

## Conference theme: Policy

### Vocation at the Expense of Academia? Student Expectations of Two Year Degrees (0206)

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#### Abstract

Policy drivers from Government in the UK in 2010 have placed a great deal of pressure on HEI to deliver accelerated learning for Bachelors qualifications over two years as part of wider agenda wishes to move the traditional delivery of degrees over 3 years to flexible and life long learning. Cohort analysis of experiences of students undertaking two year computing degrees at the University of Plymouth, UK, show tensions between the expected “benefits” of accelerated learning provision and the experience of students in such programmes. It also raises questions about the fundamental nature of the Bachelor degree and whether expectations of vocational education have to be at odds with the academic experience.

#### Paper

From a policy perspective, in the UK in 2010 the Two Year Degree (2YD) is one of the most strongly debated pressures on the HE sector. Clearly not a party issue, both the current<sup>i</sup> and previous Secretary of State of Business, Innovation and Skills<sup>ii</sup> have stated their intention to explore the model as a more cost-effective model for achieve Bachelor level education and open up such qualifications to a wider audience. The current Minister for HE has also reiterated the need for flexible delivery, in his words a move away from the “Club Med” model of degree education<sup>iii</sup>.

Both the Higher Education Academy and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) have explored this model of learning, with evaluation suggesting the learning experience is unaffected by the accelerated nature of delivery<sup>iv</sup>. Yet, the 2YD does raise some deep questions about the nature of the Bachelor degree – is it an independent exploration of knowledge or the means to an end? In exploring this issue this paper will examine attitudes for a 2YD cohort of Computing students at the University of Plymouth, a degree suite developed as one of the HEFCE Pathfinder projects<sup>v</sup>

Computing as a subject was viewed as a subject appropriate for accelerated learning due to highly industry focussed graduate destination profile (the Conference of Head and Professors of Computing in 2004<sup>vi</sup> showed the 73.4% of IT related graduates gain employment in the sector). It is also a very fast moving sector where up to date skills are at a premium<sup>vii</sup>. One point we will return to, however, is that while *technical* skills might be very fast moving, conceptually the manner of professional practice in IT has changed little in the 40 years that the concept of “software engineering” has existed<sup>viii</sup>

During their penultimate term students on the Computing programme suite were asked to submit a reflective essay to consider their time in HE and whether their initial expectations of the 2YD process had been realised. Analysis of 14 essays is presented below, using quotes to illustrate key findings:

In terms of the nature of the accelerated learning experience, there was little surprise that students did not feel they had a second class learning experience:

*I am very pleased I chose this course as it has allowed me to complete a degree within two years, meaning I can go into work a year earlier.*

However, the speed of the learning also placed pressure on students:

*The structure at times led to immense pressure, especially towards the end of term last year. How I managed to get some of the work in at times is still something I could not fully answer*

Cohort identity presented some interesting data in light of the policy direction that is driving the need for 2YDs in the HE sector. The cohort not comfortable with the mix of mature and “traditional” student, each subgroup feeling the programme was for the other grouping:

*The course was designed for those younger students who want to get into the work place and start earning as fast as possible.*

*the majority of students on the fast-track courses are older.... I would reconsider choosing the fast-track degree, as more people are around my age.*

Cohort identity was a key issue in the data analysis. There was clear divide and questions about the attitude of the mature students and questions around their motivations for academic learning. This was also reflected in the analysis of data from the mature student subset:

*If I had known what university was going to be like, and what I would get out of a fast track course then I would have taken another route to gaining the knowledge I need.*

*I came to University to learn how to program and I leave knowing how to use the Harvard Referencing System (just what every employer wants)... when I look at the course title “Computing for Business Applications” I see a vocational course.*

These quotes reflect the majority of the mature students’ opinions. The key theme coming from this subset was they were using the 2YD as a reskilling exercise and had no interest in the academic learning, viewing the qualification as a career transition opportunity. Anything related to academic practice (reflective essays, research methodology) were dismissed as irrelevant to their personal learning needs.

Our data presents two challenges to policy direction. First, does closer alignment with student employability and skills needs have to be at the expense of the academic experience? More specifically, is student employability simply about having up to date technical skills? Surely the quality academic experience, with its roots in inquiry, independent learning and reflective practice are much more valuable higher level skills to offer the employee. As mentioned earlier in this discussion, while technical competencies are fast moving within the IT sector, the fundamental knowledge and understanding associated with these competencies has been far more consistent with established theory – the focus on specific technical aspects are merely syntactic modification of fundamental principles.

Secondly, 2YDs are being proposed as a model to accelerate entry into the workplace and as a solution to flexible routes into higher education, where a mature applicant may not be able to invest 3 or 4 years in a career change. However the expectation and motivations of “flexible learning” applicant, as illustrated here, may differ greatly from the “traditional” student.

The fundamental aspects of the Bachelor degree should not be lost in the accelerated package. And more importantly these fundamental aspects need to manage applicant expectations. There is a risk that the accelerated package is viewed as purely vocational which could severely impact on the need for an increase of higher level skills in the UK workforce<sup>ix</sup>. Regardless of flexible delivery modes, step on step off points and accelerated delivery, the degree should remain, at its core, an academic qualification with rigour and intellectual enquiry at its heart and students embarking on such a programme should be aware of this and embrace it.

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<sup>i</sup> Cable (2010). “Higher Education”. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/vince-cable-higher-education>. Accessed July 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Mandelson (2010). “The Future of Higher Education: The Dering lecture”. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/mandelson-dearing-lecture>

<sup>iii</sup> Daily Telegraph (2010). “David Willetts: ‘Club Med’ university experience is over.” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/7881605/David-Willetts-Club-Med-university-experience-is-over.html>. Accessed July 2010.

<sup>iv</sup> McCaig, Bowers-Brown and Drew (2007). “Accelerated learning programmes: a review of quality, extent and demand”. [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/Accelerated\\_learning\\_programmes\\_1.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/Accelerated_learning_programmes_1.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> HEFCE (2007). “Flexible Learning”. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/flexible/>. Accessed July 2010.

<sup>vi</sup> Round, Lovegrove (2004). “First Destinations of UK Computing Graduates”. [http://www.cs.york.ac.uk/cphc/pdf/WICT\\_graduate\\_destinations\\_report.pdf](http://www.cs.york.ac.uk/cphc/pdf/WICT_graduate_destinations_report.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> Computer Weekly (2009). “The UK IT Skills Crisis Essential Guide”. <http://www.computerweekly.com/Articles/2009/07/13/231661/The-UK-IT-skills-crisis-Essential-Guide.htm>. Accessed July 2010.

<sup>viii</sup> J. N. Buxton , B. Randell, Software Engineering Techniques: Report of a conference sponsored by the NATO Science Committee, Rome, Italy, 27-31 Oct. 1969, Brussels, Scientific Affairs Division, NATO, 1970

<sup>ix</sup> Leitch (2006). “Leitch Review: Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills. Final Report”. [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/6/4/leitch\\_finalreport051206.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/6/4/leitch_finalreport051206.pdf). Accessed July 2010