



INDEPENDENT  
HIGHER  
EDUCATION

## **Independent Higher Education response to ‘Call for Evidence: Accelerated Courses and Switching University or Degree’**

**19 July 2016**

### **Introduction**

Independent Higher Education is the UK’s representative body for independent providers of higher education, professional training and pathways. Our members are known for their innovative course design and delivery, including flexible learning which allows students to experience more than one provider and accelerated courses which have been developed for and in partnership with industries which require job-ready graduates. The proven success of the innovative flexible and accelerated models of provision offered by Independent HEIs should serve both as inspiration for the wider sector and as a prism through which to interpret any further information the Government may receive through this call for evidence.

### **The impact of a credit transfer system on the higher education sector**

There is a clear need for a standardised, recognised and well-delivered model of credit transfer in the UK which is built upon the platform of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ), and established Subject Benchmark Statements. While we recognise that the most significant impact would be for those students who enter degree-based study and wish to switch, the benefits would extend beyond this group.

The most common form of switching institution or subject area already exists in the flexible pathways offered by many Independent HEIs, as well as by further education colleges and by the Open University. The transparency, recognition of credit and clear mechanisms for switching provider and even subject area have been shown to be successful in Independent HEIs, who have higher numbers of BME and mature students taking their courses than public universities according to a recent HESA report and a recent BIS report by IFF Research. A credit transfer system would only expand the positive impact that flexible pathways to degrees have already had on widening access to degree level qualifications.

## **Mechanisms to more effectively embed a system across the sector**

### ***Using flexible learning models to facilitate credit transfer***

The saturation of the market in traditional three or four-year degree models has meant that Independent HEIs, which are rarely presented to prospective students as part of standard information, advice and guidance, have had to innovate to stand out. The most common innovations are in flexible models which deliver credits by week, month and year across levels 2-6. These models allow students to step in and out of education as it suits them, gaining recognition for the work that they have completed and access to a clear range of educational opportunities for moving forward within their current institution or elsewhere. The value in these models is that they have been pre-designed for flexibility. They do not lead to “exit awards” as commonly found in traditional university models. They provide step-by-step entry into and pathways through higher education towards a full Degree, and they are designed to be supportive, engaging and most importantly mobile. We believe that the expansion of these types of model offer an innovative solution to credit transfer.

Some of our members also offer the standard full-time, three-year degree courses alongside their flexible models. Alongside their university partners, they have designed a pathway which allows flexibility wherever it is possible. They know that not all degrees will be suitable for students to switch on and off, but they make clear to students which courses offer this flexibility, what qualification their credit will earn them, and where they can take it. Movement between providers and subjects is not an afterthought added because something went wrong, but a carefully considered element in the design of the course which aims to enhance the options of students.

These flexible pathways, which encompass articulation agreements or partnerships between providers, as well as levels designed for student exit and re-entry from degree level study, are the closest the UK comes to the American 2 + 2 model identified in the consultation. Much like the American system, flexible pathways are designed after careful consideration of the needs of students.

The most common of these models is the “top-up year”. This is a programme which recognises HND/HNC level study in a particular subject and offers an additional year which can convert that study into a Degree by allowing students to complete the credits, content and knowledge gain necessary for a Degree in a year. Top-up years work best within recognised articulation routes, either through partnerships or in the same institution. They are also of great benefit to students who have to take time away from study at level 5 or after two years of a Bachelor’s Degree. Our members also take in a number of students who have successfully completed two years of their undergraduate programme at a traditional university but were unsatisfied with the experience. The top-up year allows these students to retain the value of their prior learning while obtaining a final Degree that is more suited to them.

The next most common model is to break each year into its respective level on the qualifications framework and offer flexible pathways from level 4 to level 6.

This model is well suited to:

- Students who know the general subject area they wish to study but who are keen to explore a breadth of knowledge before deciding on a specialism. For example, students who know they are interested in information technology and computing but are unsure if they want to pursue coding, graphic design or games design for their final qualification.
- Mature and returning students who are unsure if they will be able to make the time commitment required for a full Bachelor's Degree course.
- Self-funding students who are unable to get the level of funding they require from government and who plan to fund their studies by working between levels.
- Students who are self-employed and seeking higher education to advance their own business. These students may not be looking for a Degree, or any specific qualification, but may care instead about the knowledge they will gain. They may want a route which allows them to decide for themselves when they have learned enough.

These are the types of student that our members report as most common on their flexible learning models. Many also report significant success with these models for those who have left school before A-levels or those who have been unemployed who may need a more flexible course of study.

Flexible learning models involve forethought into how the learning gained at one provider might be recognised across a range of others. Providers must be encouraged to identify what learning outcomes are transferable both to other providers teaching the same subject, but also to other, similar subjects. As this already happens within articulation partnerships and flexible learning models to attract students to transfer, there is a model to work from in achieving a more universal system of identifying credit transfer options to students.

## **Barriers to a more extensive credit transfer system**

Our members suggest that many of the students who transfer onto their courses do so because of the specialist nature of their programmes as compared to their previous study. While they have designed a system which promotes flexibility, they also recognise that this is not appropriate or currently possible for all Degrees. Providers are keen not to set students up to fail on their new course by allowing advanced entry on transferred credits which have not actually prepared students for the level of the course they enter on.

- Specialist Courses – The most significant barrier is highly specialist degrees which rely on a full range of inter-linked credits. These are most common in vocational and creative courses but can extend to academic subjects. It would be unfair to students and irresponsible of a provider to encourage entry to a higher level of study when the student has not yet obtained the same level of understanding and, in particular, the practical skills mastered by other students on the course. Course requirements must be carefully considered as there will be some specialist courses where credit transfer is not appropriate.
- Cost or resource – Transfers based on modules is time-consuming and expensive for providers who much prefer to work with full academic years of study where possible. To avoid cost and resource being a significant barrier we would

encourage a transfer system which looks at years of study and maps degrees to levels on the qualifications framework like many flexible learning models.

- Student demand – Many of our members do not report large numbers of students transferring in from other providers. While some may not consider as ‘transfers’ students entering their flexible pathway programmes, those members who have transferred students outside of these pathways did not report large numbers of students. It may be that recognition, promotion and expansion of more flexible learning models may address many of the challenges currently faced by the students who would consider transferring, and that there may not be sufficient demand for the adoption of a more comprehensive model.
- Degree recognition – Many of our members have partner universities who validate their programmes and who determine if students have met the required outcomes of their particular Degrees. Our members report challenges with credit that transferring students wish to bring with them not matching the specific Degree outcomes closely enough for the validating partner. This is often an issue of module design, including assessment, industry experience and similar elements, rather than academic learning gain.

## **Options for credit transfer models**

### ***International lessons***

1. Greater use of the flexible learning system  
We would recommend using the existing flexible learning system models found across the UK. They are similar to the American 2 + 2 system identified in the consultation but have been successful within the UK’s qualifications frameworks.
2. Frameworks for “recognised credit”  
Some North American universities have set up a system of “recognised credit” – identifying those modules in other universities that students can take in keeping with their own degree. This is particularly useful for students who may need to study at home for one semester or for students who may need to make up extra credit in the summer, when many universities run elective courses. It allows providers to maintain autonomy in their course design while also engaging in exchanges of credit which fit their degree outcomes.

In some states and provinces, a recognition system has been set up to identify these credits and the universities and colleges which recognise them. These processes are more common because of the Further to Higher education routes which typify North American degree-level education. This can take the form of an online tool or a facilitating body which completes the matches of modules and qualifications across member institutions. The Ontario Council for Articulation and Transfer, for example, has an app which supports students in understanding the transfer of their credit. In Nova Scotia the government offers a “Higher Education Gateway” specifically designed to assess prior learning and transfer credits. The latter model is lighter touch, allowing significant discretion for higher education institutions while enhancing transparency for students.

## **Accelerated Degrees and the barriers to their greater availability**

When surveyed, those of our members who offer accelerated degrees did not recognise many of the barriers to designing and delivering such programmes that the consultation identified. They offered a number of reasons why Independent HEIs might not find accelerated degrees difficult to bring to students:

- Their academic staff are all on teaching contracts. They are offered a similar annual leave entitlement as most employees in the UK and so have no problem teaching elements of their course when staff at traditional universities may be on holiday.
- Their accelerated courses include work-based and industry elements, meaning that students do not fear missing out on the work opportunities that students on more traditional degree courses may obtain in the summer months.
- Their courses have high contact time and innovative assessment models by design. Where other providers may fear that students need time to obtain feedback on assessment and to understand that feedback, within their models student feedback is a more continuous and rigorous process. Providers ensure that students have access to academics daily or weekly, and formative assessments are part of every module. Students are made aware of their progress more regularly so that they can learn from it more quickly.
- Employers often fund the course for students who are already or will become part of their workforce. The interest of employers is to obtain job-ready graduates as quickly as possible, allowing both the industry and student to benefit fully from the learning gain. From the perspective of our members these Degrees deliver higher education content in an intensive environment to students who want to work like they would in their field. These particular students do not want long summer breaks where they do not or cannot engage with their industry or field of study.

The largest and most significant barrier to accelerated degrees is the current design of the Student Finance system. Student Finance is based on years of study and not on credit gained. It is set up to facilitate three or four-year degrees with tuition for the course divided by year of study. Accelerated degrees facilitate the same amount of credit within a more compressed timeframe. Many programmes deliver teaching during times traditionally reserved for student holidays (summer, shorter Easter breaks, fewer reading weeks), to ensure that credits receive the attention they need for higher education.

Many of our Designated members charge an overall tuition fee which is equivalent to or less than for a three-year degree. This allows students to show a comparable value to the degrees, often necessary to ensure a return to commercial lenders. For many commercial lending is the only way to meet the additional cost beyond the capped loan amount available to Designated providers.

The current student loan system leaves students less well off in maintenance funding as well as in tuition fees, as they can only receive maintenance loans for two periods of funding which are based on the traditional study periods. As the second year is their final year they see a reduction in maintenance because they are considered to stop studying in June. This however is not the case and the student loan system is not equipped to deal with this difference. This leaves students out of pocket for the

additional months within the two years when they are studying but not receiving maintenance loans. Students from widening participation backgrounds in particular, and especially those re-training after unemployment, find it almost impossible to obtain sufficient funds for two-year accelerated courses, regardless of their academic ability to complete the course. The loan system should be redesigned to fit a credit-based model which allocates tuition fees on a per-credit basis and which recognises the additional maintenance required during the summer months. Only with a credit-based system will students be given access to the funding they need to complete an accelerated course.

Accelerated courses often save students (and the student loan book) money on maintenance loans, as the students will take less time overall for study by several months. This is doubly valuable to students as it means not only are they earning a salary more quickly but they also do not have the additional maintenance loans to pay off.

As well as changing the Student Finance system for students, it would be beneficial if the tuition loan payments to providers also supported accelerated and flexible learning by delivering payments to providers more regularly throughout the year. Where learning is more intensive, so too is the cost of delivering it. Providers need a payments system which better reflects when they pay staff and incur other costs of delivery. Some of our members report that the existing SLC payments system hinders their innovation through accelerated and flexible courses.

Several of our members, including SAE Institute, London School of Business and Management, Condé Nast College of Fashion and Design, KLC School of Design, Point Blank Music School, Court Theatre Training Company, the Academy of Contemporary Music and Met Film School, already offer accelerated courses and have experienced success in both student demand and satisfaction.