

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Chaired by Jane Creaton

Wed 11 Dec 2019

15:00 - 15:30

Accelerated degrees – an institutional experience – the staff perspective

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Research Domain: Academic practice ,work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: Accelerated degrees have existed within global higher education for many decades, but have become topical in the UK as a result of a Governmental desire for more universities to offer degree study in this format (UK Government, 2017; DfE, 2019). More flexible learner models to match more diverse student populations are some of the underpinning drivers.

Abertay University has piloted a suite of accelerated degree programmes since 2015 with built-in annual reviews designed to examine the staff and student experience of engagement with this study route. In 2019 a more in-depth survey was instigated to provide a broader understanding of the staff experience of delivering accelerated pathways, as well as ascertaining (through qualitative dialogue) their perceptions of the student experience. This session will provide Abertay context to the accelerated study route, examining staff responses and exploring key points of consideration for managers looking to adopt this delivery format.

Paper: Widening participation with a broader range of entry points to higher education, coupled with a desire to upskill graduates for future industry needs, have put flexible routes to gaining a degree award quite firmly on the UK Government agenda (UK Government, 2017; DfE, 2019). Accelerated degrees are an example of these alternate study pathways. However, current UK provision is small scale potentially as a consequence of their perceived ‘niche’ appeal (Tallantyre, 2013) to a specific subset of the student population – namely, mature students and adult returners (Marques, 2012; Collins, Hay & Heiner, 2013). While some academic staff welcome the additional tenure and an alternate approach to pedagogy that delivering this model of study offers (Davies, Howard & Slack, 2009; HEFCE, 2011), there are acknowledged issues in terms of a form of teaching delivery that utilises the full calendar year. These issues most often relate to workload allocation and the capacity to do other academic activity, for example teaching preparation and research (HEFCE, 2011;

Tallantyre, 2013). Consequently, tensions can arise in staff teams if a particular cohort of academics are repeatedly required to deliver these programmes (Johnson and Rose, 2015). In recognition of the challenges of this study format, Pollard, Hadjivassiliou, Swift & Green (2017) state that there needs to be further investigation of the staff experience if this type of provision is to be expanded.

Context

Abertay University has offered six undergraduate accelerated degree programmes since 2015 and the author has been tracking the staff experience since their inception. Subsequent to market research garnering demand, each of the four academic Schools opted to offer minimally one programme in both non-accelerated and accelerated formats as part of a pilot exercise. In tandem, a tuitions fee and student finance model was negotiated with the Scottish Funding Council.

Early evaluations, as for the above noted prior studies, raised issues regarding workload, lack of time to reflect on and prepare materials, and capacity to take annual leave. Consequently, Heads of Department were asked to work with programme deliverers to ensure that workload allocations were fair and transparent and to avoid, if possible, staff teaching in all three terms. Block delivery models were proposed to facilitate holiday and research time, as well as the utilisation of more independent study focussed modules in the summer term (for example, project work or placement) - but only if these were appropriate to the programme of study (noting that these activities still required academic support). In 2019, after four years of implementation, ethics permission was granted to conduct a more extensive review of the staff experience of accelerated degree delivery.

Method

A link to an anonymous online questionnaire was sent by e-mail to the 76 academic staff involved in teaching the accelerated programmes. Staff were asked, via a series of open questions, to describe their experience of delivering in this format, as well as to give their perceptions of the student experience of pursuing an accelerated route.

Results and Discussion

In contrast to the highly positive accounts of the accelerated experience that were evident in the concurrent student experience survey, staff sentiments were more polarised with a less positive narrative emerging (n= 55 responded). The concept of diluting value and quality while detracting from deeper and slower learning, and reducing student potential, featured in a number of staff comments:

'you simply cannot teach a cognitively rich subject in a shorter amount of time. The human brain needs time to come to terms with complex topics, and this cannot be compressed without losing the value of the degree'

Debate exists in the literature regarding whether concentrated study periods enable immersion in the discipline (Kuiper, Solomonides & Hardy, 2015; Harvey, Power & Wilson, 2017) or whether conversely, they detract from reflection on learning and therefore academic development (Hunt, 2017). The inherent characteristics of the student may be a key influence in this regard. That is, for those

students described as 'engaged', 'motivated', or 'mature' learners, the delivery mode was perceived by staff to work well. However, for other students, the academic staff perceived the workload as too high and consequently, some 'struggled'. Again this was in direct contrast to the student accounts of their experience.

Johnson & Rose (2015) document that staff involved in accelerated degree delivery have reported perceptions of isolation, marginalisation and a loss of connectedness with institutional norms. However, these sentiments did not emerge in this study but 'tiredness' because of three terms of teaching did. Hunt (2017) voices concerns about extended delivery models, as did the University and College Union (UCU) in 2010 when it was thought that there would be increased provision of this format. Disquiet regarding the impact on staff wellbeing, as well as the non-sustainability of the good will and hard work that can accompany the accelerated format, features in the literature (Pollard et al, 2017). Heads of Department reported attempts to address the workload issues but there remained perceptions by the academic staff of a lack of equity regarding the distribution of teaching. This was exacerbated in areas where there had been rapid growth in student numbers with staff recruitment struggling to keep apace.

A number of staff felt that conceptually accelerated degrees had some merit, but the size of cohorts and the fractured experience (HEFCE's (1999) displacement effect) dominated the staff dialogue (potentially a consequence of running accelerated and non-accelerated programmes in tandem). More than two decades ago when Fallows and Symon (1999) evaluated an earlier pilot of accelerated degree provision they stated that the requisite 'significant culture change amongst the academic staff' to accompany this form of provision 'will only be achieved through careful human relations'. The present study confirms that this still holds true and there remains much work to be done in this domain if universities are to deliver on the Government agenda and invest in delivering accelerated degrees.

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