

News story: Government boosts student choice with two-year degrees

Hundreds of thousands of prospective students will be handed more choice than ever before over what they can study at university with the expansion of two-year degrees, the Universities Minister has announced today (Sunday 18 November), which will encourage new providers into the market and help students fast-track their way into the workforce.

It follows a consultation on the proposal to roll out shorter university courses – also known as accelerated degrees – creating an unprecedented level of choice and flexibility for people wanting to study in higher education, particularly mature students.

The UK higher education system is world-renowned, with four universities in the world's top ten, and 18 in the top 100. Today's announcement will build upon our world-class system by widening choice and creating more diversity for all students choosing to study at one of our institutions – part of the government's drive to provide greater value for money for students.

The move will not just enable students on all such courses to graduate one year faster compared to standard degrees, but it will come as a welcome boost for businesses who will be able to access talented graduates a year earlier – most notably, but not limited to, subjects such as accountancy, financial management and law where accrediting bodies are developing accelerated courses for rapid graduate employment. Accelerated degrees are also expected to be made available for the vast majority of other courses too.

Accelerated degrees meet exactly the same quality assurance measures as standard degrees and will provide exactly the same level of qualification. For example, a two-year accelerated degree will condense 3-year degrees with 30 weeks teaching into 2 years with 45 weeks teaching.

As part of the consultation response, Sam Gyimah has also given the green light to new fees for accelerated courses. Students who opt for a two-year degree will save at least 20 per cent (£5,500) in total tuition costs compared to a standard three-year course. The new fee limits set out in the government's response to the consultation, which will be published tomorrow, will be subject to parliamentary approval.

Universities Minister Sam Gyimah said:

Innovative solutions and ground-breaking opportunities remain the driving force behind our higher education system. We have created a successful, world-class system but this is all about making it even better.

Accelerated degrees not only make it possible for the next generation of students to access higher education and the

undeniable financial, academic and personal benefits it has to offer, but drives the sector to offer dynamic choices that serve students' needs.

Providers will be able to tap into a new market of students, particularly mature students, who were previously locked out of higher education. This provision creates a new arena of competition that delivers for students, taxpayers and employers.

Verity Davidge, Head of Education and Skills Policy at EEF, The Manufacturers' Organisation said:

For manufacturers facing acute skills shortages, accelerated degrees widen the graduate talent pool, they are faster and also ensure sought after STEM graduates are able to enter the labour market more quickly. These degrees will also be attractive to learners, who will find themselves with less student debt – resulting in a much needed boost in supply to industry.

With manufacturing moving at pace through investment in new digital technologies and techniques, these new channels of learning are both timely and needed to ensure current and new employees are able to gain the skills they need for the future.

Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of the Office for Students, said:

The Office for Students is committed to promoting greater diversity, choice and value for money in higher education. We want to encourage the development of new and alternative high quality provision that responds to students' needs and preferences.

Accelerated degrees offer students from all backgrounds the possibility of studying over a shorter period of time, at a lower overall cost compared with a standard three-year course. For many, they are likely to be an attractive option.

We look forward to seeing the impact of the new fee limit on student choice and diversity of provision across the country, and we will be working with students, universities and colleges, the government and other partners to support the wider delivery of these degrees.

Although the proposals allow institutions to charge up to 20 per cent more per year for accelerated degrees (in recognition of the increased teaching time required), the overall tuition fee cost of the 2-year accelerated degree to the student is 20 per cent less than the same degree over three years.

The 20 per cent increase per year will allow providers to support higher in-

year costs for accelerated provision, such as tuition weeks over the summer and administrative staff pay and capital overheads.

For the taxpayer, it means significantly lower tuition loan outlay, higher rates of repayment and therefore a lower cost to the public purse of higher education. A higher proportion of students on accelerated degrees will also repay their loans in full.

There has been historic cross-party support for this policy, from Shirley Williams in the 1960s, to Labour spokesman Lord Stevenson, Roberta Blackman-Woods, Lord Liddle and Lord Watson who all supported it in the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill.