

Accelerated learning programmes: a review of quality, extent and demand

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Executive summary

This review suggests that there is considerable interest in accelerated degrees and that the adjustments that HEIs will need to make to facilitate them are seen as making HE more responsive to employer and student needs (and thus in accordance with some aspects of the Bologna Process). The review did not identify significant concerns about quality and standards, since it seems to be accepted by professional bodies and Sector Skills Councils that these will be assured by normal HE quality processes such as validation and review. Issues are more related to the adaptations needed to institutional processes (e.g. the academic year), workload for students and concomitant issues related to the ability of students to cope with it and the development of their skills in doing so.

Student interests in accelerated degrees providing a quicker route into employment mirror those of employment sectors where skills shortages encourage employer interest in them. Student interests, expressed in evaluation reports and other research, also centre round the financial benefits of accelerated courses.

Accelerated learning programmes, including fast-track degrees, are responsive to the needs of employers and students, particularly mature students or those who have a specific need to graduate more rapidly. They are not designed to replace existing traditional degree programmes, but to add to the range of options open to students. In many cases, especially in Europe and the UK, acceleration is for the more able students; i.e. those of sufficient maturity, with motivation and commitment to handle the additional workload. Therefore fast-track degrees are applicable in specific circumstances, including students' life circumstances.

Accelerated learning and fast-track progression can be seen as just one aspect of a much larger series of changes within higher education that are providing flexible and distributed learning and responding to the demand for lifelong learning. The development of accelerated degrees is clearly linked to and made possible by a number of developments that have been common across HE in the last ten to 15 years: modularisation, credit accumulation, Accredited Prior Experiential Learning/Accredited Prior Certificated Learning (APEL/APCL) work-based learning, e-learning and blended learning.

Many accelerated learning programmes (such as fast-track degrees included in the HEFCE-funded Flexible Learning Pathfinder project) actively deliver on several of the Bologna action lines, particularly action lines 3 (establishment of a system of credits), 4 (promotion of mobility), and 7 (focus on lifelong learning). In addition to the evolving action lines, Bologna has since the Prague summit in 2001 developed a social dimension, and recognised that: "lifelong learning strategies are necessary [...] to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life." (Kladis, 2003). Many of the programmes discussed in the report have a lifelong learning and social inclusion focus and the concept of most types of accelerated learning is dependent on a system of transferable credit as envisaged by Bologna.

The recent Burgess Report highlights the findings of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Scoping Group. The group included sector-wide representatives from several key bodies including the National Union of Students (NUS), Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) (amongst others). The report into arrangements for a national credit system for England notes that although the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was initially conceived as a measure of workload, it has now also been further developed to include the concept of learning outcomes (UUK 2006, p.41). The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Framework for Qualifications is also based on a learning outcomes approach. To this extent, accelerated programmes of learning, and specifically fast-track degrees, do not contravene or threaten the principles of the Bologna Declaration.

This review provides evidence that accelerated learning occurs in many formats, at many levels and in many countries, and that it is generally more prevalent in countries where students pay tuition fees. In such cases accelerated learning programmes are responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse and career-focused student body and the flexible and ever-changing demands of employers.

Introduction

The 2003 White Paper on higher education (DfES 2003) recognised the need for greater flexibility in delivery of higher education to meet the needs of students from non-traditional backgrounds and to attract people with different demands and commitments. The White Paper outlined a proposal to pilot accelerated Honours degree programmes (fast-track two-year BA/BSc Honours degrees). These are now being piloted in (at the time of writing) four English HEIs as part of an overall investigation into different models of flexible learning, funded by HEFCE. Motivation for this came from two key and interrelated factors: financial pressure on students and rising levels of student debt; and the aim to increase participation towards 50% of those aged 18–30 (DfES, 2003:8). The reasoning was that accelerated programmes might provide a means to provide more flexible opportunities at a lower cost to participants.

There are two major issues that accelerated programmes of study raise. The first relates to the programmes themselves. Degrees that form part of the national accreditation framework are defined in terms of the level of their learning outcomes (QAA, 2001) and the number of estimated learning hours to achieve them (i.e. 10 learning hours per credit) (SEEC, NUCCAT, NICATS, CQFW 2001). For accelerated degrees to have an equivalent value, the notional learning hours have to be accommodated and there may be concerns about the feasibility of this. There may also be concerns about the practicalities of transferring to courses of more normal length, i.e. appropriate transfer points would have to be built in. There are issues in assuring quality for a programme that purports to achieve the same learning outcomes in a shorter time and this includes issues such as resourcing and student workload. There are issues related to the acceptability of the qualification both in this country and internationally.

The second set of issues relates to the Bologna process that aims to encourage compatibility and comparability across 45 countries for HE provision. The norm in many European countries has been four-year undergraduate programmes, while the Bologna process anticipates three-year programmes of study as the first cycle of a three-part Bachelors-Masters-Doctoral qualification cycle. Accelerated programmes of study in an even shorter time span may raise concerns among European HE policymakers.

This report sets out to address both sets of issues by reporting on the findings of research carried out by the Centre for Research and Evaluation (CRE) on behalf of the Higher Education Academy and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The aim of the research was to identify the nature of accelerated learning programmes historically and in the contemporary HE environment.

Initial research questions included:

- What lessons can be learned from previous accelerated learning programmes?
- How do the consumers of higher education outputs (employers, Sector Skills Councils,

- professional bodies) view the quality and standards of accelerated learning programmes?
- What lessons can be drawn from the development and market testing of the current Pathfinders programme?
 - Can the quality and standards of the students' experience be compared favourably with conventional programmes?
 - What are the key variations by subject discipline, profession or student type?

Work focused initially on analysis of findings and data from the Accelerated and Intensive Routes (AIRs) project, data provided by the University of Buckingham (an institution that has many years of experience of providing two-year degrees) and data supplied by the Flexible Learning Pathfinders. A literature review was also carried out to identify international and historical examples of accelerated learning programmes.

In the fieldwork stage, the research team interviewed ten representatives of professional bodies (including those most relevant to the subject areas covered in Pathfinder pilots), and key representatives of employer groups (such as the Association of Graduate Recruiters and Sector Skills Councils) and heads of quality in the four pilot HEIs and two further HEIs (see Appendix 2 for a list of participating organisations). Team members also gathered the views of individual members of the Fast-Track Degrees Evidence Group representing DfES, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the UK HE Europe Unit and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

The views of other organisations were gathered by desk research. To enable an international higher education perspective on accelerated degree programmes in the context of the Bologna process, an email survey was administered to members of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and among the membership of the European Higher Education Society (EAIR) (see Appendix 1). The focus of the fieldwork was on validation and quality issues, employer attitudes to fast-track entry to professions, market research to illustrate demand and lessons to be learned in the establishment of such programmes in the future. Much of the following report will focus on these issues.

The review of literature and secondary data has brought together information on accelerated programmes of learning that occur at different levels in different contexts and in different countries. Literature has been reviewed from the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Secondary data have been gathered and reviewed from the Flexible Learning Pathfinder projects, and Government bodies in England and other countries, including Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the Republic of Ireland. The main themes the literature highlights are: the extent of provision; how and which types of students benefit from acceleration; evidence that accelerated programmes maintain quality; and evidence of demand for accelerated learning.

Context: accelerated programmes of learning and the European Higher Education Area

This report into accelerated programmes of learning has to be seen in the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as this is the process by which such qualifications can demonstrate their comparability and compatibility.

The move towards an EHEA was launched at a meeting of Ministers for Education in Bologna in June 1999. The resulting Declaration called for the adoption of a system of 'easily readable and comparable degrees', in order to 'promote European citizens' employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system'. Further, the declaration called for a system 'essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate', with progression to the second cycle dependent on completion of three years of the first-cycle study. This was initially controversial in Europe where four-year degrees have been the norm. A successful EHEA would also necessitate a system of credits, such as in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), 'as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognised by receiving Universities concerned' (EHEA 2003).

As the Bologna process rolled out over successive ministerial meetings from 1999, ten action lines were established:

1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles
3. Establishment of a system of credits
4. Promotion of mobility
5. Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance
6. Promotion of the European dimension in higher education (added after the Prague Ministerial summit of 2001)
7. Focus on lifelong learning
8. Inclusion of higher education institutions and students
9. Promotion of the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (added after the Berlin Ministerial summit of 2003)
10. Doctoral studies and the synergy between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

Although most of the discussion about Bologna and accelerated programmes of study has concentrated on whether the Bachelors' degrees should be taken over a minimum of three years, the evolution of the Bologna process has reduced the emphasis on the duration of an undergraduate degree for certification under the EHEA. The emphasis now has moved towards individual units of credit and learning outcomes. This is partly because of the

concurrent Lisbon accord¹ which promotes lifelong learning and flexibility and partly in an effort to make Europe's education systems more responsive to the needs of the labour market. A joint DfES/HEFCE statement on Fast-Track degrees (April 2007) notes that:

- UK government and sector representatives will continue to promote the importance of learning outcomes within the Bologna Process as the most appropriate measure of study in an era of lifelong learning when students follow a range of routes and modes of study
- *'Beginning in 2007, DfES and Welsh Assembly Government, working with QAA and HEIs, will self-certify the Framework for HE Qualifications as compatible with the Bologna Process Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA. The development of national credit arrangements for England will be central to this process and the recommendations of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Group are helpful in this regard'* (DfES & HEFCE: 2007).

Respondents from the UK HE Europe Unit² and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) have also indicated that such fast-track degrees have the potential to support Bologna policy objectives, notably supporting lifelong learning and the social dimension.

What is perhaps more pertinent to this research is that accelerated learning programmes actively deliver on (or can only work in the context of) several of the key action lines identified above, particularly action lines 3 (establishment of a system of credits), 4 (promotion of mobility), 7 (focus on lifelong learning) and the social dimension of Bologna. Accelerated programmes such as those in the Flexible Learning Pathfinder project and other fast-track degrees in the UK are dependent on modules of credit and often the ability to transfer credit onto other programmes (this is particularly the case with postgraduate and professional qualifications). Many of the programmes discussed in the report have a lifelong learning and inclusion focus because they are predicated on there being demand from mature students for more flexible ways of attaining qualifications more quickly and also on demand from employers and professional bodies for faster routes into various professions.

To this extent, then, accelerated programmes of learning and specifically fast-track degrees do not contravene or threaten the principles of the Bologna process. Flexibility has been introduced to the HE systems of several European nations and Bologna signatories since 1999, often in response to the Bologna call for credit modularisation. In some cases, this has led to circumstances where more able students can progress faster (for example in the Norwegian system, see below), where this does not run counter to the required sequence of modules and frequency and time of modules offered. The Netherlands has also moved recently to a fully modularised three-year first degree system based on ECTS that in principle

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1. The Lisbon Strategy is an action and development plan set out by the European Council in Lisbon in early 2000 which committed the EU to develop by 2010 the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth.
 2. The UK HE Europe Unit was established in 2004 as a sector-wide body that aims to raise awareness of the European issues affecting UK higher education and to coordinate the UK's involvement in European initiatives and debates.

decouples the time element from the accumulation of credits (NUFFIC: 2004). Researchers at the University of Twente in the Netherlands have also noted the emergence of a number of programmes that select high-flying students to take more modules than 'average' students in addition to the normal programme. No additional official diplomas or degrees are involved and the only reward is that students can mention it on their CVs; however this supports the idea that more can be studied in a set period of time (response to email questionnaire, see Appendix I.4). The Latvian Council of Higher Education's development plan also includes recommendations to 'increase the tempo' of all three levels of higher education (Council of Higher Education: 2006, 5.5).

Types of accelerated learning

The main focus of this research report is fast-track two-year undergraduate degrees in the UK context. This usually involves either a full third semester in the summer (trimesterisation) or a shortened summer session and two slightly elongated semesters in the autumn and spring (Baldwin & McInnis, 2002). These types of acceleration usually elongate the teaching year by up to 10 weeks. In some cases, students enrol on a standard three-year programme and students (or the institution) decide after one or two terms whether they should go onto an alternative, accelerated track. The fast-track students separate from their peers on the three-year course and pursue the relevant modules in an accelerated form. Other degrees are offered as stand-alone fast-tracks over two years or standard length over three years with no interaction between the two. All these examples are fast-track in the sense that the programme of study is completed in a shorter period of time, without a reduction in teaching and contact time (the same applies for accelerated part-time programmes offering a six-year degree in three years). Other variations on the academic year include a combination of face-to-face learning and distance learning (to create blended learning) in the summer semester or a summer session consisting entirely of distance learning following two standard-length semesters. Whilst generally in HE the connection between amount of credit and number of teaching hours is becoming more tenuous (because of reducing teaching costs and an increase in the use of e-learning), this link may become even more decoupled in accelerated degrees.

Accelerated learning can take a number of other forms and take place at a number of educational levels. In the US, acceleration often means taking courses over a shorter period of time with less contact hours overall. This can be short-cycle courses using weekends and blocks of time to suit the needs of busy professionals or people (usually mature) with time constraints such as family responsibilities. However, it can also take the form of accelerated degree programmes, and there has been a long history of such provision in the US (over 25 years) where it is now offered in more than 250 institutions (Wlodkowski: 2003). Another variant is a fully modularised HE system, such as in Norway, that allows able students to take more modules in an academic year than the norm; although in practice such factors as total student workload, required sequence of modules and frequency and time of modules offered restrict the fast-track student. This model is also seen in Australia and New Zealand where several universities have combined full modularisation with trimesterisation to offer students the maximum flexibility in when and how many modules can be taken in a calendar year, again with the proviso that modules may have to be sequential.

Acceleration is found in other educational contexts; it can take the form of accreditation for exemption from parts of professional qualifications for membership of professional bodies, often based on Accredited Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) or Accredited Prior Certificated Learning (APCL). Such acceleration is seen as a way of avoiding repetition in parts of the professional qualification route, and professional bodies promote exemption as providing institutions with the opportunity to attract more students who wish to pursue a

professional qualification on completion of their academic studies, by providing them with an accelerated route to professional membership.

In some subjects (for example law and medicine), fast-tracking is often in the context of introducing graduate entry to professions, replacing longer than normal undergraduate degrees with shorter postgraduate courses for graduates in any discipline (Kearns 2003, Rushforth 2004). This accelerates the qualification process from the professional point of view, though not of course for the students who have to be graduates already. However, they do provide a faster entry route into professions for mature students wishing to change careers.

Accelerated learning can also be introduced as a temporary response to shortages in certain professions, for example Miklancie and Davis (2005) noted that a shortfall in the USA of qualified nurses encouraged accelerated '2nd degrees', i.e. undergraduate degrees taken by those who already have a degree in another subject. In 1998 three UK conservation bodies, the UK Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (UKIC), the Institute for Paper Conservation (IPC) and the Society of Archivists, set up a joint accreditation group to institute a temporary 'fast-track' accreditation scheme to enable practitioners with 10 years' experience or more to qualify (Lester: 2000).

Many of these features can be seen in programmes delivered by the Pathfinder projects.

Pathfinder models of accelerated learning

The business plans of the Pathfinder projects contain considerable detail about programme design and processes. The plans share the following elements:

- They are often part of wider plans to make provision more flexible and the elements enabling accelerated learning are often also required for other flexible mechanisms. The need to have provision that allows students to study at a pace of their choice is seen as key.
- Accelerated learning provision often seems to be building on existing developments to make provision more flexible. For example the bids often refer to changes already made to the regulation framework of the university, to modularisation, credit transfer, the use not only of Virtual Learning Environments but also of individualised student portals.
- A recognition that institutional processes need to be adapted to enable accelerated provision, for example, pricing models, the academic staff contract and assessment regulations. These need to be adapted without loss of quality. In addition, appropriate administrative structures, technical support and ICT infrastructures need to be considered.
- The fact that there are practical issues to be explored with employers in relation to work-based learning (e.g. placements, mentoring, problem based projects, CPD).
- Culture change is referred to, for example in relation to changes to staff working practices, often linked to year-long working.
- They seem more generally to refer to the adaptation or re-combining of existing modules, rather than to completely different provision, and also refer to the development of new

models that can be generally applicable across the HEI.

- They usually refer to provision in relation to meeting employer and Sector Skills Council needs.
- Elements mentioned include: the development of frameworks that allow for flexible provision; the use of APCL and APEL; work-based learning; blended learning; e-learning; distance learning materials; student support via websites; multi-purpose modules; personalised learning plans/PDP; personalised student web portals.

Reports from the pilots on progress to date identify models of provision, institutional changes implemented and issues arising.

One model at Northampton (not yet running) for a two-year management degree is as follows:

- year 1: 6 level 1 modules; 1 level 2 module; a double weighted project over the summer that can be in an industrial setting or can be based on a placement.
- year 2: 3 level 2 modules; 4 level 3 modules; dissertation over the summer.

One issue is that this model limits the amount of module choice, but the indications, from evaluative work across the Pathfinder projects, are that students are not too concerned about this.

The Pathfinder projects have identified further issues including availability and expertise of staff; administrative systems; the academic year and work-flow; quality assurance processes; and resource development. The University of Derby has identified staffing issues; staffing levels tend to rise incrementally and this may not allow for sudden new developments; there may, for example, be a bottleneck caused by attempts to release staff from other duties either for staff training related to the new developments or to implement them. Some training needs include the development of mentoring skills and expertise in developing higher level competencies. Some of the issues in administrative systems include those that deal with finance, since fee payments will differ from normal processes. The cost of implementing APEL is also an issue (fees for this in general do not cover the considerable support needed for students to engage) and online tools are being developed to support this.

Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU) considers that a barrier to the lengthening of the academic year is not the staff contract (that agreed from 1989-91 in what are now post-92 HEIs allows considerable flexibility) but, rather, entrenched working practices. It has carried out a major consultation throughout LMU and a decision has been made to deal with this issue 'full on' rather than piecemeal as developments arise. In process, therefore, is the revision of the academic calendar and related changes to 'workflow' to facilitate more flexible provision. Traditional patterns are seen as under-using university resources and being inappropriate for student and employer needs. The new calendar allows for weekend and block provision and for summer working. In addition to addressing this major barrier, LMU has also been streamlining its course approval processes. In developing models of provision it has considered how to incorporate PDP, produced guidelines for distance learning materials, produced examples or

student workbooks/study guides, developed course structures and learning components that give more control to students (e.g. learning goals, location of study etc).

Table I (overleaf) outlines the types of accelerated learning that this research has uncovered. It should be noted that in almost all cases acceleration is offered and designed for certain types of student as an alternative to standard-length awards, i.e. students who are mature and want to change career, or are already in a profession and wish to progress their careers through postgraduate or professional qualifications.

Table 1: Types of accelerated learning

| Forms of accelerated learning | Level | Where applied | Caveats |
|--|-----------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Trimesterisation: adding summer semesters to shorten a 3 year course into 2 years | UG PG | UK AUS US | Students have to demonstrate that they have the ability to manage acceleration |
| Combining DL (paper based or e-learning) and face-to-face learning in summer session | UG PG | UK Asia US AUS | Students have to demonstrate that they have the ability to manage acceleration |
| Adding a short summer session to two elongated semesters | UG PG | UK US AUS | Students have to demonstrate that they have the ability to manage acceleration |
| Adding a summer DL module to two standard semesters | UG PG | UK AUS US | Assumes connectivity; DL may not attract student support |
| Elongating two semesters to allow for a traditional summer break | UG | US AUS UK | |
| Full modularisation which allows for more modules to be taken per year than the norm, thus hastening completion | UG | Norway AUS NZ | Restricted to able students |
| Trimesterisation and full modularisation which allows students option to take modules as and when | UG PG | AUS US | Acceleration is restricted if modules have to be chronological |
| Introducing graduate entry can create (e.g.) a 4 year medical/law degree (instead of 6) leading to professional status | PG | IRE AUS US | For graduates this option does not shorten the overall study time |
| Work-based learning involving additional modules to allow faster progress than those studying in university | UG | UK | |
| Exemptions from part of qualifying examinations based on prior experience or certification | PG | UK US | Usually offered as partly accelerating postgraduate sections of the qualifying process for professional status |
| Blocks of time shortening an already short course, i.e. one week blocks or weekend schools | short-cycle courses | US AUS | Not easily merged with standard length programmes because of sequence of modules; can affect comprehension if too short |
| Intensive learning version of a programme in fewer hours than full programme | UG, PG short-cycle | US | Targeted at mature adult learners, often offered by non-accredited institutions |
| Advanced Placement Credit for advanced High School students allows students to attain HE credits prior to entry by doing HE level work | UG | US | |

Evidence and perceptions that accelerated programmes maintain quality

Pathfinder and other stakeholder evidence and perceptions

Evidence in this section of the report is based on fieldwork interviews with quality and validation officers of Pathfinder institutions, other HEIs and published views of interested parties, such as the University and College Union (UCU). As noted in other sections of this report, systems in place for quality assurance apply in the same way for accelerated programmes such as Pathfinder fast-track degrees as for standard-length degrees. The University of Northampton's Assistant Director of the Academic Office (responsible for validation) noted that the fast-track went through 'the same validation process, with the same validation panel membership, the same structure as any other validation and included an employer representative' (Northampton). At another HEI it was noted that 'the validation panel, including an external, were all sceptics about the 2 year degree but they could not find anything wrong with it. After that, the only thing you have to worry about is, are student outcomes within the normal distribution you would expect?' (Director of Flexible Learning, LMU).

As noted throughout this report, one of the main quality issues relates to students' ability to handle the additional workload. However, at the University of Staffordshire, law lecturers believe that the pressure is not necessarily greater: 'students spend 2/3 of the year with their fellow students on 3-year degrees (the same curriculum and pace). The learning outcomes and quality of the other 1/3 are the same as for a 3-year degree. It is up to Staffordshire and the sector to show the strengths of what they are doing – and the strength of the sector. The Law Society (a relatively conservative body) accepts the fast-track degrees and this is a good sign' (notes from BBC Radio Five Live broadcast, 16 Sept 2006).

A further issue is student support; however another senior lecturer in law at Staffordshire noted that 'There will always be more than one tutor for every module, so they will have back-up' (The Times, 19 Sept 2006). Staffordshire's programme has systems in place to ensure that if students found the workload too heavy, they would not be able to stay on the fast-track programme and would be offered the opportunity to transfer to the three-year degree.

The argument that Bachelors' degree programmes have to take three years was described as 'absolutely antique in the modern world' by a Director of Flexible Learning at one Pathfinder institution, who believes that traditionalists offer only a 'patronising view that it takes 3 years for a student to mature – now this does not apply to mature or part-time students, and there are also a lot of gap year students anyway'. However, the University and College Union (UCU) expressed concern about the ability of two-year degree students to combine study with periods of reflection, thinking, developing maturity normally undertaken during holiday

periods: 'To a large extent we see a degree as more than just a cramming process, so we have some concerns about the educational aspect of this' (BBC News 16 October 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6056348.stm>).

Professional bodies, Sector Skills Councils and AGR

Views were gathered about quality and validation issues from ten professional bodies covering the following professions: accountancy, law (barristers and solicitors), psychology, human resources, hospitality, chartered surveying, engineering, physics and marketing (all by interview except engineering and physics, the views of whom are represented by documentation cited in the bibliography). Views were also gathered from the Financial Services Sector Skills Council (FSSC), the E-Skills Sector Skills Council (E-Skills), Skills Active and the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR). Two of the three SSCs consulted and the AGR support the idea of accelerated learning programmes in principle and report that the employers they represent are also supportive. Each body notes that this support is with the proviso that standards are not compromised in any way.

Most of the consulted professional bodies (PBs) accredit or recognise accelerated programmes of study or support the principle of acceleration of at least part of their qualifying processes. Eight PBs accredit in this way, six of these accredit postgraduate and professional routes into qualification, while three of the eight accredit undergraduate degrees (the Bar Standards Board, the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Institute of Hospitality). Only the Institute of Physics and the Engineering Council UK were not involved in this at all. Six of the ten PBs reported demand: in three cases, from HEIs that wished to develop programmes more responsive to the needs of employers and students; and in two cases – CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) and RICS (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors) – directly from mature workers looking to gain professional qualifications. The Institute of Physics, which does not countenance fast-track degrees, accepts that there is demand for a more interdisciplinary physics-based degree from a number of HEIs.

Quality assurance was not seen as an issue by any of the eight PBs that recognise or accredit accelerated learning: they were content to benchmark their standards against those of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or had their own parallel arrangements. The two law PBs worked in conjunction on a joint board while the CIPD had developed transferable 'units' (i.e. parts of professional qualification) for their exemption programme with the Chartered Management Institute. None reported that accelerated learning in the form of fast-track two-year degrees would present more problems than standard length provision for accreditation purposes.

The length of degrees was not an issue of concern to the Institute of Hospitality or the Solicitors Regulation Authority, who felt that standards and outputs were of greater significance than the duration of the course:

We are not bothered by the length as such, we don't think the mode is significant, the qualification has to be up to the standards accepted for the degree and the fast-track degrees that I have seen are working to those standards. (Institute of Hospitality, 2007)

There are some two-year law degrees that cover all the bits we want but are shorter and there are a few that have tried using the holidays, we have absolutely no objection to that and in terms of policy we can see that that is a good idea because of costs so long as that type of degree hits all our buttons we will accredit that through our Joint Academic Standards Board. (Solicitors Regulation Authority, 2007)

One professional body stated that it was reassured by the quality procedures that are followed to award professional accreditation, which are the same as for three-year degrees:

When programmes are suggested for accreditation we use QAA material, if it is good enough for their [subject] benchmark it's good enough for us. It is very time consuming to do it all again, but we report on areas of weakness but allow them through if it is something they can address quite easily, and it is the same process for an accelerated programme. (Institute of Hospitality, 2007)

The Bar Standards Board felt that the high standard of post-16 education in the UK meant that shorter degree courses would not leave UK students at a lower level academically than some of their international peers who had studied for longer:

The argument about UK versus abroad is that in some countries the school exit level is far, far lower than our A-levels and that applies to a lot of European countries as well. The key thing in any such study is the entry level requirements and experience and so on. (Bar Standards Board, 2007)

For postgraduate students, the advantage and recognition of their previous studies and experience were seen to be invaluable, therefore accelerated programmes of learning were of benefit to such students:

At the heart of this is how different learners learn and how it affects their learning outcomes and if they can demonstrate through an accelerated programme that the outcomes are still being met and that it is based on their prior experience and learning and therefore they are able to fast-track through then that is a very valid route into membership. We certainly do not want to ask people to start back at the beginning again when they are experienced practitioners for a number of years. (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007)

Mutual recognition supports the whole transferability, portability agenda. We are part of an interprofessional organisation with marketing and management and looking at the standards and learning outcomes we have in common, that is where credit ratings are helpful. (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007)

Sector Skills Councils and other employer organisations

Sector Skills Councils were similarly supportive of the notion of accelerated degrees, with the proviso that standards are maintained.

We believe that if you have 2 years of 4 quarters you could get pretty much the same number of weeks in as a traditional 3 year programme, and that there would need to be a clear distinction between the 2 year and the 3 year programme. We believe that you would need to be very sure that you had got in place the mechanisms for selecting students who could stand this kind of intensification and have a delivery mechanism that is varied enough and interesting enough so that people could learn at that pace, but in principle we think that is reasonable. (E-Skills, 2007)

Provided the rigour and the LOs are not diluted in any way then we don't have an issue with them. (FSSC, 2007)

Another SSC was supportive of the notion of fast-track degrees, within the context of accrediting work-based learning:

If institutions were prepared to really engage in work-based learning and fast-track employees, that would be attractive. (Skills Active, 2007)

The Association of Graduate Recruiters, which is close to the perspective of larger employers, noted (in interview) that the issue of accelerated degrees 'was discussed within the AGR board some time ago, in principle there is certainly no objection to accelerated learning, bearing in mind it might be more attractive to mature students who want to get from point A to point B more quickly and without too much debt' (AGR, 2007).

Other views on quality

The QAA conducted an Institutional Audit at the University of Buckingham (an institution which offers mainly two-year degrees) in 2003. The audit declared that 'broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of awards' (QAA: 2003, p1). External examination procedures at Buckingham are in line with the expectations of the QAA's academic infrastructure. The audit found that 'the standards demonstrated are appropriate for the programme and/or course by reference to published national benchmarks, the FHEQ, and the University's relevant programme specification'. As a private HEI, Buckingham does not receive HEFCE funding or undergo subject-level review by HEFCE or the QAA, so accreditation by external agencies such as professional bodies is particularly significant as an indicator of quality. The QAA Review noted that undergraduate programmes offered by the School of Law are accredited by the Law Society and Bar Standards Board, and:

the accounting and financial management degree permits exemptions from various papers in the professional examinations of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (QAA: 2003, p13).

The Accelerated and Intensive Routes (AIRs) project, launched by the then Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council in the context of its commitment to widening access and increasing participation, operated in ten institutions throughout England between 1992 and 1995. Students who undertook AIRs during the 1990s were 'far more satisfied with the general level of support and resources provided on their course' than students on the three-year versions of their degrees (HEFCE: 1996) and in fact 73% of two-year pilot students and 91% of three-year pilot students surveyed expressed satisfaction, compared with 54% and 41% of three-year students in the corresponding years. Some three-year students felt that AIRs courses were actually better resourced than their own (HEFCE, 1996). A survey of external examiners carried out as part of the evaluation of AIRs found that 86% of them felt that the overall quality of the pilot courses compared favourably, or was of the same quality, as the three-year programme or with comparable courses in other institutions. The employability of graduates who had taken AIRs courses during the 1990s was not impaired; in fact employment of AIRs graduates in 1994 was at the same level, 58%, as those in employment nationally from conventional degrees (HEFCE: 1996).

Rose et al (2001) found that workplace learning, where students undertook six modules a year compared with four for full-time university-based students, produced superior academic results. Students on workplace learning 'are exposed to fewer staff contact hours leading to a 'fast-track' degree programme'. 'The lecturing staff utilise the workplace to generate relevant and more recognisable examples, case studies and coursework for workplace students, whilst still following the syllabus of the established module. Thus comprehension is accelerated.' All students, both in-house and workplace, undertook the same exams, which removes doubt as to the comparability of the academic rigour and standards of the learning achieved.

A further aspect of quality that is pertinent to accelerated programmes of learning is entry requirements. Table 2 below details the entry requirements for the existing Pathfinder fast-track degree programmes, and the UCAS Tariff points required are consistent with those expected on standard-length degree programmes in similar institutions. Some prescribe additional requirements that students have to satisfy before acceptance on such programmes, which are usually offered on the basis that mature students with some work experience in the field will form all or most of the cohort. The UCAS entry course database including entry requirement details can be found at www.ucas.com/search/index.html. Entry requirements for fast-track postgraduate degrees (many in Scotland and Wales) are detailed in Appendix 3.

Table 2: Pathfinder fast-track degrees with entry requirements as listed by UCAS

| Institution | Course | Time taken to complete | Entry requirements |
|-------------------------------|---|------------------------|--|
| University of Derby | Applied Earth Sciences (Accelerated) | 2FT Hon BSC | Points accepted: 300 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 300 |
| | Business Studies (Accelerated) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 200–240 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 200 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140–160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) – (Adventure Tourism) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140–160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) – (Countryside Management) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140–160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) – (Events Management) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140–160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) – (Hospitality) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140–160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) – (Outdoor Recreation) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140–160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) – (Public Relations) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140–160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) – (Public Services Management) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140–160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| | Combined Subject Programme (Accelerated) – (Travel and Tourism) | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 140 - 160 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 140 |
| Staffordshire University | Geography – Two-year Accelerated Degree | 2FT Hon BSc | Points accepted: 160–240 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 160 |
| | Geography – Two-year Accelerated Degree | 2FT Hon BA | Points accepted: 160–240 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 160 |
| | LLB (2 year) | 2FT Hon LLB | Points accepted: 200–300 Minimum points required from qualifications with the volume and depth of A level or equivalent: 200 Applicants are interviewed where they offer non-standard qualifications. Mature applicants are usually interviewed |
| Leeds Metropolitan University | Hospitality Business Management | 2FT Hon BA | Tariff Points Accepted 200 Applicants must have studied an AVCE double award or National Certificate/Diploma in Hospitality, Catering or related subject as this is an intensive 'fast-track' award. |
| | Tourism Management | 2FT Hon BA | Tariff Points 200 |
| University of Northampton | Marketing (2 year fast track) | 2FT Hon BA | None listed |

The extent of provision

Fast-track degrees and other forms of accelerated learning are provided by a growing number of English and Welsh HEIs; they build on a history dating back to the 1970s. The University of Buckingham has offered two-year degrees as its core provision since its inception in 1976 as University College Buckingham. Two examples of accelerated learning programmes funded during the 1990s, even though they were short-lived, provided some evidence for historical UK demand for fast-track degrees. The Accelerated and Intensive Routes (AIRs) project-based on extending learning into the summer, operated in ten institutions throughout England between 1992 and 1995 and covered the broad subject areas of business, engineering, law, computing, humanities, modular science and technology, education, and art & design. The Extended Academic Year (EYA) experiment at the University of Luton during the late 1990s also involved year-round learning. More recently, the HEFCE has funded fast-track degree development in four HEIs (at the time of writing) from 2006. UCAS data shows accelerated programmes of learning are not restricted to the Pathfinder institutions, indeed, accelerated law degrees are widely available (see Appendix 4).

Beyond the UK, accelerated provision appears to be commonplace in HE systems overseas, especially in countries such as the USA, Australia and some Asian countries that have longer experience of HE students paying their own fees and course modularisation. The Center for the Study of Accelerated Learning (CSAL) in the USA has identified 79 institutions delivering accelerated learning programmes that are accredited by their regional accreditation council and a further eight that are accredited by business accreditation agencies. Altogether, the CSAL identified over 250 colleges and universities with specifically identified accelerated programmes in the USA, the vast majority designed to serve adult students (in the USA the definition for adult students is over 25; they make up 41% of all higher education students). Overall 13% of all of adult students studying for degrees are enrolled in programmes that offer degrees in less than the traditional length of time in the USA, a figure predicted to rise with the ageing population (Wlodkowski: 2003).

In Norway, the modularisation of courses allows the best students to fast-track by taking more than the standard number of modules per year, and this is common in humanities and social sciences across the Norwegian HE system. In Asia, the University of Singapore and others, including the University of Malaysia and the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, have summer sessions that enable fast-track study. In Australia, the private Bond University and in New Zealand the Victoria University have both adopted trimesterisation which allows for accelerated learning. This is achieved through students taking additional modules, provided that modules are taken sequentially where required. One 1995 study suggested that there were over 900 summer programmes in 80 countries and in 29 out of 32 Australian HEIs in 1991 (White: 1999, p246).

Scottish variations

It is important to note that many of the non-Pathfinder accelerated or fast-track programmes in the UK are based in Scottish universities because Scotland has already self-certified its Framework for HE Qualifications as compatible with the Bologna Process Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA. The majority of accelerated Scottish programmes are postgraduate programmes designed to enable graduate entry to professions, replacing longer than normal undergraduate degrees with shorter postgraduate courses for graduates in any discipline. As noted above, this accelerates the qualification process from the professional point of view. For existing graduates, they provide a faster entry route into professions for those wishing to change careers. Entry requirements for fast-track postgraduate degrees are detailed in Appendix 3.

The student perspective

It is important to remember that some of the Bologna Action Lines are supported by aspects of Pathfinder fast-track degrees, specifically, moves towards mobility and lifelong learning, and it is often these aspects that students feel are the most beneficial. The popularity of fast-track degrees among those that take them is based on students' ability to change careers and re-enter the labour market as quickly as possible, thus saving both time and money, and this is, of course, particularly important to mature students.

Pathfinder institutions' original business plans indicate a strong concern with student centredness and meeting the needs of a widening range of students, however they contain little information about students' actual views on such provision. Evidence subsequently gathered by the Pathfinder pilots provides more insight into student perceptions. In 2006-7 Staffordshire University surveyed 18 law students on a two-year fast-track degree, getting 11 responses. Financial considerations seemed key for the students. When asked what further information they would have liked before beginning the course, the most common response was more information on financial issues, for example on bursaries. Responses to the question about why they had applied for the two-year option (most would have applied for the three-year option had the shorter degree not been available) fell into three main categories: reduced costs (mentioned by virtually all respondents); evidence for employers of students' commitment and ability to work hard; the reduction in the time needed to qualify as a solicitor. Concerns were mainly around workload, including the amount of information to be absorbed for examinations and only having short breaks. The skills the students had that they saw as most useful for the course mainly related to workload: time management; efficiency; working under pressure; being a fast typist; prioritising. The general tone of student responses was very positive, and other information gathered by the project team also suggests an encouraging response by students to the course: the fast-track students had the highest attendance record of all those on the course; a slightly higher proportion submitted assessed work; a higher proportion were acting as representatives on university committees. Application levels also indicate a positive reaction to the initiative. There is some more limited information about the Staffordshire University Geography two-year degree where there are 6 students, of whom 3 are interested in teacher training and see their degree as shortening their time in HE from 4 to 3 years.

A Leeds Metropolitan University evaluation had similar findings to those from Staffordshire University. Students there saw the main benefits of accelerated degrees as being able to enter work sooner and lower costs, both for fees and living expenses. Disadvantages were seen as a limited student experience, no summer break, higher workload and concern about covering work in a rushed way, and fear of being 'guinea pigs'. Other Pathfinder projects either have not yet run the courses planned or are in the process of collecting and analysing data. At the University of Northampton the 'financial incentives associated with eliminating the costs of a third year of study and the possibility of entering the workplace a year early [provided] important motivating factors in favour of two-year degrees.' (Carroll: 2006).

In several examples other than those from the Pathfinder project, accelerated learning has been partially introduced to help more able students progress faster (Norway, Victoria University in New Zealand and the Australian Bond University). One Australian study showed that students liked the smaller group size (53%), the faster pace (44%), the easier access to lecturers and tutors (33%) and the more casual nature of classes (31%) (White: 1999).

Researchers at the University of Twente in the Netherlands have also noted the emergence of a number of programmes that select high-flying students to take more modules than 'average' students in addition to the normal programme, which supports the idea that highly able students of any age can handle more work in a given period of time. In addition, the vocational HE institutions (HBO) can offer acceleration to students who have undertaken an additional year of secondary education, and there is competitive pressure between HBO and traditional Dutch universities that encourages this. Another strand of research suggests accelerated learning and fast-track degrees in particular favour mature students, who bring a combination of attributes, compared to 18-year-old school leavers: they are more motivated to learn; they are keen to get into the labour market quickly; are more intrinsically interested in what they are learning (and thus find it easier to recall knowledge); they are more proactive and assertive learners (Miklancie and Davis: 2005). One major research study in the USA found intensive programmes superior to longer programmes on format alone (i.e. on length of course, independent of age, prior ability or other differences between students). However, this advantage seemed to decline over time when students from both courses were retested three years on (Seamon: 2004), and some in the USA HE sector report that comprehension can be affected negatively if courses are accelerated excessively (response to email questionnaire, Appendix 1.4).

There are debates about the importance of reflection time; some research suggests that learners retain knowledge better without long gaps between study and application of knowledge, though other aspects of reflection may suffer accordingly. Accelerated or intensive learning can offer retention benefits for all students: longer, more intense sessions can stimulate deeper understanding, deeper processing of knowledge and a more thorough understanding, and in student surveys it was found especially beneficial for higher order learning (Seamon: 2004). An investigation of intensive sessions in the US found that the best learners, including upper division students and those with the highest grade point averages, preferred the intensive course format to the regular semester system. However, there is evidence that suggests certain pedagogies are associated with success, for example class discussions ahead of lectures to maintain interest in the subject (Rossman: 1971 in Seamon: 2004).

Evidence of demand

Evidence of demand for fast-track degrees from some sections of the student body (typically mature students and students in certain subjects such as business and law) can be found in both historical and current examples of provision. Graduate entry accelerated degrees are justified on cost/time saving, widening access grounds or in the interests of maximising the use of university teaching accommodation over the full year. In some cases, acceleration is allowed only for the most able students, for example, in the Norwegian HE system, and there are examples from Australia, New Zealand and the UK (the Geography fast-track degree developed as part of the Staffordshire University Pathfinder project). Justifications for accelerated learning vary by country. For example, government demand for resource efficiency is cited in Australia and Norway, and employer demand to have students graduate in shorter time is cited in Norway, the UK, Ireland and Australia (especially in relation to graduate entry into programmes such as fast-track Law and Medical degrees).

Fee-paying, full-time undergraduate students are a relatively recent phenomenon in the English and Welsh higher education systems and it is noteworthy that far more accelerated programmes are on offer in the US, Australia and other countries that have longer experience of such higher education markets (see below). Demand, therefore, has to be seen in the context of opening up options for some sections of an increasingly diverse group of potential students, making often instrumental decisions based on cost and time out of the labour force. Accelerated learning and fast-track progression can be seen as just one aspect of a much larger series of changes within higher education that are providing flexible and distributed learning and actually responding to the demand for lifelong learning, and therefore helping to deliver on a major element of the Bologna process agenda.

Pathfinder evidence

The business plans of the Pathfinder projects contain a strong focus on market research and marketing but often overall aims are given only, for example, to develop coherent and co-ordinated strategies or to reach employers via innovative and imaginative methods. Possible selling points are identified, for example, one plan refers to all-year-round operations being needed to meet community needs and to accelerated degrees being appropriate in subjects where knowledge changes rapidly. Most refer to marketing to students, employers and organisations such as Sector Skills Councils. One has as a central plank the need to communicate with staff, students, Sector Skills Councils and employers to ensure that all understand this type of provision.

A considerable amount of market research has been carried out by the University of Northampton's Pathfinder Project (Carroll: 2006). A survey was conducted of past, present and potential students and telephone interviews were conducted with local employers (150 were approached but only 11 agreed to participate). Across all three student groups (past,

present, future) over 50% would be interested in two-year degrees, were willing to lose their traditional summer break and were willing to study for more than 40 hours a week. Benefits were seen to be shorter study time, more intensive study time, lower living expenses, getting into employment more quickly. Concerns (and reasons for not being interested in two-year degrees) were the amount of work, 'cramming' (i.e. too little time for reflection and in-depth study) and encroachment on other time (e.g. social life, part-time work). Just over half of student respondents thought they would 'miss out' in relation to the lack of time to absorb learning and for social activity. Potential support needed was seen as being in relation to financing, tutorial support, peer support, timetabling (e.g. spacing out of deadlines) and very clear upfront explanations of the amount of commitment needed. Student respondents seemed to be concerned that employers would not value two-year degrees as much as three-year degrees, but this finding was not borne out by the employer consultation, since employers said they would value them equally. This suggested a greater need to market the degrees as being useful for employment to students, rather than to employers. Staffordshire University has also carried out a survey of students in 4 universities. Only at Loughborough did less than 50% of respondents state that they would be interested in two-year degrees (42%). At Nottingham Trent, the figure was 55%, at Derby, 69% and at Staffordshire, 53% for first year students and 64% for second year students.

One prospective Pathfinder institution (the University of Worcester) became interested in introducing fast-track degrees 'in response to anecdotal demand from students on teacher degrees for a two year programme for some of their mature students'. Such evidence for demand was not restricted to mature students, however. Media reporting on the launch of Staffordshire's Pathfinder programme noted that: a Law student said that the fast-track degree was cheaper as one year's fees would be saved, that it was still a recognised degree, and that as far as employment was concerned, graduates would stand out with employers as being high achievers, having completed the same amount of work as for a standard degree in a shorter time (Radio 5 live broadcast, 16 Sept 2006). A senior lecturer in law at Staffordshire University said that the department had been 'pleasantly surprised' by the numbers applying. With school-leavers, career-changers, European, African and Canadian students, the degree has a healthy mix (The Times, 19 Sept 2006).

Leeds Metropolitan University (another Pathfinder institution) has been evaluating its students' views since the introduction of a new Sports Coaching programme and found that 'their primary motive for taking the two-year option was not the cost to them but getting into the job market quicker'. It was noted, however, that others preferred the three-year option because they wanted coaching opportunities abroad.

Evidence from other non-Pathfinder sources

The University of Buckingham has a majority of international students in its intake (up to 75% according to the Registrar's Office) and has been approached by institutions in Italy and Germany to deliver Buckingham degrees jointly in those countries. Buckingham also reported

that an increasing proportion of applicants are from home-based students which they believe is linked to the introduction of the variable fee régime in England since 2006. As noted above, there may be a logical correlation between fee-paying and instrumentalist attitudes towards the time taken to achieve a degree, and noticeably in Buckingham's case this demand is not restricted to mature students.

The EYA (Extended Academic Year) project during the 1990s at the University of Luton provided some evidence for historical UK demand for fast-track degrees, and more recently HEFCE commissioned a report into demand for flexible and innovative HE in 2006 (SQW, 2006) that examined current accelerated degree provision in the UK. The Extended Academic Year project was one of several pilot programmes established in the 1990s following the Report of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (the Flowers Report) into the organisation of the academic year. An evaluation of the project found that 'The University of Luton EYA experiment has shown that there is demand for year-round study' (Fallows: 1999). The concept is particularly attractive to those who study part-time whilst concurrently engaged in full-time employment (Fallows: 1999). The author also noted that such demand was not uniform across the student body and in fact interest increased with age. The EYA project highlighted similar issues to the AIRs programme that was specifically targeted at mature students.

Some evidence for demand for flexible and specifically fast-track higher education was also identified by the HEFCE-commissioned report demand for flexible and innovative types of HE in 2006. The researchers visited ten institutions to consult on non-traditional delivery of teaching and learning. They found that 'the institutions visited mainly offered choice with respect to the number of modules that could be studied per semester. The higher education institutions we consulted have introduced this type of flexibility in response to student demand' and although this offers the possibility of acceleration 'the principal way in which students exploit the inherent flexibility of a modularised system is through extending the period of study' (HEFCE: 2006).

As noted above, there is much more evidence from countries where there is a longer history of fee-paying students and more flexibly responsive HE systems than in the UK. For example the Center for the Study of Accelerated Learning in the USA has identified colleges and universities with accelerated programmes, the vast majority designed to serve adult students. This suggests that there is demonstrable demand for accelerated learning, especially in the context of student-paid tuition and short-cycle courses aimed particularly at adults.

Evidence from professional bodies

Again, in interviews conducted for this research with PB representatives, the value of work experience before attending university was seen to be beneficial both in terms of the maturity of the student and the knowledge that they could transfer to their academic studies:

What is interesting is the profile of the candidates, if you are going on a Masters programme, they are becoming maturer cohorts than there have ever been before, so naturally they are looking at the programme and thinking, 'I have done half of this already' in their previous lives and we are actively encouraging them to be APEL'd. (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007)

Because of fee paying it may pan out that instead of being offered degree places and accepting them on the basis of predicted A-levels scores, students will take a year out after A-levels to work and then come and study for two years in the right degree with a bit more maturity and some money in their pocket. (Institute of Hospitality, 2007)

Some PBs are conscious of shifts in the backgrounds and career patterns of those hoping to gain membership of their organisations and see accelerated programmes as fitting alongside these shifts:

Working closely with QAA we are aware that in our sector there are so many zig-zaggers now, you don't get many pure HR careerists, people's real-life jobs were not necessarily matching our standards. The bank of units reflects the balance of generalist and specialised parts of the work that people do and need to have accredited. Has to be 20% of postgrad programmes in work-place, full-time taught are not accredited by us on their own. May go into undergraduate work as well, work-based learning, skills-based and CPD'd. We want a double-loop learning with reflective learners, so it is not always [appropriate to] be accelerated. (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007)

The Institute of Hospitality highlighted the issue of reflection time, something that is often cited as an advantage of traditional three-year degrees that include a long summer recess. The comment here, however, suggests that the time provided by traditional degrees might not always confer benefits over accelerated degrees that continue through the summer:

It is increasingly going to become an issue that 3 years is quite a long time. I am not sure working for three months in HMV or whatever counts as reflection time. (Institute of Hospitality, 2007)

There were, however, some concerns expressed about intensive degrees and their suitability where knowledge acquisition is accumulative:

The Institute [of Physics] does not believe that the compressed 2-year honours degree proposal will be appropriate for physics. Physics is a hierarchical subject where advanced teaching builds on traditional 3-4 year degrees providing sufficient time for the difficult physical concepts to be introduced and re-visited as the student progresses in maturity, which would be very difficult to achieve in a compressed course. In addition, these compressed degrees will not be consistent with the Bologna Declaration (Institute of Physics, response to White Paper: 2003).

Evidence from Sector Skills Councils and AGR

The research interviews suggested that, for some SSCs, accelerated programmes of learning were seen to be something that would be supported by students and employers alike:

Currently we are in discussion with several universities on how we could accelerate an honours degree, particularly one that combines computer science and business along with personal development skills and project management, the sort of things our employers like to see... There is a shortage of IT professionals that also have business skills, how to apply technology in their businesses rather than just be interested in the technology itself, and also network architects people like that there are shortages so intensifying degrees into two years would be good in that respect. (E-Skills, 2007)

We believe that accelerated degrees will probably be popular with students, and employers will accept them as long as there is no dilution in content (E-Skills, 2007)

We are very supportive of more flexible ways of attaining qualifications, and all the employers we speak to say that so long as the standards are there and it is not a lesser qualification they have no objection to things being done quicker. (FSSC, 2007)

Some organisations reported that accelerated modes of study would reflect the efficiency needs of business:

We believe the employer will treat them the same and we would too, we think doing the same content but faster is much more like work anyway and therefore it is quite a good preparation. (E-Skills, 2007)

I think employers have always been fairly pragmatic about the academic year not being an actual year... businesses are always looking at ways to increase efficiency. Ultimately what an employer is going to judge the degree by is the outcomes or outputs. They will not discriminate for or against someone who has done an accelerated degree but they would certainly want to be able to measure the knowledge and the standing skills that individual had picked up during their degree course. (AGR, 2007)

Anything we do comes from the employers so the expectation is that it would be quite acceptable. Got to be sure you recruit the right people and make sure the staff are fully committed to delivering over a longer academic year, there would not be a situation where the research-intensive staff left it to junior staff to deliver and it become low-status ... But with all the caveats we think this kind of flexibility would suit our sector quite well. (E-Skills, 2007)

We had some research done last year, Graduate Skills in the City of London, and what we found was that increasingly employers are looking to recruit postgraduates in quite specific areas, so I would imagine there is plenty of scope for acceleration there. (FSSC, 2007)

One place I can see postgraduate fast-track being popular is in the area of leadership and management. People may need to learn new strategic roles and there is not the time to go off and learn something that takes years, and we need something much more concentrated at MBA level. (FSSC, 2007)

A fast-track Masters is also of interest to our employers, possibly even more so than the undergraduate honours degree. Generally, we and employers want to ensure that programmes contain knowledge about the uncertainty and messiness of real life in business. We would not want that sacrificed in an intensified programme either at undergraduate or Masters level or the four year combined. There must be a development programme in there as well so that people do not just learn stand-alone bits of courses. (E-Skills, 2007)

There is evidence of a positive interest in the employment sector involved in the development of HE provision in this area:

Everything we do is in consultation with our employer boards, we have three, one for IT people in businesses, one for businesses in general that are heavily dependent on IT, one for IT professionals and an overall board including SMEs etc, and they direct strategy and policy. We also talk to universities and invite them in but the content is set by the curriculum board that is a sub-set of the main board. (E-Skills, 2007)

Lots of companies in our sector have a high graduate entry or they support people through qualifications. Employers are keen to have APEL but that depends on each HEI, how it is done. One thing employers are keen to speak to us about is to ask if they can have their in-house work-place training mapped against the HE framework and see what sort of level it is, and they are always very interested in being able to count that toward something, as entry requirements for higher study for example. (FSSC, 2007)

One example is FSS employers always provide training on how to deal with money laundering and it is not captured anywhere, they would like that to count towards some larger award, and we are looking at running a couple of pilots to see if we can get it evaluated formally by someone from HE. They can then say, it has been evaluated, it is at level C or level I and it is worth say 10 credits. (FSSC, 2007)

Conclusions

This review suggests that there is considerable interest in accelerated degrees and that the adjustments that HEIs will need to make to facilitate them are seen as making HE more responsive to employer and student needs (and thus in accordance with some aspects of the Bologna Process). The review did not identify significant concerns about quality and standards, since it seems to be accepted by professional bodies and Sector Skills Councils that these will be assured by normal HE quality processes such as validation and review. Issues are more related to the adaptations needed to institutional processes (e.g. the academic year), workload for students and concomitant issues related to the ability of students to cope with it and the development of their skills in doing so.

Student interests in accelerated degrees providing a quicker route into employment mirror those of employment sectors where skills shortages encourage employer interest in them. Student interests, expressed in evaluation reports and other research, also centre round the financial benefits of accelerated courses.

Accelerated learning programmes, including fast-track degrees, are responsive to the needs of employers and students, particularly mature students or those who have a specific need to graduate more rapidly. They are not designed to replace existing traditional degree programmes, but to add to the range of options open to students. In many cases, especially in Europe and the UK, acceleration is for the more able students; i.e. those of sufficient maturity, with motivation and commitment to handle the additional workload. Therefore fast-track degrees are applicable in specific circumstances, including students' life circumstances.

Accelerated learning and fast-track progression can be seen as just one aspect of a much larger series of changes within higher education that are providing flexible and distributed learning and responding to the demand for lifelong learning. The development of accelerated degrees is clearly linked to and made possible by a number of developments that have been common across HE in the last ten to 15 years: modularisation, credit accumulation, Accredited Prior Experiential Learning/Accredited Prior Certificated Learning (APEL/APCL) work-based learning, e-learning and blended learning.

Many accelerated learning programmes (such as fast-track degrees included in the HEFCE-funded Flexible Learning Pathfinder project) actively deliver on several of the Bologna action lines, particularly action lines 3 (establishment of a system of credits), 4 (promotion of mobility), and 7 (focus on lifelong learning). In addition to the evolving action lines, Bologna has since the Prague summit in 2001 developed a social dimension, and recognised that: "lifelong learning strategies are necessary [...] to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life." (Kladis, 2003). Many of the programmes discussed in the report have a lifelong learning and social inclusion focus and the concept of most types of accelerated learning is dependent on a system of transferable credit as envisaged by Bologna.

The recent Burgess Report highlights the findings of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Scoping Group. The group included sector-wide representatives from several key bodies including the National Union of Students (NUS), Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) (amongst others). The report into arrangements for a national credit system for England notes that although the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was initially conceived as a measure of workload, it has now also been further developed to include the concept of learning outcomes (UUK 2006, p.41). The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Framework for Qualifications is also based on a learning outcomes approach. To this extent, accelerated programmes of learning, and specifically fast-track degrees, do not contravene or threaten the principles of the Bologna Declaration.

This review provides evidence that accelerated learning occurs in many formats, at many levels and in many countries, and that it is generally more prevalent in countries where students pay tuition fees. In such cases accelerated learning programmes are responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse and career-focused student body and the flexible and ever-changing demands of employers.

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Appendix I Research instruments

These instruments are at a draft stage and it is expected that their further development will be iterative. They are designed as semi-structured interview schedules that will garner basic information on key elements of the research and more contextualised intelligence relating to each institution/organisation. Analysis in the final report will draw on both strands of evidence in addition to the data gathered from other elements of the research and the literature/data review.

Interview schedule for employers

- Does your company employ graduates?
- Would you employ graduates that had taken a full degree in a shorter time than the norm (e.g. in 2 years rather than 3)?
- Would you have a different approach to recruitment for graduates who have done an accelerated degree (if so, please explain)?
- Would you have a different approach to the training of your new recruits if they have done an accelerated degree (if so, please explain)?
- Do you see any advantages/disadvantages to you as an employer of accelerated degree programmes?
- Do you see any advantages/disadvantages to students of accelerated degree programmes?
- Does your company support your employees in studying for further HE or professional qualifications and if they had studied an accelerated programme would this have an impact here?
- Do you have any other comments on accelerated degree programmes?

Interview schedule for quality heads at HEIs

- What has your involvement been with fast-track accelerated learning programmes (ALPs)?
- If you are part of the pathfinder project, were you doing any ALP before it and if so for how many years and what sort of programmes?
- Is the internal validation/approval procedures for ALP is it the same as for the more conventional length of degrees?
- Do you have one validation/approval process or a main version and a lighter touch version? If you have a lighter touch version and an ALP is based on a longer programme would you use that version?
- Are your external examiners aware of your accelerated provision and do they support the concept?
- Is there any difference in the composition of the validation panel for ALP degrees?
- Are the quality review processes the same for ALP and longer degrees?
- Are your external examiners aware of your accelerated provision and do they support

the concept?

- What do you think are the quality issues in ALP?
- Have you encountered such issues and how have you dealt with them? If you have not encountered them, how would you dealing with them?
- Are you aware of graduate destinations for ALP courses and if so do they differ from the destinations of students on longer courses?
- Do you have any other comments about ALP courses?

Interview schedule for members of Professional Bodies

- What do you know about fast-track degrees or accelerated learning programmes?
- Are there different levels of membership within your body?
- What level could an ALP student enter at? Does this differ from the level a student from a conventional length degree could enter at? Are the two options seen equally?
- Would ALP graduates go through the same application process to apply for membership of your body or would there be different arrangements?
- Would you formally exclude ALP graduates from membership?
- Have you had approaches from any institutions or individuals about ALP and recognition by your body?
- Has your professional body recognised any ALP courses?
- Would you have any concerns about giving ALP courses recognition by your body and if so what are they?
- If students are on an ALP course that does not have recognition from your body, is there another way they could gain membership?
- Do you require or value work experience gained during vacations or other periods of more conventional length courses? If so would you value any previous work experience of ALP students?
- What is your feeling about the quality of these programmes (positive/negative)?
- What do you feel are the positive and negative aspects of such programmes?
- Have any discussions taken place within your body about ALP and at what level in your body was this discussed? For example, do you have a policy here?
- Anything else you would like to tell us about this?

Email requests for information

Emails sent to members of the European Higher Education Association (EAIR) and members of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)

Dear Colleague

I am part of a team at Sheffield Hallam University working with Professor Lee Harvey on a

project for Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Higher Education Academy in the UK about accelerated learning programmes (may be know as intensive or fast-track degrees taken in shorter periods of time) and would like to know the perspective of people working in the field of HE quality. The DfES will produce the final report in May and we think it would certainly benefit from your input.

If you are able to contribute we would like you to look at the questions below and reply to this email with your answers about your perspective on such programmes and any experience you have with them.

Issues include:

1. Positive and negative aspects of accelerated programmes of study?
2. Any quality issues that are highlighted?
3. How do you think such programmes can interact with the Bologna process?
4. Are you aware of institutions involved in the approval, planning or accreditation of such accelerated programmes in your country?
5. If so, are they undergraduate or postgraduate ones?
6. Can you describe the process of recognition for such programmes and is it different from longer programmes?
7. Are you aware of how students from accelerated programmes differ from students from standard length programmes?

Appendix 2

Organisations that contributed to the research (Interviews 2007)

Higher education institutions

Staffordshire University
University of Northampton
Leeds Metropolitan University
University of Derby
University of Worcester
University of Gloucestershire
University of Buckingham

Professional Bodies and Sector Skills Councils

Solicitors Regulation Authority
Bar Standards Board
Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
The Chartered Institute of Marketing
Institute of Hospitality
Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
British Psychological Society
e-skills UK
Financial Services Skills Council
Skills Active

Other organisations

Association of Graduate Recruiters
UK HE Europe Unit
Quality Assurance Agency
Higher Education Funding Council for England

Appendix 3

Postgraduate fast-track degrees at non-pathfinder institutions with entry requirements (from UCAS)

| Institution | Course | Time taken to complete | Entry requirements |
|---|---|-------------------------|---|
| The University of Stirling | Law Accelerated Entry (graduates only) | 4FT Hon LLB | An Honours degree or a good Ordinary degree is required in any subject. Some experience in law matters also strongly recommended |
| University of Newcastle upon Tyne (this is the correct title) | Medicine Accelerated Programme, (Graduate Entry) | 4FT Hon MBBS | Designed for graduates of any discipline and those whose prior experience qualifies them for entry. Applicants must have achieved or expect to achieve min. upper 2nd class Hons degree or be a practising health professional with a post-registration qualification. Applicants are expected to show evidence of recent academic endeavour (last two to three years) eg. A level, Open University, GAMSAT. Particularly promising candidates are interviewed. Must pass UK Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT) |
| University of Dundee | Law (Eng/NI) – Accelerated Law (Scots) – Accelerated | 2FT Ord LLB | A University degree is required for Graduate (Accelerated) Entry. |
| Napier University, Edinburgh | LLB (Accelerated) | 2FT Ord LLB | designed for graduates of other disciplines who are looking to gain a qualification in Law. |
| University of Aberdeen | Law – Accelerated (Graduates only) | 2FT Hon LLB | A University degree is required for Graduate (Accelerated) Entry. |
| University of Birmingham | LLB for Graduates | 2 year full-time Degree | GRADUATE ENTRY ONLY: At least a lower second-class Honours degree (or equivalent from a university outside the UK). |
| University of Wales Institute, Cardiff | Secondary Education (two years) for QTS Secondary Education (two years) for QTS – (French) Secondary Education (two years) for QTS – (Music) Secondary Education (two years) for QTS – (Welsh) | 2FT Hon BA | This is a two year course for applicants who have at least one year's experience within Higher Education and GCSE English Language and Maths. Pathways exist in Music and Welsh for which a high level of skill is required within the subject. |

Appendix 4

Two-year accelerated law degrees, from UCAS

| Institutions | Duration and level of programme |
|-----------------------------|---|
| University of Hertfordshire | LLB Law accelerated programme – two years' duration |
| University of Huddersfield | LLB (Hons) two-year full-time accelerated programme |
| | LLB (Hons) three-year part-time accelerated programme |
| Birkbeck College | Senior Status (part-time) LLB Accelerated law degree |
| University of Southampton | LLB Law (Accelerated) |
| University of Leicester | LLB two-year Senior Status |
| University of Glamorgan | Fast track LLB two-year Senior Status |

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