

## Creating new opportunities for flexible lifelong learning

*The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining an outstanding teaching and learning experience and world-leading research. Our universities teach a quarter of all undergraduates and support over 260,000 jobs across the UK.*

*Russell Group universities provide a range of academic, technical and professional degrees. They also work closely with colleges and businesses to deliver high-quality apprenticeships, Level 4 and 5 qualifications across a range of disciplines and flexible Level 6 and Level 7 provision that supports reskilling. Through these collaborations they are creating opportunities to drive regional growth and address national and local skills gaps.*

*We are very supportive of Government's ambition to grow high-level skills, to level-up opportunity across the UK and to better support people to access the training and education they need throughout their lives. We are keen to work with Government to make this ambition a reality.*

### Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE)

We support Government's plan to introduce a Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) as part of its Lifetime Skills Guarantee. Russell Group universities already provide flexible pathways to learning and we believe that the LLE has the potential to expand these opportunities for students and encourage more individuals to train, upskill and retrain throughout their lives. This will form an important part of the levelling up agenda for individuals and wider society.

Structuring the LLE policy appropriately to ensure it is able to support both the continued provision of the UK's internationally renowned 3-4 year undergraduate programmes alongside more flexible learning opportunities will be important to support all learners and ensure the UK's offer meets the needs of employers and delivers the future skills requirements of our economy.

Given the potential gains, it is essential that we get this right to guarantee high-quality provision and optimise investment. We look forward to working with the Government to ensure the LLE:

- **Supports high-quality modular provision**, with the Government providing the right resources so high quality courses can be developed which complement the world-leading higher education already being delivered in the UK.
- **Supports efforts by the sector to develop flexible learning pathways** so students can combine credits in flexible ways that result in awards recognised by universities and employers whilst protecting the autonomy afforded to higher education institutions.
- **Includes level 7 provision** as increasing access to this level of provision is an important part of retraining people to attain the skills our economy needs.

- **Incentivises modular STEM courses** to support sustainable provision in areas which already operate at a significant deficit, and which will be crucial to filling skills gaps.
- **Provides wrap around support for student success** to ensure that LLE students benefit from an excellent student experience and are appropriately supported to succeed on their courses as they may have distinct needs from other learners.

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### *ENSURING LLE SUPPORTS HIGH-QUALITY MODULAR PROVISION*

In expanding short courses or modular provision, the Government will wish to assure itself that quality is not compromised, and the high global standing of UK higher education is maintained. In doing so, it will be important to adapt the regulatory regime; ensuring this is genuinely proportionate and risk based and that appropriate indicators are used to assure quality.

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### *SUPPORTING THE SECTOR IN THE TRANSITION TO GREATER MODULAR PROVISION*

Russell Group universities already offer innovative flexible learning opportunities and are keen to build on this strong foundation. However, introducing new flexible, modular provision will come with its own unique challenges. For example, new upfront investment from institutions will be required to develop or adapt courses, the cost of “recruiting” and onboarding students is likely to increase as this will need to happen module-by-module, and short courses with industry partners will need to be updated more frequently to remain relevant. Close working will be needed to develop proportionate data reporting measures at a modular level that do not have unintended impacts on other university activities. measures.

To create high quality courses that suit student and employer needs, it will be important for Government, the sector, and employers to work together to understand and provide the right support and guidance to organisations delivering these courses. We would welcome the opportunity - potentially through an LLE finance taskforce - to explore in more detail the support that will be needed to deliver enhanced flexibility and how risks can be reduced or shared.

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### *WORKING WITH THE SECTOR TO DEVELOP FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS*

In meeting the aims of LLE, the sector will need to develop flexible learning pathways for those students wishing to stack credits potentially over a long period of time, and possibly between different institutions. Such pathways would enable students who wish to, to build towards a larger qualification and ensure a coherent final award that is recognised and valued by employers.

Whilst the benefits are clear, there will be challenges in implementing such an approach as credit transfer is not widely used in the UK<sup>i</sup> and some institutions do not currently use credit as a basis for programme design.<sup>ii</sup> A concerted approach will therefore be needed to develop and embed a common credit framework, ensure appropriate accreditation of modules and develop mechanisms of credit transfer and flexible learning pathways.

Government will need to support such efforts by the sector whilst protecting the autonomy afforded to higher education institutions through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. For example, the adoption of a common credit framework must not lead to a requirement for all courses to fall within this framework; this being a matter for individual institutions to determine.

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## INCLUDING LEVEL 7 PROVISION WITHIN THE LLE

We note the Government's current intention to limit eligibility to Levels 4-6, but feel this will restrict the potential of the LLE and limit the opportunities it can provide individuals.

DfE's 2020 Working Futures report<sup>iii</sup> notes that "in many occupations, the nature of jobs is changing, making higher qualifications a necessary requirement for those jobs". The study predicts that by 2027 16.2% of the workforce will have a master's degree or doctorate, an increase from 7.7% in 2007<sup>1</sup>. Currently, to qualify for a master's loan in the UK, your course must be worth at least 180 credits and, if part-time, last no more than twice the length of the full-time equivalent course. This means students wanting to undertake modular learning towards a master's degree over an extended period do not have access to a loan that would enable this.

Opening up the LLE to include Level 7 would enable more individuals the flexibility to develop and progress their skills throughout their careers, creating significant opportunities for workforce upskilling to meet the demands of our advanced economy.

There are also likely to be fewer barriers to developing flexible learning pathways at Level 7 and doing so could be a useful way to pilot this approach ahead of rolling out the LLE to Level 4-6.

Russell Group universities would be delighted to support the Government in designing and delivering a pilot for LLE at Level 7.

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## INCENTIVISING MODULAR STEM COURSES

High-cost subject degrees, including many STEM courses, on average already operate at a deficit across the sector, despite additional funding provided by Government through the Strategic Priorities (SP) grant. To avoid exacerbating these deficits and to incentivise providers to develop modular options in the STEM disciplines that don't inadvertently reduce the quality of existing STEM courses, Government will need to ensure courses are eligible for additional funding through the SP grant. Government will also need to increase the total SP grant available to the sector to ensure this grant - the value of which has already decreased 19.3% in real terms since 2018/19<sup>iv</sup> - is not further eroded.

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## PROVIDING WRAP AROUND SUPPORT FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

In developing new short-courses and modular options, our universities would want to ensure not only the quality of teaching and learning but sufficient wrap around support and opportunities for students to develop soft skills and social capital which are important in levelling the playing field post-graduation.

We are aware that such support is likely to be even more important for students undertaking these courses given:

- individuals may not have been in formal study or training for many years and could therefore require additional support on entry; and
- individuals taking a series of short courses over several years may require extended academic and mental health and wellbeing support, as well as access to facilities and services, including careers advice.

It will be important for the sector and Government to work together to consider the costs involved in delivering effective wrap-around support and ensure these can be met to maximise the benefits to students.

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<sup>1</sup> [Working Futures 2017-2027: Long-run labour market and skills projections Headline report](#), DfE, 2020

Russell Group universities provide an outstanding education for their students, helping them to learn the skills they need to enter the workforce and succeed, whatever their background. 80% of the 2018/19 cohort of students graduating from Russell Group universities were in highly skilled employment 18 months after graduation compared to 67% of those graduating from other UK universities.<sup>v</sup> These skilled graduates will be critical for economic recovery and boosting the UK's productivity in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

Our universities offer a range of technical and professional courses that are helping to address the skills gaps identified in Government's *Skills for Jobs* white paper earlier this year.<sup>vi</sup> For example, our universities teach more than a third of engineers and four out of five doctors and dentists.<sup>vii</sup> Indeed, at least 20% of Russell Group graduates move on to positions in professional scientific and technical industries, this compares to only 10% of other UK university graduates.<sup>viii</sup>

As well as improving access to high-value degrees, our universities work closely with further education (FE) colleges, businesses and professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to ensure their courses are designed to prepare students for the world of work, whether they are studying towards a higher apprenticeship, higher technical qualification, bachelor's or master's degree:

- 14 Russell Group universities deliver higher and degree apprenticeships. In 2019/20, 1,654 students started higher apprenticeships at Russell Group universities. The vast majority of these, 88%, were at level 6 or 7 (bachelor's or master's level) and 36% were in STEM disciplines.<sup>ix</sup>
- Five Russell Group universities are leading or supporting the establishment of Institutes of Technology including: **University of Birmingham, University of Exeter, Newcastle University, Queen Mary University of London** and **University of Sheffield**.
- Over 3,500 courses across Russell Group universities are recognised by 154 different accrediting bodies. The **University of Birmingham** alone has over 200 accredited courses, representing approximately 80% of the courses offered at the University. These include those accredited by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the Engineering Council, the Institute of Physics, and the Royal Society of Biology.<sup>x</sup>

Often working in partnership with FE colleges and industry, our universities look for opportunities to deliver learning in an accessible and flexible way, for example through distance or part-time study, to help ensure people have access to training and learning throughout their professional lives. For example:

- The **University of Manchester** and **Newcastle University** are creating new level 6 short courses in Agile Software Engineering (in partnership with IBM) and Digital Healthcare (in partnership with Newcastle Health Innovation Partners) respectively through the Office for Students' higher education short course trial.<sup>xi</sup>
- The **University of Warwick** partners with local FE colleges to deliver 2+2 degrees in 'Social Studies' and 'Health and Social Policy'. The course is aimed at mature learners and entry requirements focus on life experience and motivation to study rather than formal qualifications.
- **Queen's University Belfast** (QUB) designed and delivered eight new part-time postgraduate programmes to aid individuals impacted by furlough or job loss due to the pandemic. The flexible distance-based delivery of these courses and their affordability allowed easy access to members of the local community to help them upskill, enhance their current job roles and develop future career opportunities.
- The **University of Glasgow** is providing short skills-focused CPD courses to support employees and employers to upskill and reskill in response to economic challenges, in particular the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant unemployment and skills gap issues.<sup>xii</sup>

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- <sup>i</sup> Credit Transfer in Higher Education: A review of the literature (2017) Institute for Employment Studies
- <sup>ii</sup> DfE *Findings from the Call for Evidence on Accelerated Courses and Switching University or degree*
- <sup>iii</sup> [Working Futures 2017-2027: Long-run labour market and skills projections for the UK](#)
- <sup>iv</sup> See page 7 of the OfS [Recurrent funding for 2021-22: Outcomes of consultation](#), July 2021 and Table 4 in [OfS consultation on recurrent funding for 2021/2022](#), March 2021
- <sup>v</sup> 2018/19 Graduate Outcomes Survey data. Employment by Standard Occupation Classification (SOC). Includes undergraduates who studied full-time and were in paid employment 18 months after graduation.
- <sup>vi</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/957810/Skills\\_for\\_jobs\\_lifelong\\_learning\\_for\\_opportunity\\_and\\_growth\\_print\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957810/Skills_for_jobs_lifelong_learning_for_opportunity_and_growth_print_version.pdf)
- <sup>vii</sup> 2019/20 HESA Student data.
- <sup>viii</sup> 2018/19 Graduate Outcomes Survey data. Employment by Standard Industrial Classification (SIC). Professional scientific and technical activities include: legal and accounting, scientific research and development, veterinary, and architectural and engineering.
- <sup>ix</sup> Department for Education, [2019/20 apprenticeships and traineeships dataset](#)
- <sup>x</sup> 2019/20 Unistats data
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/skills-and-employment/higher-education-short-course-trial/>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.gla.ac.uk/study/sfcupskilling/>