Accelerated degrees in Higher Education

Case study report

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Executive Summary

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to undertake a literature review and a series of case studies. Since the report was commissioned responsibility for higher education policy has transferred to the Department for Education (DfE). The case studies aimed to complement the literature review by presenting a picture of how accelerated degrees were currently being delivered and identify examples of good practice.

Between April and August 2016, six full case studies and one mini case study were undertaken with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England that offered either accelerated degrees or flexible study at undergraduate bachelor's level.

The case studies were conducted using qualitative research methods: in-depth interviews, joint interviews and focus groups with a range of staff; and, in some cases, focus groups or interviews with students.

Teaching provision at the case study institutions

There was much variation between the case study institutions and their teaching provision, but some general trends were identified.

For the majority of the case study institutions, accelerated degrees constituted a small minority of the undergraduate courses that they offered: most of the case study institutions delivered ten or fewer accelerated degrees. However for one institution, accelerated bachelor's degrees constituted their standard mode of delivery for undergraduate courses, and another case study institution did not deliver any accelerated degrees but delivered a high proportion of flexible and alternate modes of study.

There appeared to be no 'standard' term in the sector for describing accelerated degrees: most of the case study institutions referred to accelerated degrees as 'fast-track' degrees and some referred to them as 'accelerated', and during interviews or in longer marketing text, they were quite often referred to as 'two year degrees' or 'two year fast-track' etc.

All of the full case studies were involved with flexible and alternate modes of learning to some extent such as part-time study, blended learning, distance learning, and work-based learning. Indeed, many emphasised their 'history' of engaging with flexible learning. Staff at several institutions linked flexible and alternate modes of study with their institution's commitment to widening participation by increasing routes and modes of access to higher education.

There was a strong focus on vocational subjects in the accelerated degrees offered, with subjects including management, education, law, and journalism. A couple of institutions offered humanities subjects but this was less common and could incorporate vocational

elements such as education-based placements. The case study institutions tended not to offer accelerated degrees in science subjects and staff expressed the opinion that it may be more difficult to 'accelerate' science subjects.

The number of students on accelerated degree courses in the case study institutions were relatively small. Class size varied between one student and 40, but intakes of between 10 and 20 were more typical. There was large variation in the total number of students participating in accelerated degrees at each institution, ranging from 12 to 1,000 students. Half of the case study institutions reported total cohorts of 12 to 30 students.

The case study institutions varied in the length of time they had been delivering accelerated degrees. Most institutions had started delivering accelerated degrees between two and ten years ago but one had been delivering accelerated bachelor's degrees for several decades.

The most common underlying motivation for creating accelerated degrees appeared to be to increase student recruitment or to gain a competitive advantage. Most case study institutions felt that accelerated degrees complemented the flexible and alternate modes of study they already offered and some also felt they were well suited to a vocational emphasis.

Staff thought that accelerated degrees would attract or facilitate different types of students to participate in undergraduate courses. It was felt that by reducing the number of years for which a student needed to pay, and thus reducing the overall tuition costs of an undergraduate degree, it might make it easier for those from a widening participation background to access higher education. Some felt that the reduced timespan might also attract career-changers or people with existing experience of work who might want to get into the workforce quickly and be more used to working throughout the year and/or be less interested in the social aspects of a traditional three-year degree.

The market for accelerated degrees

Staff and students felt that there was low general awareness of accelerated degrees among students and prospective students. Staff felt that awareness among employers was also low, and some students reported needing to explain what they were in interviews with employers or other HEIs.

Case study institutions used a range of market research approaches before launching accelerated degrees from desk research through to focus groups and surveys. Most institutions had used desk or qualitative research.

Student characteristics varied widely across institutions and courses, but there were some patterns.

- All case study institutions reported some level of young mature student participation i.e. people in their early- to mid-twenties.

- Case study institutions described accelerated degree students as focused, highly motivated and keen to progress, with some HEIs reporting that they attracted better performing students than was typical for their institution.

Some case study institutions did not promote accelerated degrees separately but included these in their general promotion of undergraduate courses, which some staff found frustrating. However, some institutions reported that marketing to mature students could be difficult and expensive – these were a key target market for many of the courses. Other institutions undertook specific promotional activities for accelerated degrees. These messages often focused on accessing the workplace faster rather than the potential cost savings.

Most case study institutions reported that they would continue to offer accelerated degree courses if they continued to attract sustainable numbers of students.

Design and delivery of accelerated degree courses

Most case study institutions used a three-term structure to the academic year for their accelerated courses differing from the two term structure used for their traditional undergraduate degrees. The third term was 'slotted' into the traditional summer periods in order to incorporate six terms of study into two years. In most cases, accelerated courses were based on three-year equivalent 'parent' degrees offered by the university, and accelerated and traditional students often shared some lectures. However, some accelerated degree courses were bespoke and no teaching was shared. One institution used a four-term approach to the academic year and delivered most of its undergraduate teaching through the accelerated degree model.

Modes of teaching used during the summer terms varied widely across the case study institutions. Only one institution maintained a traditional approach of lectures and seminars. Most case study institutions employed blended learning, where students attended university for two to seven weeks of classroom-based learning at the beginning of the summer term, with the remainder of the term being delivered through online or distance learning. Several case study institutions used work-based learning as a compulsory element of their accelerated degrees, often via placements. The overall design of an accelerated degree was sometimes quite innovative compared to the institutions' typical delivery.

Most case study institutions allowed students to transfer from the accelerated degree onto an equivalent three-year degree. Staff felt that this was an essential safety net but noted that some successful students transferred for other reasons as well. Some

institutions allowed students on traditional degrees to transfer onto accelerated degrees. Transfers in either direction usually occurred after the second term of the first year.

Benefits

Benefits experienced by staff and institutions:

- Staff in many case study institutions felt that accelerated degrees attracted 'stronger' students than their typical intake. Students were highly motivated and committed and this translated to positive outcomes. However, staff acknowledged that this could be a result of selection at the recruitment stage - applicants were vetted carefully to recruit students that the institution felt could 'cope' with the demands of accelerated study.

- Some staff felt that accelerated degrees helped an institution to stand out and were a 'premium' product. One institution had initially charged higher fees for its accelerated degrees (£9,000 instead of £8,500) but then later increased all undergraduate fees to the maximum fee level.

Benefits experienced by students:

- A key benefit highlighted by both staff and students were the reduced costs of an accelerated degree where students pay two years' of tuition fees rather than three. This was also seen as a benefit for employers funding an employee's study.

- Staff and students felt one benefit was entering the labour market faster compared with traditional undergraduate degrees. One young mature student saw it as an opportunity to catch-up with their peers. Staff and students suggested an accelerated degree could be combined with a master's degree or vocational qualification.

- Staff and students felt that the small cohorts typical on accelerated degrees increased the amount of contact time between staff and students and facilitated a more interactive learning environment. They were also felt to benefit relationships between students. Both staff and students felt that accelerated degree students formed more cohesive and supportive groups.

- Staff felt that accelerated degrees helped students learn to work under pressure and manage workload, helping prepare them for work or further intensive study. Students shared this view.

- Accelerated degrees at the case study institutions often had a vocational focus and many involved placements. Staff felt this helped with gaining employment and students reported that the vocational aspects of their courses were important to them.

Challenges and barriers

Challenges related to practical issues of delivering accelerated degrees:

- Many staff highlighted the impact that the shorter time-scales of accelerated degrees had on the time available for marking and moderation. Students needed to receive feedback and grades on time in order to progress on their course. Marking to tight deadlines and trying to fit with exam board timing caused increased stress for staff.

- The pace and relatively inflexible structure of accelerated degrees could also cause challenges for students. Staff noted that students had less time for placements or part-time jobs and tight scheduling meant that sometimes students had fewer or no subject module options compared with students on equivalent three-year courses.

- Another challenge regarding the pace of accelerated degrees was the perception that they were too difficult or stressful. Two institutions identified this concern in their market research exercises. However, accelerated degree students reported that, though they had to work hard, their course was manageable.

- Staff and students identified issues around access to support and facilities. Out of term opening hours and staff annual leave or conferences meant that students' access was limited at certain times of the year. Some students also felt they lacked some aspects of peer support as by their second year there were no longer students above them to provide advice.

- Staff also noted that universities earned less money per degree for an accelerated degree compared with a traditional degree as they could only charge standard fees for two years rather than three. Some staff felt that universities should be allowed to charge higher fees for accelerated degrees.

- Opinions were mixed as to whether there were increased costs from accelerated degrees. Some staff felt that there were no real extra costs as they used existing staff and facilities, but some staff believed there were opportunity costs involved such as loss of income from renting accommodation to students instead of utilising these facilities to host conferences.

- Staff at all institutions were concerned with the general lack of awareness surrounding accelerated degrees, which was seen as a barrier to the expansion of accelerated degrees. It was felt that low awareness among schools, colleges and careers advisors meant potential students did not receive advice or information about them. Staff reported that some students and schools/colleges did not realise they had the same value as a traditional three-year degree. Some students reported having to explain what an aceelerated degree involved to employers and other HEIs during interviews.

- Staff emphasised the need to recruit students with sufficient motivation, resilience and ability to cope with accelerated study. Most case study institutions interviewed all their accelerated degree applicants, but most still experienced some degree of student drop out. Interviewing was also felt to be important as some applicants may have come to higher education through alternate routes. Institutions felt able to interview all applicants as cohorts were small but this would be more challenging with larger numbers of applicants.

Reflections on accelerated degrees and the wider higher education landscape

Overall staff were positive about accelerated degrees. Most were highly engaged and enthusiastic about the accelerated courses offered and enjoyed teaching the highly motivated students. Many felt that accelerated degrees addressed a gap in the market and offered a new alternative route into higher education.

Some staff felt that the government could play a larger role in the promotion of accelerated degrees, both through raising awareness amongst students and by reassuring employers of the parity between two- and three-year degree courses. One staff member highlighted that the government had been very successful in raising awareness surrounding apprenticeships. Some students also suggested that options for two year degrees could be clearer in UCAS.

Some staff felt that targeted financial advice for students, possibly from Student Finance England, could be beneficial and several students suggested that larger student loans for accelerated degree courses would be helpful as there was less opportunity to work alongside study.

Most staff felt that there was potential for growth in accelerated degrees in the future and that recent increases in fees had been a significant factor in making them a more attractive option. They thought that the number of accelerated degrees offered could be increased but felt that increasing cohort sizes too much could lead to unmanageable workloads for staff. However, it was also felt that care needed to be taken in choosing a subject and format that was appropriate to or benefitted from the accelerated model.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to undertake a literature review and a series of case studies. Since the report was commissioned responsibility for higher education policy has transferred to the Department for Education (DfE). The literature review 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). The case studies aimed to complement the literature review by presenting a picture of how accelerated degrees were currently being delivered and identify examples of good practice.

Research context

Over the 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. At the same time, the sector is coping 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 Further Educaiton (FE), non-publicly funded providers, 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[1]).

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 Universities UK report (2015[2]) 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. DfE are 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 case study element of the research was to use qualitative research to conduct a series of case studies of institutions which deliver accelerated bachelor's degrees or other flexible learning to explore what current delivery of accelerated degrees looks like and to identify examples of good practice. This would inform and enrich the findings of the literature review on accelerated degrees. More specifically, the case study research aimed to add depth and examples of current practice relating to:

- perceptions and experience of the current market for accelerated degrees – to explore what demand there is for accelerated degrees, what type of student is attracted to accelerated degrees and whether this has changed over time;

- design and delivery of accelerated degrees – to explore how institutions deliver accelerated degrees, how this fits alongside any three year delivery and how flexible and alternate modes of learning can be incorporated;

- beneficial outcomes – to explore any perceived benefits for institutions, students, staff and employers and whether there have been unexpected benefits;

- challenges and barriers – to explore any perceived challenges for institutions, students, staff and employers and any barriers experienced; and

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[1] Outram, S. (2011). *Final Evaluation of the HEFCE-funded Flexible Learning Pathfinder Projects*, The Higher Education Academy
[2] UUK (2015). Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education, Universities UK

- good practice – to identify good practice in accelerated degrees. These may include: examples of delivery that are perceived to be particularly effective or innovative, approaches used to resolve challenges in delivering accelerated degrees and examples of courses that have met a need in the education market.

The case studies sought to identify and synthesise a range of experiences, stakeholder views and delivery approaches to accelerated degrees to identify common themes and highlight good practice. It also sought to illustrate how accelerated degrees fit into the current higher education provision landscape and potential scope for how this may be developed in the future.

Methodology

In addition to a literature review reviewing evidence and policy around accelerated degrees in the UK and internationally, a series of case studies were carried out to identify good practice and successful delivery of flexible learning. Between April and August 2016, six full case studies and one mini case study were undertaken with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England that offered either accelerated degrees or flexible study at undergraduate bachelor's level.

Case study selection

Good practice case studies were selected in collaboration with HE analysts at BIS to explore institutional good practice, examples of flexible modes of study delivery and, in particular, delivery of accelerated degrees at undergraduate bachelor's level. The seven case studies were selected to represent a range of experiences and contexts from the following factors:

- number of accelerated degree courses offered

- number of students studying for accelerated degrees

- subjects offered as accelerated degrees

- number of years the institution has been offering accelerated degree courses

- type of institution (publicly or non-publicly funded)

- characteristics of students at that institution

Case study approach

The case studies were conducted using qualitative research methods. For the full case studies, the core element comprised in-depth interviews, joint interviews and focus groups with a range of staff including: senior management, academic staff, business development staff and staff supporting students. The mini case study comprised one

interview with a senior staff member involved in designing, developing and delivering an accelerated degree course. Staff interviewees were asked about:

- flexible learning provision at the case study institution;

- provision of accelerated bachelor's degrees;

- reasons for the institution offering this provision;

- the market for accelerated degrees;

- design and structure of accelerated degrees;

- benefits and challenges of offering these degrees;

- students experiences of accelerated degrees; and

- their own experience of involvement with accelerated degrees.

In a number of case studies, interviews and focus groups were also conducted with students who were participating in an accelerated bachelor's degree exploring their experiences of studying for an accelerated degree, factors influencing decision-making around choosing their course, perceptions around accelerated degrees and future plans. Discussion guides used for staff and students can be found in appendices two and three respectively.

The research was not designed to be an audit of provision but an exploration of how flexible learning and accelerated degrees are currently delivered in England and to identify any examples of good practice and any challenges or barriers to offering or studying for accelerated degrees and thus update the literature on accelerated degrees in England. Most qualitative information was collected in face-to-face interviews or focus groups during fieldwork visits to the institutions; any remaining information was collected through telephone interviews and group discussions via Skype. Information about participants across all case studies by role is summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Case study participants by role for the total sample

Role	Number
Senior management	11
Academic staff	18
Business development staff	8
Student support staff	2
Students	19
Total	58

A qualitative approach ensured that the greatest possible diversity of viewpoints and key HE characteristics would be reflected. However, it should be noted that, unlike large scale survey research, findings from qualitative research cannot be interpreted as being

statistically representative of all HEIs and colleges in England, or be used to describe the numbers and proportions of institutions or staff delivering accelerated degrees or the number of students participating in them. Instead qualitative research provides depth of insight. It gives a detailed understanding of how individual institutions deliver accelerated degrees and what factors influenced the creation, design and delivery of these courses, as well as identifying examples of good practice and challenges or barriers to delivery of accelerated degrees.

In England, around 20 publicly funded institutions and five non-publicly funded institutions were identified during this study as offering accelerated bachelor's degrees. An overview of accelerated degree provision in the UK and overseas is provided in the accompanying literature review. In this study IES undertook full case studies with five publicly funded universities and one non-publicly funded university, as well as one mini case study with a sixth publicly funded university. The case studies were selected to represent a range of experience of delivery of accelerated degrees in terms of how many accelerated degrees are offered, how long the institution has offered this provision, institution type, and course subjects offered. The selected case study institutions offered a range of subjects including vocational subjects, such as management, education, journalism and finance and accounting, humanities subjects, such as English and history and some science courses, such as sports sciences and psychology. An overview with profiles of the case study institutions is presented in the following section.

The shortlisted case studies were sent an invitation to participate in the research from the Head of Higher Education Analysis at BIS and a research briefing describing the aims and format of the research. This letter (sent in October 2015 or April 2016) set out what the research involved, introduced the research team and asked for a named contact. The research team then followed up and worked closely with the institution liaison to identify the most relevant individuals to speak with and to arrange the interviews and group discussions at the most convenient times for interviewees and arrange for suitable venues. The case studies involved visits of one day. A topic guide was developed in partnership with BIS colleagues and was used flexibly with individual participants based on their role in the institution and their experience. With interviewees' permission, the discussions were recorded in order to supplement the notes made by the lead researcher for each case study.

Analysis of the case study findings used a content analysis technique against a framework of themes developed using the analytical framework and sub-themes identified in the literature review. Findings were organised and summarised using these themes with anonymised quotes provided to illustrate and illuminate key points. In addition to this, examples of good practice have been identified and, where permission has been given, these examples are presented throughout this report with details identifying the relevant institution. Participating institutions have also received a brief case study write-up for their institution which can be used internally for course or policy development.

Overview of case study institutions

Six full case studies and one mini case study explored good practice at seven higher education institutions. Quotes or findings from these institutions have been anonymised in the report except where institutions have explicitly given permission to be identified for specific examples of good practice. However, some basic information is provided in the following institution profiles in order to provide some context for the findings.

Institution 1

Institution 1 is a post-1992 university. The institution offers several accelerated bachelor's degrees in vocational subjects. The accelerated degrees have been running for around two years, and are part of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Pathfinder Pilots. There are up to 100 students at the institution studying for an accelerated degree. There are around 16,000 students at the institution in total. The institution places importance on their widening participation agenda and a large amount of their teaching is delivered via online or part-time study. The institution has a dedicated department delivering online learning, including international and distance learning, and over 3,000 students study this way.

Institution 2

Institution 2 is a post-1992 university. The institution offers one accelerated degree combining two subjects and with a vocational emphasis. In total, around 30 students at the institution were studying on the accelerated degree course. The overall student population at the institution was 4,000. The institution offers some flexible learning with a number of part-time courses and one of their master's degree programmes is delivered through blended learning.

Institution 3

Institution 3 is a pre-1992 university and was established in the latter half of the 20th century. The institution does not currently offer any accelerated bachelor degrees but specialises in flexible learning, both in terms of time and alternate modes of delivery. There were up to 200,000 students at the institution. Over 60 per cent of students entered the university through widening access routes and many were mature students. Most students studied part-time.

Institution 4

Institution 4 is a post-1992 university. The institution offers three accelerated bachelor's degrees. All of these courses are in vocational subjects. These degrees have been running for around three years. Current student numbers are small with one or two

students on each course as they are piloting these courses but they plan to increase numbers over time. Fewer than a dozen students in total at the institution were studying for accelerated degrees at the institution. There are around 11,000 students at the institution. The institution is committed to a widening participation agenda and offers some alternative and flexible modes of study.

Institution 5

Institution 5 is a post-1992 university. The institution offers eight accelerated bachelor's degrees. Most of these courses are in vocational subjects except for one humanities subject. The institution has offered accelerated degrees for around ten years and was involved in the Flexible Learning Pathfinder programme. Around 200 students overall were studying for accelerated bachelor's degrees at the institution. The institution identified as a 'widening participation' institution (as 50 per cent of students come from postcodes classified in this category) offered some alternative and flexible modes of study.

Institution 6

Institution 6 is a pre-1992 non-publicly funded university and was established in the latter half of the 20th century. The majority of its undergraduate bachelor's degrees are offered as two year accelerated degrees and this has been the dominant model for several decades. These accelerated degrees include vocational, humanities and science subjects. Accelerated bachelor's degree courses comprise up to 40 students each cohort year. Of the around 2,000 students at the institution, around 1,000 study at undergraduate level. Undergraduate courses are delivered almost exclusively using the accelerated degree model. Around a third of students at the institution are non-EU international students. The institution offers relatively limited provision in terms of alternate and flexible learning provision beyond accelerated degrees; a small proportion of students study part-time.

Institution 7

Institution 7 is a post-1992 public university. They offer one accelerated bachelor's degree in a vocational subject. This degree has been running for eight years. Student numbers on the degree courses have been in the range of 12 to 18. At the time of fieldwork, there were 20 students participating in the accelerated degree course across both years of study. The total number of students at the institution is around 8,000. The institution is committed to a widening participation agenda and offers some flexible learning.

Report structure

This report draws together experiences and perceptions regarding accelerated degree provision at seven case study institutions to present a picture of current delivery and to identify examples of good practice.

- Chapter 2 presents an overview of learning provision at the case study institutions including information about courses types, teaching modes, organisation of teaching, an overview of accelerated degree provision and institutional motivations for offering accelerated degrees.

- Chapter 3 describes case study institutions' experiences and perceptions around the market for accelerated degrees and how institutions have engaged with this. This includes: awareness of accelerated degrees, market research undertaken by institutions, characteristics of students attracted to accelerated degrees, how institutions promote them and changes in the market for accelerated degrees both observed and expected.

- Chapter 4 provides an overview of how the case study institutions have approached the design and delivery of accelerated degrees and present examples of current practice. This chapter covers: considerations around design, how different accelerated degrees courses are delivered and approaches to student transfer between accelerated and non-accelerated courses.

- Chapter 5 explores perceived benefits of accelerated degrees reported by interviewees at case study institutions. This includes benefits for institutions, staff and students.

- Chapter 6 explores challenges and perceived barriers in delivery accelerated degrees reported by interviewees at case study institutions. This includes challenges and barriers for institutions, staff and students.

- Chapter 7 explores attitudes and opinions around the future development of accelerated degrees, what may affect this and topics around accelerated degrees and flexible learning where more information or research would be beneficial.

Chapter 2: Teaching provision at the case study institutions

This chapter provides an overview of the teaching provision delivered across the case study institutions. First, it explores how accelerated degrees fit into the portfolio of teaching offered by institutions with regards to traditional undergraduate provision, flexible and alternate learning and organisation of teaching delivery. It then presents a picture of accelerated degree provision across the case study institutions in terms of the number of courses offered, subjects and cohort size. Finally, institutional motivations for offering accelerated degrees are explored identifying key themes.

Standard provision and flexible learning

For the majority of the case study institutions, accelerated degrees constituted a small minority of the undergraduate courses that they offered: most of the case study institutions delivered ten or fewer accelerated degrees. However for one institution, accelerated bachelor's degrees constituted their standard mode of delivery for undergraduate courses and another case study institution did not deliver any accelerated degrees but delivered a high proportion of flexible and alternate modes of study. It is worth noting that there appeared to be no 'standard' term in the sector for describing accelerated degrees: most of the case study institutions referred to accelerated degrees as '*fast-track*' degrees and some referred to them as '*accelerated*', and during interviews or in longer marketing text, they were quite often referred to as '*two year degrees*' or '*two year fast-track*' etc.

As reflects the number of accelerated degrees offered by the case study institutions, most organised their academic year following the traditional model of undergraduate teaching with a long summer holiday: most used a three term system although some referred to the first two teaching terms as semesters. More atypical arrangements included: an institution where the academic year comprised four terms and holidays were relatively reduced, and another institution with two main teaching terms where if students chose to take modules in both teaching terms this could lead to reduced holiday and possible overlap between the terms.

All of the full case studies were involved with flexible and alternate modes of learning to some extent such as part-time study, blended learning, distance learning and work-based learning. Indeed, many emphasised their 'history' of engaging with flexible learning, including one institution which had participated in the Accelerated Degree Pathfinders and the Accelerated and Intensive Routes to Study (AIRS) and another institution specialised in offering flexible and alternate modes of study. Institutions tended to regard flexible and alternate modes of study as strongly linked with their institution's commitment to widening participation by increasing routes and modes of access to higher education.

In terms of their wider engagement in flexible delivery:

- Part-time: Nearly all of the institutions referred to part-time learning. Some reported that they had a lot of part-time learners, although one reported that this had decreased somewhat as part-time study has decreased in the sector overall. Others reported some part-time provision; one institution described offering 'quite a few' degrees as part-time but felt that they were not 'well-supported' in terms of student numbers, and another described limited provision available in only one 'school' of the institution.

- Distance learning: Several institutions supported some degree of distance learning. A couple of institutions delivered significant amounts of their teaching through distance learning and another had developed courses for people in the armed forces where delivery was entirely online. However, one case study institution noted that their distance learning provision was mostly at master's level and that there was little provision at undergraduate level.

- Blended learning: Several institutions reported offering blended learning, including one institution which had a department dedicated to online and flexible learning provision. However, another clarified that blended learning was mostly used for master's degrees and only '*a little bit*' at undergraduate level and they appeared to have little distance learning provision at either undergraduate or master's levels.

- Linkage to the workplace: Several institutions described incorporating work-based learning into their courses as part of their alternate study offer and nearly all institutions gave examples of incorporating placements into either their accelerated degrees or their standard courses. Some offered work-based learning on some of their courses such as the opportunity for students to choose a work-based learning project instead of a final year dissertation or similar. However, one institution purposely did not include placements in their accelerated degree courses because they expected to recruit individuals who already had significant experience in the workplace. Use of placements and work-based learning during accelerated degrees is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

Provision of accelerated degrees

For most of the institutions included in the case studies, their main undergraduate offer was traditional three-year degrees and accelerated degrees comprised a very small minority of their offer. Most of the case study institutions were running eight or fewer accelerated degrees, including two institutions which were only running one accelerated degree course. However, for one case study institution, most of their undergraduate degrees were delivered as accelerated degrees and this was their standard offer. Another institution did not offer accelerated degrees but offered flexible timescales for study in other ways.

There was a strong focus on vocational subjects in the accelerated degrees offered:

- half of the case study institutions had included some kind of management course in their accelerated degree offer and one institution offered management degrees exclusively;

- Education-based degrees were offered by two of the institutions;

- Law was offered by three of the institutions involved in the case study, and journalism was offered by two institutions; and

- a couple of institutions offered humanities subjects but this was less common and, in the case of one institution, their accelerated humanities degree offer (English) incorporated vocational elements such as education-based placements.

Most of case study institutions did not offer any accelerated degrees in science subjects and many staff interviewees expressed the opinion that it may be more difficult to 'accelerate' science subjects. One interviewee reported how colleagues from the mathematics department had emphasised that, for some modules, it was important that students understood one module before starting the next and so they were unsure whether this would be possible in a compressed degree.

The number of students on accelerated degree courses were relatively small for all case study institutions. The largest reported class size among our samples was 40 students per course but this was at an institution whose main undergraduate degree offer was accelerated study. Another institution reported that their largest accelerated degree class comprised 22 students, but other institutions reported typical course intakes of between 10 and 20 students. One institution reported case numbers of one to two students per course but explained this was because they were currently in a pilot stage and planned to gradually increase this over time and were considering expanding to two to four students for the next intake. There was a large range of variation in the total number of students participating in accelerated degrees across the case study institutions. Several institutions reported relatively small cohorts with 12 to 31 students, a couple of institutions reported around 100 to 200 students and another reported around 1,000 students as accelerated degrees were their standard undergraduate offer. Furthermore, one case study institution did not offer accelerated degrees and specialised in other forms of flexible study.

The institutions in the case study included a wide range of experience in terms of how long they had been delivering accelerated degrees. Some institutions had recently started delivering accelerated degrees two to three years ago and one of these institutions considered their courses to be at a pilot stage and still under development. Some were more experienced; one had started offering several accelerated degree courses four years ago but only one course was still running; and others had started offering accelerated degrees eight to ten years ago alongside their standard

undergraduate provision in some subjects - these tended to have been involved in the Pathfinder pilots for accelerated degrees. However, one institution had long-standing experience in offering accelerated degrees and had been delivering accelerated bachelor's degrees for several decades.

For some institutions, there had been changes in the number and subjects of accelerated degrees offered since these had been introduced at their institution and changes or fluctuations in the student numbers over time. For example, one institution had initially offered two accelerated degrees comprising education with a subject specialism and two degrees in the area of management. However, the management degrees did not receive the interest expected and one of the education degrees with a subject specialism did not sustain student numbers over time so that now the institution offers only one accelerated degree which has continued to attract sustainable numbers. A couple of institutions reported that students numbers for their accelerated Law degree appeared to be falling, although the institution for whom two year degrees were their standard offer did not report this issue. In contrast, one interviewee felt that some of the accelerated courses had 'become part of the mainstream' for their institution e.g. Accountancy and Finance. Staff at one institution speculated that declining course numbers may have been caused by: 'soaking up' the latent local demand for a course; increased competition from other providers or courses; and a lack of marketing promoting the course. Several interviewees felt that demand for accelerated degrees was subject specific: '*What we have found is that some areas are more popular than others and I think some of that is about how it relates from industry and the teaching.*'

Motivations for offering accelerated degrees

Among the case studies, the most common underlying motivation for creating accelerated degrees appeared to be to increase student recruitment or to gain a competitive advantage. Most of the institutions felt that accelerated degrees fit well with flexible and alternate modes of study already offered by that institution and, for one institution that offered accelerated degrees as their standard mode of undergraduate study, accelerated study was a key selling point. One institution with experience delivering part-time, distance, blended and work-based learning described accelerated degrees as '*just another option*', whereas another felt that it actively built on their strengths and experience as an institution: '*Being a new university there were lots of reasons why the courses would fit and also the vocational nuances that we offer*'.

Some institutions also felt that accelerated degrees fit well with an emphasis on vocational subjects: '*We thought there was a match between having an accelerated programme and the topics that we deliver*'. This is presumably because, for institutions where the traditional three-year model of undergraduate study is dominant, the issue of how to deliver 'additional' teaching throughout the year presents an opportunity to

consider alternate modes of study with less reliance on classroom-based learning such as work-based learning during placements.

> **Leeds Trinity University** described how the decision to create an accelerated degree had been motivated by changes in the teacher training landscape and a review of the department's portfolio of courses. It was felt that, with the increase of initial teacher training delivered by schools, an education-based accelerated undergraduate degree with a subject specialism would provide the opportunity for motivated individuals to complete an undergraduate degree and PGCE in three years instead of the typical four years. Furthermore, it was felt that by combining education with a specialist subject, the accelerated degree would draw upon the strengths and reputations of two departments.

By increasing the flexible and alternate modes of study on offer, it was thought that accelerated degrees would attract or facilitate different types of students to participate in undergraduate courses. Some institutions felt that by reducing the overall tuition costs of an undergraduate degree, by reducing the number of years that a student needed to pay for, they might make it easier for those from a widening participation background to access higher education. Some institutions felt that the reduced timespan might attract career changers or people with existing experience of work who might want to get into the workforce quickly and be more used to working throughout the year or be less interested in the social aspects of a traditional three-year degree. For these reasons, some institutions thought that accelerated degrees might attract more mature students who were considering higher education.

> **The Open University**, which does not currently offer accelerated degrees, felt that they would consider these if there were demand from students or potential students. 'Flexible access' to higher education was considered a key aim of the institution by staff interviewed - the institution delivered a high proportion of flexible learning and a high proportion of its students came from widening participation backgrounds. However, staff interviewed from the institution were concerned as to whether the intensity of study required in accelerated degrees was suited to the needs of students from widening participation backgrounds.

Chapter 3: The market for accelerated degrees

This chapter explores institutional experiences and perceptions around the market for accelerated degrees. This includes awareness of accelerated degrees among students, potential students and employers and findings from market research undertaken by case study institutions regarding accelerated degrees. It provides an overview of the characteristics of students undertaking accelerated degree courses at the case study institutions and whether this has changed over time, as well as exploring how case study institutions have promoted accelerated degree courses. A further section explores staff perceptions around how the market for accelerated degrees may change in future and whether case study institutions would be likely to continue to offer them in future.

Awareness of accelerated degrees

Staff at several case study institutions felt that awareness of accelerated degrees among students and prospective students was generally low. This viewpoint was echoed by students themselves as illustrated by the example below.

> Students at one case study institution reported having low awareness of accelerated degrees before commencing their current study and many felt it was difficult to find information about them: '*Unless you look for it on UCAS, you wouldn't find it*'. They also felt that other students at their institution probably weren't very aware of them either. Several students reported that they had been attracted to the course content and then discovered that the course structure was over two years rather than the traditional three – the course had been created as an accelerated degree and there was no three year version offered by the institution. One student reported that they hadn't realised the course was accelerated until they received the paperwork for the degree: '*when you're signing up to uni, it's not made clear that it's done how it's done.*' However, other students felt that this had been made very clear to them.

Only one case study institution reported high awareness of accelerated degrees but this was their main undergraduate study model and they acknowledged that this was probably not representative of the wider UK context. Another case study institution which did not offer accelerated degrees at this time reported that they were unaware of demand from their students or potential students for this form of study.

Similarly, staff from several case study institutions felt that, in general, awareness of accelerated degrees among employers was also low. Students at one institution, who were in the process of applying for PGCE courses at universities or school-based teacher training, reported that interviewers were often not aware of accelerated degrees: '*We did have to explain it at interview, on interviews I felt we got questioned, like 'What is your degree? How does it work?' Nobody really knew what it was.*'. Staff from the case study

institution where most undergraduate provision was accelerated felt that awareness of and views on accelerated degrees by professional bodies varied by sector and market but felt that this was changing positively. The Business school felt that employers viewed them positively and could see the benefits of quicker study and that some employers felt that studying at this intensity with less holiday breaks meant students were more job-ready. However, the institution noted that there were issues at an international level as some countries did not acknowledge two year degrees, most commonly countries in south east Asia.

Market research

Case study institutions were asked whether their institution had undertaken any market research, either prior to or after creating their accelerated degrees, to explore topics such as: demand for accelerated degrees, characteristics of those who might be attracted to them, existing accelerated degree provision and how this was delivered and what other learning provision was competing for this market.

Many of the case study institutions described market research about accelerated degrees that their institution had undertaken or was currently in the process of undertaking. There was a range of approaches taken across the institutions. Some had undertaken desk research looking at existing provision of accelerated degrees for similar courses or at competitor institutions. Several had used qualitative approaches such as focus groups, interviews and speaking with students, employers or prospective students at open days, industry fairs and other events. A couple of institutions had used surveys to explore attitudes to accelerated degrees by personal characteristics such as age.

> **Derby University** reported how staff had attended industry fairs in order to meet with both employers and potential students to elicit feedback about potential accelerated degrees. They found that feedback from employers and students was mostly positive: '*We met a lot of potential students that, you know, really wanted to study in HE but can't commit to three years and they wanted to look at doing it another way.*' Although during this market research staff found that there was limited awareness of accelerated degrees and that some students were concerned about the pace of learning required.

There were other examples of research undertaken:

- One institution reported doing some desk-based market research focused on looking at other universities, other two year degrees, viability and who the competitors would be. One staff member felt that if she were asked to do this exercise now she would have undertaken considerably more analysis as she feels there is a great deal more data available now.

- Staff at another institution reported that they weren't aware of any market research having been conducted by their institution but that they were aware of other accelerated degrees and other existing research on accelerated degrees.

- A staff member at one institution which was currently considering introducing an accelerated degree course described research that the institution had commissioned which was currently out in the field comprising '*quite a comprehensive questionnaire which covers not just the question of the accelerated degree in computing but more widely about combinations of different type of degrees*'. The survey was targeted at professors, students, alumni and people who had registered interest in computing at the institution.

At **Staffordshire University**, which offered several accelerated degrees, most course leaders for accelerated degrees described also undertaking their own market research. One course leader clarified that '*It wasn't just whether it was marketable; it was whether it actually worked, whether a student could do this in two years.*' Several course leaders found in their research that there was little awareness of accelerated degrees but that many students reacted positively to the concept. In one case, focus groups were conducted with potential students of different ages and abilities. Fast-track courses had the highest appeal for mature students aged 30–40 but were less popular amongst younger students: high achieving A-level students wanted to enjoy university life and invest their time studying over three years; less academically able students felt intimidated – it '*scared them to death.*' On the whole, however, feedback was positive.

Students attracted to accelerated degrees

There was a great deal of variation in the characteristics of students participating in accelerated degrees at the case study institutions. This variation occurred both between institutions and between accelerated degree courses within one institution. However, there were some patterns in terms of age, domicile, motivation and perceived quality of student.

As indicated by their market research, but also based on their own perceptions, staff in several of the institutions expected accelerated degrees to attract mature students or career changers. Looking across the case study institutions and indeed across courses within a single institution, a more complex picture emerges in terms of student characteristics. At one case study institution, one course was expected to attract mature students but students have been predominantly 18–19 years of age, whereas another course expected to attract school or college leavers and has attracted mature students. All case study institutions that deliver accelerated degrees reported some level of young mature participation i.e. people in their early to mid-twenties. Several of the institutions described course intakes comprising students of a wide range of ages up to mature

students in their forties or fifties. One interviewee helpfully classified students participating in their accelerated degree course into three types: '*high flyers*' from school, those aged 21 who may have started one degree but were not sure what they wanted to do and are now more focused and mature students who want a qualification to progress in their careers, such as those returning from paternity leave.

Some of the institutions noted how students recruited to their accelerated degree courses may not have traditional qualifications such as A-levels and that students may not have entered the course via traditional routes such as UCAS. Other institutions reported that they attracted international students to their accelerated degrees, Indeed one institution had a high proportion of international students and described countries in south and south-east Asia as an important recruitment area for them. All case studies that delivered accelerated degrees, however, described students studying for these degrees as focused, highly motivated and keen to progress. Interviewees often described them as strong students or a higher calibre of student: '*these are good students, they up the game of the whole group, and they have a positive effect on retention, chivvying them along*'. Some institutions felt that they were able to attract better performing students than would typically apply to their institution and felt that these students were attracted by the accelerated aspect of the course.

Several institutions had expected accelerated degrees to appeal to mature students and career changers in particular, because they saw it as an alternative to part-time study, as providing another '*opportunity*'. It was felt that for those who could afford to take two years out of the workplace, accelerated degrees offered a way to get into a new career quicker. Similarly, some believed accelerated degrees provided an appealing alternative for those who were less interested in the 'traditional student experience', such as mature students. Many of the case study institutions offered accelerated degrees in vocational subjects and a couple suggested that degree apprenticeships could also attract those who were keen to get into the workplace quicker and reduce the cost of a higher education qualification. One interviewee expressed concern that accelerated degrees could '*get lost in the noise*' around apprenticeships.

None of the case study institutions that delivered accelerated degrees described particular changes in their student demographics over time. However, as noted above, the size of accelerated degree cohorts were quite small (one to 40 students) and many of the case study institutions had only been delivering them for a few years, so interviewees often found it hard to say whether there had been any meaningful changes in the characteristics of students attending their courses. In contrast, the case study institution which did not offer accelerated degrees but did deliver a high proportion of flexible and alternate modes of study has observed a change in their student body over the last few years, so that the average age of a student was now 28 years when previously it had

been 35. This could suggest an increased interest in flexible and alternate modes of studies from younger students.

Promoting accelerated degrees

At several case study institutions, staff reported that accelerated degrees were not promoted separately and were included within general promotion of undergraduate courses, such as in prospectuses, on the institution website, during open days and possibly on social media. The notable exception was the institution which had accelerated degrees as their standard mode of delivery for undergraduate courses - their main website included information about the shorter courses and how these could be combined with a postgraduate qualification. Staff in some case study institutions thought accelerated degrees might be mentioned during visits to schools and colleges - one course leader described having a student recruitment officer for their school and college visits but other accelerated degree courses at the same institution did not report using this promotion method.

Some staff expressed frustration that marketing at their institution for accelerated degrees was limited: '*[the marketing] doesn't segregate the fast-track at all; it doesn't sell it as a niche product or differentiate it.*' One interviewee contrasted marketing and awareness of accelerated degrees with apprenticeships: '*Lots of young people are aware of apprenticeships but I don't think other flexible ways to study are very well known*'. However, some institutions highlighted the issue that marketing to mature students could be difficult and expensive and mature students were a presumed key target market for many of the accelerated degrees. One interviewee explained that the institution typically purchased digital marketing aimed at the 17-20 age range and that to target mature students '*because it's twenty-one plus, it's such a huge range it's quite expensive*'.

Leeds Trinity University developed a whole marketing strategy when they launched their first accelerated degree courses. The new degrees were highlighted at the beginning of their prospectus and a further two page spread mapped out how accelerated degree course terms mapped onto the traditional academic year and the three-year model of delivery. The approach taken was out of a concern from the marketing team that people might not understand accelerated degrees and the credit system used. The institution also published a press release and spoke about accelerated degrees in their '*high-end corporate literature*'. One staff member reported '*we made a big deal of them*'. In addition, the institution sponsors an award in a relevant field and uses this vehicle to promote related accelerated degrees as they feel this is the relevant target audience. They have also produced case studies of students who have completed the course to use in marketing materials, arguing that '*they can really tell the story about the two year degrees and where they take you*'.

Gloucestershire University felt that it was important when promoting accelerated degrees not to place the emphasis on the reduced costs compared with a traditional three-year degree - "*this is the wrong way to go about it*". Instead, the institution presents the accelerated degree as "*the opportunity to enter work earlier*". Interviewees felt that this message was better for targeting the mature or career changing audience who they believed would be attracted to and benefit from an accelerated degree. A further concern was that applicants attracted by cost savings may not be prepared for or suited to the intensity on accelerated study.

Future plans for accelerated degree courses

Most case study institutions reported that they would continue to offer accelerated degree courses if they continued to attract sustainable numbers of students. One interviewee specified, in addition, that an accelerated degree would also need to continue to complement the portfolio of courses offered.

Interviewees across the case studies gave their views on the factors that could influence demand (and also the provision of) accelerated degrees.

- One interviewee felt that '*the market was changing*' and that the sector was '*waking up*' to flexible study. However, none of the case study institutions made any predictions of great changes in the market for accelerated degrees.

- Another interviewee wondered whether their institution needed to consider doing more to attract students with BTEC qualifications in response to what she saw as the '*rise in BTECs*'. Another interviewee felt that there was possibly potential for additional accelerated degrees combining education and a specialist subject which could lead on to a PGCE.

- Interviewees at one institution wondered whether accelerated degrees could have potential for employers who wanted to support an employee's professional development and felt confident that they had the potential to appeal to '*non-traditional students and students who haven't considered going to university before*'.

- One institution, which did not already offer accelerated degrees, felt that they would possibly consider these in the context of recognising prior learning and if there were demand from students as part of expanding their flexible offer. They acknowledged that the market for full-time study at their institution was expanding and that the average age of a student was becoming younger but felt that accelerated degree courses would be challenging for their model of delivery.

Interviewees at one institution believed that increases in tuition fees and living costs meant that costs for a traditional three-year degree were becoming similar to the cost of an accelerated degree at a non-publicly funded university and that an accelerated degree at a non-publicly funded institution was becoming a more viable and '*competitive*' option. As a result of this, they felt that accelerated degrees were beneficial to students because there were fewer years of fees and a quick entrance into the workforce. However, they believed that accelerated degrees would probably not become the dominant mode of study because public universities could only charge two years' worth of fees and have a cap on student numbers which would be a concern for them. They also felt that the traditional three-year degree was deep rooted in UK culture. Interviewees thought that there could be interest in accelerated degrees from the Government in terms of flexible learning, but one employee felt that a key factor would need to be an agreement between the Government and universities to fill any funding gaps and that universities would need substantial support to change to two year degrees as the dominant mode of study. It was also felt that maintenance grants would need to be reviewed to equalise these across different types of universities.

Chapter 4: Design and delivery of accelerated degree courses

This chapter explores the different approaches to designing and delivering accelerated degrees among the case study institutions and identifies common themes and experiences, as well as presenting examples from the case study institutions. This includes course structure, teaching modes and, where relevant, transfer between accelerated and traditional three-year programmes. Please note that discussion of practical challenges in the design and delivery of accelerated degrees and lessons learned are included in Chapter Six which explores challenges and barriers to delivering accelerated degrees.

The case studies allowed deeper insight into how accelerated degrees work in practice. It became apparent that there were many differences as well as similarities across institutions. This facilitated an understanding of accelerated courses in relation to the traditional three-year undergraduate course and highlighted the practical issues associated with running accelerated degree courses. This was particularly salient in cases when accelerated courses were based on existing traditional 'parent' courses, as the structure of both accelerated and traditional degrees often involved significant overlap; hence similar student experiences.

Design and delivery

The design and delivery of accelerated degrees varied across institutions, although there were some notable similarities, for example, in terms of structure of the academic year. Almost all institutions presented a three-term structure to the academic year for their accelerated courses. These institutions' traditional three-year degree courses tended to be based on a two-term structure; hence, the two terms from the third year of a traditional (three-year) degree were 'slotted' into the summer months of years one and two of the accelerated degree. Accelerated courses did not necessarily involve learning at a faster pace, but utilised the summer months when traditional degree students usually have a long break. Overall, students on both accelerated and traditional programmes completed six terms during the course of their degrees but accelerated students studied during the summer to complete their degrees within a shorter time frame. In general, accelerated courses were based on three-year equivalent 'parent' degrees offered by the university. As a result of accelerated and traditional degree programmes sharing a common curriculum, there was often an overlap between the two courses, with students from both cohorts sharing lectures. In general, however, accelerated and traditional degree students did not share tutorials. There were also a couple of instances in which accelerated degrees were created as bespoke stand-alone courses; although in these cases very similar traditional versions did exist.

For accelerated students at most institutions, the first two terms of the first academic year mirrored almost exactly that of the three-year degree. During the first two terms students studied at level 4 alongside their traditional degree counterparts, sharing lectures but usually having tutorials with their accelerated cohort only. Usually for accelerated degrees, the third term commences when the traditional academic year ends, approximately at some point in the month of May. The third term then runs through the summer to around August/September, whilst traditional degree students have their summer holiday. The third term saw students studying at level 5. Accelerated students tended to have a break of one or two weeks at the end of the third term before then commencing their second academic year in September.

The second academic year ran similarly to the first. The first two terms of the second academic year saw students studying at both level 5 and level 6. This involved accelerated students having lectures with their three-year degree peers who were now also in their second academic year. However, accelerated students still had tutorials within their accelerated cohort. Again, for accelerated students, the third term of their second (and final) academic year commenced at the beginning of the traditional degree students' summer holidays. During the third term of their final academic year, accelerated students studied all level 6 classes. There was only one institution at which the three-term structure differed, as teaching took place over four terms: Winter (mid-January to mid-March), Spring (early April to mid-June), Summer (mid-July to early September), and Autumn (late September to early December).

Derby University offers several accelerated courses consisting of three terms per academic year, referred to as 'trimesters'. The accelerated students start in September with the students on the traditional programme. The first trimester runs from September until December after which all students have a Christmas break. In January all students return for the second trimester. Both trimesters one and two are studied at level 4 and all (traditional and accelerated degree) students study together for the second trimester, which lasts until the beginning of May. This is the point at which the traditional and accelerated courses diverge.

Traditional degree students have a summer holiday, lasting until September. Accelerated students have a break of approximately one month up until the end of May before returning to the university for their third trimester, which runs over the summer. The third trimester involves four weeks of classroom-based learning at level 5, with the remainder of the trimester being taught using a blended learning approach. Students are encouraged to undertake placements. At the end of the third trimester accelerated students have a week off before commencing the second academic year in September. At this point the traditional students return and join the accelerated students for the first trimester of the second academic year. Teaching during this period is at level 5 and the trimester runs until December when all students have a break for Christmas. The

university felt that these modules worked well with the accelerated cohort studying alongside their peers on the three-year degree.

All students return in January and the accelerated students commence their studies at level 6, whilst the traditional degree students continue at level 5 (accelerated students have already covered this material). Teaching for all students lasts until around May when traditional degree students leave university for their summer holiday. As in the first year, the accelerated students have around four weeks' break before commencing the third trimester over the summer. The accelerated students' third trimester follows the same format as the previous year i.e. they attend university for four weeks teaching, followed by independent study through a blended learning approach. For the accelerated students, the third trimester of their second year is all at level 6 and students finish their degrees at the end of this trimester in September.

As highlighted, the overall structure of accelerated degrees was highly similar across institutions. However, the delivery of teaching during the summer terms was more varied. This was sometimes dependent on the individual institution's approach, or was related to the type of degree course. Only one institution maintained a continuous traditional approach to teaching throughout the summer term i.e. students attended lectures and seminars as normal over the summer months. The most common approach of institutions was, however, to employ blended learning. This involved students attending university for between two to seven weeks of classroom-based learning around the beginning of the summer term, with the remainder of the term being delivered through online/distance learning.

An example of a successful approach at **Staffordshire University** involved accelerated students attending the University for two weeks of the summer term. Students spent the first two weeks of the summer term learning online with directed study on a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). This was followed by two weeks of face-to-face learning, during which students were required to attend university every day between 9am and 5pm. Attendance during these two weeks was mandatory; students who missed a day were recommended to transfer to the three-year course as the learning during this time was intense and course leaders felt that, if students were unable to attend for even one day, they would struggle to catch up. The remainder of the summer term consisted of online learning. Staff at the institution felt that the weeks dedicated to online learning allowed their students to undertake a placement or work and earn some money over the summer.

Another approach used by institutions involved work-based learning as a compulsory element of their accelerated degrees, although there was variation across institutions in the way the work-based learning was implemented. An example of this is demonstrated in the case study box below:

At **Southampton Solent University**, the academic year for accelerated students consisted of three 15 week terms. Each term consisted of seven/eight weeks of classroom-based learning followed by the remainder of the term spent at a paid placement. During their time at the placement the students also had work and assignments to complete which tied in with their placement so they were able to work on live briefs and they were able to access teaching materials through a blended learning approach. Over the course of the accelerated degree, students spent 48 weeks at their placement. This was adapted from an existing traditional three-year course; although students on the three-year course did not undertake as much work experience during term times as they were able to do so during their long summer holidays.

Another institution also required students to undertake mandatory placements, however, these lasted all term and involved students spending four days a week in their placement and one day a week at university, so no blended learning was involved. This was a bespoke course.

Whilst accelerated students did not enjoy the typically long university summer holidays, they did still have time off between terms. At one institution this was as long as four weeks off between the second and third semester before summer teaching commenced. However, at other institutions, the time off between terms could be as little as one week. Accelerated students also tended to have the same Christmas holiday period as students on the traditional programme.

However, some accelerated degree courses were quite innovative in their design and were very different to the typical delivery of traditional three-year degrees. One example is explored in depth in the following case study.

Southampton Solent University had a very distinct design for their three accelerated courses, which involved a heavy focus on work experience (and as such were quite different in design to those at other case study institutions). For example, one accelerated degree course involved students spending all seven/eight week placements with the same employer. The course was in a vocational subject in a sector that staff felt placed a strong emphasis on work experience and work experience was a key aspect for employers when looking to hire graduates. They believed that by incorporating such a heavy work-focus, this would put their students in good stead for the future. A student on the course reported that the work experience element was first and foremost what had attracted her to apply for the course, as she had not initially realised that it was a two-year degree. She, however, felt that the benefit of completing her degree in two as opposed to three years was a 'bonus'. To recruit to the programme the University advertised through the employer on jobs sites and LinkedIn and potential students applied through the employer. Potential students were interviewed by the employer and the university and then offered the opportunity to apply to join the

accelerated degree. The placement activity with the employer was then able to commence only once the student was successful in their application to commence their studies. Given that the student would spend a significant proportion of their time with the employer, the university felt that it was important to have this level of engagement with the employer from the beginning, as the student would need to 'fit in' at their workplace. This was regarded as an innovative means of recruiting students, as it targeted a different market.

Transferring

Almost all universities had a system in place whereby students were able to transfer from the two-year degree onto the three-year degree. Members of staff generally felt that this was a vital aspect when they were designing the accelerated courses and was described as acting '*like a safety net*' or '*a safety blanket*'. A course leader at one university which offers this option to its students said it was an '*exceptionally important factor in designing these fast-track courses.*' Universities usually monitored their accelerated students' performance quite closely so that if students were found to be struggling they would advise them to transfer onto the three-year course. This usually occurred at the end of the second term of their first academic year when students had completed level 4 i.e. when the three-year degree students finished for the summer. In general, students were able to transfer at a later date, but most institutions felt that this was a natural cut-off point. One member of staff explained, '*In the case of most students you would know at the end of level 4 whether you're going to have an issue or not.*' Another interviewee, who was a course leader at a different institution said, whilst it is the last thing he wants, every year he has to advise accelerated students to transfer and '*for a while it destroys them*', although, in the long-run, '*obviously it's better for them and better for us if we protect them but it's still a hard thing.*'

Members of staff at several universities commented that students did not necessarily transfer because they were struggling. In their experience, students often transferred for other reasons. For example, one institution had experienced several students transfer onto three-year courses because they were enjoying their time at university and wanted to make the time last. Another institution mentioned that they have had students who have requested to transfer because they wanted to have the summer off for '*a breather*' and to spend time with their families; others wanted to work over the summer so they can save more money. Case study participants were positive about allowing their students to transfer and thought it was beneficial to have this alternative available to their accelerated students. One individual said, '*I think that's quite a good thing really; we can be flexible with our students.*'

It was also the case at several institutions that students were able to transfer in the opposite direction, i.e. students on traditional courses were able to transfer onto an

accelerated version of the same course. Obviously, this was only possible when an accelerated degree was based on a 'parent' course. Usually this was conditional on the student performing well during the first two semesters of their first year. Only one institution said that they did not allow this at all.

> **Staffordshire University**, which has an established accelerated degree offer, had significant experience of students transferring both onto the traditional course as well as transferring onto the accelerated courses. Interviewees felt that it was particularly important to allow students to transfer from the accelerated course onto the traditional course. One course leader said, '*You are setting [students] up for complete failure if you have no options for them to go to. So you have to have a parallel route.*' However, there were difficulties associated with this. For example, cohort sizes for accelerated courses at the University were small and, as such, even if a few students transferred this could cause a cohort to shrink in size by half. The University also allowed traditional degree students to transfer onto the accelerated course. For example, traditional degree Accounting and Finance students who perform well during the first two terms of their first year can request to move onto the accelerated Accounting and Finance course, meaning that rather than taking a break for their summer holidays at the end of their second term they would join the accelerated cohort to carry on learning. However not everyone who requests to transfer is permitted to do so. The students who had transferred onto the accelerated course felt they had been allowed to do so because they were '*more mature.*' They said that there were other traditional degree students with comparable grades who had also requested to be transferred onto the accelerated course, but who were not allowed.

Chapter 5: Benefits

This chapter examines the key perceived benefits of accelerated degrees. This section considers two main strands of benefits: the first focuses on perceived benefits for institutions and staff, and the second identifies possible benefits to students and employers.

Benefits for the institution and staff

Two key benefits observed by many of the case study institutions offering accelerated degrees were the opportunity to attract an additional, high-performing student cohort, and the opportunity to develop a niche or 'premium' product.

Staff in many case study institutions felt that the accelerated degrees attracted 'stronger' students than their typical intake. One interviewee described students on accelerated degrees as highly motivated and more committed: '*They are challenging students; they keep us on our toes. They are committed students who do the reading, contribute to discussions; they are alert to what is going on'*. It was felt that this high motivation translated to positive outcomes: one interviewee reported that accelerated degrees '*increase[d] the number of Firsts and 2.1s that [we] generate through our courses*', and posited that fast-track students significantly raised the institution's rankings for Accounting and Finance. Staff at several institutions acknowledged that the strong performance of students on accelerated degrees may be attributable to the calibre of student recruited rather than the way that the course is delivered. As the accelerated degrees were felt to be particularly challenging in terms of workload and intensity of study, applicants were typically vetted carefully to recruit students that the institution felt could 'cope' with the demands of accelerated study. This appeared to be an unintended benefit of the accelerated degrees as no institution identified the recruitment of high performing students as an explicit aim when they were initially creating the degrees.

Within the HE sector in England, only a small proportion of undergraduate degrees are delivered as accelerated degrees so an accelerated degree course could present an opportunity for an institution to stand out in a particular field. Several case study institutions had developed bespoke accelerated degree courses which had not been adapted from an existing three-year degree. These often had a vocational focus: one institution developed a specialised education-based degree so that students could complete a bachelor's degree and gain Qualified Teacher Status in three years, and another had worked closely with employers to develop several accelerated degrees incorporating work-based learning which they hoped would attract a new learner market. Some students on one course reported that they would not have considered their current institution had it not offered that particular course. The accelerated degrees could also be positioned as a 'premium' product. One institution had initially charged higher fees for its

accelerated degrees (£9,000 c.f. £8,500), but then later increased all undergraduate fees to the maximum fees level. Another institution identified its accelerated delivery model as a core component of its premium offer as a provider.

Benefits for students and employers

There were several benefits for students that were identified by staff and students at the case study institutions. These included economical, vocational and student experience aspects of the course, There were few direct benefits identified for employers, but some indirect benefits arising from the student experience

One key benefit highlighted by students and staff across the case study institutions was the potentially reduced costs. Students on accelerated degrees pay tuition fees for two years rather than three so the total cost in fees is less compared with a traditional undergraduate degree. Most case study institutions charged the same annual amount for accelerated degrees and three-year degrees[3]. One institution was non-publicly funded and so could charge higher fees than the public institutions but their total tuition fee costs for accelerated degrees were still less than three years of tuition fees at £9,000. Some institutions highlighted this as a benefit for employers as well, if they were funding an employee's study costs. Similarly, accelerated degree students only required two years of living costs as well. However, a student at one case study institution reported that university accommodation provision was limited over the summer so that only more expensive options were available to the accelerated students. While overall costs were reduced, accelerated degree students could sometimes experience increased or additional individual costs, e.g. paying for accommodation over the summer, compared with peers on similar three-year courses at the same institution.

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[3] As publically funded higher education institutions have their annual undergraduate fees capped, currently at £9,000.

The **University of Buckingham** provided examples of the cost analyses they had undertaken to demonstrate the potential financial benefits of studying for an accelerated degree at their institution, compared with a traditional three-year undergraduate study elsewhere. These are presented in the table below. As they are a private institution, they are permitted to charge higher fees than is typical for the sector.

Table 2: Estimated costs for students as calculated by case study institution				
Costs	Case Study (home)	Other (outside London)	Case Study (international)	Other (non-London average)
Year 1 (Tuition)	12,444	9,000	17,160	11,200
Year 1 (Estimated Living Costs)	8,000			
Year 2 (Tuition)	12,444	9,000	17,160	11,200
Year 2 (Estimated Living Costs)	8,000			
Year 3 (Tuition)	NA	9,000	NA	11,200
Year 3 (Estimated Living Costs)	NA	8,000	NA	8,000
Total	40,888	51,000	50,320	57,600
Case Study Saving	10,122		7,280	

Another key benefit identified by staff and students was that accelerated degrees enable students to enter the labour market faster compared with traditional three-year undergraduate degrees. Some students at one institution, who had worked for a year or two after leaving school or spent an extra year at college before thinking about higher education, described the accelerated degree as an opportunity for them to catch up with their peers: '*as a lot of us didn't come straight from school so, by being able to do it in two years and not three, it was a lot more accessible for me. I don't have to waste another year training so it means I'm getting into employment slightly older so that's why I did it.*' Furthermore, one institution focused its marketing approach for accelerated degrees on the proposition that students could follow their accelerated degree with a professional qualification and enter the workplace sooner: '*getting out there more quickly to start earning…three years with a professional qualification rather than four years*'. Staff and students across the case study institutions highlighted this strategy of combining an accelerated degree with further study or training. One institution which offers mostly accelerated degrees advertised on their website that students can gain a 'Bachelor's and Master's in just three years'.

Student cohorts for accelerated degrees at the case study institutions were relatively small ranging from one student to 40 in a course cohort, and students and staff across the institutions felt that this benefitted learners in a couple of significant ways. One benefit was the increased amount of contact time between staff and students, and,

through that, allowing for a more interactive learning environment. At one case study institution, staff interviewees reported that students tended to receive '*more one-to-one focus*' which was important for students '*whose voice perhaps wouldn't be heard in larger groups,*' and that the small cohorts allowed '*more scope for them to contribute and have tutorial time that others wouldn't necessarily have in a bigger group.*' A staff member at another institution observed that accelerated degree students both received and '*expected*' a greater amount of contact time and support from academic staff. Several students highlighted benefits of this approach. A student at one case study institution observed: '*I've benefitted from a more informal structure; so, rather than reading a PowerPoint, it's more discussion based which is really good.*' Furthermore, a student at another case study institution emphasised the value of the relationships with their teaching staff: '*You know your lecturers and the lecturers know you. If you went somewhere like [university] you're a number or a face sat in a massive lecture theatre.*'

The small cohort sizes were also thought to have a positive impact on students' interactions with each other. Staff at several institutions reported that students on accelerated degree courses tended to form a very cohesive and supportive group. A staff member at one institution observed that '*you never see 'a' fast-track student, they all support each other*', and a staff member at another institution commented that the accelerated degree students '*form a support network amongst themselves really quickly*'. Similarly, students on one accelerated degree course felt that they were probably closer as a group than students on similar three-year degrees at their institution. Indeed, one student contrasted this with the example of a friend who had started university at the same time and did not know the names of everyone on his course.

Staff at some case study institutions felt that studying for an accelerated degree helped students learn to work under pressure and manage workload. It was felt that this helped prepare students for the workplace or further intensive study such as a PGCE.

Students at **Leeds Trinity University** on an education-based accelerated degree felt that this had benefitted them during interviews for PGCE or school-based initial teacher training. One student felt that developing the skills to successfully manage intensive study through studying on an accelerated course had helped her 'grow-up': '*I think that stands you in good stead when you go to interviews, especially on one of my PGCE interviews, I felt mature compared to some others and I'm, like, the most immature person going, but I felt like some of them weren't ready to become a teacher – If that makes sense?*' Other students on the same course reported receiving positive reactions from interviewers to their accelerated degree qualification, although some had needed to explain what they were first. Another student was told by their interviewer '*You must be really organised!*'

However, these benefits may be less relevant for mature students who have already developed these skills in the workplace, although those seeking to progress to further study may find it useful to have the opportunity to demonstrate these skills in an academic context.

Accelerated degrees at the case study institutions often had a vocational focus and many staff highlighted this as one of the main benefits of a particular course. Some courses included a significant emphasis on placements. One institution delivered an accelerated degree which combined education with a subject specialism which included three placements whereas similar three-year education-based degrees with a specialism only incorporated two placements. An accelerated degree course in business delivered by another institution included an '*overseas residential*' visit to a multinational corporation, but this option was not included in any of its three-year business-based degrees.

Staff at **Southampton Solent University** whose accelerated degrees had a strong vocational focus and included a large proportion of work-based learning, felt that their students really benefitted from the exposure to industry and the work experience they gained, although they were unsure whether students were aware of this: '*because for them they're just on a degree… they don't recognise necessarily that they're getting the benefit of industrial experience.*' As one of these courses developed, staff were able to incorporate more work-based elements into it, staff reflected that, '*That's been a slightly unintended consequence but something that was very valuable.*'

Many students interviewed reported that the vocational aspects of their accelerated degree were important to them. Students on one accelerated degree course appreciated how the placements gave them insights into their chosen career as well as knowledge and experiences that they could talk about at interview; these students also felt that the final placement was timed to fit well with the timescales of applying for further vocational training.

Chapter 6: Challenges and barriers

Case study participants all sought to highlight various challenges they had faced, and practical issues they had encountered, with regards to the overarching success of their accelerated degrees. Challenges often presented themselves as barriers to the expansion and take-up of accelerated degrees. Institutions often faced practical issues with the design and delivery of their accelerated courses. The concerns raised were often shared by several universities, although some faced more unique challenges that were highly specific to their institution.

Challenges relating to practical issues

A practical issue raised by several members of staff at various institutions was the impact that the shorter time-scale for the programme had on the time available for marking and moderation. Several interviewees stressed the importance that students receive feedback and grades in time to progress on their course. The quick turn-around this required from staff was often a source of stress and several case study institutions mentioned that this could also have implications for exam boards. One individual explained that '*staff can feel that they're continually overloaded all the way through; whereas, traditionally, perhaps June is a quieter time.*' Similarly, a course leader from the same university said, '*I've got children, so, you know, having to teach for 12 weeks deep into August then mark the stuff for the exam boards and take a holiday is a bit of a challenge.*' This issue was also raised by another institution in relation to their infrastructure; although they were able to address this at an early stage. Initially, their online system only allowed accelerated students to progress at the same rate as their peers on the traditional programme. At the end of the second term, accelerated students needed their grades to be processed quickly before they progressed onto their third term, so that if their performance was not strong enough they would be able to transfer onto the traditional three-year course. However, the system initially was not fast enough as traditional students are on their holiday at this point, and processing speed was not an issue. This was altered, as the university did not want their accelerated students to be at a disadvantage because they had to wait to progress and be awarded their degree.

The pace and resulting relatively inflexible structure of accelerated degrees could also cause challenges or issues for students. At institutions where work-based learning was not incorporated into the curriculum, staff felt that, due to the design of the accelerated degrees, accelerated students did not have as much time to undertake work placements as they were studying throughout the summer. Some institutions mentioned that, traditionally, their three-year degree students undertake significant work experience over the summer. Another institution mentioned this in terms of their students not having as much time as students studying traditionally to look for and apply to jobs. Also due to the structure of the degrees, there was often little room for flexibility within the course. Some

of the case study institutions had a very rigid structure in order for them to fit all of the required modules into the two-year timetable, which often meant that students were unable to have any choices in what they studied. This was a practical issue raised by both staff and students. Student interviewees at one institution in particular mentioned that this was one aspect of the course they disliked. However, institutions often felt it was impractical to offer electives to such small student cohorts.

Another perceived challenge for students resulting from the pace of accelerated degrees, was that students could be '*completely stressed out*' by studying a three-year undergraduate degree in the space of two years. Indeed, this emerged from a couple of institutions' original market research. One academic said that through running focus groups with potential students as part of her personal research, she had found that the less academically-able students had been '*scared to death*' by the concept of an accelerated degree. In reality, accelerated students commented that they had to work hard but, overall, found their courses very manageable; although it should be noted that, due to selection bias, the types of students studying accelerated programmes tended to be more mature and committed to the course (so this becomes a 'virtuous cycle').

A further potential issue was that of accelerated degree students having less support. There were a couple of instances where accelerated students had limited access to the same support as traditional degree students. In one case this was due to limited staffing over the summer term, highlighting the reliance upon key staff/champions to support accelerated degrees. In the other case, accelerated students felt that they lacked the peer support network to whch traditional degree students had access.

The participants of an accelerated degree student focus group at one university expressed dissatisfaction with the support offer over their summer term. The students felt that some members of staff were not as supportive as others. The students were complementary of their tutor, however, for unexpected personal reasons he was unavailable for a significant duration of the summer term of their first year. The students were dissatisfied with the lack of support available to them in their tutor's absence and said, '*We were literally left with no-one to help us.*' Members of staff were '*distant*' and when the students asked for help '*they didn't help at all, didn't get back to us.*' The fast-track students were surprised by this as staff often told them that they would prefer to teach their class than a class of traditional degree students: the students were told they were '*a joy to teach.*' Many of the accelerated students in the discussion group also felt that the fact they were more able than the traditional degree students had worked against them. For example, tutors would spend more time with the traditional degree students because they needed more help and support. One student commented, '*I think, because we are fast-trackers, they expect us to get higher results with the same amount of help.*'

In one case study institution, students studying at level 6, traditionally third-years, could volunteer to be mentors. The accelerated students complained that when they were coming into their second (final year), there was '*no-one above them*' to advise on aspects of levels 5 and 6. Additionally, they had already been in hall for two weeks when the traditional degree students start the academic year and said that the traditional degree students did not approach them and that they were seen as a '*cliquey*' other group.

However, in general, accelerated students did not appear to suffer or be disadvantaged by having reduced access to university resources or teaching over the summer months.

Challenges relating to finance

Case study universities tended to charge the same fees for their accelerated courses as their three-year courses; although a couple of institutions mentioned that there had been a certain amount of controversy over this. For example, certain members of staff had felt that accelerated courses ought to be charged at a higher price, as it was a premium product involving more time learning (see Chapter Five on benefits). One university had originally charged £9,000 per annum for their accelerated course compared with £8,500 for a standard three-year course; however, the fees for the three-year course

subsequently rose, and accelerated and traditional degrees are now the same. Only one case study institution currently charged higher fees of £12,444 for their accelerated courses, meaning that a two-year degree at this university would cost £24,888 compared to £27,000 for a standard three-year course elsewhere. Despite significantly higher fees being charged, the university estimated that students save £10,112 over the course of the degree, which includes both the saving in fees paid but also the saving from reduced living expenses and rent.[4]

Case study participants were asked whether or not the running of accelerated degrees was more expensive than the three-year courses, for example, keeping up the running of facilities during the summer months like the library. A couple of institutions had found that the marketing of accelerated courses had cost more, as *'trying to target the mature student is quite expensive and quite difficult to do.'* However, this was not a cost directly associated with the delivery of accelerated courses. Overall, case study participants did not feel that any additional costs were incurred through delivering accelerated courses; though it should also be noted that most interviewees were members of academic staff and so would not necessarily be well-informed with regards to financing. For example, the academic staff at one institution were all on fixed-term contracts and the teaching of accelerated students was written into their contracts so they did not believe that the university incurred any additional teaching costs through running the accelerated degrees.

On the other hand, several members of staff mentioned that there may well be opportunity costs involved with running accelerated degrees. For example, one university mentioned that because their students lived in halls throughout the summer term, they were unable to rent these rooms out for conference guests or tourists, which would generate more money. However, for several of the case study participants, this was not an issue as a large proportion of the teaching over summer was delivered via blended learning.

Another opportunity cost, of course, is receiving only two as opposed to three years' worth of fees from each accelerated student. This was not a practical issue as such, but was raised by several individuals at various institutions who were concerned about the disincentive this created for institutions to expand accelerated courses. One Award Leader said that the institution that employs him view the accelerated courses *'as a loss of revenue.'* He continued to say that the university *'see the student as an amount of money and they see the two year fast-track as one year short on that amount of money… which is infuriating.'* On the other hand, another university was positive about this and said, *'instead of viewing it as losing a year's fee, we see it as gaining two years of fees,*

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[4] The university based this calculation on an estimated £8,000 per year in living costs.

as the course attracts students we wouldn't otherwise get.' Furthermore, it was suggested that a university initially transitioning to deliver these degrees may incur significant start-up costs.

Challenges relating to awareness and student recruitment

Perhaps the most common concern cited by institutions was the pervasive lack of awareness surrounding accelerated degrees in that they exist as an additional option for those considering their higher education choices. Overall, it was felt that this posed a significant barrier to the expansion of accelerated degrees, and several institutions believed that this issue was exacerbated by insufficient marketing. This concern was not limited to students' lack of awareness, but also that of employers, schools, colleges and careers advisors. This issue was particularly salient in relation to schools and colleges, as several institutions mentioned the importance of engaging with both schools and colleges, as a means of increasing awareness amongst younger people; however, they found that often careers advisors '*aren't really thoroughly educated about the opportunities they deliver.'* The same individual, a senior member of the marketing department at a post-1992 institution, added, '*If we are going to do any promotion or activity, it's the engagement at schools and colleges level where a huge amount of investment needs to take place to raise that awareness.'*

A further caveat that was mentioned alongside concerns for awareness of accelerated degrees, was that '*there's very little understanding about what they are*.' For example, one institution felt that the concept of accelerated degrees was not fully understood by younger students in particular, who often believed that they were only worth two-thirds of a traditional degree. Furthermore, several institutions felt that they had not yet achieved a parity of esteem between their accelerated and traditional routes; students, employers and schools who had some degree of awareness of accelerated degrees viewed them as an inferior option to the traditional undergraduate degree. Indeed, it was mentioned by a member of staff at one institution that '*the perception from the schools is that it's still a lesser degree.'* There was also a concern amongst students that if they studied on an accelerated programme they would have to explain what an accelerated degree was to prospective employers. Overall, it was felt that such misunderstandings, as well as the general lack of awareness surrounding accelerated degrees, had the potential to be significant limiting factors for the expansion of accelerated degrees in future. This was particularly salient given that one Head of School highlighted the need for sufficient demand from students and for employers to value accelerated degrees to ensure continued provision.

A further challenge that had arisen for a few institutions, was the ability to recruit the '*right-type'* of student. A course leader at one institution said that they're '*looking for a certain kind of student,'* as '*they've got to be self-starters; they've got to be able to work*

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on their own; they've got to work as part of a team.' In fact, another interviewee from the same institution believed that '*the success of the accelerated degrees is choosing the students in the first place.*' This individual further explained that the courses are '*clearly very, very hard work*' and so '*it's not something you can undertake unless you are absolutely fully committed.*' These institutions emphasised that their accelerated cohort tended to be higher-achievers than traditional degree students; however, certain courses had still experienced accelerated students dropping out or transferring onto the traditional course. Given that cohort sizes for accelerated courses tended to be very small, the effect of even a few students leaving the cohort could be significant. For example, one institution originally had three students on one of its accelerated courses, two of whom dropped out. As previously mentioned, institutions did highlight that students left the accelerated course or transferred to the traditional course for multiple reasons, and it was not necessarily because students were struggling. For this reason institutions felt that '*getting the right student in the first place is crucial*' though in some cases it had proven '*very difficult to determine*' whether this was the case, as '*you can't predict with great accuracy just how focused and committed that student will be.*' For example, a member of staff at another institution had found that '*some of the applications have been from students who've seen it [the accelerated course] as a way to complete [a] degree in 2 years,*' as opposed to a student who had '*found their vocation, wants to get into the workplace and sees it as a great way to get in.*'

As a means of tackling this issue, almost all case study institutions interviewed their accelerated students, which was not normal practice with traditional three-year degree students. Also, as the profile of accelerated students tended to include non-traditional mature students, some of these individuals did not have traditional qualifications for entry into HE, i.e. A-levels, and so staff felt this was another important reason for interviewing all accelerated students. Fortunately, the policy of interviewing all accelerated degree applicants was usually feasible because of the relatively small number of applicants compared with a typical traditional three-year degree; hence it did not impose a great burden on staff, who were generally very positive about this interview process.

At one university, several course leaders mentioned experiencing a growing number of '*struggling students trying to come in as well as the non-standard mature students.*' These struggling students were usually already in the university system but had failed their first year of university elsewhere or had dropped out for another reason: '*Perhaps things haven't gone well for them.*' These students had found that they could only gain funding for another two years of university; hence have been applying for accelerated courses. One course leader explained that this profile '*doesn't make for the best students*' as they are not committed to the accelerated degree, but are motivated by funding restrictions:

It used to be, sort of, 50.50 mature students […] but recently, say, over the last three years it's been more of a tendency of students trying to get on the fast-track not for any reason apart from they've been to university and failed the first year and now can only get two years' worth of funding and so they try and get in the fast-track for that reason.

Lessons learned

Some examples of lessons learned by the case study institutions regarding the design and delivery of accelerated degrees included:

- One university had not expected so many students to transfer from accelerated courses onto traditional courses. Students were not necessarily transferring because they were struggling, rather they were not as committed to the accelerated course as course leaders had realised. As a result the university were making an effort to recruit the right students through better marketing and improved recruitment methods involving interviews.

- Another institution had originally allowed a two week break between modules when they first started running their accelerated degrees. The gaps were shortened to one week's duration, as they felt that the longer breaks made the academic year too long.

- At a post-1992 institution, one course was trialing a new structure to one of the summer terms, in the hope of giving staff greater flexibility. Previously two level 5 modules had been taught over the third term of accelerated students' first academic year. These modules had been taught simultaneously for the duration of the summer. This year they were running these courses consecutively, so that teaching staff would be less restricted if they needed to take time off. They were hoping that this strategy would help to alleviate some of the burden that teaching staff had been experiencing.

- One staff member reported that when designing the course schedule, care was taken to leave Wednesday afternoons free for accelerated students to participate in clubs and societies with traditional degree students, even during placements. This staff member felt it was important that accelerated degree students still have a good student experience.

- At one institution, staff were concerned about the restricted time available to accelerated students for internships/short placements, due to the structure of the academic year. However, students are still able to gain work experience as the university is very flexible: They work with students to help them to manage this i.e. allowing them to do one day a week to gain experience rather than taking one whole week out.

Chapter 7: Reflections on accelerated degrees and the wider higher education landscape

Overall, the members of university staff participating in the case studies were highly engaged and enthusiastic about the accelerated courses on offer. Indeed, individuals from several institutions mentioned that staff love teaching on the accelerated programmes, '*they really look forward to it [summer sessions]; they really enjoy and engage with it*' and that the students are '*a joy to teach*'. Many interviewees were visibly passionate about, and personally invested in, their degree courses, as a course leader from one institution said, '*We really care about our students; it's really engrained in everything we do.*' Members of staff felt that accelerated degrees were important as they addressed a gap in the market and offered a new alternative route into higher education for many students, which had previously been lacking. This was often mentioned in terms of a respective university's widening participation agenda. Several case study participants across institutions raised concerns over the financial burden of attending university, especially in light of the increased fees. They felt that the advent of accelerated degrees has great potential to attract non-traditional students to attend a HEI and also encouraged greater flexibility for those students who were not attracted by the traditional three-year degree.

Case study participants generally felt that the government could play a larger role in the promotion of accelerated degrees. This was in terms of raising awareness amongst students but also through reassuring employers of the parity of esteem between two- and three-year degree courses. This was a concern amongst several interviewees who felt that some students and employers viewed accelerated degrees as inferior. One member of university staff mentioned this in relation to apprenticeships. He felt that the government had been very successful in raising awareness surrounding apprenticeships as an alternative to higher education, however, accelerated degrees were still relatively unknown. Case study participants also felt that there needed to be more information available to students, for example, in terms of financial advice from Student Finance England. Several student interviewees believed that they ought to be entitled to larger student loans as they were studying for more weeks in a given academic year. Students also felt that options for two-year degrees should be '*made clearer*' on UCAS, as there appeared to be no available guidance referring to accelerated degree courses.

Although many case study institutions had received criticism from other HEIs accusing them of 'dumbing down' the traditional undergraduate degree with the inception of accelerated degree courses, and/or believed that there were barriers and challenges to be overcome, case study participants were extremely positive about their experiences. In general, members of staff interviewed thought that their courses were successful and saw the potential for growth, with many hoping to increase the size of their accelerated student cohorts and a couple mentioning the possibility of offering a wider range of two-

year courses in future. For example, one university commented that they are planning to revalidate their existing three-year Marketing degree and are hoping that they may be able to develop a two-year version of the same course. Members of staff felt that the market exists for accelerated degrees and, although it is often hard to target the right students to let them know about these opportunities, awareness of accelerated degrees is definitely growing, albeit slowly. Several members of staff mentioned the recent increase in fees as a significant factor in making their two-year courses more attractive options for many students, as one course leader said, if students are '*saving £9,000 in fees plus, you know, living costs: it's going to become more popular.*' Given that students are now consumers of education, a senior member of one institution's marketing team said, '*Universities would be foolish not to look at it as a product.*'

The vast majority of case study participants were positive about the accelerated degree offer and saw great potential for growth in future. In fact, one institution is hoping to explore whether their accelerated courses could potentially be developed into degree apprenticeships. Some case study participants felt there was scope to increase the number of accelerated courses on offer, but were more conservative about the potential for increasing cohort sizes within courses. Some interviewees expressed concern that large cohorts could create unmanageable workloads for marking and assessment, and that the benefit for students of high levels of individual contact time with staff would be reduced. It is also important to note that some members of staff were less convinced of the potential for accelerated degrees. This tended to be subject-specific, as several universities commented that some accelerated courses were far more popular than others and so recognised that a two-year format was not appropriate for certain subjects. One course leader explained that, whilst the numbers of accelerated students on her course had risen, they were still dealing with small cohorts and, as such, she was concerned as to whether continuing to run her course was sustainable. Indeed, a member of staff at a different institution felt that her university would benefit from doing some of its own research to look at what they were doing as an institution in order to respond to changes in policy.

Appendix 1: Research brief for case study participants

Exploration of accelerated degrees: Alternative, flexible and innovative modes of study

There is known to be a reasonable body of evidence examining various non-traditional modes of study delivery in Higher Education (HE). These comprise a wide range of options, including accelerated or compressed degrees, part-time study, distance learning, virtual institutions and mixed methods of study. The ways in which institutions can provide this have increased markedly in recent years, responding to student demands and improvements in technology, amongst others. However the Government feels they do not currently have a detailed picture of the existing landscape of these delivery methods, including their positives and negatives to the students and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has therefore commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to undertake research to explore the literature relating to alternative modes of study for first degree programmes, particularly accelerated degrees, and undertake in-depth interviews with representatives at a range of HEIs to uncover examples of good practice. This will build on evidence provided through the HEFCE Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots to provide an overview of existing evidence in this area, improve understanding of the current landscape and thinking around accelerated degrees, and highlight the potential implications of more flexible institutional delivery. The research takes place between January and June 2016.

Our approach to the research

To meet the research aims, IES is undertaking a rapid evidence assessment literature review and a small number of qualitative case studies of HEIs known to have some history and success with accelerated degrees and flexible study modes and some volume of students engaging in these alternative study modes. These case study institutions will contribute to sector-wide research to inform and enhance future policy and have the opportunity to showcase good practice. Six institutions across England, including your own, have been selected, representing different geographies, programme areas, and length of involvement with accelerated degrees. We very much hope your institution will agree to take part. Each participating institution will receive a confidential summary of their case study highlighting the key issues uncovered during the research.

The case studies will seek the views and experiences of key individuals at different levels and in different functions and departments, with visits from the research team organised at your convenience in April and May.

The case studies in particular seek to explore:

- Extent and range of provision of accelerated degrees and wider flexibilities, and changes over time

- Nature of student engagement and key market for accelerated degrees and other flexible or non-traditional study modes

- Design of accelerated programmes and the practical issues with accelerated degrees and other flexible delivery and learning modes

- Benefits to institutions, students and employers of accelerated degrees

- Student experiences of and outcomes from accelerated degrees

- Challenges, barriers and concerns in designing and delivery of accelerated degrees, and how best to overcome these.

What participation will involve

The intention is for an IES researcher to visit each participating institution to conduct interviews with a selection of staff to gain both the institutional and staff perspective on accelerated degrees and other flexible delivery modes. Participation in the research would involve:

- Nominating a member of staff to act as a top level contact, eg senior member of staff for liaison and facilitating the arrangement of interviews

- Identifying appropriate staff (up to 10) to participate in face-to-face interviews and allowing researchers from IES to conduct interviews with these staff during April and May

- Providing copies of any relevant documents relating to the development and/or evaluation of accelerated degrees or other flexible provision (where appropriate).

- We would wish to talk to a variety of staff representing the range of accelerated/flexible programmes offered but would be guided by you as to who would be the most relevant individuals to speak with. These are likely to include:

  o Senior management to understand the strategic issues and goals for more flexible modes of delivery particularly accelerated degrees (either centrally or in specific departments)

  o Academic staff involved in the design, planning, recruiting to and delivery of accelerated degrees

  o Staff involved in the monitoring and/or evaluation of accelerated degree programmes

  o Business development staff with responsibility for engaging with employers

  o Staff involved in supporting students on accelerated degrees.

We hope to visit your institution for one or two days and to talk to between six and 10 people, either individually or in small groups. We appreciate that some staff may not be available during the proposed visit days so would be happy to conduct some interviews by telephone or Skype. We anticipate that interview discussions will take no more than 45 minutes, and we would be happy to provide a short topic overview to outline the areas we would hope to cover. We would also be keen to gain the student perspective, so would ideally like to conduct a focus group or a small number of telephone interviews with existing students on accelerated programmes. We would seek your assistance in arranging the staff (and where possible, student) discussions at convenient times for your colleagues and in suitable venues.

We will designate a lead researcher who will liaise with the contacts you identify. All the lead researchers are experienced social researchers with a track record in research in HE.

Confidentiality

Any information accessed (via documents or staff interviews) during this study will be treated confidentially by the research team. These will not be passed to BIS. An overall research report covering main findings across case study institutions will be produced for BIS and will be published. No individual institutions or any individual staff members will be identified in that report. The case study reports produced for institutions will remain confidential to those institutions. However, if there are any brief illustrative examples of aspects of good practice that we would like to include in the report, these will be either anonymised or sent to the senior member of the institution for approval prior to inclusion as a named example.

All participating institutions will be provided with their own confidential case study report, and a copy of the final published report. If you would like any additional information about the evaluation the key contacts for the project are:

IES Project Manager	IES Project Administrator	Research Manager at BIS
Emma Pollard, IES	Gill Brown, IES	Rob Haynes, BIS
emma.pollard@ies.ac.uk	gill.brown@ies.ac.uk	Rob.haynes@bis.gsi.gov.uk
01273 763446	01273 763409	020 7215 8557

Appendix 2: Discussion guide for staff

Interviewer note: This guide is for staff with involvement of some kind in accelerated degrees (could also be referred as compressed degrees, fast-track degrees, two year degrees). These will be at different levels and in different functions and departments, and likely to include: senior management to understand the strategic issues and goals for more flexible modes of study (2,3,5,6); academic staff involved in the design, planning, recruiting to and delivery of accelerated degrees (3,4,5.6); staff involved in the monitoring and/or evaluation of accelerated degree programmes (5,6); business development staff with responsibility for engaging with employers (5,6); and staff involved in supporting students on accelerated degrees (3,5,6).

Use the guide flexibly depending on the role of the interviewee and nature of engagement with accelerated learning. Not all questions will be relevant to each interview, so don't expect to cover the whole guide in each interview.

The first two case studies are to be used as a pilot, so note any questions that don't work well and other issues that emerge that are not necessarily uncovered by the questions – to help to refine the discussion guide.

Questions marked* are informed by Barnett's work on flexibility.

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) is an independent not-for-profit research organisation.

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) has commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to undertake research to provide them with a picture of the current landscape for accelerated degrees as an alternative, flexible and innovative mode of study. The research has involved a review of the literature relating to alternative modes of study for first degree programmes, particularly accelerated degrees; however a core aspect of the study is to undertake depth interviews with representatives at a range of HEIs to uncover examples of good practice.

Thus the research will build on evidence provided through the HEFCE Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots (and earlier initiatives) to provide an overview of existing evidence in this area, improve understanding of the current landscape and thinking around accelerated degrees, and highlight the potential implications of more flexible institutional delivery. The research is taking place between January and June 2016.

We are working with six institutions in England with some history and success with accelerated degrees and flexible study modes, and some volume of students engaging in these alternative study modes. We hope to talk to around 10 staff (and possibly some students) in each of these institutions, and we are really interested in gaining the

perspectives of a range of staff with different roles and responsibilities in relation to accelerated degrees.

[individual interview] The interview will last about 45 minutes, depending on how much you have to say.

[focus group] The discussion will last about one hour, depending on how much you have to say. There are no right or wrong answers we are just keen to hear your thoughts, opinions and feedback – but group discussions work better if people don't all speak at the same time.

The interviews will be confidential to the research team. The findings of the research will be published by BIS however individuals that have taken part in the research will NOT be identified and nothing you say will be attributed to you. We are keen to identify examples of good practice from your institution but these will be checked and approved by your institution's key contact [name] before they are used.

Ask for consent to record the interview. Check if they have any questions about the research.

A Participant introduction

Interviewer note: This section is a brief introduction to the interviewee's job role and the involvement in accelerated degrees. If this is a focus group, go round the room and get each participant to provide their answers in turn. This should be a brief introduction only to start the conversation and help guide which sections of the guide to use.

1. Could you begin by telling me a little about your career background/history?
   Probe: How long with current institution, whether worked in other institutions so can bring in wider experiences?
2. What is your current job role and your responsibilities at the university?
3. Could you describe your involvement with accelerated degrees (and if relevant alternative and/flexible modes of study)?

Probe:

- strategic/policy making; designing/planning courses; recruiting/marketing/market research; delivery; administration/monitoring etc.; supporting students.

- former involvement in accelerated degrees in other roles/institutions (in the UK and abroad)

Extent and range of provision

> Interviewer note: throughout the discussion check when interviewee is giving their opinion (and what evidence they may be basing this upon) and when giving factual information.

4. Could I just check the general approach to the structure of the academic year at the institution? *Probe: terms or semesters (and number), general number of teaching weeks in the academic year, and start and end months of the academic year.*

5. Could you briefly describe the types of flexible learning/alternative study modes that your institution offers, as an alternative to the traditional three-year full-time 30 week honours degree programme? *Probe: part-time study, distance learning, elearning, blended learning, MOOCs, modular courses, accreditation of prior learning (APEL), work-based learning, HE in FE etc. What forms of flexibility are offered?**
Which are most common? How have these developed over time? Would you consider them to be innovative?

6. What term is/terms are used in the institution for accelerated degrees: that is the compression of a three-year honours degree programme into two years? *Probe: Is this term widespread? Or are different terms used for the same thing within the institution?*

[Interviewer note: use this term henceforth in place of accelerated degrees].

7. Approximately how many accelerated degree programmes do you currently offer? And in which subjects/fields? Probe: common subjects are nursing, business, law; check reflection of institution's overall subject coverage, how widely/narrowly focused ie across several departments or only one or two

8. Approximately how many students do you currently have on accelerated programmes? *Probe: approx. what proportion of the study body does this represent i.e. how niche is it?*

9. How long has the institution been involved with accelerated programmes? And has provision of accelerated degrees changed over time? *Probe: history of programmes, types of subjects, which subjects/departments were the 'leaders'/early adopters and which the 'laggers', expanded or contracted. Why is this?*

10. Why did the institution decide to offer accelerated degrees? For what purpose were they introduced*? What/who's interests do they serve*? *Probe: Check for seed funding, participation in funded initiatives such as Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilots, AIRS etc; check for alignment with mission/values etc.*
What were the motivations/drivers/pressures to offer accelerated degrees? What were/are the goals for accelerated degrees?
Who was involved in developing accelerated provision (who proposed the initiative*)

11. Can I just check if you offer accelerated programmes for any other level of qualification/study? *Probe: sub-degree, short-cycle vocational programmes, postgraduate programmes, do they have more of these than accelerated degree*

programmes (any potential for transference of learning/ideas to accelerated degree level programmes)?

Market for accelerated degrees

12. In your opinion, how aware are students of accelerated degrees? And of alternative modes of study in general, alternatives to the traditional three-year full-time 30 week programme? *Probe: Has this changed over time? How receptive are students to accelerated degrees and more flexible modes of study? How are accelerated degrees viewed? How strong is the traditional study model?*

13. In your opinion, how aware are employers and professional bodies of accelerated degrees? And of alternative modes of study in general? What level of interest and support is there for accelerated degrees among employers/professional bodies? *Probe: Any differences between employers and professional bodies? Has this awareness, interest and/or support changed over time? How receptive are employers/professional bodies to accelerated degrees and more flexible modes of study? How are accelerated degrees viewed? How strong is the traditional study model? [interviewer note: employers negative perceptions of accelerated degrees/reluctance also covered in Section 6]*

14. Did the institution do any market research before offering accelerated degrees? *Probe: what was undertaken? what did this say? If not, why not?*

15. How has take-up of your accelerated programmes been? *Probe: was level and nature of take-up as expected?* Change over time?

16. Which students are (most) attracted to accelerated degrees, and why? Probe: mature students, those with a career, those wanting to return quickly to the labour market, more motivated. Is it about student backgrounds or student attitudes? Are these students those who would not otherwise have entered HE?

17. Has the market/type of students attracted to accelerated degrees changed over time (at the institution and across the sector)? *Probe: in which direction (eg widened, narrowed; which students)? And why?*

18. How does the institution market (if at all) accelerated degrees? And to whom? Probe: offer options, advertising, careers fairs, local/national campaigns, prospectus etc

19. How (and why) do you think the market might change looking forwards (for the institution and across the sector)? Probe: with increased private provision, increased undergraduate fees, lifting of cap on student numbers, continued concerns about access and participation? Is it likely to be shrinking or expanding market? Will it spread to other 'niches'?

20. [if not already covered above] Is there potential for a greater market for accelerated degrees? Where would this be? Probe: room for more institutions, more programmes; which institutions should/could

offer accelerated degrees and why? What types of institutions don't/shouldn't offer accelerated degrees and why?

21. Will the institution continue to offer accelerated degrees in the future?
Probe: maintain current provision, reduce provision (which areas will be dropped and why); expand provision (which areas expanded and why)?

Design of accelerated degrees

Interviewer note: here we are after a detailed picture of how accelerated degrees can be delivered, practical issues for delivery and examples of good practice ie how to do it well. Also about drawing out potential for transferability of good practice, and also scalability of provision.

22. How do accelerated degrees work in practice? How are they compressed into two years (or four years for part-time)?
Probe: use of blended/elearning (new technologies) and/or distance learning during the summer period, run alongside/using other forms of flexible learning*?
Is there just one model for accelerated degrees used across different subjects/departments, or different models (how do they differ and why?)

23. Are accelerated programmes designed specifically as accelerated programmes or are they developed/adapted from standard programmes?
Probe: Why is this?

[optional Q or probes about details of accelerated degree, which check whether they meet Barnett's conditions of flexibility. Test in pilot] Do the programmes: lead to major award eg degree, offer students access to suitable materials, appropriate experiences and sufficient challenge, offer academic interaction with other students, offer access to tutors, offer prompt feedback, offer access to other academic services eg careers advice, financial services, are suitably robust and reliable, are cost effective, students likely to complete the programme*?

24. What are the fees (charged to students) associated with accelerated degrees?
Probe: are they cheaper/more expensive than traditional programmes in these subject areas.

25. What are the potential practical issues associated with designing and delivering accelerated degrees (and other more flexible provision)?
Probe: staffing issues, use of resources, timetabling and programming, greater student support.

26. What are the costs involved for institutions in providing accelerated degrees?
Probe: Level of costs and nature/cost areas, and how do they differ to offering traditional programmes?

27. Can you provide any examples of good practice in the design or delivery of accelerated programmes ie where they work really well? And explain what it is about

them that makes them work well?

Probe: what does the institution do well? What does a good accelerated degree programme look like?

28. What other institutions do it well? Are you aware of examples of good practice from other institutions (perhaps those previously worked in, or partner institutions? Can you talk me through these and why they work well?

29. To what extent do institutions share good practice about accelerated degrees and flexible learning/alternative study modes?

Experiences and benefits of accelerated degrees

> Interviewer note: will already have covered the perceived benefits to institutions of accelerated degrees in the previous sections – as these will be reflected in the goals and drivers, so this section will mop up any other/unexpected benefits to institutions BUT will mainly focus on benefits to students and employers. Also about drawing out possible examples of positive experiences and outcomes.

30. Turning now to the benefits of accelerated degrees, what benefits has the institution gained from offering accelerated degrees?

Probe: What were the intended outcomes for the institution*? did the actual benefits meet expected benefits/goals?

Any unintended/unexpected benefits?

Students

31. What benefits do (or can) accelerated degrees offer students?

Probe: what expectations do students have for accelerated degrees eg cheaper, quicker, hard work?

Do accelerated programmes generally meet students' expectations? What are the real benefits it delivers?

What was the anticipated effect on the educational experience of students*?

Any unintended/unexpected benefits?

What could be used as positive marketing messages?

32. What monitoring/evaluation does the institution undertake with regards to the experiences and outcomes of students on accelerated degrees? *Probe: use of institution's Management Info/admin data (retention, movement across programmes, qualifications achieved), use of large-scale data (eg NSS, destinations), comparisons with 'standard' or 'parent' programmes, bespoke evaluation for accelerated programmes only.*

33. What are experiences and the outcomes for students on accelerated degrees? How well do they compare to traditional study models? How is this measured?

Probe: to what extent are differences in outcomes driven by differences in the

backgrounds of students on accelerated degrees? Retention, student engagement, student satisfaction, qualifications, employability

34. Could you talk me through any positive (real/illustrative) examples of positive experiences or outcomes for students of accelerated degrees?

Employers

35. To what extent do employers engage with accelerated degrees?
    Probe: involved in design of courses, marketing of programmes, supporting/encouraging employees to take-up accelerated programmes
36. What benefits do (or can) accelerated degrees offer employers? What is the perceived value (added) of accelerated degrees, compared to the 'traditional' study model?
    Probe: what expectations do employers have for accelerated degrees - in new recruits and for professional develop of existing employees? Do accelerated programmes generally meet employers' expectations? Any unintended/unexpected benefits? What could be used as positive marketing messages?
37. Could you talk me through any positive (real/illustrative) examples of positive experiences or outcomes for employers of accelerated degrees?

Challenges, barriers and concerns

Interviewer note: this section is about drawing out the challenges faced In design and delivery of accelerated degrees; and how best to overcome these including examples of learning and good practice in tackling issues. Key aspect is what are the issues stopping expansion of accelerated degrees

38. What are the concerns expressed about accelerated degrees? a) within the institution by staff; b) by students, and c) by employers?
    Probes: What are student reactions to accelerated degrees, how do they rate the employability of accelerated degrees?
    Do employers value, trust accelerated degrees? Do they have confidence in them? Have you had any feedback from employers on this?
    To what extent are these shared concerns ie between the institution/students/employers? Have these concerns changed over time?
39. *Any unexpected, unintended (negative) outcomes from accelerated degrees*?
    Probe: potential to close off other forms of flexibility?
40. What are the factors and issues that inhibit the expansion of accelerated degrees?
    Probe: costs, staff attitudes, staff contracts, student support needs, lack of student awareness, student attitudes/traditional model is the norm etc Need to get details on these and the impact they have eg what additional/different support needs to students on accelerated courses require?

Have these changed over time and are they likely to continue to be barriers/inhibitors looking to the future?

41. Are there any issues/challenges that you feel are particular to your institution? Why? And are there perhaps any issues/challenges that you feel are particular to the English HE context (that perhaps are not an issue in other countries)?

42. How has or could the institution overcome these barriers/challenges? Could you talk me through some examples (of good practice)?
Probe: which cannot be overcome, which are the easiest to tackle?

43. Is there anything you wished you had known about before engaging with accelerated degrees? Lessons learned to pass on to others?

Finally

44. How can government encourage greater take-up of accelerated degrees? What other organisations/institutions could have a role here? And what could they/should they do?

45. In your option should more of this type of provision be offered? Is more flexibility, particularly in the form of accelerated study a good thing?

Additional information

- Any key external research/reports we should look at?

- Any documents relating to the development and/or evaluation of accelerated degrees or other flexible provision at the institution that we can have?

- Any other staff you feel we should talk to?

- Where do you feel (further) research is needed in this field? How could this best be tackled? What do you want to know? [Interview notes: about identifying perceived evidence gaps]

Appendix 3: Discussion guide for students

Introduction

Thank you for helping us with our research.

Before we start I thought I should say something about who we are and what we are hoping to do.

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) is an independent, not-for-profit, apolitical research organisation.

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) has commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to undertake research to provide them with a picture of the current landscape for accelerated degrees as an alternative, flexible and innovative mode of study. The research is taking place between January and September 2016.

The research has so far involved a review of the literature relating to alternative modes of study for first degree programmes, particularly accelerated degrees; however a core aspect of the study is to undertake depth interviews with staff and students at different HEIs to explore good practice. So we are working with six institutions in England, including your university, and talking to both staff and students to gain a range of perspectives. We are particularly keen to find out about your views about and experiences of accelerated degrees (how you found out about them, why you chose them, what worries or concerns you had, what benefits you hoped you would get, what the course is like, what are the good aspects and what are the more challenging aspects).

The discussion will last about one hour, depending on how much you have to say. There are no right or wrong answers we are just keen to hear your thoughts, opinions and feedback – but group discussions work better if people don't all speak at the same time. We really appreciate your help but please do remember that your participation in this focus groups is entirely voluntary: you do not have to answer any question you do not want to and you can end the conversation at any time without the need to give a reason.

The discussion will be confidential to the research team. The findings of the research will be published by BIS however individuals that have taken part in the research will NOT be identified and nothing you say will be attributed to you.

Ask for consent to record the interview. Check if they have any questions about the research.

Background

1. Firstly perhaps we could go round the room and introduce ourselves – saying a little bit about ourselves including what course you are on, when you started, and what you were doing before coming to the university. *Probe: Did they transition straight from college into higher education or, if they're older, have they been in the labour market up until now? What jobs/careers? Have they done a degree before/been in HE before?*

Check terminology used for accelerated degree (from course title/description) and then use this throughout.

Check if they know each other, whether all on the same course etc

Choosing your course

Now thinking about your decision making about HE

2. Thinking back, when did you first think about going to University and why were you interested in HE? *Probe for anticipated benefits of HE, family experience of HE, expectations from family*

3. What sort of university and course did you think you wanted at that time? Why was this? *Probe for early interest in flexible learning options eg part-time study, distance learning, sub-degree qualifications, elearning, modules, credit transfer, check if only really interested or aware of standard 3 year full-time Bachelor's degrees*

4. At that time were you aware of accelerated degrees? Where/how (and when) did you first hear about accelerated degrees/flexible learning? *Probe: University website, guidance given by schools/colleges, parents, social media…?*
Probe: check whether they were interested in accelerated degrees when they heard about them, or whether it wasn't really something they were considering.

5. Now thinking about when you made your application to study here, what attracted you to: a) this particular institution? and b) to your particular course? *Probe: what factors were important (eg distance from home, reputation, subjects offered, campus based, size, 'feel'), including whether the accelerated courses offered were a critical aspect? See if you can get participants to give a ranking order to the factors to get a sense of where accelerated study comes.*

6. Did you consider and/or apply to any other institutions/courses? Which ones and why? Were these for standard 3 year full-time undergraduate degree courses or also accelerated degrees? *Probe on consideration of other flexible learning options*

7. How did you find out about these particular accelerated degree options?

8. What was it that appealed to you about an accelerated degree? What were your reasons for applying to study an accelerated degree? *Probe: Cost? Faster completion?*
Probe: did they consider a standard length degree, was the accelerated option the

only way they could make HE work for them/would they have gone to university if they weren't able to do an accelerated course?
Probe on attraction factors of other flexible learning options: part-time study, modular study, distance learning etc

9. How did you expect it would be different from a traditional length degree?
10. Did you have any misgivings/concerns about studying on an accelerated programme/format? Probe: workload, lack of time for reflection, cost, lack to time for family/friends, lack of time for paid work, concerns about recognition in the labour market, lack of support

Experience of accelerated degrees

Now thinking about your experiences at the University

11. What were the entry requirements for your course? *Probe on how this fit with their previous qualifications, how did entry qualifications compare to those needed for the standard course*
12. Could you talk me through the application and admission process? *Probe for interviews, and if so, what types of questions were they asked?*
13. Could you give a brief outline of the course structure and how the course is delivered? (eg How does it work in practice). *Probe: timetabling, use of elearning, differences in approach between terms/semesters, whether there is a 'standard' programme running alongside and whether there is any interaction with students on the standard programme?*
14. How many [other] students are on your course, and what sort of profile do they have? *Probe: age range, gender, career experiences, [nb: participants may be on the same course]*
15. How are you finding the course?
    a) What aspects do you enjoy the most and why? What works well?
    b) What aspects do you find challenging and why? What works less well?
    Probe: student cohesiveness and peer support, support from Uni and tutors, access to wider facilities, workload, timetabling, assessments, feedback etc
    Probe: Is it more or less difficult/challenging than you expected? How are you finding the pace and pressure of learning? How do you think you compare to your fellow students? What do you find is the main challenge of studying an accelerated degree?
16. [if not already covered] What support does the university provide for students on accelerated degrees? How, if at all, does this differ to that provided to students on 'standard' programmes? *Probe: pastoral care/student health and wellbeing, academic support. What do you think of the support that the university offers its accelerated students?*
17. What were your expectations when you started your course? And do you feel the course has met/exceeded your expectations? Why?

18. In terms of your accelerated degree, what does the University do particularly well? What do you consider to be examples of good practice that could be shared with other courses and universities offering accelerated degrees?
19. In what ways, if at all could the University improve the course? What other things could improve your experience?
20. Are there any drawbacks to studying an accelerated degree? And how (if at all) can these be addressed/overcome?

Future plans

Now thinking about your future plans (for when you have finished your degree)

21. What do you hope to do after University? What are your career aspirations?
22. In what way do you think an accelerated degree will help you achieve this?
23. [if appropriate] Have you already started thinking about or actually making applications for jobs? How do you feel employers view accelerated degrees/your degree? *Probe on employer reactions, do you have any concerns about the way in which accelerated degrees are viewed by employers?*

Wider perceptions

Lastly thinking more broadly about accelerated degrees
24. How do you think accelerated degrees are perceived by: a) potential university students; b) current university students; c) employers [if not already covered]; d) government. *Probe for positive and negative perceptions, why do they think they are viewed in this way, differences in views between these groups*
25. Do you think more universities should offer accelerated degrees? Why/why not?
26. What do you think might affect the uptake of accelerated courses in future?
27. How could students be encouraged to consider accelerated degrees? *Probe: marketing messages and channels, how to raise awareness, do they think students should be encouraged*?
28. Is there any advice you would give to someone considering applying to an accelerated degree? [or what do you know now that you wish you had known before starting your course?]
29. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thanks and close

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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