

QAA Viewpoint

Accelerated degrees November 2017

Background

Accelerated degrees, sometimes called fast-track or two-year degrees, are full-time undergraduate programmes that are completed in a shorter time frame than usual. Providers offer more teaching weeks across the year, usually equivalent to a full-time job.

The [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#) allows providers in England to charge higher fees per year for an accelerated programme, with overall tuition fee costs no higher than a traditional full-time degree (subject to the approval of Parliament). Previously, publicly funded providers were subject to the same annual undergraduate fee cap, whether a degree was a standard full-time degree or accelerated. Advocates of the changes argue that students on accelerated programmes also benefit from lower maintenance costs, and enter the world of work at least a year earlier.

Is there an appetite to expand availability of accelerated degree courses?

A small number of universities currently offer accelerated degrees. The [University of Buckingham](#) offers most of its undergraduate programmes over two years. Other institutions in the UK, including [BPP University](#), [Staffordshire University](#) and [Abertay University](#),¹ offer a range of accelerated degrees, some with professional accreditation.

In 2016, the Government asked for evidence on accelerated degrees. The [analysis of responses found](#):

- 73 per cent of providers reported demand from students or employers, though others reported a lack of awareness of accelerated programmes.
- Alternative providers, small and specialist providers, and post-92 universities are more likely to offer accelerated degrees
- 14 per cent of providers thought them unsuitable for most of the subjects they offer
- 36 per cent of responders cited concerns about the cost of delivery.

This followed a pilot programme funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England between 2005 and 2010, in which eight universities promoted various forms of flexible learning, including accelerated degrees. In its [analysis of the project](#), the Higher Education Academy noted that ‘in some cases, accelerated students’ performances clearly exceeded those of the equivalent conventional students’.²

¹ Abertay accelerates a four year honours degree over a three-year programme.

² The Government will consult shortly on specific proposals for accelerated courses.

Why does the Government want to see more students on accelerated programmes?

[The Westminster Government proposes encouraging a wider range of providers and learning models](#). Accelerated degrees will improve access and social mobility, it says, appealing particularly to mature students, and those seeking to retrain and enter the workplace more quickly.

What do providers need to consider?

To answer this question, we invited contributors from universities already offering accelerated programmes to share their views. You can read the full responses from Andrea Cameron (Abertay University), Chris Maguire (BPP University) and Nigel Thomas (Staffordshire University) in full in *The Experience of Institutions Offering Accelerated Degrees*, published in conjunction with this QAA Viewpoint. While only a small sample and therefore not exhaustive, their comments offer a snapshot of practice today.

Abertay and Staffordshire noted that students were more likely to be classed as mature, though BPP University's experience is a more even split. Students on accelerated programmes are often particularly driven to succeed, have a good work ethic, and may be keen to complete their studies with a good degree and return to the workplace. That drive can mean that students on accelerated programmes can have very high expectations of their academic experiences. The challenge can be ensuring a parity of experience with the students on 'standard' programmes, in particular ensuring facilities and teaching staff are available throughout the summer.

Extended teaching weeks can mean that students have less opportunities for work experience to complement their studies. All three universities noted this challenge, and each mitigates the issue with measures including careful scheduling of placements, good links with employers and awareness raising of available opportunities. Scheduling is important for teaching staff too, and care should be taken to make sure that academic staff have the time to engage with their research.

In specialist providers that offer a smaller range of programmes, it may be easier to offer accelerated programmes in all or most subject areas. BPP University would be able to offer all degrees as accelerated programmes, but currently offers them in subject areas where there is the most demand (mainly Business and Law). Staffordshire and Abertay currently focus their provision on a smaller proportion of programmes, though a range of subject areas are represented at both.

BPP University noted the particular challenge of close monitoring to ensure that students on two-year programmes are progressing appropriately. While monitoring of this type is not exclusive to accelerated degrees, a carefully balanced student cohort may be at greater risk of instability if even just one or two students were to drop out or 'decelerate', which could have a negative impact on collaboration and students' experiences more generally. When monitoring students, providers should not underestimate the demands an accelerated programme can place on even the most driven of students, with less time for breaks from study throughout the year.

QAA's view

We would encourage providers of all types and missions to consider accelerated degree programmes, along with other flexible methods like part-time, online and distance learning, as part of a diverse mix of higher education provision. QAA has been asked to give its view on the standard of two-year programmes. The UK's focus on student outcomes, rather than the duration of study, means that in our view, accelerated courses can fully meet the required standard of a UK degree. That universities and colleges that offer accelerated degrees have passed QAA reviews demonstrates that they can indeed meet expectations for quality and standards. Two-year programmes can also deliver a high quality educational experience, and provide a welcome extra choice for students. Contributions from the universities listed above corroborate this.

The UK is a signatory of the [Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region](#), otherwise known as the Lisbon Convention. The Lisbon Convention '... aims to facilitate the recognition of qualifications granted in one Party in another Party. It provides that requests should be assessed in a fair manner and within a reasonable time. The recognition can only be refused if the qualification is substantially different from that of the host country - and the onus is on its educational institution to prove that it is.'

From this, we can conclude that there should be no reason in principle that two-year programmes should not be recognised internationally. QAA has heard anecdotal reports that accelerated degrees might be treated less favourably internationally, although in researching this Viewpoint we were unable to identify any tangible evidence to provide corroboration of this. However, if this perception does exist, the UK's continued participation in, and engagement with, the Lisbon Convention, the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area helps support the European and international recognition of UK higher education qualifications. QAA's international outreach work can also support this.

The feedback from providers did demonstrate a number of logistical challenges, such as the additional burden on academic staff, and the challenge of making sure facilities are available for students on accelerated routes and in a way that does not disadvantage them. Universities and colleges could conclude that these challenges are too difficult to overcome. This perception could be changed with proactive encouragement from the Department for Education and the Office for Students on the benefits of institutions offering a range of provision. With the increased focus on accelerated degrees through the new regulatory framework in England, universities and colleges may welcome support in developing and delivering these programmes. We will continue to work with providers across the UK to support the development of accelerated degrees, through the advice and guidance that we produce.

Annex A: The Experience of Institutions Offering Accelerated Degrees

Andrea Cameron, Head of School of Social and Health Sciences Abertay University

How long have you been offering accelerated programmes?

We first started offering accelerated degrees in 2015.

How many accelerated programmes do you offer, and what proportion of courses are available in accelerated form?

Our initial pilot involved seven undergraduate degrees programmes drawn from all four academic schools, which represented 21 per cent of programmes at that time offering an accelerated format. We are currently focusing on just four programmes being offered in an accelerated format, just over 10 per cent of our provision.

In what subject areas do you offer accelerated programmes?

- Food and Consumer Science
- Business and Management
- Games Design and Production Management
- Ethical Hacking

Is there a 'typical' accelerated programme student?

Our 'typical' student would be defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency as mature, is more likely to be non-Scottish and have come from a further education college with advanced entry into the second year of their degree programme.

What are the specific challenges (quality or otherwise) of delivering accelerated programmes? How do you mitigate or overcome them?

There can be challenges around equivalent student experiences. The students are being taught the same content but cohorts are often smaller, in some cases this can be advantageous, but for some types of project work it may require an alternate solution to be found.

There can be challenges regarding the availability of staff during the summer term so we have ensured that there is always an appropriate named point of contact for the students.

We have also been careful to select modules which we think will work in the summer term, for example, project-placement activity. Teaching is often block delivered and the students are aware of this in advance to enable both them and staff to organise their summer. We do try to give staff teaching-free blocks across the academic year so that they are able to engage with their research too.

What are the benefits of delivering accelerated programmes?

We have oriented our curricula to be more student-centric and flexible, therefore offering an accelerated route through the degree programme that aligns with these objectives. The students who have enrolled on these programmes see a faster route to entering the graduate workforce as attractive.

Cohort identity and peer support is more evident in these groups driven mainly by size and, therefore, visibility of the students.

There is a lot less teaching activity taking place in the summer terms meaning that we can deliver in alternate ways and block book specialist resources such as our Ethical Hacking lab, where students almost get exclusive use of this facility during the summer.

With the benefit of hindsight, what would you have done differently?

We would potentially have considered only offering an accelerated route for some programmes. With smaller programmes, you are essentially 'cannibalising' the cohort into two even smaller student groups.

Nigel Thomas, Dean of the School of Life Sciences and Education Staffordshire University

How long have you been offering accelerated programmes?

Over the last 10 years we have developed our portfolio of undergraduate accelerated degrees. We began this provision as part of one of the original Flexible Learning Pathfinders, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and supported by the Higher Education Academy. From 2005 to 2010, HEFCE gave development funding to eight higher education institutions to pilot forms of flexible provision. This was in response to the Government's 2003 Higher Education White Paper, which highlighted the need for more flexibility in courses in order to meet the needs of a more diverse student body. We continued to develop our provision in accelerated degrees beyond the original HEFCE funded project.

How many accelerated programmes do you offer, and what proportion of courses are available in accelerated form?

In our current undergraduate portfolio, we have eight accelerated degree courses. These courses are only a small part of our portfolio. While our provision in this area is small scale, we do have a breadth of subject areas covered by our accelerated courses.

In what subject areas do you offer accelerated programmes?

We currently offer accelerated degree programmes in the following subjects:

- Accounting and Finance
- Business Management
- English Literature
- Events Management
- Journalism
- Law
- Football Coaching and Performance
- Sport Strength and Conditioning

Is there a 'typical' accelerated programme student?

Students are individuals who bring to the course a different set of skills and ambitions and have a different set of needs.

When we first offered accelerated degrees we expected to see applicants from a widening

participation background, attracted by the financial benefits of a shorter degree. What we have observed is that many applicants are typically older than our on campus three-year degree students, and have not necessarily come through a traditional academic route into university. They are keen to return to the world of work as soon as possible to start earning.

We have found that our students on accelerated courses have a very high work ethic, are highly organised and engaged in their studies. We have found they are keen to take advantage of all learning experiences, including the additional opportunities we offer for volunteering, research projects and community events.

Accelerated degree students are also higher attaining as we see far better degree outcomes and often better student experience metrics. For instance, 100 per cent of our Accounting and Finance Accelerated degree students achieved a 'good' degree last year and twenty of National Student Survey question scores were higher than 90 per cent.

What are the specific challenges (quality or otherwise) of delivering accelerated programmes?

We've encountered various challenges in delivering the accelerated programmes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students who opt for an accelerated course with a full year's teaching - that is, September to August - are committed to their studies and have expectations that stretch and reward them every week and throughout the year. Not only can this place significant demands on staff to create relevant subject-based opportunities for extra curricula enrichment, it also places demands on the wider University to ensure there is a full and rich year-long student experiences, for example, ensuring that all facilities are open and available throughout the whole summer.

Similarly, there is a greater challenge for academic teaching staff to ensure parity of experience when teaching accelerated and traditional three-year degree students within the same class, as there is often a greater spectrum of ability and engagement than you would normally find in any one class.

What are the benefits of delivering accelerated programmes?

Our courses are delivered over six teaching blocks with a summer teaching block starting in May, which typically includes a two-week intensive period followed by blended learning support.

How many accelerated programmes do you offer, and what proportion of courses are available in accelerated form?

In our current undergraduate portfolio, we have eight accelerated degree courses. These courses are only a small part of our portfolio. While our provision in this area is small scale, we do have a breadth of subject areas covered by our accelerated courses.

From our experience here at Staffordshire our accelerated degrees have reaped many benefits including:

- Stronger links with employers and professional bodies. For example, our new BSc two-year degree in Football Coaching and Performance has been developed as a result of interest from prospective students and employers, and the University's long established and successful partnership with Stoke City Football Club and the Sir Stanley Matthews Coaching Foundation.
- Improved our good degree rates
- Attracted more mature students to the University and also students from outside our traditional recruitment markets

- Enabled a better use of our Estates, as summer modules are taught when there is less demand on physical resources.
- Enhanced our digital provision of teaching. Our accelerated degrees typically have had a distance or blended learning component. So teaching on accelerated degrees has been a catalyst for the development of technology enhanced learning, which has subsequently spread into areas where there has been more traditional delivery.

With the benefit of hindsight, what would you have done differently?

Typically our initial accelerated degree developments were linked to existing three-year degree courses. With hindsight we could have considered more carefully our prospective student market to ensure we were not competing with our existing portfolio when we developed two-year courses.

In more recent years, we have developed accelerated degrees as a separate offer and validated more specialist standalone two-year products designed for a particular market, such as our Football Coaching and Performance or Sport Strength and Conditioning degrees.

Secondly, despite offering accelerated degrees for over 10 years and with so many financial advantages to students – indeed student typically save £10,000 and start earning money a year earlier – we still need to raise the profile of this offer in the market place and give them their own identity. In hindsight, we could have done more to raise awareness of accelerated study options with prospective students. We are continuing to develop our portfolio of accelerated courses and are addressing the need to raise the profile of this provision with prospective students.

Chris Maguire, Dean of Academic Affairs BPP University

How long have you been offering accelerated programmes?

BPP University gained degree awarding powers in 2007 and it offered our first degree programmes in 2008. The accelerated modes of our programmes are a standard part of BPP University's provision and are validated with the traditional routes.

In addition we have run an accelerated version of the Legal Practice Course for many years.

How many accelerated programmes do you offer, and what proportion of courses are available in accelerated form?

There are two types of accelerated programme at BPP University:

- a) A traditional accelerated programme which simply uses the summer term instead of leaving it as holiday; and
- b) A concentrated accelerated programme which delivers the same amount of content in a shorter time span.

For a) we offer all of our Law and Business programmes in accelerated form subject to demand. For b) we only offer the accelerated Legal Practice Course. The latter attracts elite students who have been sponsored by the City law firms.

In what subject areas do you offer accelerated programmes?

We would offer them all if there was demand. We mainly offer them in Law and Business.

Is there a 'typical' accelerated programme student?

For traditional accelerated programmes, not really, although entry tariffs tend to be higher. Applicants tend to be focused on getting their award as soon as possible, and often then go on to enter the professions. They are often less concerned with the wider attractions and opportunities of student life. However, both young and mature students apply for accelerated programmes as well as students of wide abilities.

For concentrated accelerated programmes students tend to be highly competent and focused on entering the professions.

What are the specific challenges (quality or otherwise) of delivering accelerated programmes? How do you mitigate or overcome them?

BPP University delivers its programmes over multiple sites at multiple start times so the delivery of accelerated programmes over three terms within an academic year is not a challenge in itself.

Close monitoring of student progression is necessary to ensure students are progressing appropriately. Where they do not they may be required to transfer into the traditional programme to enable them to recover. As a consequence, if cohort intake size is not closely managed and of sufficient volume, the viability of the programme and the student experience of learning in a collaborative environment might be undermined.

The challenge for students is not having a significant break within the academic year. This may adversely affect students in their ability to cope with the continual pressure of study, reflection and digestion. It also may have a negative impact financially in that they may have lost the opportunity to work for a term per year. Because of this, accelerated students may choose to take paid work alongside their studies, which may then impact their resilience and potential to succeed.

Accelerated students also struggle to fit in pro bono and other careers-enhancing activities, such as vacation schemes and mini-pupillages, to the potential detriment of their competitiveness to other, full-time students. We attempt to mitigate this by drawing attention to in-course activities.

Finance seems to be a problem as a three-year programme is charged at a higher fee if a student decelerates, and some students have incurred additional costs after decelerating due to progression issues.

Students who decelerate and come off an accelerated programme are recorded as non-completers, even though they may go on to the traditional programme, and consequently count against the University in its retention statistics.

What are the benefits of delivering accelerated programmes?

For the student, the ability to complete their award more quickly (by up to a year) with the consequent financial benefits that brings such as lower living expenses, as well as the ability to move on with life opportunities more quickly.

For the University, it more efficiently uses fixed assets such as buildings and facilities. It provides an opportunity that distinguishes the University in the market place and underlines our focus on practice-focused, professional-facing provision.

With the benefit of hindsight, what would you have done differently?

As the University has a three term approach to the academic year and as we provide within our courses significant flexibility of delivery, including online support, there is nothing significant that we would do differently except ensure students are aware of the type of experience and demands that an accelerated programme provides.