INTRODUCTION

The traditional three-year, full-time, on-campus path to a first degree remains one of the main routes to higher education. It accounts for 58% of all students at UK universities, and has successfully increased young participation to record levels. However, for those who work while studying or have caring responsibilities, more flexible approaches to learning are required.

Flexible learning means offering students a choice in when, how and where they study, to fit learning around other commitments. This includes allowing people to study at a slower or faster pace, providing options for where learning takes place, as well as how to access course information and assessments. It can also mean more choice in how to enter and leave study, take breaks and re-join later.

Ensuring that people can study throughout their lives will be increasingly important, both in meeting the skills needs of the UK economy and widening the personal and financial benefits that higher education provides to individuals.

This briefing looks at the current extent of flexible learning across the higher education sector from three perspectives:

• pace of study (from part-time to accelerated courses)
• flexible learning across higher education institutions, further education colleges and alternative providers
• different ways of delivering learning (including classroom-based, online and employer-based learning)

It sets out the experiences of higher education institutions providing and developing flexible learning opportunities, including challenges and opportunities faced.

Evidence was gathered as part of the Universities UK (UUK) project on the economic case for flexible learning – from institutions on the project advisory group, wider UUK membership and a public call for evidence in early 2018 – and from a range of data sources.¹

¹ Where possible, data reflects taught provision across all types of higher education providers and forms of flexible learning. However, due to limitations in some cases, information may be focussed on taught provision at higher education institutions where comprehensive data on students and courses are available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.
An important feature of flexible learning is the option to study at a pace that suits an individual’s needs. This can involve studying at a slower pace to fit learning around other commitments, or at a faster pace to gain a qualification over a shorter period. Flexible learning can also provide the opportunity to adjust the pace of study as and when needed, changing the intensity of their course.
Part-time study

There were 612,200 students studying part-time courses across all types of providers in the UK in 2016–17, accounting for 24% of all higher education provision having fallen by a 11% since 2013–14.

Part-time courses were offered by 158 of 163 UK higher education institutions in 2016–17, representing a larger proportion of all provision across all provider types in Northern Ireland (36%) compared to Scotland (26%), Wales (28%) and England (23%).
Accelerated courses

Accelerated courses provide students with the choice of gaining a qualification in less time than is traditionally the case. They are likely to appeal to ‘young mature’ groups in their early to mid-twenties and those with some experience of work looking to enter or return to employment quickly (HEA, 2009).

There are an estimated 2,500 (DFE, 2017) to 3,400 students on accelerated degree courses in England, accounting for 0.2% of all undergraduate provision.

In England, 70% of accelerated degrees are provided by six alternative providers, with 30% spread across 24 higher education institutions. Accelerated degree programmes are also offered in two universities in Scotland and one in Wales (DFE, 2017).

Accelerated degrees tend to be limited to subjects that can be delivered in a condensed format, with around 60% of provision in England in business, law and languages.

Although relatively small in scale, some institutions indicated that they aim to increase capacity in accelerated degrees, particularly in areas related to retail and service industries.

2 UUK estimate based on 2016–17 Higher Education Early Statistics Return, and full-time degree students at the University of Buckingham with an expected length of study of two years as reported by HESA for 2016–17.
Flexible learning: the current state of play in UK higher education

Flexible forms of full-time study

Institutions are also increasing the flexibility of full-time learning to meet the needs of learners with work or other commitments. This includes full-time courses that can be studied in evenings, and greater use of technology combining online and face-to-face teaching allowing students to access course content in their own time.

**De Montfort University** has implemented its Universal Design for Learning initiative to improve the flexibility of learning for all its students, particularly those with disabilities. This includes access to audio and visual learning material before, during or after a lecture or other taught sessions, to allow learners to review content around other commitments.

**University of Northampton** has increased the flexibility of its provision through its Active Blended Learning programme and investment in its Waterside Campus. This provides a 24/7 learning zone allowing learners to choose when to study and combines face-to-face teaching with online discussion groups or learning environments across all its provision.
Flexible learning opportunities are available across a range of higher education providers, including universities, further education colleges and alternative providers. Providers also work together to enhance pathways between further and higher education, which is important in increasing participation for groups in employment with lower or no formal qualifications.

**Part-time study**

In 2016–17, higher education institutions accounted for 85% of all part-time study. As a proportion, however, part-time study was greater at further education colleges and lower at alternative providers.

**PART-TIME PROVISION AS PROPORTION OF TOTAL PROVISION IN 2016–17**

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher education institutions</td>
<td>518,930</td>
<td>-50,000*</td>
<td>-9%‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further education colleges</td>
<td>83,845</td>
<td>-495*</td>
<td>-0.6%‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative providers</td>
<td>9,425</td>
<td>-6,895*</td>
<td>+273%‡</td>
</tr>
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Part-time provision at higher education institutions is spread across postgraduate (44%), other undergraduate (23%) and first degree courses (32%), with a similar pattern seen at alternative providers.

This differs significantly from further education colleges where 94% of part-time provision is related to other undergraduate courses.

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3. Alternative providers receive no grant funding from government. Data in this briefing refers to students that have access to government student finance only. A full dataset for all provision at these providers is not available, but research has estimated that they may account for as many as 250,000 students (BIS, 2016).

4. Other undergraduate provision includes courses at level 4 and 5, including but not limited to foundation degrees, diplomas in higher education, Higher National Diplomas and Higher National Certificates.
University partnerships with other providers

Higher education institutions work with other providers, particularly further education colleges, to enhance pathways to higher education for those with lower or non-traditional entry qualifications, creating a range of technical, vocational and academic routes to higher level study.

This can include teaching each other’s courses, or students being taught at another provider under a ‘franchised’ arrangement (UUK, 2018).

In 2016–17, 64,145 students studied through a ‘franchised’ arrangement, of which 40% studied part-time. This form of study has decreased by 18% since 2012–13.
Other forms of flexible learning across provider types

Research shows that accelerated degrees are offered by six alternative providers, representing 70% of all provision in this area in England, and by one further education college. A quarter of alternative providers offered online learning in 2014–15 (BIS, 2016). Further education colleges have also reported using online technologies to improve flexibility of study by allowing students to study at home (Jisc, 2017).
TYPES OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Flexible learning can be classroom-based, employer-based, online or a combination of these methods. While classroom-based part-time study is the most common form of flexible learning, recent years have seen a shift towards employer-based and online learning at some institutions.

FLEXIBLE LEARNING PROVISION

CLASSROOM-BASED LEARNING

Part-time study at higher education institutions
14%
(-42% SINCE 2010–11)

ONLINE LEARNING

Including The Open University
8%
(-32% SINCE 2010–11)
Excluding The Open University
3%
(+2% SINCE 2010–11)

EMPLOYER-BASED LEARNING

Degree / higher apprenticeships
0.12%
(+200% EXPECTED IN 2017–18)

Sandwich courses
8%
(+45% SINCE 2010–11)
Classroom-based part-time learning

This involves primarily on-campus study on a part-time basis, with higher education institutions increasing the use of online technology with face-to-face teaching (e.g., videos of lectures). In 2016–17, 157 of 163 UK higher education institutions delivered some form of classroom-based part-time study.

CU Coventry focuses on a flexible approach to higher education including full-time and part-time courses. This includes structured timetables with regular hours, courses taught during evenings and weekends, enabling study alongside part-time work, family responsibilities and other commitments.
Employer-based learning

This form of learning enables students to combine work with study, bringing together higher education providers and employers to create new learning opportunities in workplaces. Examples include apprenticeships and sandwich courses.

Many higher education institutions cite the growing importance of employer-based learning in creating strong collaborations and partnerships with employers, improving employability for students, and addressing the skills needs of employers.

Apprenticeships

Higher and degree apprenticeships are a relatively new form of flexible learning, with degree apprenticeships being launched in September 2015 in England.

At least 60 universities in England are planning to, or have implemented, degree apprenticeships, and 7,600 learners are expected to be enrolled on degree apprenticeships in 2017–18 in England (UUK, 2017).

By the end of 2017, nine of Scotland’s universities and colleges were expected to deliver Graduate Apprenticeships. There has been significant growth in higher apprenticeships in Wales, with 5,980 individuals starting in 2015–16, and degree apprenticeships in Wales are to be introduced in 2018–19.

There is significant potential for apprenticeships to play an important role in meeting skills needs of employers, and creating opportunities for learners who might not have considered going to university.

PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL DEGREE AND HIGHER APPRENTICESHIPS REPORTED AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN 2016–17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aged 21–34</th>
<th>42%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enter with no formal qualifications</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter with A-level or equivalent</td>
<td>11%</td>
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**Sandwich Courses**
Students take six or more months out of their study to undertake work experience as part of a sandwich course, improving their chances of securing a graduate-level job, as well as helping employers develop links with higher education providers (ASET, 2016).

In 2016–17, sandwich courses accounted for 8% of all taught provision, and were provided by 109 of 163 UK higher education institutions. They are more prominent in Northern Ireland (25% of provision) compared to England (8%), Wales (5%) and Scotland (1%).

**PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL SANDWICH PROVISION REPORTED AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN 2016–17**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Institution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>98%</td>
<td>First degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>Age 20–29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92%</td>
<td>Enter with A-level or equivalent</td>
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The £30 million National Innovation Centre for Data, funded jointly by Newcastle University and the government, is a unique facility providing data skills for industry. Acting as a point of call for local and regional businesses, it helps to address real employer data and digital-based challenges through collaborative projects. These allow employees to combine study with real work problems, helping to transfer practical digital and data skills to the workplace.

University of Central Lancashire are developing an innovative ‘Flexible Degree 2 Apprenticeship’ programme that gives students in the first and second year of study the opportunity to move into a degree apprenticeship with a local SME and provides a matching service to place students with local businesses.
Online learning

Many higher education institutions report that they had invested, or were aiming to invest, in online provision aimed primarily at learners in employment seeking to enhance their careers. Development of online learning was also aimed at addressing increasing employer needs for shorter courses for workforce development, including non-credit bearing courses such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

In 2016–17, online learning made up 8% of all provision at UK higher education institutions, with The Open University accounting for 65% of all online learning, and other institutions 35%.

The number of UK higher education institutions offering online provision has increased from 102 in 2010–11 to 117 in 2016–17.

Excluding The Open University, online provision is more likely to be provided by institutions in Scotland (6%) compared to those in England (2.8%), Wales (2.5%) and Northern Ireland (2%).

Institutions identified online learning as one of the key ways of improving flexibility for learners, particularly in balancing study with work and personal commitments.
Through its Digital Learning strategy, Imperial College London has developed the first online qualification from a UK university to be hosted on the Coursera platform, and is expanding its provision of MOOCs from its world leading artificial intelligence centre. In addition to providing flexible learning to a wider range of learners, content and technology developed as part of the process has also been used to improve flexibility of on-campus study.

University of Aberdeen developed the world’s first and only master’s degree in decommissioning oil rigs. The course, which can be studied part-time and online, addresses demand from employers for skills in dismantling and disposing oil and gas installations, as well as providing flexibility for learners to study offshore for long periods of time while working.

University of West of England, Bristol, provides a range of flexible healthcare courses including its foundation degree in Healthcare Science, which is delivered through a unique combination of interactive online learning resources, live remote lectures, study weeks and workplace training.
Flexible learning subjects

Although learners study a variety of subjects across different types of flexible learning, there are some common patterns with nursing, business studies and education. The nature of some types of flexible learning may result in more limited demand, and supply, in some subject areas. For example, evidence suggests that there are significant difficulties in delivering accelerated forms of learning for science-based or creative subjects (DFE, 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASSROOM-BASED PART-TIME</th>
<th>FRANCHISED STUDY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nursing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Business studies</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business studies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nursing</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<th>HIGHER AND DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS</th>
<th>SANDWICH COURSES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nursing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Business studies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Computer science</strong></td>
<td><strong>Engineering</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business studies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Computer sciences</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<th>ACCELERATED DEGREES</th>
<th>ONLINE LEARNING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60% of provision in England in subjects such as business, law and accounting</td>
<td><strong>Business studies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychology</strong></td>
<td><strong>Psychology</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social studies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social studies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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</table>
EXPERIENCES FROM HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Developing and delivering flexible learning

Higher education institutions are delivering, or are developing, a wide range of flexible learning opportunities with a focus on employer-based learning and online provision. In doing so they have considered how best to address the needs of learners – including those with work and other commitments – and employers.

“On average our learners are in their early thirties and combine study with employment. To meet their needs, we have strengthened our online provision, adjusting timings of interactive elements to when individuals are not at work, and giving students the choice of how many modules they would like to study per semester.”

“Our approach to flexible learning blurs the boundary between a part-time student and a full-time student. Many of our mature learners are single parents and they need to work full-time, learn full-time and run family life. They simply cannot afford six years to gain a degree, so we focus on flexibility.”

“We have increased the flexibility of our provision by moving all assessment and feedback online, redesigning our timetable to make it work better for commuting students, investing in e-resources, launching four-year extended degrees and developing online/distance learners offers.”

“To meet skills needs in our region and improve employability of our graduates, we are developing an innovative dual-learning programme combining higher and further education study, in partnership with a local further education college and Local Enterprise Partnership.”

“We have introduced summer pre-enrolment digital skills workshops to aid transition into higher education and to support mature students who have not been in education for a number of years.”
Challenges and barriers

In developing and delivering flexible learning opportunities over the last five years, higher education institutions have identified a range of challenges and barriers that they needed to overcome.

**REGULATION**

- Lack of consideration for how regulatory measures (eg measures of performance such as the Teaching Excellence Framework) impact on groups that access flexible learning, including mature learners and those in employment.

**INTERNAL SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES**

- Adapting internal systems and processes which are geared towards full-time undergraduate provision.

**MEETING DIVERSE LEARNER NEEDS**

- Balancing flexibility with extra support for certain groups.
- Disparities in internet access across demographics and locations in the UK.

**ENGAGING WITH EMPLOYERS**

- Encouraging employers to consider the needs of learners.
- Employer scepticism of quality of online degrees.
- IT systems not being fit for purpose in some sectors (eg public sector).

**STAFF AND CULTURAL CHANGE**

- Development of online learning systems slower than anticipated due to the need to train staff accordingly.

**INVESTMENT AND FUNDING**

- Significant financial and human resource needed to develop high-quality flexible learning.
- Better understanding needed of costs and return on investment for institutions.
- Incentives in current funding system skewed towards full-time provision.
Drivers of flexible learning

Higher education providers have identified key factors that will influence the development, and delivery, of flexible learning opportunities over the next five years.
CONCLUSION

For individuals who want to combine learning with work or other commitments to gain a first degree, more flexible approaches to study are needed than the three-year, full-time, on-campus path. This is important to ensure that the benefits of higher education are available to the widest possible range of individuals, including those who might have missed out on study in the past and those looking to enhance their careers. Flexible approaches to learning will also be important if employers are to meet changing skills needs and improve productivity.

The recent fall in part-time study has seen a shift in the extent and type of flexible learning offered across the higher education sector. While face-face, classroom-based part-time study remains common, it is significantly less so than in the past. Recent years have seen growth in employer-based and online learning across many institutions. While this is a positive trend, it will be important to consider the barriers that institutions are facing in delivering this provision and whether there are any changes which could help encourage further and wider growth in flexible learning.
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