumers of ITT provision”. Additionally, conversations with trainees and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) indicated that the choice of school and provider were often made on the basis of location (with travelling distance and affordability highly interlinked), followed by whether the school or provider had a good reputation with the applicants mentioning how they valued the opportunity to speak to providers face to face, and often the opportunity to visit on open days. In fact, we know the reasons for choosing a career in teaching may include a multitude of variables. Findings of a small-scale study concerning entry into teacher education collected from a total of 140 participants attending Teaching Taster Courses (recruitment initiative which includes talks and interactive sessions about the rewards, challenges and innovations within the teaching profession) in an English university (Taylor 2006, 451) showed that, for these prospective entrants, commitment to teaching was very high and most participants were not considering alternatives to teaching.

In the case of the 2-year degree under analysis, a student interested in becoming a teacher has the possibility to achieve a teaching qualification in the same three years as a standard 3-year degree with QTS by attending one additional year for PGCE or by following School Direct routes. The question here is whether students from this fast track degree are interested exclusively in teaching or are considering other career options.

### **Accelerated degrees: part of a re-tooling to rescue the university project**

As we have begun to show, in England in the last 5 years with what has been called: the neoliberal reform of education, there has been an accelerated move towards school autonomy and school-based teacher education with direct impacts upon the notions of teacher professionalism and professional formation. As argued by Ball (2015) there has been a move towards the *tyranny of numbers* with measurement and monitoring playing a particular role on education policy and teachers working on the articulation of performance and improvement.

In particular, the school-based teacher education has caused severe discomfort in the university education Faculties and Schools with the prospect of a progressive reduction in places allocated to them. In fact, the impact of initial teacher training reforms on English Higher Education institutions has, according to the Universities UK (2014, 16), ‘led to ITT provision being deemed a medium to high-risk activity by universities, and the viability of certain individual courses has come into question’ with universities responding to changes in provision by strengthening their activities in other areas of teacher development or putting their names to their own school-led programmes, which according to Smithers et al (2013, 29) ‘may be a way of securing the best of both worlds’. This situation has also been the result of the changing levels of demand for ITT courses, changes in the types of trainees attending universities, issues associated with the sustainability of courses, and the wider financial sustainability of ITT provision as well as the universities’ partnerships with schools, the extent to which allocations reflect regional needs for teaching and the increased uncertainty due to fluctuations in allocations, demand and income.

These concerns have framed Furlong's recent book 'Education: an anatomy of the discipline', sub-titled 'Rescuing the university project' (Furlong 2013a). In this book Furlong raises pivotal questions about education being no longer considered a field of study or *discipline* at all, the impact of globalisation, the emergence of the enterprise university as well as neo-liberalism and its impact on teacher education. The author supports the need to rescue the university project, re-imagine the university and for calls for 're-tooling' the discipline of education. Drawing on these recent developments and on the work of Furlong, Whitty (2014) has explored its implications for teacher training and the consequences for the 'University Project' in education and for the future of Education as a subject of study in universities:

'... some English higher education institutions would abandon teacher education, some would embrace School Direct with enthusiasm, private 'for profit' providers as well as Academy chains would enter the field and compete nationally, some education research and education studies degrees would move to social science departments, some key 'full service' Education departments would remain in universities and new institutional, regional, national and international partnerships would develop' (Whitty 2014, 476).

As a result, according to the same author more education departments may start being less centrally engaged or not even engaged at all in (initial) teacher education calling for a debate about their nature and purpose and relationship to other university departments (Whitty 2014). Indeed, Furlong (2013b) argues that educationalists need to win the argument that 'those studying education need the opportunity to engage with evidence, to challenge underlying assumptions, to debate ends as well as means'. Moreover, the direct association between educational studies and teacher training should be questioned and explored because, with the different brands of teacher professionalism now emerging, universities may have a future concentrating in diverse brands of education studies (Whitty 2014). At this level, a small research project (yet to be published) developed by Furlong and Whitty, supported by the British Academy/ Leverhulme Trust, has been examining how the field of educational studies is constituted in other jurisdictions with a view to placing a wider range of possibilities on to the agenda for English universities.

Overall, the concept behind the creation of accelerated degrees in education may answer this quest for diversity in approaches, routes and career options by allowing students to gain insight into education, teaching and learning without necessarily having to take a teacher training degree. Our study may, therefore, be used in the analysis of the range of options available in the field of education and our results contribute to the discussion at several levels: about whether students are yet to find the potential of this new educational profile, using it as an alternative route to access teaching or as part of a context where institutions are creating new types of degrees to increase their offer or just indirectly aiming to feed their teacher training programmes and invest in their own survival.

## **The Study**

This small-scale study set out to explore the expectations, perceptions and reflections of students attending the 1<sup>st</sup> year of a new 2-year accelerated degree in the field of Education in England aiming to answer two main research questions:

- What were the students' reasons for choosing this accelerated degree?
- What are their perceptions/opinions after one year of attending the degree?

By employing a mixed-methods' approach (Creswell and Clark 2011) we aimed to obtain a combination of quantitative data and qualitative data through the use of two different surveys undertaken by the students at two different stages: at the beginning – Survey 1 and at

the end of the first year of attending the programme– Survey 2. The surveys were composed by the researcher conducting the study in collaboration with the programme leader responsible for the design and implementation of the programme and the Director of the Faculty overseeing the development of this new undergraduate degree. The study was carried out in strict accordance with the ethical guidelines laid down by the University Research Ethics Committee. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and maintained and data collection was performed by the researcher responsible for the project who was not involved in the development or delivery of the programme to prevent any conflicts of interests or issues of power.

At the beginning of the first academic year, in order to obtain data in a quick and non-intrusive way, facilitate the process of students filling in the survey and obtain a general view of the students' reasons/ motivations for choosing the programme, we designed an online survey – Survey 1 - consisting mainly of closed answers allowing the collection of quantitative data. This survey aimed to collect information to help us answer our first research question (*What were the students' reasons for choosing this accelerated degree?*) and included questions about the students' main reason for taking an undergraduate degree, for choosing the institution and programme, about how the student became aware of the programme and intended career and routes. Students were contacted via email (using the programme's mailing list) and invited to fill in the *online* survey using a link to *Survey Monkey*. There, students received information about the first stage of the project and were asked for explicit consent by ticking a specific box that opened the online survey.

At the end of the first academic year, the students were invited directly by the researcher to fill in Survey 2 during a celebration session (representing a convenience sample of students who were in the event on the day the data collection was scheduled). After receiving information about the second stage of the project and being given the possibility not to participate or withdraw whenever they wished, the students were invited to provide feedback about their experience based on a set of predominantly open-ended questions. In addition, the surveys were designed to explore any perceived changes in their view about the specific field in education the programme was associated with (not disclosed here due to confidentiality issues), development of knowledge and skills, correspondence to initial expectations, differences from the approach taken by the 3-year degree and perceived benefits of taking this degree. The main focus of this survey was to collect information to help us answer our second research question (*What are their perceptions/ opinions after one year of attending the degree?*). Nevertheless, this second survey included three *follow-up* questions that intended to bring additional information regarding the first research question by collecting the students' perceptions after the first year of attending the programme regarding:

- what had attracted the students to apply (Q1)
- the use of the degree in the future career (Q2)
- the intention to apply for Teacher Training (Q3)

All the questions included in each of the surveys and their association with each of the two research questions can be found in Figure 1:

Figure 1 near here



### **Data collection and analysis**

The study comprised two sets of data deriving from two different groups of participants, all of them students attending a 2-year accelerated BA (Hons) in the field of education from one English university (with a total number of 60 students enrolled) (Table 1):

Table 1 near here

According to the data presented in Table 1 we can observe that in the first stage of data collection a total of 43 students agreed to participate (70.5%) with a majority of female participants (89.4%) with ages ranging from 18 to 40 years old (average of 21 years old). In the second stage of data collection students were invited directly by the researcher and 31 students agreed to participate (51.6%) with a majority of female participants (90%) with ages ranging from 18 to 26 years old (average of 20 years old). In performing the analysis and discussion of the results we should, however, take into consideration the fact data were collected from two potentially different groups of students and acknowledge it as a significant limitation of the study. Furthermore, it should be regarded as another source of impediment for any kind of generalization besides the reduced size of the sample and the depth of the study performed.

The analysis of the information collected was performed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and mean values for the Likert scales) for the quantitative data and deductive categorization for the qualitative data arising from the areas for justification/ provision of further information or open-ended answers. This categorization followed an iterative approach with the themes being identified by the researcher responsible for the study and a colleague not involved in the process individually so that they could then be compared, refined and, ultimately, agreed by the two researchers (Lincoln & Guba 1985, Corbin & Strauss 2008, Creswell 2012).

### **What were the students' reasons for choosing this accelerated degree?**

First, in order to inform the analysis of this first research question, it is relevant to explore the students' main motivation for taking an undergraduate degree, for choosing the institution and the choice of programme (Table 2).

Table 2 near here

According to the data collected using Survey 1, the main reason for taking a university degree (Q1) was to get prepared for the chosen career (82.3%) and for choosing the institution (Q2) was its location/ distance from residence (47%) or because this institution had the required programme (41.1%). From the intersection of these two variables we can see that students seem to be very career driven having chosen the institution because it was convenient or had the required degree. This may indicate that their choice was guided by a clear perspective of their intentions for their professional future. Moreover, when we analyzed the trend (mean value) evidenced by the level of relevance (using a 5-point relevance scale) attributed to a set of provided factors for choosing this programme (Q3 – Survey 1) we found students pointing out 'career options' as the most relevant factor (4.63) followed by 'content/areas of study' (4.00), 'programme length' (3.73), 'approach/ organization (teaching, learning, assessment)' (3.59) and 'programme fees' (3.06). This outcome may not only reinforce the career drive but may also evidence the relevance attributed to the programme length, a tendency among students attending accelerated 2-year also identified by the Education Marketing Solutions (2013).

Having these variables into consideration, we thought it would be important to analyze the students' career prospects at the beginning and at the end of the first year. According to the answers to Q5 (Survey 1), 94.4% of the participants pointed out teaching as their main career intention with only one student intending to follow a career in health (2.8%) and no students choosing any of the other career options of the degree (education settings in museums, education publishing and journalism, social work, police). According to the data, the route to teaching pointed out by the students was mainly through PGCE (67.6%) or through School Direct (14.7%). At the end of the year (Survey 2, Q2), 87.1% of the students intended to use the degree to access teaching as their future career (by mentioning: 'PGCE', 'QTS', 'Teacher training' or 'School Direct') with 6.5% stating that they intended to use the degree in their future career, 3.2% use it as a foundation knowledge and 3.2% for getting a job. Moreover, a total of 96.8% of the students explicitly stated their intention to apply for teacher training with the remaining 3.2% stating that they did not have that intention (Q3). Thus, overall, this strong intention to pursue a career in teaching came to be consistent with the finding from the study conducted by Taylor (2006) with prospective entrants to teaching education attending Teaching Taster Courses in an English university that showed this same high commitment to teaching with most participants not considering any alternatives to teaching. This strong drive and commitment evidenced by prospective teachers contrasts, however, with serious issues associated with the recruitment and retention of new entrants into the profession (Kyriacou and Kunc 2007). At this stage, the question was: if the great majority of the students are willing to pursue a career in teaching, how and why have they chosen this specific route?

According to the initial survey (Survey 1, Q4), the awareness of the programme came mainly from UCAS information/ website (52%). However, 29.4% of the participants chose to add other option to the provided list of options and indicated that they had either been contacted by the university (students quotes: 'programme leader contact', 'course leader – clearing', 'university/ course leader at interview') or been presented the degree as an alternative to the 3-year degree (students' quotes: 'alternative offer', 'by being offered instead of 3 year'/'by being offered instead of 3year QTS', 'referred by University after applying for 3 year course', 'did not get onto the 3 year course, this is what I was offered instead', 'just got put on wanted the 3 y course'). The detection of this specific issue has determined a change of direction in the study with a new variable having to be brought into the equation. The fact that a considerable number of students had been contacted by the university with the presentation of the degree (*or*) as an alternative to the 3-year degree may illustrate the effort the institution has made to publicize the offer to potential interested students or as an alternative to the 3-year degree. We believe this specific context may be associated with what Furlong (2003a) called "re-tooling" of the "discipline" of education and was referred by Whitty (2014, 478) when stating that even for those universities that remain in teacher education there were potentially possibilities associated with the opportunity of bringing new routes to teaching and offers somehow distinctive forms of approaching education as a field of university study. But was this fast track degree being used by the institution to still keep and/or attract students who didn't manage to access the 3-year standard degrees and, at the same time, directly feed the PGCE route to teaching afterwards? Notwithstanding, we may also argue that students may feel that through this fast-track degree they were also allowed a new option to access not only teaching (specially for those who have not accessed the standard 3-year degrees) but a degree after two years – quicker and cheaper - with other education-related career options and not necessarily teaching-oriented. This seems like a reasonable argument having in mind the relatively low numbers in teachers' recruitment with 93% of the targeted places filled in 2014-15, lower than the 95% in the previous year (DfE 2014).

Furthermore, data obtained one year later through an open answer about what had attracted them about this degree (Survey 2 – Q1) indicated that 41.9% of the students referred

that they had not applied for this programme or had been offered it after not being accepted for the 3-year programme ('I did not – applied for 3yr QTS', 'this was an alternative offer because I did not get into the 3 year course'), 29% mentioned they wanted to prepare for a career through PCGE to teaching ('this programme prepares me for my chosen career', 'wanted to become a xx teacher', 'it leads to the PGCE'), 22.6% referred the length of the programme – 2 years ('the potential to complete a xx degree in two years', 'Only 2 years') and 6.5% the distance of the institution ('close to home'). These results seem to reinforce the idea that students didn't intend to apply for this degree in the first place but the standard degree of three years with QTS instead and were offered this accelerated option after not being accepted. The data also show that the perspective of getting a degree in 2 years attracted the students to this programme and that they wanted to pursue a career in teaching. So here we have the students referring the fact that not only was this degree an alternative choice for the (great) majority but also that it was appealing to be awarded a degree after 2 years. This fact is understandable within the context of a generation of new fee paying students, in this case mature students (perhaps having to support their own studies and/ or have family and professional responsibilities) but, isn't this really the target of the fast track degrees? Indeed, as suggested by McCaig et al (2007) this type of degrees tends to be more appealing to mature students looking for a quicker route into employment specially in sectors where there are skills' shortages as well the financial benefits of taking a fast-track degree.

Overall, we believe, at this stage, this could perhaps be seen as a "win-win" situation for both parties: from the university's perspective, it has made the success of the degree enrollment numbers (with 60 students accessing this degree in the first year) and, therefore, the success of a new offer in an "endangered" area of recruitment; from the students' perspective, they have had the possibility to take a degree in their area of interest, quicker/ at a lower cost and, at the end, still be able to access other career routes besides teaching.

### **What are their perceptions/opinions after one year of attending the degree?**

Our second research question intended to gather data about the students' experience after attending the first year of this fast track degree but after the results portrayed above it gained a new implicit dimension: are students satisfied with this different approach to their field of study? The sources of data are open ended answers about the correspondence of the programme to their initial expectations, perceived changes in their view about the specific field in education, development of knowledge and skills, differences in approach from the standard 3-year degree, the benefits of taking this degree, recommendation and recruitment targets.

The data collected at the end of the first year through Survey 2 (Q4) indicated that 56.7% the participants considered the programme had corresponded to their expectations. The 36.7% who didn't have their expectations fulfilled considered the programme had 'more theory than expected/ less relatable to teaching/practical/ classroom activity', 'It has been more theory than I expected', 'the programme did not have as much teaching knowledge than I thought'. Others considered it "a lot different, thought it would be more practical", 'Not as relevant to xx education as expected' or 'Expected it to be like the 3 year course but accelerated' (other - vague/ imprecise answer – 6.6%). The perspective of having more than half of the students stating that the programme corresponded to their expectations opened an area for discussion about the type of information students received, their own perceptions, (mis)conceptions and the reality of what the programme was/ turned to be. Among the (mis)conceptions of the students might have been the idea that their degree would be an exact accelerated version of the 3-year standard degree. In order to assess this students were asked if they considered their programme had demonstrated differences in its approach from the standard 3-year programmes (Survey 2, Q8). In fact, 48.2% of the participants identified differences from the standard 3-year programmes by stating, for example that: '2-year

programme is more theory-based and 3-years is more practical/ teaching focused', 'Yes it is more theory not as much hands on', 'Yes, they are taught how to teach. We are only taught what it is', 'Yes because our course has more academic knowledge and no placement', 'Yes, because we have more theory based work' (25.9% of the students did not perceive differences and 25.9% did not know, were not sure or did not have interaction with students from the other programme). At this stage it is important to refer that the lack of interaction between the students of two different degrees (with different timetables and no joint courses) could have prevented students from having a clear perception about the 'real' differences.

These comments evidence the extent to which almost half of the participant students were aware that their degree was more theory-based degree (there was no intensive teaching practice as in the 3-year degree). The question is whether students were expecting those differences and were satisfied with the content/ approach of the degree. These 48.2% of the students saying that their programme is more theory based may well be the sign of dissatisfaction bearing in mind the fact that most students are willing to pursue a career in teaching and were interested in taking a 3-year programme with QTS in the first place. Nevertheless, it is relevant to observe that, 80% of the students agreed that this first year of the degree had contributed to a change in their view about the specific field of their degree, 16.7% referred that it 'hadn't' / 'not really'/'not too much' and 3.3% 'a little' (Survey 2, Q6) and 87.1% indicated that it had contributed to the development of both knowledge and skills, 9.7% that it had developed knowledge not skills and 3.2% that it had developed knowledge and skills in some courses (Survey 2, Q7). The changes in views and impacts on knowledge and skills came somehow to reinforce an idea of quality and satisfaction with the degree after experiencing this other approach or still be a sign of the need to accept the characteristics of the programme as it is although envisaging the gains and opportunity to still reach a career in teaching. In fact, these outcomes were not regarded as the most evident benefits of taking this degree (Survey 2, Q5) with 43.3% referring the fact that it provides a quicker/cheaper route to a degree ('cheaper and shorter time period', 'A quick route to achieving a degree', and a less expressive 36.7% referring its good background knowledge ('good all round knowledge of education', 'learnt a lot about education, history, philosophy, etc', 'background knowledge). Additionally, a total of 13.3% mentioned the access to School Direct/ PGCE ('access to school direct or PGCE', 'it leads to PGCE'). Here the instrumental and strategical motivation to access a fast track degree seems to be evident, a result consistent with the relevance attributed to the 'programme length' for choosing the programme (Survey 1) and recent data about the UK market for the accelerated 2-year (Eurograduate 2013) which showed its highest interest by mature students with half of the students surveyed (53%) citing lower costs as the main advantage of a 2-year accelerated degree and with one quarter (26%) saying it would allow them to begin earning sooner.

This positive outcome can also be confirmed by the fact that 90.3% of the participants would recommend the programme (mainly because it is 'good' or 'interesting') (Survey 2, Q10). Ultimately, we believe the issue of students' expectations, experiences and opinions may have been further explored when the students were invited to state who, according to their experience, should be targeted in terms of recruitment (Survey 2, Q9). The categories identified from the students' answers included: people passionate about education/ working with children (31%), people wanting to become teachers (24.1%), older/ mature students/ school leavers without qualifications/ individuals who want to have a taste of university (13.8%) and people not sure about being a teacher/ what area of education to choose (10.4%). It could be contended that, according to the data, although students seemed to be unaware of the differences or expecting them, their experience has been overall positive with the great majority of the students recommending it but mainly to people passionate about education/ working with children and older/ mature students/ school leavers without qualifications/ individuals who want to have a taste of university and people not sure about being a teacher/

what area of education to choose) and not so much, as expected from their own profile, to people wanting to become teachers. Can we, therefore, infer that they consider that it was a good choice because it is quicker and cheaper route to teaching and/or because this degree was the only alternative (and maybe last chance) to access a teaching career?

This was just the first year of the experience and the students are yet to experience another year of studies, the process of entry in PGCE and then in the teaching profession. Further work could really focus on this last question as well as follow these students throughout their second year of studies, access to PGCE (or not!) and entry/ retention in the profession after 5 years.

### **Conclusion**

The study goes some way to contributing to a perceived gap in the literature about 2-year BA accelerated degrees in general and in education in particular and illuminates a number of questions about such a specific type of degree in such a particular field of knowledge.

The general aims were to identify the reasons that motivated students to choose this type of degrees and describe their perceptions about their experience after one year of attendance. Perhaps at this early stage of studies in the field our best contribution was to raise questions about a complex and somehow unexpected outcome of an interesting and useful but relatively common evaluation regarding the students' expectations and experiences whenever a new programme is introduced.

After analyzing the potential and particularities of 2-year degrees, we described a case in which the students were choosing (and/or) being chosen to take such a degree as an alternative to a 3-year degree towards teaching. Students seemed to be willing to access teaching (some were not accepted for the standard degree), found/were offered a quicker and cheaper route with a variety of additional career options and, after the first year, report gains in their knowledge and skills although expecting a more practical approach, recommend the degree and keep their interest (perhaps even increased) in becoming teachers. At the same time, these high fee paying students, mainly mature ones, are being offered the possibility to graduate one year before the standard degrees and still follow their initial intentions to become a teacher - a career option craving for motivated and resilient graduates aiming to embrace a long and consistent career. All this in a context where universities and education departments are trying to find new ways to (re)invent/(re)gain their role in education and teacher training and need students to feed their teaching training route courses. Indeed, this degree may portray one new brand of education studies in universities claimed by Whitty (2014) as part of a "re-tooling" process or be an answer to Furlong's call for educationalists to demonstrate the distinctive role of universities in providing the best theory-practice instruction through research, evidence, questioning and universal horizons through a natural partnership with the world of work (Furlong 2013b). Only further research may help to explore these issues and answer the questions from the title ... not yet answered. At this point, discussion has been initiated.

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