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Pearson College Call for Evidence response

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

Accelerated degrees and switching university or degree

19 July 2016

Questions

Question 1: How many students changed degree course within your higher education institution over the last three academic years? I.e. students who changed course but continued to study at your higher education institution.

N/A

Question 2: How many students have transferred into your higher education institution over the last three academic years?

2012/13: 5
2013/14: 50
2014/15: 13

Very approximate.

Question 3: Are there any common patterns as to why they have transferred into your higher education institution?

Most top up from an HND taught elsewhere, a smaller number change subject and institution, a smaller number change institution but still do the same subject.

Question 4: How many students have transferred out of your higher education institution over the last three academic years?

Aware of only 1.

Question 5: Are there any common patterns as to why they have transferred out of your higher education institution?

Moved country.



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Question 6: Have you got a credit transfer process in place?

Yes.

We have validating partners who have credit transfer or Accredited Prior Learning policies. We need to operate within their policies.

Our preference would be to have a more flexible credit transfer approach than validating partners tend to have.

Question 7: If no, why not?

N/A

Question 8: If yes, how are students made aware of your credit transfer process?

All policies are made available to students through the online learning environment and this is communicated to students during induction.

Additionally students who apply and have studied elsewhere may ask about credit transfer, or potential credit transfer may be identified during the application interview. In either case a detailed discussion will be had with the applicant.

Question 9: What would the impact of a credit transfer system be on the higher education sector? If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.

There is already a credit transfer system and depending on the institution it allows students recognition for some of their previous study (or experience).

However we will assume that this question means what would be the impact of a more extensive credit accumulation and transfer system. If we want to offer a more flexible system that is responsive to a wider range of student needs, then the issue is not just credit transfer (meaning students move between institutions) but also flexible credit accumulation. Flexible credit accumulation allows students to engage with HE as and when suits them best and helps students who are unable or unwilling to engage with a typical 3 year full time system. This could be within one institution or across several institutions.

The key to such a system is the ability to allow enrolment on a per module basis rather than on a full degree. Students then study modules that are most useful or interesting to them, and can build to exit awards such as certificates, diplomas or full degrees. This may be over a longer period of time (or shorter) than current common practice. This would especially suit older working students, as the three year campus model is really most suited to school leavers. Students could increase or decrease their pace of study according to their changing needs. They also may not want to complete a full degree but find very good value in doing modules that are relevant to them eg they may wish to do a particular set of



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accountancy or HR modules to help them at work. It would also help to stop categorising students as “drop outs” and “attrition” but instead recognise the positive learning experience in passing individual modules. It would provide a less intimidating scaffolding approach for students who are less certain or confident about engaging with HE as they would not need to commit to an entire degree at the outset and feel like a drop out if they don’t get there in the standard three years.

This is all closely related to credit transfer as students may wish to use different institutions for different modules.

For students, a more extensive system would open up the system to the needs of a wider range of students, and may help address the severe decline in part time working students we have seen over the past 10 years. Other areas where it could provide more choice and mobility for students are:

Flexibility for students who want less a conventional higher education experience (for example a student may prefer, for numerous reasons including familial responsibilities, to e.g. study for the first two years in a local college environment and then complete their degree via a one-year degree top up, a common model for Higher National student progression)

Recognised and consistent credit for online HE modules could open up HE for students in work and with other commitments and ultimately widen participation

Flexibility to study abroad e.g. topping up in non UK universities, if credit is built in such a way that it can be recognised in non UK systems, and also vice versa where overseas credit is recognised in UK universities

Such a system could also fit well with higher and degree apprenticeships (or employer sponsorship more widely) as it would give employers much more choice in shaping apprenticeships (which are meant to be employer designed), both higher and degree apprenticeships. Where the apprenticeship does not cover a full degree, student apprentices would have the opportunity to progress to a full degree if they wished using credit transfer and accumulation.

For universities, it would provide the opportunity to better service a wider range of stakeholders, including making a different kind of contribution to widening access. In some cases it would provide an opportunity to grow student numbers and build close relations with employers. It may encourage closer collaboration between consortia of universities as they could establish shared modules and pathways and mutual recognition policies. It could also be a good mechanism for the enrolment of some non-traditional students. Universities could take risks and enrol students on a flexible credit system, rather than reject their application due to worries about external continuation optics.

However, although such a system would be beneficial in terms of student choice, widening access and employer sponsored programmes, it could cause some financial uncertainty to institutions. At present once a student starts, they are typically with the university for three years with three years of tuition fees. This



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system could change that, with less certainty over fees, more competition between years of students, and greater expenditure on marketing.

Question 10: What would the impact of a credit transfer system be on your institution? If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.

A more extensive credit transfer and accumulation system would benefit our institution as it would allow us to more easily satisfy the needs of students, employees and employers and to explore new ways of offering HE.

Question 11: By what mechanisms could a system of credit transfer be more effectively embedded across the sector? If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.

In order to encourage universities to extend their credit recognition and accumulation approach the following could be considered:

Introduce SLC funding by module rather than by year and by programme. Perhaps a new mode could be created: "flexible credit accumulation mode" and these proposals would only apply to students on such a mode.

Allow enrolment of students to be by module (rather than by programme and year)

Create a central service for the accredited recognition of experience, that universities could rely on to determine level, credits, and outcomes from work experience (rather than having to do it themselves). This could also cover university and non-university based learning credit recognition (eg professional education). Mapping credit recognition can be time consuming and expensive for universities, and can lead to inconsistent results/judgments by different universities.

Change acceptable practice re credit recognition so that it does not necessarily have to map precisely to all learning outcomes of the new university. This may require reconsideration of some of the QAA expectations to allow broad brush mapping by level and overall discipline.

Broadly, recognition of prior credit would need to remain within the control of the individual universities as it relates to being control of their own standards. However consideration could be given to how to make this more consistent across institutions, as inconsistency can be confusing for students. Suggestions to improve this are:

The lack of agreement/consistency between institutions in interpretation of credit could be addressed via clearer guidelines/best practice for translating general to specific credit



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Issues with parity of credit recognition may be due in some instances to unfamiliarity with a type of programme. Education of admissions staff in these qualifications is vital to ensure fair assessment/valuation of credit in process of transfer from general to specific credit.

Possibly having a central credit recognition service as outlined above that universities could choose to rely on rather than having every university having to research and map every type of qualification. Examples could be drawn from the USA where credit transfer is simplified by the use of three primary credit evaluators (rather than each institution doing its own assessment) - World Education Services (WES), the International Education Research Foundation (IERF), and Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE).

In order to protect UK university autonomy, participation in an extension credit recognition should be optional as should the use of a central recognition service. Universities should be able to measure and decide on credit recognition themselves, or choose the central service. Additionally, if the latter, then that should be deemed to be sufficient and not seen as a delegation of their power, but something they are entitled to rely on ie there should be no QAA risk if they chose to rely on the service (cf the rules on collaborative provision).

Question 12: What do you see as the main barriers to a more extensive credit transfer system? If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.

There are several barriers to a more extensive system:

Funding: Essentially SLC funding is by year rather than by credit. It would need to be set up as by credit (with a minimum of perhaps 10 credits). At present it is not really possible to enrol in a module and get an SLC loan.

Regulations/practice re enrolment: it is considered “best practice” to enrol students on the highest level qualification they could complete. This is mainly a full honours degree. If they leave at any point before that they are considered to be a drop out. If a student wants to enrol one year at a time (eg on a certificate or a diploma) this is very difficult. We have worked with several validating partners and this is not really allowed. Even where a student exits with a certificate or a diploma it is more a consolation prize for not having completed a full degree rather than a really positive achievement in its own right. This practice would need to change so that students can enrol per module, or on an award less than a full degree, without negative repercussions for the student or for the institutions offering flexible study.

Financial uncertainty and operational planning: this could be a challenge as student numbers at different levels could become less predictable. On the other hand it could just as easily be an opportunity.

Regulation/practice re credit recognition: At present, our experience across several universities is that to recognise credit from elsewhere, it must very closely “map” to the specific learning outcomes of the degree at the new university. This is quite difficult as institutions design their degrees differently (even if they have the same name) often following particular interests and perspectives of the academic staff. This



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would need to be much more flexible. One method could be to focus not so much on mapping every learning outcome but simply on whether students are capable of undertaking the relevant modules at the new institution ie are there any prerequisites that they have not covered, and otherwise give broad credit recognition for modules studied at the relevant levels in the same discipline. This would be a significant change in practice for many universities.

Fees: There are two issues here. Universities should be able to charge a reasonable fee for the credit recognition process and students should only pay for the credits they actually study at the new university (ie credit recognition should also mean a discount on tuition at the new university). In order to recognise credit at present a detailed “mapping” exercise has to be undertaken. This can be time consuming and therefore expensive, especially if the new university has to look at a lengthy portfolio of work. Fees vary a lot at universities, with some charging quite a lot and others doing it for free. One barrier is if universities do not feel they can charge a reasonable fee (eg fearing there may be an expectation it should be done for free). Consideration also needs to be given to whether credit recognition fees can be covered by SLC funding.

However, related to this is that if a student obtains credit recognition for a module/s but not the entire year, they should only pay tuition for the number of credits they actually study that year at the new university. At present some universities still charge for the whole year. Some best practice guidelines around fees could be developed to encourage this.

Question 13: Are there any lessons we can learn from international credit transfer models, e.g. from the US? If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.

No comment.

Question 14: Does your institution offer accelerated degrees?

Yes.

All students can apply to accelerate their degree at the end of their first year. We approve applications on the basis of student progress at that point ie not trailing assessments or modules. Students then study additional credits over the summer term. This allows them to complete in 2 years.

Question 15: If yes, what are the advantages to the students and your institution of offering degree programmes designed in this way?

About a third of or students envisage that they would like to accelerate when they start. However a smaller number actually accelerate. Students cannot accelerate unless they are progressing well and even then most decide that they do not want to accelerate after all – they’d rather have a long summer holiday. So there is a noticeable difference between perception and practice. We do not see this as a problem.



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Benefits to students:

Having the option to accelerate – gives students greater choice.
Only 2 years of study, so they can move into employment faster.
Possibly cheaper total tuition fees.
Lower maintenance loan to repay.

Disadvantages to students:

More intense experience – miss long holidays.
No time to catch up if they are falling behind.
Less time to earn money over the summer.
Potentially less time for internships and placements.
Out of synch with most of the cohort from the first summer onwards.
SLC funding is per year, not per level, so overall funding available for degree is less. This is a major disincentive in practice.

Advantages to the institution:

Always good to be able to offer extra service to students.
Helps motivate students to do well in year 1 (if run in the way outlined above).
More activity happening over the summer (some may see this as a disadvantage).

Disadvantages to institution:

Financial – only two years of tuition instead of three for the same amount of work.
Timetabling challenges – not just over the summer but from that point on as the cohort is out of synch.
Staffing challenges – many do not want to teach over the summer but focus on administration, research, marking, design etc.
Class size can be small, especially for programmes with elective choices.
Progress points at unusual points of year (Christmas/New Year) and need to have tight timetables for exam boards to make decisions before students start next level.

Question 16: If no, what are the institutional barriers that would need to be overcome to offer more accelerated degrees?

N/A