Professor Stephanie Haywood

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19th July, 2016

Laurence Grafton
Higher Education Strategy and Policy
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

Dear Mr Grafton,

Accelerated Courses and Switching University or Degree: Call for Evidence

The Engineering Professors' Council (http://epc.ac.uk) represents the majority of academic engineers in the UK, with 81 university engineering faculty members comprising over 6,500 academic staff. It is a "nominating institution" for the purposes of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and four panellists from REF2014 sit on its governing Committee, which also numbers a Vice President of the Royal Academy of Engineering, a President of the Institute of Measurement and Control and an immediate past President of the Institution of Civil Engineers, as well as four university's pro Vice-Chancellors.

We enclose our response to the Consultation: Accelerated Courses and Switching University or Degree

We would be pleased to elaborate on any on our response if invited to do so.

Yours sincerely

S. Haywood

Professor Stephanie Haywood

President

Response Form – Accelerated Courses and Switching University or Degree: Call for Evidence

We welcome responses to the questions below (any or all) as well as any other comments respondents may wish to make.

A copy of this call for evidence can be found at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/accelerated-courses-and-switching-university-or-degree-call-for-evidence

You can complete your response online at:

https://bisgovuk.citizenspace.com/he/accelerated-courses-and-switching

Alternatively, you can e-mail or post the completed response form to:

Laurence Grafton
Higher Education Strategy and Policy
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

Tel: 020 7215 5000
Email: flexiblehe@bis.gsi.gov.uk

The closing date for responses is 19 July 2016

Information provided in response to this call for evidence, including personal information, may be subject to publication or release to other parties or to disclosure in accordance with the access to information regimes. Please see page 8 of this call for evidence for further information.

If you want information, including personal data, that you provide to be treated in confidence, please explain to us what information you would like to be treated as confidential and why you regard the information as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the department.

I want my response to be treated as confidential ☐

Comments:

Our responses below refer entirely to UK HEI engineering programmes.

ALL OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Your details

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Role: President

Organisation: The Engineering Professors' Council

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Q1: What would the impact of a credit transfer system be on the higher education sector? *If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.*

The current system of credit, usually accompanied by credit transfer/accreditation for prior learning, was put in place to support a perceived demand for students to transfer between UK HEIs. We do not believe that this has happened on any significant scale in practice, except for clearly defined articulation arrangements between institutions, which already work well. Hence we would suggest that demand to transfer mid-degree is likely to be limited.

University courses are much more diverse than the premise of credit transfer assumes. When students do transfer now, there are often gaps in prerequisite knowledge /understanding, even where they have in theory studied courses similar to prerequisite topics in the receiving institution. The difficulty of awarding credit in a fair way for year abroad exchange students offers some evidence for this. The benefit of a different perspective obtained from such an experience is invaluable – and valuable because of its difference. Nevertheless, universities often only ask that students pass this year due to the difficulty of giving fair grades and due to the time needed for students to acclimatise to the new surroundings, processes and methods of teaching/learning.

Another example of transfer between HEIs, which already exists on a significant scale and from which perhaps something can be learnt is direct entry of overseas students to 2nd year of BEng and sometimes 3rd year of MEng. Generally, in engineering subjects, this works best with progression agreements in place between sending and receiving institutions. Otherwise careful analysis of previous study is essential to ensure success. If credit transfer between any pair of institutions were to become the norm then significant standardisation of degree programmes would be needed. Much would be lost from this standardisation in terms of diversity of knowledge, skills and experience in the graduate cohort. Arguably, the benefits gained from existing exchange programmes and joint teaching would be lost by the

standardisation required to make credit transfer an easier process. It is also likely that the system would be distorted for the majority in order to cater to the needs of a very small number of students.

Q2: By what mechanisms could a system of credit transfer be more effectively embedded across the sector? *If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.*

Credit transfer already exists and students do move between institutions for a variety of reasons. However, we are not convinced of any academic benefit of embedding credit transfer more widely and encouraging greater movement between institutions on any significant scale.

This question presupposes there is some intrinsic benefit of movement between institutions. In reality, moving almost always involves additional work to bridge gaps in knowledge and may have a negative effect on student performance.

Currently, credit transfer works best where students move between institutions through formal agreements to ensure prerequisites are met (See Q1)

Q3: What do you see as the main barriers to a more extensive credit transfer system? *If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.*

Engineering programmes may have broadly curricula at different HEIs but there is also significant diversity and a student who transfers will almost certainly find a mismatch in the detail of what has been taught in any given year/module. Credits taught at a given level in one HEI may have an entirely different academic flavour from those taught in another HEI and would not simply be transferable in practice, even though they might appear equivalent on paper. (see above).

Accreditation is a serious barrier because an HEI must be able to demonstrate that a student has achieved all the ILOs stipulated by the Engineering Council. At present this must be done by a laborious matching of the ILOs, course by course, for each student. We would need a system where "ILOs achieved" could be transferred as well as credits. This would require a formal matching of ILOs to courses, which is now being demanded for veterinary accreditation but not by any other subjects as far as we are aware. It would make engineering accreditation considerably more bureaucratic and time-consuming; this may be incompatible with it remaining a voluntary activity.

Q4: Are there any lessons we can learn from international credit transfer models, e.g. from the US? *If you reference other sources in your answer please state the name of the source.*

Curricula in the USA, particularly in early years of university, tend to be more standardised than those in the UK. Greater standardisation is likely to lead to reduction in the overall level of challenge presented by courses as well as less diversity. This lack of diversity would limit the set of experiences provided by universities and could have a negative impact on partnerships with local industries.

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

Engineering programmes are already densely packed and it is hard to see them readily being reduced in length without loss of student understanding and skills development. A period of time is needed for students to digest the information presented to them and to consolidate and deepen their understanding. The summer presents this opportunity not only through reading and revision but through summer work and research placements, which are an important part of engineering education. These could be lost from accelerated degrees. The lack of a resit opportunity, separate from the next period of study, may also impact student progression. In addition, many students also need to work to earn money to fund their studies in the summer period.

It will be necessary for students to be supported – by loans or whatever other mechanism is developed in the future – for ~45 weeks of the year rather than 30. The teaching staff and buildings will also have to be dedicated to teaching and learning for the whole year, implying that the cost of teaching, and of studying, will be greater than that required for a 30-week year. Annual fees universities can charge and student loans will need to rise

From a staff perspective there are implications of loss of research time (or the need to employ additional staff at greater cost). UCAS, degree ceremonies, MSc projects, resits, summer schools and widening access activities take place in most universities; the latter in particular could suffer from accelerated degrees.

There are practical problems in terms of timetabling and staffing or universities attempting to offer both accelerated and conventional length degrees

Q6: Where have you seen attempts (successful or otherwise) to overcome those barriers either in the UK or overseas?

Accelerated degrees are available in the US and the proposed new university in Hereford, NMiTE (New Model in Technology and Engineering), proposes to reproduce a model along these lines used by Olin College. The proposal will be for a teaching only institution and therefore barriers such as the need for research time

will be removed. It remains to be seen whether the demand for such courses is sufficient for conventional universities to compete in this arena.

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