Written evidence submitted by Gordon Sweeney, Head of Education, Point Blank Music School (HERB 50)

Higher Education and Research Bill 2016
Suggested amendment

Author

1. Gordon Sweeney is the Head of Education at Point Blank Music School, a small and specialist Alternative Provider based in London. In this role he is responsible for the academic infrastructure, strategy and provision at his organization. Sweeney also represents the AP sector in a wider context as a member of the QAA Alternative Provider Liaison Committee and has spoken at a number of HEFCE events and written about the AP sector for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). In addition, he is a member of the HESA Data Landscapes Steering Group.

Summary

2. This evidence suggests a rationale for amending one word in the bill regarding ‘regulated course fees’, changing the link in fee payments from academic year to academic level.

Suggested Amendment:

<table>
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<th>Part 1 10(3b)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Current: in respect of an academic year applicable to that course which begins at the same time as, or while, the provider is registered in the register</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amendment: in respect of an academic level applicable to that course which begins at the same time as, or while the provider is registered in the register</td>
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Rationale

3. Since the 2003 publication of the Government White Paper, ‘The Future of Higher Education’, highlighted the need for greater flexibility in programme structure to meet the changing needs of students, there has been discussion of the benefits of delivering accelerated two-year degrees. The current HE and Research Bill provides an ideal opportunity to remove the remaining barrier to sector-wide adoption of this flexible approach, by removing the link between tuition fee and year of study.

4. The HE Bill (in pt 1 10(3b)) does explicitly link fees to academic year. Changing the word ‘year’ to ‘level’ would allow institutions to deliver degrees over a shorter time period through intensive delivery, without reducing their tuition fee income by a third. The limited amount of two-year accelerated degree provision that is currently available, at Higher Education Providers such as Staffordshire University, Middlesex University, The University of Buckingham, BPP and my own institution Point Blank Music School, does not equate to less contact hours. Instead all of the above
institutions have opted for three longer terms in an academic year, with students continuing to study over the Summer period. This is the same model adopted by the majority of institutions during the HEFCE ‘Pathfinder Project’ from 2005 – 2009 where two-year accelerated degrees were trialed. Of the eight Universities involved in the pathfinder project, six have continued to offer a very limited portfolio of two-year accelerated pathways following the end of the pilot. Delivering the same number of academic credits with the same number of contact hours does have a large financial impact on an institution as the cost of academic delivery for an institution is the same as delivering a traditional 3-year degree. The main reason the limited portfolio has not been expanded is this cost implication.

5. The success of the pathfinder project, and an increase in accelerated provision in Alternative Providers, such as BPP, Point Blank and The University of Buckingham, demonstrates that there is a desire amongst students and institutions to run programmes outside of the traditional three-year structure. Alternative Providers are not subject to the £9k fee cap so therefore raise tuition fees above the cap on accelerated provision. The pathfinder project also highlights the cost impact for delivering two-year accelerated degrees. There is an initial high start-up cost when changing the infrastructure of an institution, with significant on-going costs are associated with academic activities resulting from an increased teaching schedule through teaching in the Summer term. In effect, this is intensive delivery of the same number of academic credits and modules. A two-year pathway does not reduce the amount of time tutors spend with students or amount students access library and support facilities. Therefore, the major barrier in sector-wide adoption of the accelerated pathways comes down to the financial impact of reducing tuition fee income by a third whilst providing the same weight of time on delivery. Linking tuition fee to level, rather than by academic year, would address this problem.

6. For Universities and Alternative Providers who do deliver accelerated provision, the main marketing message centers on the favorable cost of two-year provision over the traditional three-year degree. Students would be studying for a shorter time period. This would reduce the amount of maintenance loan they would draw down in addition to a year’s worth of living costs, therefore reducing their total amount of graduate debt. In fact OFFA have previously stated their encouragement for two-year accelerated degrees commenting that “we will take into account the potential of such provision to attract students from under-represented groups, and the reduced cost to students of accelerated degrees” (https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance-and-useful-information/accelerated-degreesflexible-provision/).

7. An increase in accelerated degree provision would save students money, save the government money and facilitate greater flexibility in programme structure by removing the current financial barriers to this mode of delivery.

8. It could also facilitate students to continue in higher education beyond undergraduate level, completing a postgraduate course in the same timeframe as their current undergraduate course. With the recent postgraduate loan initiative,
this may prove to be extremely attractive to students. Again, the benefit for a Higher Education Provider in retaining students for a postgraduate qualification is extremely desirable and the longer term benefit will be an even more highly educated and skilled graduate workforce.

9. The biggest legislative changes to higher education since 1992 provide the ideal opportunity to update the funding system to reflect the changing needs of students and facilitate innovation in programme delivery outside of the traditional three-year model.

*September 2016*