

Fast-track degrees may hit education standards, government warned**Ruth McKee and Haroon Siddique, *The Guardian*, 24 February 2017**

Plans for fast-track degrees with higher annual fees risk adversely affecting the quality of education received by university students, the government has been warned. The two-year degrees proposed by the government will cost the same as a three-year course, meaning annual fees for them will be higher. Ministers are expected to table a bill to lift the current £9,000-a-year cap on tuition costs so universities can charge higher annual rates.

Before the official announcement on Friday, concerns were raised about how education standards would be maintained and the workload fast-track degrees would impose on staff.

The University and College Union (UCU) said the proposals would do little to open up the university experience to more students but appeared to be aimed at helping for-profit companies thrive in the higher education sector. The UCU general secretary, Sally Hunt, said the only saving grace of fast-track degrees would be if they were available at cut price, which was not the case under the plans.

The Russell Group, which represents 24 leading universities, also expressed fears about the impact on learning. The Department for Education has stressed that the fast-track degree would carry the same weight as the current undergraduate model. Universities will be able to charge more than £13,000 a year for a three-year degree cut down to two years. Annual fees for a four-year course trimmed to three years could rise to £12,000 a year. The proposals will apply to institutions in England.

The fee hike would be limited to the accelerated courses and universities would have to prove they were investing the same resources in the fast-track students as in those studying for a conventional degree. Education ministers think the reduced timeframe will appeal to those who are in a hurry to get into, or return to, the workplace. Those who take up the new qualifications would forgo the traditional long summer and winter breaks in exchange for the faster pace of the degree. Although the fees for each year could increase, it is thought the system would appeal to students keen to cut down on living and accommodation costs.

Labour's universities spokesman, Gordon Marsden, questioned whether fees of more than £13,000 a year would be acceptable. "Is it yet another example of their using their new higher education legislation as a Trojan horse to let tuition fees rip?" The promotion of two-year degrees was a manifesto pledge from the Conservatives. Although two-year degrees were pushed by previous Labour and coalition administrations, universities have been slow to adopt the format due to the current tuition fee cap. Up until now the qualifications have been cheaper than traditional degrees because of the tuition fee cap, which means some have seen them as inferior to conventional courses.

The proposal to lift the cap for the fast-track students is part of a package of changes set to be incorporated into the higher education and research bill as it proceeds through the House of Lords. Maddalaine Ansell, chief executive of University Alliance, which represents a group of vocationally focused universities, said: "Accelerated degrees can be a really attractive option for mature students and those who are looking to get into the job market quickly with new skills. "Our members already run some very successful accelerated degrees, for which students pay much less. More flexibility on fees would allow universities to run more courses like this, and in more subjects."