

Russell Group response to BIS *Call for Evidence: Accelerated Courses and Switching University or Degree*

Summary

Switching university or degree

- Russell Group universities are committed to providing our talented students and outstanding staff with a stimulating and supportive environment where they can achieve their very best.
- Russell Group universities have high levels of student satisfaction and some of the best university completion rates in the UK. However, for some students, for example those who undergo a change in personal circumstances, institution or course transfer can provide a route to degree completion.
- Portability of credit is welcome in principle and switching courses may be right for a small number of students. However, it can entail significant upheaval and instead it is preferable that students enjoy high quality uninterrupted undergraduate study. To maintain the excellent quality of higher education in the UK, the system should prioritise and incentivise student success and retention as far as possible. It is also important that awarding institutions retain full ownership of the admissions process. Universities are best placed to assess the suitability of applicants. A mechanistic approach to institution transfer could result in students entering courses for which they are not well-equipped, missing key concepts or experiencing unnecessary repetition.
- There is a risk that a universal system of credit transfer could lead to greater homogeneity between institutions and/or courses which would damage the diversity of the sector and the ability of institutions to offer distinctive and specialist provision. This would run counter to the wider focus of the HE White Paper on improving student choice and meeting the needs of employers.
- Suggesting institution transfer can compensate for patterns of university entry for disadvantaged groups shifts the focus away from tackling critical issues of under-attainment and low aspirations at school. These are the key barriers to university access for disadvantaged students.
- As well as investing in a wide range of schemes to improve aspirations and attainment, Russell Group universities have developed a number of flexible routes for students without traditional qualifications who demonstrate sufficient ability and potential to be able to transfer from a college to a leading university.
- For example, the 2+2 programme at the University of Warwick allows students without traditional qualifications to spend two years at a local further education college studying for their degree before continuing to study at the University for a further two years.
- The College of Engineering and Physical Sciences at the University of Birmingham offers foundation year courses in a number of subjects and at the University of Liverpool and University of Nottingham students can undertake foundation study for entry to a wide range of degrees.

Accelerated courses

- There are a number of reasons why providing accelerated degrees in universities which excel in high-level, research-led teaching is problematic. Shortened courses would require academics to teach in periods typically designated for research, making the provision of research-led teaching extremely difficult.
- Accelerated degrees could also limit the time for independent learning and reflection as well as reducing opportunities to take part in programmes designed to develop employability skills.
- Condensing three years of teaching into two without altering the financing model under which annual tuition fees are capped would also prove financially unsustainable.

1 Switching university or degree

- 1.1 Russell Group universities provide students with outstanding opportunities to learn, develop and realise their full potential. **Consequently our universities have high levels of student satisfaction and some of the best university completion rates in the UK.**
 - (a) The 2015 National Student Survey shows 88% of students at Russell Group universities were satisfied with the quality of their university course compared with 86% across all UK universities (and 85% at non-RGUs).
 - (b) The latest HESA statistics show an average continuation rate for young full-time first degree entrants at Russell Group universities of 97% compared to 94% for the UK as a whole.
- 1.2 However, for a small number of students, for example those who undergo a change in personal circumstances, institution transfer can provide a route to degree completion. A QAA framework to enable transfer between institutions is already in place to facilitate the movement of students via the recognition of prior learning.¹ The current scale of student movement is very limited.² This reflects the fact that, as reported in a HEA-commissioned report in 2013, “learners have not expressed significant demand” for credit transfer and “in most courses the numbers of applications are low”.³
- 1.3 The current QAA Higher Education Credit Framework for England is based on the principle that guidance should be broad, overarching and advisory, allowing higher education institutions to adopt and adapt elements as appropriate to their needs and circumstances. The guidance states (our emphasis)⁴:

“...institutions' decision-making processes regarding academic standards and quality should, and will, **remain properly and entirely the responsibility of each autonomous institution** ... The application of these national guidelines on credit will remain a matter for individual institutions to decide on at their discretion.”
- 1.4 We support this position: universities are best placed to assess the suitability of applicants. A mechanistic approach to institution transfer could result in students entering courses for which they are not well-equipped, missing key concepts or experiencing unnecessary repetition. This would damage the quality and coherence of the student experience.

¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Academic-Credit-Framework.pdf>

² In 2014-15, 2.1% of first degree entrants at Russell Group universities transferred to another UK institution following their first year (compared to 2.2% across all UK institutions).

³ https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/review_of_transfer_of_credit_report.pdf

⁴ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Academic-Credit-Framework.pdf>

Therefore, while portability of credit is welcome in principle, it is vital that awarding institutions retain full ownership of the admissions process.

- 1.5 It is important to note that an increased incidence of degree switching would only be viable with a significant flow of students into, as well as out of, institutions; given the incidence of courses recruiting to capacity and high levels of retention at Russell Group universities there is less scope for this pattern of movement.
- 1.6 Russell Group universities work hard to maintain high levels of student retention and invest heavily in teaching, facilities and services for students. The call for evidence seems to offer institution transfer as a remedy for instances of poor quality provision. While switching courses is right for a small number of students, it can entail significant cost and upheaval. Instead, it is preferable that students enjoy high quality uninterrupted undergraduate study. **To maintain the excellent quality of higher education in the UK the system must prioritise and incentivise student success and retention as far as possible.**
- 1.7 Imposing a universal credit transfer system would ultimately undermine the diversity and quality of UK higher education, encouraging a much more mechanistic and potentially bland and unchallenging approach to teaching and learning. **Indeed, there is a risk that a universal system of credit transfer could lead to enforced homogeneity between institutions and/or courses by introducing a system of greater equivalence, which would limit the ability to offer distinctive and specialist provision.** For example, overall course structures, content and timing of course elements would need to be more aligned, as would the balance between led and independent learning. In fact this runs counter to the Government's stance on flexible provision: in a "market" which embraces a range of degree structures it is more difficult to compare courses and a comprehensive credit transfer system is impracticable.
- 1.8 Higher education in the United States does not provide a useful comparison on this issue: for US students the first years of their degree are focused almost entirely on accumulating discrete units of credit. This is not the case in the UK where degrees are broadly holistic and each programme has its own carefully considered structure and logic. Therefore even when institution transfer is carefully brokered, the interruption can diminish the overall student experience. Emulating the US modular system of credit transfer would be undesirable and would necessitate fundamental changes to the very nature of UK higher education.
- 1.9 While some universities in the UK have considered offering more of a liberal arts portfolio approach, this is typically only for a limited number of courses and often with particular types of student in mind (e.g. The Open University with its focus on part-time and more mature students).
- 1.10 The introduction of a large-scale system to facilitate switching would require the complex mapping of curricula over large numbers of institutions. It is unclear who would bear the expense for this exercise which would, given the limited demand, benefit relatively few students. There would also be an impact at an institutional level due to the administrative and financial costs associated with handling the switches and the increased burden on university admissions departments.
- 1.11 The call for evidence makes explicit reference to the transfer of students in the event of course or institution closure. It should be noted that individual students are protected under consumer law and HEFCE has developed a statement of good practice on course changes and closures.⁵ Moreover, the White Paper includes a new requirement for universities to set out and publish plans to protect their students in the event of exit or course closure.

⁵http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Regulation/Student,protection/Statement_good_practice.pdf

Therefore a bolstered credit transfer system is not necessary to deal with potential course or institution closure.

- 1.12 There is also a tension between the concept of increased institution transfer and the existing model of widening participation to higher education. Currently Russell Group universities invest significantly in outreach initiatives to improve the aspirations and attainment of students from disadvantaged groups, and many run access schemes to encourage students onto their courses.⁶ **Suggesting institution transfer can compensate for patterns of university entry seems to diminish the importance of these efforts and shifts the focus away from tackling issues of under-attainment and low aspirations at school.**
- 1.13 As well as investing in a wide range of schemes to improve aspirations and attainment, Russell Group universities have developed a number of flexible routes for students who wish to apply to a course, but who may not fulfil the 'typical' A-level entry criteria. One example is offering foundation courses which allow students without traditional qualifications to be taught in a further education college before making the transition to studying at university. For example, the 2+2 programme at the University of Warwick allows students without traditional qualifications to spend two years at a local further education college studying for their degree before continuing to study at the University for a further two years. The College of Engineering and Physical Sciences at the University of Birmingham offers foundation courses in a number of subjects and at the University of Liverpool and University of Nottingham students can undertake foundation study for entry to a wide range of degrees.
- 1.14 Our universities work hard to provide all students with the support they need to succeed and this is reflected in our high levels of retention for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁷ Increased institution transfer could undermine these efforts and prompt disadvantaged students to opt for a less challenging course of study elsewhere.

2 Accelerated courses

- 2.1 Russell Group universities provide an outstanding student experience for both undergraduates and postgraduates. Students benefit from world-class teachers, first-rate facilities and a highly motivated and talented peer group. Our universities have some of the highest staff to student ratios and are continually investing in staff, services, facilities and systems to create supportive learning environments that help students get the most from their studies. We support diversity and innovation in higher education, **but there are a number of reasons why full-time degree programmes lasting three years or more are generally the most appropriate form of provision at research-intensive institutions.**
- 2.2 University degrees must meet certain standards in terms of content to gain professional body accreditation and the Regulated Qualifications Framework partly defines qualifications on the basis of learning hours.⁸ For accelerated and standard degrees to be of the same value the content and notional learning hours must therefore be equivalent; it follows that shorter degrees would require staff to commit a greater proportion of their time to teaching, or that universities would need to employ more staff.
- 2.3 At Russell Group universities students work with leading experts in their field and often engage in research processes themselves; this combination of teaching and research excellence creates an ideal learning environment which attracts the most outstanding students from the UK and across the world. **However a shortened programme would**

⁶ In 2016-17, the 20 Russell Group universities in England alone will be investing £243 million in scholarships, fee waivers, bursaries and outreach activities aimed at the most disadvantaged.

⁷ Latest HESA statistics show an average continuation rate for young full-time first degree entrants from low participation neighbourhoods at English RGUs of 94.1% compared to 91.2% for all other universities.

⁸ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461298/RQF_Bookcase.pdf

require academics to teach in periods typically designated for research, making the provision of research-led teaching extremely difficult.

- 2.4 Two-year degrees would not only require a compressed timetable, but would limit the time available for self-directed study. A great deal of expertise and effort goes into developing degree programmes that offer Russell Group students the requisite time to develop valuable skills and knowledge. On top of scheduled teaching, independent learning is a vital component of university education. Consequently, **accelerated degrees may put pressure on student learning and compromise the overall undergraduate experience.**
- 2.5 Some courses also require students to complete extended research/design projects, work placements (particularly in health-related programmes) or field trips. It would not necessarily be feasible to compress such provision into an accelerated degree programme.
- 2.6 Russell Group universities aim to provide the optimum environment for students to develop a broad range of transferable skills which are highly valued by employers. Our members now go further than ever to ensure students are as 'work-ready' as possible - for example through employability programmes and internship opportunities.⁹ Shortened degree programmes would limit the opportunities for students to take part in such activities and could mean they are less prepared for the 'world of work' than students on longer courses.
- 2.7 As two-year degrees would be more intensive than those of a standard length, this must be reflected in the tuition fee paid to the institution: **it would not be viable for universities to offer three years' worth of resources for the price of two.** If these courses are not properly financed it will impact negatively on the quality of student experience and ultimately on the sustainability of institutions.
- 2.8 Assuming that the maximum tuition fee is adjusted accordingly, students undertaking a two-year course could still make a financial saving, compared to those on standard degrees, by virtue of incurring lower overall living costs. However, there would still be a real risk of unintended consequences, if this makes some groups of students more likely to opt for accelerated provision. For example, this could reverse progress institutions have made in widening participation if disadvantaged students opt for accelerated degrees that do not have the time available for wider study and other experience available to students on traditional courses.
- 2.9 A shift towards two-year programmes may also have implications for the international reputation of UK HE. Bachelor's degrees are generally expected to be three or more years in length (as reflected by practice in the European Higher Education Area); therefore two-year degrees represent a departure from an international norm. **A move to accelerated provision may call into question the quality of UK provision, especially compared to four year courses overseas.**
- 2.10 Accelerated degrees would also require the use of student facilities for a greater portion of the year. This is problematic because campus infrastructure is not necessarily available for such use: planned building and refurbishments often take place during term breaks and the summer months are occupied with activities such as pre-sessional programmes, summer schools and widening participation events.

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⁹ For example, the Warwick Skills Portfolio Award is given to students at the University of Warwick who complete a programme of seminars and activities to help them develop the skills most valued by employers:
<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/skills/awards/wspa>