

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT HIGHER EDUCATION (FEE LIMITS FOR
ACCELERATED COURSES) (ENGLAND)
REGULATIONS 2018

Monday 14 January 2019

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON

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| † Abrahams, Debbie (<i>Oldham East and Saddleworth</i>)
(Lab) | † Moore, Damien (<i>Southport</i>) (Con) |
| † Badenoch, Mrs Kemi (<i>Saffron Walden</i>) (Con) | † Phillips, Jess (<i>Birmingham, Yardley</i>) (Lab) |
| Betts, Mr Clive (<i>Sheffield South East</i>) (Lab) | † Robinson, Mary (<i>Cheadle</i>) (Con) |
| † Brereton, Jack (<i>Stoke-on-Trent South</i>) (Con) | † Seely, Mr Bob (<i>Isle of Wight</i>) (Con) |
| † Fletcher, Colleen (<i>Coventry North East</i>) (Lab) | † Skidmore, Chris (<i>Minister for Universities, Science,
Research and Innovation</i>) |
| † Jones, Mr Marcus (<i>Nuneaton</i>) (Con) | † Thomas, Gareth (<i>Harrow West</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † Loughton, Tim (<i>East Worthing and Shoreham</i>)
(Con) | † Turley, Anna (<i>Redcar</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † McCarthy, Kerry (<i>Bristol East</i>) (Lab) | Laura-Jane Tiley, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| † Marsden, Gordon (<i>Blackpool South</i>) (Lab) | |
| † Milling, Amanda (<i>Cannock Chase</i>) (Con) | † attended the Committee |

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 14 January 2019

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Draft Higher Education (Fee Limits for Accelerated Courses) (England) Regulations 2018

4.30 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Higher Education (Fee Limits for Accelerated Courses) (England) Regulations 2018.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

The draft regulations were laid before Parliament on 29 November 2018. They should be read alongside the wider fee limits regulations which set tuition fee limits to apply to all standard or non-accelerated degree courses from August 2019 and were approved by Parliament last summer.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 provided that regulations may be made to set different fee limits specifically for accelerated courses. The draft regulations set out various fee limits in respect of accelerated degree courses starting from August 2019. The limits cover both full-time study years and permutations matching those of standard degrees, for example where a student takes an accelerated course that incorporates a sandwich year. All accelerated degree annual fee caps at public providers of degrees are set as a multiple of 1.2 times the annual standard degree equivalents.

An accelerated degree is the equivalent of a standard degree in every sense but one: it is completed one year sooner than the same degree studied at the widely established pace of three years of 30 weeks' study and 22 weeks' vacation each year. By studying for more weeks each year—about 45 weeks for the year—and taking shorter breaks between terms, accelerated students can complete exactly the same teaching content of, for example, that typical three-year degree, but graduate in two years.

Accelerated degrees are not new. About 20 public universities and 11 private providers already offer accelerated degree courses, although the range of subjects and the number of providers of accelerated degrees have remained small in the context of all undergraduate enrolments. We estimate that fewer than 1,000 students are enrolled on accelerated degree courses at public universities, with about a further 3,000 studying with private university providers.

Good examples of providers successfully offering accelerated degree courses include the University of Buckingham, which has delivered two-year degree courses for about 40 years. Its students regularly give excellent feedback on the quality of teaching and on their study experiences. Staffordshire University has offered accelerated

degree courses for more than a decade, with a high proportion of mature and commuter students among its cohorts.

I have only been Universities Minister for about a month, but I have visited two institutions that celebrate their accelerated degree course provision. It was fascinating to discuss with students at St Mary's University in Twickenham the theatre-production technical course that they were taking. It used to be offered as a three-year degree, but it has now become a two-year degree, because many students were simply finding work after two years and not completing their three-year course. As a result, St Mary's decided to institute a two-year degree programme to help students not only to enter work but to achieve their qualification.

This morning, I visited Middlesex University London, where I had another fantastic discussion with students. They were on the business administration two-year accelerated degree course. All the students mentioned that, while such courses were not for everyone, they meant something not only to those people who wanted to get on in life, ensuring that they would enter the world of work earlier, but perhaps to students who started a foundation course and wanted to go on to further study with a shorter time limit.

I can see the benefits of such courses being offered at universities around the country. The problem is that the existing limits on the annual fees that public universities can charge have made it hard for most public providers to offer accelerated degrees. The tuition fee cap applies to all public universities on an annual rather than a per-course basis. That reflects the length of the total period of study, but not the substantive volume or cost of teaching delivered in each study year.

Condensing three years' teaching into two, by reducing the number of weeks of vacation downtime throughout the course, has generally not been seen as financially justifiable under the existing arrangements. Public providers of accelerated degrees, however, attest to the wider benefits that make accelerated provision worth while, which include highly motivated undergraduates; a more intense and engaged teaching experience; and the incentive to shake up established teaching and working practices and to innovate in tuition delivery.

For students to complete their degree one year sooner than a standard degree means that they accelerate their graduation and have one year less of living costs, crucially, alongside lower total tuition fees.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that St Mary's University in Twickenham already offered accelerated degrees, but he then said that the financial circumstances of other universities meant that they were not willing to provide accelerated degrees. Why does he think financially St Mary's can offer two-year accelerated degrees, but other universities cannot?

Chris Skidmore: That is a good point. As I have said, Buckingham has had accelerated degrees for 40 years, and I have a list of publicly funded HEs that I could share with the Committee, but uptake has been limited due to the restriction on the ability financially to provide those courses—the difference between an £18,000-a-year degree course and a £27,000-a-year one. St Mary's in

Twickenham has a course that runs for two years, but for a very limited number of students; it is not able to expand that course. Having talked to providers who currently run two-year courses, we have learned that they, too, have a limited ability to extend the programme to meet current and possible future demand. That is why this provision is in the regulations that have been introduced on the Floor the House, to make sure that we can benefit not only institutions that are yet to take up accelerated degrees, but institutions that may want to create new courses with accelerated programmes. I stress again that accelerated programmes are not a silver bullet; we are not assuming that every student will take up a two-year degree instead of a three-year or four-year course. However, they provide flexibility and innovation, and crucially allow for the greater student choice that I hope the regulations will provide.

As a result of students being able to take an accelerated degree over two years, they will start full-time work one year sooner than their peers; they will potentially benefit from an average annual salary of £19,000 straight away. Customer surveys conducted by the Student Loans Company in summer 2018 show that both accelerated and standard degree students regard the year of time saved as the most valuable benefit of accelerated degree study. As I have said, accelerated degrees are not for everyone, but for some—mature students, for example, or young people with a keen appetite for learning who want to study more and take fewer breaks to secure a faster entry or return to the workforce—they are exactly the right choice, or the only possible choice. Some employers also like accelerated degrees, as they offer an early opportunity to recruit demonstrably ambitious, focused and motivated graduates.

Following a commitment that the Department for Education gave in late 2017 during the passage of the 2017 Act, we consulted on a proposed 20% uplift in the annual tuition fee for accelerated degrees. That uplift aimed to ease the financial barrier inhibiting the wider provision of accelerated degree courses while still offering students a saving of roughly £5,550 on their total tuition fees, compared with a three-year degree course. On top of that, we must add the savings on living costs—roughly £7,500 a year—and also take into account a possible extra year of earned income as a result of starting work early. That is effectively going to benefit those who embark on a two-year accelerated degree course; it will be a saving for students.

Last year, we published our response to that consultation. It set out our intention to proceed with the regulations, to enable a specific new annual tuition fee for accelerated degrees at 1.2 times the standard equivalent. We consider that this fee will better reflect the actual weight of teaching and support delivered in the accelerated degree year; with it, more universities will be able to expand their range of courses and offer students greater choice, with more flexible modes of study. Wider provision will in turn offer many more students the choice of applying for an accelerated course in their preferred subject at their preferred university, and even with the increased annual fee cap, accelerated degrees offer big overall savings for students. As I have said, the total cost of tuition will be 20% lower, alongside no final year living costs and the unique opportunity to graduate and begin full-time work a year earlier.

The UK is widely envied for the quality and vigour of its higher education system. Our universities regularly rank among the best in the world. Their doors are open to anyone with the potential to succeed, including more disadvantaged students than ever before.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Would the Minister explain how the quality and academic rigour of these courses will be evaluated? Has there been an opportunity for pilot programmes? I know some concern has been expressed in various sectors about that.

Chris Skidmore: To take the hon. Lady's point about quality and rigour, we would never want an accelerated degree course to be seen as a poor man's degree— as somehow less rigorous and less beneficial. The standards that need to be maintained for those degrees must absolutely be the same as for full-time degrees. If we look at some of the institutions that have been offering accelerated degrees for a long time, they stand by their commitment that the teaching time and teaching intensity of those courses should remain exactly the same. Instead of about 30 weeks of study there are 45, and the number of tutors is the same. The point of the draft regulations is to provide for the extra investment in tuition staff that is needed to deliver an extended course across 45 weeks of the year. On the hon. Lady's point about the teaching framework, I was at Middlesex earlier today talking to the vice-chancellor, Dr Tim Blackman, and he was absolutely insistent that this is still 360 credits of study. Whether over two or three years, 360 credits still need to happen.

Debbie Abrahams: Where these courses have been offered, has there been any change in access, for different socioeconomic groups in particular?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to access and participation, one of the Government's key commitments is to ensure that, regardless of their background, people are able to go to university, if they wish to take that route. The two-year accelerated degree course provides people with the opportunity to see a destination, to not have to cover an extra year of living costs, and to then go into work.

One of the two students I spoke to at Middlesex today was a girl who had started out on a higher apprenticeship at the City of London Corporation, without the qualifications to get her into a position to take a degree. She realised she had hit a wall, and that if she wanted to go further in her profession she would need to reach degree level, but, effectively, she had already begun work. What I am keen to expound to the Committee is that the two-year degree is not a silver-bullet solution; it is part of a menu of options that enables us to break down the artificial wall between further and higher education for students who may not have had the best start in life, those who are not from the most advantaged backgrounds and who may not have achieved the qualifications they have the potential to achieve.

I am keen to explore how students may take a foundation year and then an accelerated degree course on top, accessing higher education in a way in which they may not initially have been able to. We need to take this

[Chris Skidmore]

under the whole umbrella of future qualifications that will allow for the increased participation of disadvantaged students.

Gareth Thomas: Further to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, a number of years after the Government decided to put tuition fees up to £9,000, mature students were one of the groups in which significant numbers had been deterred from going to university. What discussions have the Minister and his Department had to check that the measure would not be a further discouragement to mature students?

Chris Skidmore: As the new Universities Minister, I am keen to be seen not just as a Minister for students. I am Minister for everyone in the HE sphere, and that covers mature students as well. It is crucial that we look at the decline in mature learners.

On mature learner provision, I hope that the expansion of the accelerated degree course will allow someone who has entered the world of work, or has a mortgage or other financial commitments, and who looks at a three or four-year degree course and thinks, “Maybe that’s just a bit too much of a time commitment”, to find that a degree of about two years, at an accelerated learning pace, will suit them. It is crucial that we look at things and outcomes through the eyes of the student, whether an 18-year-old or a mature learner. It is crucial that they have this option. We are not forcing two-year degrees on anyone; we are allowing an expansion to take place so that people can look at institutions and choose a course that will be tailored to their individual learning needs.

Gareth Thomas: If the Minister wants to be the Minister for students, presumably he has talked to student representative bodies. What is their assessment of the proposed 20% fees hike?

Chris Skidmore: I have been the Minister for a month, and I have been to about eight HE institutions so far. I have an ambition to reach them all. Whether I will be able to do that as a new year’s resolution I am not quite sure, but I am determined to get out and listen to the student voice and to concerns.

When I speak to students, I also want to ensure that they are getting the student experience and having the opportunity to build friendships as part of an HE community. What was really interesting in going to Middlesex was talking to some of the students who are doing the business administration course. They felt they had twice as much access to the student community because they got to meet different groups, including the peer group in the year above them, as a result of their accelerated course. They felt it was an advantage to be able to talk to both sets of peer groups in the course structure.

An evaluation was carried out before I became Universities Minister. It showed 92% support among students who take accelerated degree courses, but it raised the issue of public understanding of accelerated degrees—55% of students did not know they existed. There is a question about how we ensure that universities

that want to investigate offering accelerated degree courses have the opportunity to do so, and the draft regulations will allow that expansion to take place.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) *rose*—

Gareth Thomas *rose*—

Chris Skidmore: I am coming to the end of my speech, but I will take one more intervention. I have been quite generous to the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure he will be able to come in again later, so I give way to the hon. Lady.

Jess Phillips: The Minister has been incredibly generous. I would have quite liked to do my degree in two years. I am not sure it would have taken that long, actually—if I added up the hours of tuition, I could probably have done it in about five months. The Minister is presenting quite a good picture of access for mature students, people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and people who started through the apprenticeship route, but I fear these measures may create a two-tier system. We can pretend that the university someone went to or the sort of degree they did does not matter, but we all live in reality, so are Oxford and Cambridge investigating offering two-year degrees?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. When we look at the groups in our HE system, we have the Russell Group universities and groups such as GuildHE. I met representatives of GuildHE last week to discuss provision, and it supports accelerated degrees. I hope, by taking a bottom-up approach to allowing institutions to expand provision, we can ensure that no one is snobby about two-year degrees. I declare an interest: I went to Oxford University. A lot of my friends decided to study law, so they did a law conversion course and then the Bar vocational training to become a barrister or a solicitor. In effect, that is a two-year degree in law.

When we look at the reality, it is important that we champion accelerated degrees and make the case that they are an important provision. If the draft regulations pass, as I hope they will, one of the challenges I will have is going out and making it a key part of my mission as Universities Minister to say that we still need innovation in the HE sector. The Augar review will report shortly, but we must also level the playing field—I am sorry to use a horrible cliché—to ensure that FE routes and HE routes are synonymous and that no one can say going to an FE college, which may offer degrees or accelerated courses, is for other people’s children.

We need to raise standards across FE and to ensure that there is the ability for a crossover, almost like an education passport. There is also the question of people who start degrees being able to finish them at a time of their choosing. However, to start with, this measure passed into legislation through HERA 2017, and it will be incredibly advantageous if we can begin work to demonstrate how new course provision will help expand the market and increase student choice.

All our students deserve high quality and good value from their university education. As I said, the draft regulations are a key part of our wider work to make that an accessible reality for everyone. They align with

the Government's ambitions for a diverse and flexible post-18 education, which is currently being developed, and I hope that the Committee approves them.

4.49 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is probably almost too late, but may I wish you, Mr Robertson, and the Committee—not least the Minister—a happy new year?

I am glad that we finally have the opportunity to debate the proposed changes, because over the years—I do not think it is down to any particular Government—the gap between something being passed and in some cases being implemented, and its reaching the backstop of parliamentary approval seems to have become longer and longer. I am glad we now have the opportunity to continue the significant debate we had on the Higher Education and Research Bill.

I welcome the Minister's enthusiasm for the broader issues that he believes accelerated degrees may open up. We can all agree that there is a need urgently to address the lack of flexibility in our higher education system. With the emerging challenges of Brexit and automation, the world of work changing, and higher education, further education and online learning slowly merging, our education system urgently needs to adapt. I have said frequently that that will involve people, young and old, doing not only the traditional three-year degree model, but short, sharp training courses to help retrain and upskill, and being able to drop in and out of education to suit their life circumstances. Incidentally, these are all things that our party's national education service and lifelong learning commission will focus on. We must develop a higher education system that will produce a high-skilled workforce to meet those growing demands and fit our local economies.

The essential question—where, I am afraid, I begin to part company with the Minister—is whether today's proposals, which greatly expand and increase accelerated degrees on an annual basis, will help or hinder that process. I am grateful to my hon. Friends who have posed questions, as the Minister has already heard some concerns and about the need to nail down not just aspirations but facts about how this is will be taken forward and what its implications will be.

During all the stages of the Higher Education and Research Bill, in both Houses, we talked about the importance of making the current system fit for the 21st century. Accelerated degrees might play a useful part in a more flexible HE system for all ages. However—this is crucial to our misgivings about the regulations, not just about what they say but about when this will happen—as my colleague Lord Stevenson said in the debate in the Lords, it should only be as part of a wider overhaul in the sector. That overhaul is nowhere near happening yet.

Gareth Thomas: Would it be fair to say that today we are being asked to vote for a 20% hike in tuition fees, albeit for accelerated degrees, without any commensurate guarantees of an improvement or at least maintenance of quality of tuition and other provision from universities?

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head and echoes the other misgivings expressed by colleagues.

As the Minister pointed out, accelerated degrees—fitting three years into two—are not new, and have always been with us. He has quoted some examples. They have often been crafted closely to specific needs of individual HE institutions. I hear what he has to say about the various universities; they have clearly found that that is a good model, which they have wanted to take forward. The devil is always in the detail; it is the details and the firm focus on increasing the maximum fee cap to which we are vehemently opposed, because we do not believe that, at this stage, they will bring the wider benefits to universities and most importantly to would-be students that the Minister thinks they will.

It is not just us saying that; a large number of dissenting voices the demand for accelerated degrees in the form that the Government propose. It is all well and laudable for the Minister to talk about how we might see the effects that we would all like to, but at the moment that has not been the case. That is reflected in the comments of the various university groups. The chief executive of the Russell Group, for example, Dr Tim Bradshaw, said:

“Greater choice for students is always good but I would caution ministers against ‘overpromising’...The Government's own projection for the likely take-up of these degrees is modest and we actually hear many students calling for four-year degrees, for example, to spend a year on a work placement or studying abroad.”

The group MillionPlus said something similar:

“Demand for accelerated degrees has been low for many years and is unlikely to increase significantly on account of these fee changes.”

Who therefore will the accelerated degrees benefit? The trade union that represents many of the staff in universities states that

“there is little evidence of solid demand for this type of course”, and that—I am afraid to say that I agree with this, in particular because it is the thrust of what the Minister's predecessor but one, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), laid out clearly in the White Paper and the Bill that followed—

“this decision is being driven by the government's marketisation agenda and the need to row back on the spiralling costs of university education, particularly in light of the withdrawal of maintenance grants.”

We await the Augar review, and lots of promises are floating around, but as of this moment nothing concrete is in place.

I have emphasised time and again that the Government's need to facilitate changes for a better work-life balance and the progression needed to benefit our economy must include looking at credit transfers, flexible courses and urgent action to address the catastrophic fall in part-time learning since 2010. Unfortunately—which this is, because I wish we could have a consensus on it—the Government's pitch for the accelerated degrees we are debating smacks simply of a PR initiative that has been fashioned for new HE entrants, often with narrowly focused HE objectives, which my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and others were worried about during debate on the Bill.

The result of the Government's 2012 HE funding changes, including the tripling of tuition fees—we cannot get away from this—is that the average debt for students in England is £46,000. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the removal of maintenance grants from

[Gordon Marsden]

students from low-income families meant they were graduating with the highest debt levels, which are in excess of £57,000. We therefore have clear evidence that the nudge factor, which the Government—or their predecessor—have been very keen to push, is actually operating to nudge people against participating in higher education. Yet the Government have chosen this time to introduce this statutory instrument, before the Augar report has even appeared.

During the passage of the Bill, we challenged them consistently about the way in which they wanted to use the teaching excellence framework to increase or remove the fee cap. The draft SI increases the higher amount to start a degree to £11,100 on an annual basis. We have to address the impact that that will have on less well-off students', or would-be students', ability or willingness to take places on those courses. Can we realistically expect all the people who might want to do such a course to ratchet up to the figure mentioned?

As the University and College Union has said:

“This is not about increasing real choice for students,”

but it could allow

“for-profit companies to access more public cash through the student loans system... Instead of gimmicks which risk undermining the international reputation of our higher education sector, the Government should focus on fixing the underlying problems with our current student finance system, which piles debts on students.”

The idea that accelerated fees only mean a cut in student debt is, I am afraid, knowingly or unknowingly, hiding another motive. Wedded as they still appear to be—I have heard no repudiation of the broad themes that the hon. Member for Orpington spelled out when the Bill was introduced—to an outdated market-driven view, the Government have pinned their hopes on a rapid expansion of new providers that charge the higher fees on a two-year basis. All that is all in the various secondary papers and instruments that were produced during the Bill. So far, we have seen no evidence of that expansion.

Do all the leaks that suggest that Augar is now under pressure from the Government to lower tuition fees per year make nonsense of the rhetoric and the introduction of this statutory instrument? Incidentally, will the Minister give us the latest estimate for when the Augar review is to report?

The draft explanatory memorandum lists the theoretical benefits for providers and students, but it also refers to the numerous concerns that have been expressed across the sector. It says:

“Students on existing accelerated degrees report a very high level of satisfaction, and highlight the opportunity to graduate and start or resume work a year sooner”—

the Minister talked about that—

“together with costs savings and academic benefits.”

How many and what sort of students, and with what financial background, were interviewed to reach that conclusion? It ignores the fact that those degrees would be available only to students able to study all year round. That has major implications for access and participation, which are already faltering for part-timers under this Government.

The total number of English undergraduate entrants of all ages from low-participation areas fell by 17% between 2011-12 and 2016-17. There were 12,600 fewer English undergraduate students from low-participation areas

starting university courses each year than there were in 2011-12. We must ask ourselves what these accelerated degrees, on the basis on which they have been put forward in the statutory instrument, do for them, and the answer is relatively little. There has been a 54% fall in entrants from low-participation areas studying part time, who will not be able to access funding for accelerated degrees. How does the Minister plan to address that? Can he explain in any shape or form how accelerated degree will address the devastating fall in part-time HE study?

Critics have also pointed out the danger of squeezing three years into two for personal development opportunities or participation in extracurricular activities and volunteering. Does the Minister not value the important personal development that our universities provide outside the classroom, which could be denied by this acceleration? UCU also pointed out:

“Accelerated degrees...result in reduced opportunities for students to engage in part-time employment over the course of their studies. This limitation is particularly acute for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to need to seek employment...to fund themselves through university.”

We would like a situation with fees in which students did not have to work part time as much as they do, but given that that is the case, perhaps the Minister will admit that the giveaway in the accelerated degree proposals is that they are not focused on those sorts of people, but in many cases on richer or employer-funded applicants. UCU also said:

“The lack of holiday time factored into these degrees also means that they could prove difficult to student parents; those with caring responsibilities; and students whose disabilities mean that they might benefit from low-intensity study. For this reason, there is a risk that take-up of these courses could have strong socio-economic stratification and that students from less advantaged backgrounds might have lower attainment on these courses.”

Incidentally, there is a reference in the draft explanatory memorandum to the impact of the statutory instrument on the Erasmus+ programme. Will the Minister tell us the situation regarding ensuring our continued participation in the scheme?

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I have listened very carefully to the hon. Gentleman for some time now. He seems to be talking an awful lot about accelerated degree courses and very little about fee limits, which is what this statutory instrument is supposed to be about. What he has not mentioned but might want to, because it was mentioned by one of his colleagues, is value for money.

I have two daughters, one of whom has just left university and one of whom is still at Cambridge, where she has intensive tutoring. The one who has just left was at another university, where she was lucky to get five hours a week. Even if that were doubled, it would not mean a shortage of time outside the lecture room. Does the hon. Gentleman think the proposals offer better value for money? Should not he really be getting at the question whether students get value for money? At the moment, in my experience, they do not.

Gordon Marsden: The hon. Gentleman's comments are enlivened and enriched by his personal family experiences, but the difference of outcome in his family rather makes the point. It is not just a matter of what

students get and do on courses, although I fully accept that that is important. It is also about how students are put off courses in the first place. I think most of my hon. Friends would, like me, find it difficult to see how a suggested 20%-a-year increase will encourage, rather than deter, people who already find it difficult to make such a decision.

The Open University says that

“there needs to be increased choice and flexibility for students to study at a time, pace, mode and place that they choose.”

One of the stated objectives of the 2012 funding reforms in England was to

“allow greater diversity of provision, which means more short two-year courses and more part-time opportunities”.

However, we know that the reforms have failed spectacularly to achieve that objective, with 59% fewer people in England entering part-time undergraduate higher education each year than in 2011-12, before the reforms. That is why it is vital to increase options.

However, the Government have failed to address the crisis for the OU and other adult learning providers. Another increase in tuition fees, which they are now presiding over, and which would allow higher education providers to charge more per year, will not help the process. MillionPlus agrees. It says that

“accelerated degrees are just one form of flexibility”

and that Government have missed out on the opportunity of creating

“greater flexibility in fee structures and loan availability to enable students to access financial support for periods of study of less than a year (for example to borrow by modules rather than by year)”.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham prayed in aid his personal experience. My experience as a former Open University tutor—although somewhat long in the tooth—is that it is precisely the people, particularly adults, from disadvantaged backgrounds, who would like support for funding by module. That is what they do not get at the moment.

“True flexibility... can only come when students are not penalised for studying part-time, or for shifting between full and part time study.”

Those are not my words but the words of MillionPlus.

The Government have given little thought to the impact on staff workloads of accelerated degrees. UCU has rightly expressed concern that the changes could put yet more pressure on its members without much immediate or direct benefit to them, at a time when they believe—and we agree—that they are getting a raw deal on full-time contracts, pay increases and progression.

Despite the Minister’s enthusiasm and good intentions, there is no guarantee that existing university teachers will be willing or able to teach the new accelerated degrees as configured. There is a risk that the move to accelerated degrees will compromise time currently allocated by such teachers to research, and fuel—of necessity, if they are not prepared to do the relevant work—the use of even more casualised teaching staff to deliver provision during the summer months. With threats to our existing world-class higher education institutions and research piling up from the uncertainties of Brexit, should we be taking that chance?

Issues to do with short-term contracts, extra bureaucracy and guarantees of quality still need to be addressed. What steps have the Government taken to alleviate the

pressures on staff that these courses may create? Ministers should focus not simply on accelerated courses for a market driven by untested new providers, but on protecting the global strength and reputation of UK higher and further education.

The proposal is irrelevant to the main priorities of the HE sector in 2019. It is irrelevant to the multiple threats that existing universities and providers face from a chaotic Brexit, and the collateral damage they face from lack of certainty about our participation in Horizon research programmes through the 2020s after we leave; lack of certainty that HE students, providers and staff will continue to benefit from Erasmus+ over the same period; and the withdrawal of European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund funding, from which many community-focused universities and providers have benefited.

The proposals, cast as they are today, represent a developing market model that the hon. Member for Orpington left in the out-tray for his successors. They do nothing to strengthen our HE sector internationally or nationally. They do not address the important issues that Augar is supposed to be looking at. That is why we will not support the regulations.

5.11 pm

Chris Skidmore: I thank the Committee for taking time to consider the regulations.

I will turn to points made by the shadow Minister in what was a rather wide-ranging speech. Turning to some of the broader issues around the Augar review, I am sure he will understand that it is an independently led review that will report in due course in 2019. I, as much as anyone else in this House, look forward to studying its conclusions carefully.

We agree on the importance of creating greater flexibility in post-18 provision. Putting party political hats aside, we all understand that we need to work harder on ensuring that those who are able to go to university have the opportunity to do so. The Government have put access and participation for the most disadvantaged communities right at the heart of our vision, and we have seen an increase of 52% in the most disadvantaged students going to university since 2009. We all know that more must be done to ensure that we open up the vocational and technical route for those students who deserve better, and for our economy and our industrial strategy, ensuring that we can increase productivity and develop a dynamic and modern economy.

It is in light of that that we have introduced the regulations. This is the beginning of what I hope will be a far greater flexible provision in post-18 education—*[Interruption.]* Would the hon. Member for Harrow West like to intervene?

Gareth Thomas: No—I was heckling.

Chris Skidmore: I will come to the hon. Gentleman’s heckle in a moment. I wanted to start on a point of agreement, which is that Members on both sides of the Committee share the ambition that we can and must do more for post-18 education. As for the regulations—the point on which the hon. Gentleman heckled—increasing the cost of fees by 20% must be seen in the round: this is a saving of £5,500 for a two-year degree as opposed to

[Chris Skidmore]

fees for a three-year degree. It is a saving of one year, or £7,500, on living costs and, crucially, potentially a gain of up to £19,000 of annual earnings if that student is able to access the workplace early. I stress that this is not a silver bullet. It is not the only part of a strategy that must deliver for students in higher education; it is opening up a menu of options that we hope to develop.

The shadow Minister talked about access for disadvantaged students. The Government want to ensure that the most disadvantaged students are able to access this provision. Our consultation on accelerated degree proposals asked higher education providers specifically about access arrangements, and 74% responded that they wanted accelerated degrees to be treated the same as any other higher course fees for the purpose of access. We have seen a revolution in the amount of funds spent on access and participation over the past four or five years, from £440 million to £860 million. We must look at how we can invest to ensure that we open those routes for the most disadvantaged students.

Gordon Marsden: I appreciate that I spoke at some length. Access and participation are absolutely crucial, but one question is whether the money is spent well in the first place. I am sure the Minister will look at that. He also talks about the financial details and all the rest of it. The truth of the matter is that many people, particularly adult students, for perfectly good reasons will not sit down with a three-year prospectus but will ask themselves what they can afford that year. That is the crux of it, and that is why we are concerned that this 20% increase will nudge people away from participating, rather than nudging them towards it.

Chris Skidmore: I politely disagree with the hon. Gentleman on discouraging access. The figures demonstrate that, when students have been asked about potential two-year degree routes—in the context of saving over an envelope of two years instead of three—60% responded that they would have considered it had it been on offer. It is important that we allow an opportunity for this course provision to be established. We are not forcing universities or HE providers to offer accelerated degrees as an option. We are just ensuring that we can incentivise it for the future.

Jess Phillips: I thank the Minister again for his generosity in giving way. Will any review process be put in place, and what targets and standards will be used? We need to make sure that lots of people who go through these accelerated courses do not come out without demonstrably higher earnings, a better education or better options while still paying more money each year. How will we assess and make sure that people who do these courses end up with the same prospects as people who do a three-year course? We do not want to create a two-tier system for people who it is harder for—single mums and so on—and essentially charge them more per year.

Chris Skidmore: On the point around charging per year versus the overall charging mechanism across three years, they will still be charged £22,000 instead of £27,000.

Jess Phillips: I am sure they will be thrilled with that reduction—£22,000.

The Chair: Order.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady's point about a review mechanism is welcome, and I entirely agree with her that it is important. We have the ability to analyse data to a greater extent than in the past. The longitudinal educational outcomes—LEO—data has been tracking students, which I think began in 2008 under the previous Labour Government. That is now coming to fruition and provides a context in which we can weigh up value for money and return on investment.

With that data comes other issues around social value and making sure that we do not lose sight of courses such as nursing, for instance. That may be perceived to provide low value for money or return on investment, but we absolutely need more nurses and routes into nursing. The two-year degree provision allows for an extension route into nursing through nurse support workers, who may reach a certain level of qualification and may want to access a nursing degree. This is about breaking down those barriers. It is a social justice argument, saying to somebody who perhaps did not get the qualifications to access higher education when they were 18 that they can return to a degree and get that qualification. By having that degree, they are able to access that level of nursing that they may have wished to access. It is about fulfilling people's dreams across a wide range of access measures, not only at the access points at 18.

An important point that I want to put on the record is that we will undertake to assess the effectiveness of accelerated degree funding and expenditure on access measures compared with their standard equivalents in the accelerated degree review, to be undertaken three years after the implementation of the draft regulations. I will take away the points made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley on the context of that review and what it will cover in its evaluation.

On the workload of university staff, as I have said, the provision of accelerated degrees is not mandatory. I put that point to Middlesex University staff today, and they felt that there was no diminution of teaching time. I asked the teaching professionals—the academics—directly whether it would compromise their ability to research, and the answer was no. They said that they had managed to structure a course that did not increase individual teaching time; the teaching time is spread across a range of individuals throughout the year. There is a learning opportunity, and I am keen for institutions that have successfully implemented two-year degrees to spread best practice about how courses might be structured so that academics do not lose their research potential across the year.

Debbie Abrahams: I worked for 10 years at the University of Liverpool, and I spent my summers prepping new courses, reading and writing articles. We were compelled to do that to make sure we had the appropriate ranking—it was the research assessment exercise at the time. It would have been absolutely impossible to do the stuff we did during the summer and prepare for a truncated course.

Chris Skidmore: What Middlesex and other institutions have done is to say that those who are working in the summer months have the opportunity to find their research time elsewhere in the year. They have been

successful in ensuring that there is no diminution in the ability to conduct research; it just takes place at a different time. We have seen flexibility in academic research. Not everyone decides to book off the summer. Some people work in the summer but have what is effectively a mini-sabbatical elsewhere in the year, with other people taking up their teaching time.

Some universities provide accelerated degrees, which ensure that they have more study weeks per annum than the mainstream 30 weeks a year. They have managed to budget effectively, innovatively and flexibly with their academic and administrative staff to deliver more demanding in-year courses, including accelerated courses.

In summary, these regulations will encourage and enable existing providers to expand their accelerated offers, and new providers to offer accelerated degrees and discover the realities, challenges and benefits for the students and themselves. I commend the regulations to the Committee.

Question put.

The Committee divided: Ayes 9, Noes 7.

Division No. 1]

Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Brereton, Jack
Jones, Mr Marcus
Loughton, Tim
Milling, Amanda

Abrahams, Debbie
Fletcher, Colleen
McCarthy, Kerry
Marsden, Gordon

AYES

Moore, Damien
Robinson, Mary
Seely, Mr Bob
Skidmore, Chris

NOES

Phillips, Jess
Thomas, Gareth
Turley, Anna

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Committee has considered the draft Higher Education (Fee Limits for Accelerated Courses) (England) Regulations 2018.

5.24 pm

Committee rose.

