

Royal Society of Biology Response

Department for Business Innovation and Skills Call for Evidence: Accelerated Courses and Switching University or Degree

July 2016

Royal Society of Biology

The Royal Society of Biology (RSB) is a single unified voice for biology: advising government and influencing policy; advancing education and professional development; supporting our members, and engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences.

As a professional body we represent a diverse membership of individuals which includes academics within higher education institutions, students and bioscience employers. We have had contributions to this response from our individual members, committees and special interest groups including the Heads of University Biosciences. We have also received contributions from other bioscience based learned societies, our member organisations¹.

Q1: What would the impact of a credit transfer system be on the higher education sector?

Many institutions already successfully offer a credit accumulation and transfer system. It is noted in the call for evidence that students remaining at institutions may be due to a 'lack of information' on switching. We believe that this information on switching is available, however may not be advertised widely. Institutions are not going to actively encourage students to leave, especially as funding is bound to tightly controlled student numbers, however they may be keen to gain additional students from competing institutions. Seeking to offer students' further flexibility is positive, however we have some concerns regarding the potential impacts of the system on the higher education sector, which will of course depend on the numbers of students wanting to switch.

The information in the call highlights that 'even courses which share the same name differ between institutions', higher education institutions are autonomous, they are diverse, they have different academics teaching the courses with differing research specialisms, this is one of the strengths of the UK higher education system. Thus, the provision is not homogeneous. The benchmarks for subjects mean that core content and skills are covered /developed during programmes, however the way in which the curriculum is designed and delivered institution to institution will differ. If a student is transferring between courses (within

¹ Member organisations <https://www.rsb.org.uk/membership/organisational-membership/full> and <https://www.rsb.org.uk/membership/organisational-membership/supporting>

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the same discipline) and they are both accredited² this would help to ensure for students and higher education institutions that they are both meeting the same high standards. However, this would not protect from different aspects of research-led teaching in different institutions. Students will need support when transferring from one course to another as inevitably it will not be the same. Currently students transferring between institutions will be reviewed on a case by case basis; and this would certainly need to continue. For smaller institutions or course programmes, switching mid-year could cause substantial additional administrative burden and is rarely advisable, especially when considering assessment via credits that are gained during annual exams.

If the number of students deciding to transfer increases significantly, this uncertainty in student numbers could impact greatly on institutions ability to budget and to plan their resourcing (be that staffing, investment in facilities etc). If the numbers taking it up are low, then the impact may be minimal.

It is also noted that there is a strain on the student, that may not have been realised until the student is in their new environment, which may result in disorientation and loneliness, despite support at the institutional level.

We suggest that further consideration be given on how degree apprenticeships may fit within this landscape.

Q2: By what mechanisms could a system of credit transfer be more effectively embedded across the sector?

It may be worth considering particular timeframes when transfers could take place, to enable institutions to allocate time and resources for support transfers. This would most normally be at a natural break at the start of the academic year.

Q3: What do you see as the main barriers to a more extensive credit transfer system?

Where programmes require specialist resources, access to laboratory space and equipment, staff expertise (often there are only a limited number of experts in a particular area) it is vital that institutions are able to accurately predict student numbers to plan their resources. There will also need to be in place support to ensure that students are able to “catch-up” on any skills or content that they require on their new course.

Q4: Are there any lessons we can learn from international credit transfer models, e.g. from the US?

Of note universities in the UK do utilise a ‘study abroad’ exchange year scheme. Students travel overseas for a period to carrying out learning in the exchange university and then return. A problem with this established and popular scheme is ensuring that the accumulated credits are fairly placed within the UK system on return.

Q5: What do you see as the barriers to more accelerated degrees being available?

We have particular concerns regarding the implementation of accelerated degrees within disciplines such as the biosciences. The biosciences are very resource intensive to run, requiring teaching staff, to support practical teaching as well as laboratory facilities. On bioscience courses direct contact time is already often

² Royal Society of Biology Accreditation and Advanced Accreditation <https://www.rsb.org.uk/education/accreditation>

high to account for the teaching of both theory and practical work, to compress the time in which these courses take place. This could lead to students having only a superficial level of understanding. In other countries we see a trend towards courses being extended to ensure depth of understanding rather than condensed. We need to be sure that accelerated courses have, and are perceived to have, the same high standards as other UK degrees or this will negatively impact on student prospects and the reputation of the UK HE sector.

If we want to continue to see our bioscience students receiving research led teaching, we have to allow our academics time to do research. The holiday times offer students time to work on investigative projects and gain valuable work experience. For our teaching academics, this time is often used to further their research interests, essential for facilitating research-led teaching. For accelerated degrees to be viable, there would need to be investment in additional staff to cover the additional teaching.

Timetabling of access to laboratories and the logistics of organising fieldwork is often difficult with large cohorts of students; if practical teaching was spread over three semesters, this may alleviate this problem. Currently many institutions as part of their outreach and widening participation work will offer laboratory space for schools to use when not timetabled for student use. This offers young people a taste of what attending university is like and potentially encourages them to take a science subject at university. We would not want to see, as an unintended consequence, a reduction in opportunities for universities to support young people to engage with science.

We feel further consideration will need to be made around the funding for accelerated courses. Is the expectation that these courses will cost the same as the standard length course? There would be reduced opportunity for students to take on additional work to fund their studies during an accelerated programme. This could be a barrier for those wishing to study from low socio-economic backgrounds or for those with other financial commitments.

Accelerated degrees would of course be subject to the same Quality Assurance procedures and having teaching reported through the Teaching Excellence Framework. We would expect that to demonstrate that the accelerated degrees were offering the same experience as standard length degrees that they would engage with accreditation processes from their appropriate professional bodies. Feedback from employers should demonstrate that the accelerated degrees are giving students the same employability skills as those on the standard course. We would also want to ensure that as well as successfully preparing students for work, they are also still preparing them to undertake further study or research (MSc, PhD). Ensuring that accelerated degrees are considered to be of the same standard and status as standard length degrees is very important for a student's future prospects.