

**Serial number** 0329

**Title** Should I stay or should I go? – An exploration of student demand for greater mobility through credit transfer

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### **Background information and context**

Student mobility, in terms of the ability of students to move between institutions while studying, such as through credit transfer, has received growing policy attention in recent years, in several pieces of policy (BIS, 2016a, 2016b; DfE, 2016; BEIS, 2017) and legislation (Higher Education and Research Act 2017, s.38).

Yet despite its modern origins in the 1963 Robbins Report, the establishment of the Open University (OU) in 1969 and subsequent interest and action in the HE sector, few students currently engage in mobility, and much work has focused on the technical questions of the value of credit, and how to facilitate transfer. For instance, this can be seen in the recommendations of the Dearing Report in 1997 making several around the use of greater credit transfer and accumulation (CAT) as a means of supporting lifelong learning (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997), the subsequent work of regional consortia on credit, the Quality Assurance Agency on the Inter-Consortia Credit Agreement (InCCA) (DfE, 2017, p.30), and the Burgess Group (UUK, 2006,2008), to name a few examples. All of which are orientated around discussion of the technical potential and process of delivering credit transfer, such through the development of credit frameworks.

However more recently greater attention has been placed in policy on the development of credit transfer, with the Government also linked this to notions of improving quality, and value of education through the process of giving all students greater choice over their education (BIS, 2016b, p.40). While releasing a call for evidence, to look at *accelerated courses and switching university or degree* (BIS, 2016b).

Here the discourse on credit transfer shifted, away from the technical administrative discussion, (although this would still be a factor), and instead sought to bring discussion of credit transfer into notions and understanding of student choice:

Students considering higher education face many choices: which subject, which location and which institution is the best fit for them. These choices can fundamentally influence the course of a student's life. (BIS, 2016b, p.4)

Yet existing research has paid little attention the value students may place on greater mobility, such as through credit transfer, often focusing similarly on the technical potential, and comparative frameworks (Souto-Otero, 2013).

While research into the broader concept of 'mobility', such as in relation to students who commute to and from their university (Finn, 2017a, 2017b), suggests that current cultural attitude to mobility in the sector could limit greater uptake of greater mobility, and suggests benefits of greater mobility retention or widening participation could be limited. For instance Finn shows that the dualism between non/traditional students is mirrored in the im/mobile student, devaluing mobility and associating it with non-traditional students. Leading to call for "a gradational view of student

mobilities” in order to respond to the changing policy landscape of accelerated and flexible degrees (Finn, 2017a, p1.).

Cumulatively then this suggesting the cultural and attitudinal aspects of student mobility and credit transfer require further research, a gap which this study seeks to address.

## **Methodology**

The research design worked with seven institutions in the north of England’s, including 4 traditional research-intensive institutions, 3 post-92 institutions. The study took place during the 2016/17 academic year, and included three phases:

1. The analysis of a matched HESA data set into student movement from partner institutions. Involving matching students who had withdrawn during the 2012/13-2015/16 academic years, with records of their subsequent reappearance in HESA, and comparing the details of their degree, discipline, year of study, and location. This allowed for a quantitative picture to develop of existing to further understand if mobility and credit transfer already take place, as well as insight into their nature and scale.
2. Analysis of online surveys and focus groups with current students, and staff at each partner institution. This included participation of 2475 students, seeking to understand the nature of demand among students for credit transfer, the way in which this is currently perceived and conceptualised by students, and the consequences this may have for engagement. With follow-up focus groups allowing for the collection of richer qualitative data from students to help understand and interpret the survey’s findings.
3. An online survey and series of interviews with a purposeful sample of academic staff with leadership responsibility for learning and teaching. This included 81 staff, to understand if there were points of connection, or disconnection with the data collected from students, and understand further the nature of how academics conceptualise mobility of students, its potential barriers and consequences.

## **Key findings**

The study found that overall;

- Demand for greater student mobility and credit transfer among students is low. Less than 0.6% of the student population engaged in some form of transfer from the HESA mapping exercise.
- From the students surveyed demand is also generally low, with students expressing a desire to see greater mobility available in the event of mitigating circumstance, such as a change in personal circumstance, like caring responsibilities, or to support their health and wellbeing, such as accessing mental health support.
- Students conceptualised mobility in a way that suggested there was a stigma surrounding engaging in credit transfer and student mobility, which would discourage engagement, stemming from the lack of information, and a belief that engagement without a valid reason would be seen as showing they were unreliable.

- While some students did express the belief that greater student mobility could support them in ‘trading up’, for a better degree or institution. However, few of these students paid attention to rankings once they had arrived at university, and most talked about ‘better’ in cultural terms such as ‘Oxbridge or Not’ or ‘Russel Group or Not’.
- An estimate of the real costs of transferring mid-year indicates it could involve a range of approximately £7,791.31 to £1,437.30 (excluding tuition fees), and could inhibit participation particularly for students from low-income backgrounds.
- Staff also provided evidence that students’ belief that the quality and value of a degree awarded by mobility and the accumulation of credits may be of less value and quality to them when considering an applicant for postgraduate study with such a degree.
- Staff were unable to be specific about instances of pedagogical practice which would be affected by student mobility.

### **Implications**

This research lead to several specific recommendations for existing practice of institutions in terms of adapting current forms of student support provision, highlighting the case that for some students, in some circumstances mobility may be the best solution to them to support to remain in higher education. With work to make processes of student mobility and credit transfer more visible and transparent in this context having the potential to be beneficial for students.

However, for the wider adopt and development of student mobility, work is needed which ensures such policies are robust, maintaining the quality of degrees, changing cultural attitudes towards mobility, and mitigating the potential for social inequalities to be generated within such a system.

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