

Evaluation of the Higher Education Short Course trial

Report for the Office for Students by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC)

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1. Executive summary

In autumn 2021 the Office for Students (OfS) launched the 'Higher Education Short Course trial' Challenge Competition, through which higher education (HE) providers bid for funding to develop short courses of 30 or 40 credits at Levels 4-6 in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), education, digital innovation and healthcare subjects and to help meet skills needs for Net Zero. Employers were to be closely involved in designing and developing the provision. The programme aims were to:

1. Test how HE providers devise and develop short courses (by adapting current modules at Levels 4-6) that allow students to upskill or retrain and/or progress to full HE qualifications;
2. Assess the demand from students to access such short-duration provision;
3. Test the impact of the new student finance (loan) product for short course participation;
4. Provide further understanding about short course provision and participation, ahead of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) planned for 2025.

Through this competition, 22 providers received a total of £2 million to develop new short courses. Over 100 new courses were proposed in total, most to commence delivery in autumn 2022, with projections that over 2000 students in total would participate in 2022-23. CRAC was commissioned to evaluate the programme, with both summative and formative aims:

- To assess the extent to which the programme met its aims;
- To assess the programme's intermediate outcomes, i.e. the extent to which funded projects had progressed to or were progressing towards successful impact;
- Where feasible, to compare whether particular approaches to or types of provision work better than others, in particular contexts or for particular student groups;
- To support the sharing of learning from the programme, provide any recommendations about future provision of short courses and inform further policymaking in relation to support for lifelong learning.

The evaluation was designed as a mixed-methods approach, utilising dialogues with funded project teams, collation of student profile data from providers and programme-wide surveys with participating students and employers with the expectation of course intakes in autumn 2022. In practice, fewer courses than planned have been launched to date with fewer students than anticipated. This has reduced the amount of evidence available for assessment during the evaluation period and the balance of this report reflects this. We present the findings from the limited data we were able to collect to assess progress towards the aims of the programme and useful learning to inform the development of short courses that support lifelong learning.

Overall findings

All 22 funded providers developed short courses and between them offered a total of 96 new short courses. Overall, 17 courses at 10 providers were launched with student intakes between autumn 2022 and summer 2023, with a total of 125 enrolments. This small sample was used as the basis for much of the evaluation.

Achievement of programme aims

- The first programme aim, to test how HE providers devise and develop short courses, was largely achieved in that all the funded providers did manage to develop short courses that they could offer to potential students (although not all those they had originally proposed);
- To date, the evidence is that demand for the courses offered across the programme has been low, and many courses were not launched due to low levels of interest;
- The new student loan product was introduced and taken up by 41 students, for whom it was impactful in enabling their participation. However, the scale of take-up was far lower than anticipated (because there were so few students) so there was little evidence for its impact.

Progress towards intermediate outcomes

Development of courses

- All the funded providers developed short courses and 96 were offered to potential students (almost all the courses originally proposed for 2022-23). To date, 17 courses have been launched (with intakes of students) across 10 different providers, out of the 96 offered in total, with demand from students insufficient to launch most of the other courses offered.
- All project teams developed short courses by reworking content from existing degree courses and working successfully with employer partners to align content with their business needs. In practice, content development proved to be more complex than simply 'converting' one or more pre-existing degree modules.
- Obtaining institutional approval of the new short course/s developed was commonly more challenging and time-consuming than expected as existing approval processes are designed for courses leading to a degree. In a few cases approval was only granted for delivery on a trial, non-credit-bearing basis.
- Study experiences reported by the small number of students engaged in the evaluation were broadly positive, highlighting course flexibility, good personal support and the value of group activities to enable peer support. There was almost no evidence about post-completion outcomes as so few students reached that stage during the evaluation;
- Employer engagement during course development was strong, mostly in advisory and guiding roles rather than 'hands on' development work. Of the 16 employers who provided such feedback, 13 reported that they were satisfied with their experience. Most anticipated that the courses would in time prove valuable in upskilling adults.

Demand for short courses

- 240 applications in total were reported (including some to courses that were offered but did not launch due to insufficient cohort size), leading to 125 enrolments across the 17 courses. This extent of participation was far below the aspirations of project teams in their proposals, when over 2000 enrolments were envisaged across over 100 courses.

- Over half the courses had intakes of five or fewer students, while two providers waived fees and opened their courses to staff of partner employers to trial delivery, and two others enrolled staff colleagues to make intakes viable. Half of all the students were individual applicants who paid fees and half were employees undertaking a course as continuing professional development (CPD) activity, suggesting both intended target markets were represented, albeit weakly. However, with two providers waiving fees for their courses, these should be seen as trials of the concept rather than robust tests of potentially sustainable demand.
- Programme guidance suggested courses should aim to upskill adult learners who are under-represented in HE, as well as to upskill the staff of employers. Two thirds of participating students were aged over 30 and almost all were working full-time, potentially reflecting both these markets to some extent.
- Collectively, these outcomes represent low demand to date for the short courses offered. Providers recognised some practical weaknesses in their offer that suggest more activity and time are needed to judge the demand for short courses more robustly.
- Almost all the funded providers currently expect to continue to offer their courses in future (and some to offer more courses). Two providers have withdrawn offered courses as they doubt their financial sustainability. However, overall, this suggests ongoing interest from many providers in the continued development and offer of short course provision.

Identifying approaches that worked particularly well

Given the limited number of courses launched and their timing, there was very little opportunity to compare approaches to see what worked particularly well and/or better than others. This was exacerbated by the wide range of course topics, levels and durations encompassed by the provision that was launched. We therefore found no substantive evidence to identify differences in effectiveness of the way projects went about course development and offer. Similarly, we did not find sufficient evidence to judge whether particular approaches to target markets or promotional activities were more effective than others in attracting learners on a paying basis.

Learning from the trial

Short course development and offer

Course development was more complex than expected. Project teams reflected that pre-existing content not only had to be adjusted down in level for Level 4 or 5 courses but also had to be reconfigured to provide a learner-centred course for these new target markets. Some content had to be modernised to be credible with employers, and there were common tensions between academic designs and employer aspirations, with employers wanting somewhat less fundamental knowledge and more applied learning. Nonetheless, co-design with employers was mostly manageable although several employers wanted more flexibility in how to engage to maximise value of their input. Student feedback was very limited but suggested the extent of learning within their course, and especially the extent of self-study required, was greater than anticipated.

The most common delivery model was one or more blocks of initial in-person teaching on campus followed by remote online learning. Student feedback indicated a desire for greater flexibility still, including some asking for asynchronous learning to undertake on their own schedule, within the course timeframe. Four providers reported employer feedback that they wanted courses to be shorter than those offered and questioned whether a course of more than 13 weeks' duration was a 'short course'. There were also diverse views amongst employers, and amongst students, about whether courses should be credit-bearing.

Overall, providers found it harder to sell places on the new courses offered than they expected. Many were uncertain about whom to target as the primary market/s for their course/s, which hindered effective marketing. Not all seemed to have predicted the effort and cost necessary to implement promotions into what were new markets for them. In light of this, the financial case for a short course was also re-questioned by some providers.

Providers believed the course offer they made was weakened by a range of practical timing issues and several uncertainties, outside their control:

- They were unclear about the best target market, i.e. whether that was adults outside HE or the staff of partners and other employers;
- Many prospective applicants were not familiar with the concept of a short course;
- Providers could not guarantee the future value of credits gained from a course, whether they would be recognised by another provider and/or accumulated towards a degree;
- The student loan was new and not all its details known when marketing of the short courses started, and the student support bursary was announced later still.

The new student loan

While the number of students (41) who applied for and obtained the new bespoke student loan was much smaller than anticipated, all but two student survey respondents with a loan reported that it had enabled their participation. Take-up may be stronger in future once it is more widely known. Provider-reported student feedback revealed perceptions that the current loan application process is cumbersome, and turnaround time long, in the context of a short course application.

It was clear from employers and in feedback from providers that where an employer is considering an HE short course to upskill its staff (i.e. as a CPD activity), it does not expect the individual to pay the fees and so a student loan is not relevant in these circumstances. Almost all employers would expect to pay course fees themselves, and hoped such costs could fall within a scheme like the apprenticeship levy.

Other learning

The lack of a systematic framework for credit transfer and accumulation was a serious weakness in the current offer. None of the providers could assure prospective students strongly about the value of the credits that would arise from studying their short course, whether they could be accumulated with subsequent course credit to build towards a degree qualification, and especially if credits could be transferred to and recognised by another provider.

Providers without a previous history of short course provision found their institutional systems poorly suited to development and delivery of short courses, including course approval and admissions processes. More flexibility will be needed in those institutional processes if alternative forms of provision, such as short courses, increase in number. Providers need to think through all the potential implications of introducing new forms of provision and ensure the institution is fully and strategically committed to investing in all the changes necessary.

Programme design and delivery

All the providers felt the duration and timing of the programme funding were problematic and contributed to the low demand. The funding duration was seen as very short, and announced with too little notice to enable the necessary staffing-up. Practically, the three-month funding period was felt too short and too late in the academic year for most to develop, approve and market a course and admit applicants (who might need also to apply for a loan) in time for an intended intake in autumn 2022. We also consider that restricting funding only to course development activities meant the extent to which demand was tested will have related to how much providers invested in marketing the provision they offered (which varied across the programme).

We believe announcing programme funding earlier and funding a wider range of provider activities and for a longer duration would have been beneficial. It would have led to more substantive views of whether the programme aims were met, as more courses might have launched with time and more participation resulted, which would provide more evidence about demand, course outcomes and impact.

We reflect that the introduction and nature of the new student loan also affected programme outcomes, as at least two providers designed their course to fit the 30 credit minimum required for a loan rather than testing their aspirations for a shorter modular approach.

In the context of the timing of programme activities, the six-week turnaround stated for loan applications (which could only be made once a course offer had been obtained) made it inevitable that few loans would be taken out by students in autumn 2022 intakes. Announcing the loan and implementation details earlier would have helped.

Recommendations

For the HE sector

- There is evidence that short courses can be developed from existing HE degree modules, with the interest and support of employers, and can be offered with the potential to upskill current and/or future workforces in areas of skills need, but we recommend further experimentation;
- As overall demand to date has been low, we recommend that any future experiments in short course provision are accompanied by some planned systemic awareness-raising of the short course concept;

- We believe a key weakness in developing the short courses was the lack of a systematic framework or mechanism to support recognition of credit from a short course and ‘stacking’ such credits to achieve a larger qualification, including transfer of credits between providers. We recommend progress on this in advance of any further trials of short courses or other provision similarly designed to foster flexible lifelong learning.

For HE providers

- We recommend further experiments in short course development and especially delivery, to trial and share learning from alternative models of provision, including shorter and more granular options, both credit- and non-credit-bearing, to assess their appeal to a fuller range of learners and potential markets;
- We also encourage providers to consider how to design delivery of courses flexibly enough to enable a full range of learners to participate, including those committed to remaining in full-time work or with caring responsibilities;
- In parallel, we recommend that providers cautiously think through all the investments necessary for short course offer and delivery including changes to support systems, as existing institutional systems and processes may not be sufficiently flexible to accommodate new forms of provision;
- We recommend that in any future experiments or proposals, more attention is paid to the sustainability of provision, including the underpinning funding models, appropriate resourcing of delivery and extent of marketing that will be needed;
- We recommend more evaluative studies on short course provision are carried out, to obtain case studies of positive student experiences with which to demonstrate course impacts, but also to investigate more deeply what constitutes value from a short course.

For funders

- We recommend that any related future funding programmes are timed and designed to minimise participant uncertainty, ensuring that as many underpinning policies or activities are in place in advance, so there is less scope for contextual issues to impact upon potential outcomes;
- Practically, we recommend that the range of eligible activities for funding, and the timing and duration of funding, are carefully considered so that project outcomes are less reliant on providers’ own investments (than in the case of this programme), or that those investments are clearly set out in programme guidance so that they can be addressed in proposals;
- We recommend that the duration of funding aligns with the activities necessary to achieve programme outcomes, and that evaluations are designed so as to enable greater assessment of key post-activity outcomes.

2. Introduction, context and aims

2.1 Context

In September 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a 'Lifetime Skills Guarantee' which would aim to *“transform the skills system so that everyone, no matter where they live or their background, can gain the skills they need to progress in work at any stage of their lives”*. January 2021 saw the publication of the Government's 'Skills for Jobs' white paper,¹ which it intended would deliver much of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee. A key element would be a new 'Lifelong Loan Entitlement' (LLE),² which would entitle adults to a potential loan to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education during their lifetime, to be launched in 2025.

Evidence has been cited that many graduates from higher education (HE) either do not have skills that align well with technical skill needs of industry and/or choose not to work in the occupational sector in which they have qualified, as their degree has a broader labour market value enabling them to select work in other sectors.³ The Government's reforms sought to place the engagement of employers at the centre, believing that qualifications are strongest when developed with the involvement of employers, so that they respond to local skills needs and improve the employment prospects of the students studying them.

The Government's 'Build Back Better' white paper in March 2021⁴ highlighted the importance of Level 4-5 qualifications with a technical or occupational focus, of which most are taught in further education (FE) but some in HE. It placed emphasis both on these 'higher technical qualifications' and also implementation of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee through which it would address the need for adults to upskill and retrain throughout their working life. Recognising that evidence suggesting barriers for adult learners to access higher and technical education include inflexibility of course delivery (especially for those who might want to study flexibly and/or part time) and a lack of availability of student finance for this type of provision, the white paper set out revised support for lifelong learning. It stated that it would introduce a new student loan which would be flexible to allow courses to be taken in segments, in the hope this would allow individuals the flexibility to learn and develop new skills at the times that suited them, for example by undertaking short courses or modules of learning in FE or HE. The white paper also stated that the Government would be *“consulting on the scope and detail of the entitlement and taking action to stimulate higher technical and modular provision and encourage more frequent credit transfer”*.

¹ Skills for jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth. HM Government, 2021. 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

² Recently re-named the 'Lifelong Learning Entitlement'.

³ Higher technical education: the current system and the case for change. Dept for Education, 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907144/Higher_technical_education_-_the_current_system_and_the_case_for_change.pdf

⁴ Build Back Better: Our plan for growth. HM Treasury 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969275/PfG_Final_print_Plan_for_Growth_Print.pdf

To progress some of these aims, the Department for Education asked the Office for Students (OfS) to launch the '*Higher Education Short Course trial*' Challenge Competition (abbreviated here as the HESC programme). Announced in August 2021, this invited HE providers to bid for funding to develop standalone short courses through which learners could acquire skills (i.e. to upskill or reskill) and/or build up credit towards a full degree qualification, in key economic growth sectors and in flexible ways which would suit the needs of a wide range of learners. It would also enable the Government to pilot access to a new student finance product developed by the Student Loans Company (SLC) especially designed for learners studying shorter, flexible provision, in support of development of the LLE.

The specified aims of the Challenge Competition were to:

- Test how HE providers devise and develop short courses (by adapting current modules at Levels 4-6) that allow students to upskill or retrain and/or progress to full HE qualifications;
- Assess the demand from students to access such short-duration provision, which could promote greater choice and opportunities for students from HE providers and enable enhanced access to skills and higher level education that meets employer demand;
- Test the impact of the new student finance (loan) product for short course participation, ahead of its potential roll-out within the LLE in 2025;
- Provide further understanding about short course provision and participation, especially for adult learners currently under-represented in HE, to support development of the LLE.

Longer-term potential impacts of the short course development programme were to enable students to increase their career prospects and to contribute to filling skills gaps in UK industry, as employers would collaborate in development and delivery of the courses.

Through this competition, 22 providers received a total of £2 million in early 2022 to develop a range of new short courses. The sectors targeted were STEM, health and social care, digital content, data science and computing, as well as education and technologies considered to accelerate the UK's achievement of Net Zero (carbon emissions). Across the funded providers, over 100 new courses were proposed for delivery, the vast majority to start in September 2022.

In parallel, the Government undertook a consultation on the LLE, to which it published its response in March 2023.⁵ Respondents were broadly favourable about the concept, but pointed out that augmented advice and guidance would be necessary for prospective students to understand what was offered. For modular approaches, some doubt was expressed over whether funding should only be provided to modules which are a part of a wider course or more flexibly, as some learners might simply want to upskill in a certain area. No clear view emerged on potential credit limits for funded provision, but consultation responses indicated strong support for a mechanism to facilitate credit transfer and the Government recognised that having clear credit transfer mechanisms in place would contribute positively to delivering flexible learning within the LLE. The Government also stated that it would fund modular approaches in

⁵ Lifelong Loan Entitlement: Government consultation response. Department for Education, 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1140599/Lifelong_Loan_Entitlement_Consultation_Response.pdf

phases, limiting funding from 2025 to Higher Technical Qualifications and some other technical qualifications, and delaying funding for modular provision at Levels 4-6 (the focus of the HESC programme) to 2027. The timing of the published consultation response meant that it will not have affected activity in the projects in this programme during the period of this evaluation.

2.2 Aims of the evaluation

In January 2022, CRAC was commissioned to undertake an external evaluation of the HESC programme to investigate whether its aims were met, in relation to the funded programme's ability to incentivise development of short courses, attract students to this new provision and, as a result, increase the students' career prospects, and test the new finance product. The evaluation aims were as follows:

- To assess the extent to which the programme met its original aims (as per section 2.1 above);
- To assess the programme's intermediate outcomes, i.e. the extent to which funded projects had progressed to or were progressing towards successful impact;
- To compare, where feasible, whether particular approaches to or types of provision work better than others, in particular contexts or for particular student groups;
- To support and catalyse the sharing of learning between funded projects and any appropriate wider dissemination;
- To provide recommendations for the sector as whole and for providers about future provision of short courses and their contribution to workforce development and filling skills gaps;
- To inform further policymaking in relation to lifelong learning and support for it.

2.3 Approach to the evaluation

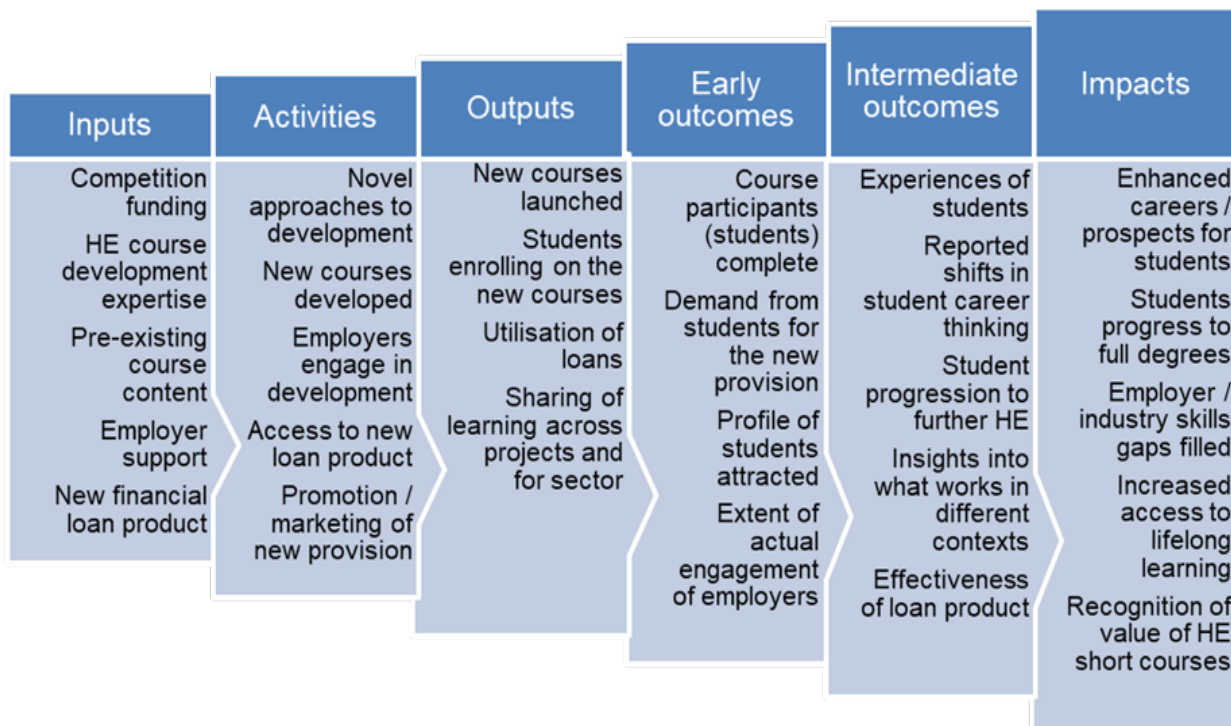
The activities to be evaluated were seen both as a composite programme (the total funded activity) and a series of local funded projects in discrete contexts. Our approach was to attempt to conduct a rigorous summative programme-level evaluation (i.e. "did the programme work?") with more formative aspects at programme and project level ("how could things have worked better?"). This required us to monitor and evaluate how each funded project worked, as well as drawing out programme-level findings and encouraging sharing of learning across all projects.

To accomplish these objectives, we devised a mixed-methods approach. Following inception, our evaluation team read all 22 funded projects' proposals and met their leaders to explore their project aims and objectives in depth. When proposing our approach, we had created a draft Theory of Change, which we were able to refine with that detailed knowledge (Figure 2.1). This was helpful to illustrate how and why intended impacts and outcomes would be achieved, with the highest-level impacts (aims) on the right-hand side of the diagram. By working backwards (i.e. right to left, in the diagram) the outcomes, outputs and activities that need to occur for those impacts to be achieved are identified. This, in turn, helped us to determine measures of those

activities, outputs and outcomes, which could provide evidence of progress towards the impacts (in addition to any direct measures of impacts that might be feasible within the evaluation period and scope).

We then devised an evaluation framework which identified the research topics and questions we sought to address, relevant stakeholders, and how different methodologies and information sources would provide evidence (summarised in Table 2.1 and described below).

Figure 2.1 Theory of change for the HE Short Course trial programme



Project-level monitoring, evaluation and support

- Document review: familiarisation with the proposals of all funded projects to understand their intended aims, strategies and activities, and review of the subsequent monitoring report each submitted to OfS;
- An initial online meeting with each project in spring 2022 to understand the proposed approach, activities and institutional context for the project, in more depth. At this point we explained what and how they would need to report progress and measures of success (to OfS and/or to us) for monitoring purposes, together with the practical help we would seek from them to conduct programme-level research activities (see below);
- Subsequent periodic online dialogues with each funded project team, around every three months, to check on their progress and learn about the barriers and challenges they were facing, together with obtaining qualitative insights into their outputs (to expand upon what they had reported at the end of funding to the OfS). The research outputs from these meetings were notes made by the evaluation team member.

Table 2.1 Mapping of research themes and questions against evaluation evidence sources

Research questions	Project reporting to OfS	Project reporting to CRAC	Project dialogues with CRAC	Local project evaluation activity	Programme-wide surveys	Roundtables and sharing learning
Formative evaluation						
How did providers develop courses?	✓	✓	✓			✓
What barriers were encountered?			✓			✓
What new provision was launched?	✓	✓				
What were course target markets?	✓	✓	✓			
What was student demand?		✓				
What was profile of students enrolled?		✓			✓	
What marketing or promotion appears to have worked?			✓			✓
To what extent was the new student loan instrument utilised?		✓			✓	
What impact did the loan have?		✓				
What were students' study experiences?				✓	✓	
Were there changes to students' thinking about career/progression?				✓	✓	
To what extent were employers engaged?	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
What were comparative experiences of different students/institutions?		✓			✓	
What is the potential sustainability of the new provision?			✓			
Summative evaluation questions						
Do courses result in enhanced student career prospects?					✓	
Are industry/employer skills gaps being filled as a result?					✓	
Did the programme meet its aims?	✓	✓			✓	

Programme-level evaluation

- Collation of information drawn from the proposals and dialogues with funded project teams, to produce consistent summary information about activities across the programme;
- Collection and collation of data from funded projects about their course launches and participating students, for every course to provide a programme-level overview of progress to OfS and the funder on a systematic basis;
- Online surveys with course participants at up to three different stages (i.e. early in their course, at completion and potentially later, if time allowed) to deepen understanding of the experiences of new course participants, including rationales for study and potential outcomes in terms of career thinking;
- A programme-wide survey of employers engaged in projects, to identify their intentions in participating and experiences of supporting course development (and/or supporting their employees to study a course);
- Collation of any information from the Student Loans Company about applications and take-up of the new loan product, and from OfS about the student support bursary introduced.

Cross-project and programme learning

- Two programme roundtables were organised by OfS and co-facilitated by members of the evaluation team (held online, in March 2022 and November 2022, respectively). These were an opportunity for project leaders to discuss challenges to progress they were facing and, in the case of the November roundtable, for selected projects to share their early experiences. Notes made by evaluation team members facilitating the roundtable sessions were valuable as further qualitative inputs to the evaluation about challenges, progress and successes. (These were made on an un-attributed and non-quantitative basis, in line with the style of engagement in the sessions, designed to share challenges openly.);
- Routine dialogues with project leads were also used for bilateral discussion of emerging experiences and challenges.

2.5 Change in evaluation focus in response to programme delivery

The evaluation was commissioned and designed with the expectation that all or most course intakes would take place in autumn 2022 with delivery completed by spring or, at latest, early summer 2023. This would allow for collection of data from students during their courses and after completion, and from providers reflecting on their delivery. In practice, many courses were offered later than planned and many that were offered were not launched as they did not enrol any students. This restricted the amount of data we could collect from students on the courses.

Although systematic profile data was obtained for almost all courses that were launched with students during the evaluation period, the small number of students who reached the end of their course during the evaluation severely limited collection of information about course experiences or post-course outcomes. With low participation overall on the courses,

engagement in the intended student online surveys was extremely low. While all three intended surveys were developed, and invitations to the student and 'completion' surveys were circulated by some providers that launched courses, the total numbers of responses obtained was very small (15 for the survey during a course and eight for the survey upon completion, from a total of five projects), although this was in fact around a 12% response rate overall. Feedback from project leaders suggested that where a cohort was only two or three students, they were not prepared to reply to surveys due to fear of potential identifiability, despite assurances of confidentiality. Several providers chose to undertake their own feedback exercises instead of implementing our surveys (citing institutional strategies to minimise burden on students). While two of these did share certain results with us, the total amount of data about student experiences was very limited.

Responses to the employer survey were also low (18 responses, relating to engagement in nine different projects). It is not clear why so few responses were received. Based on the number of employer partners predicted in providers' proposals (a total of 120 employers), 18 responses is a response rate of around 15%. While such a response rate is not uncommon in this type of research, the responses did not cover activity across all projects and therefore may not be representative of all employers' experiences in the programme.

These circumstances and the lack of data limited the extent that several evaluation aims could be assessed, particularly in relation to testing demand for courses, impacts on participants and the value of the new loan. An extension to the duration of the evaluation could have been helpful to obtain a more thorough picture, as more students would have completed courses (those launched after October 2022) and provided insights into experiences and outcomes.

As a result, the balance of this report is also different from that expected when the evaluation was designed. The limited data available from which to assess evaluation aims are presented, but there is greater emphasis on formative findings including some narration of activities that took place to maximise learning from the programme. Thus, Chapters 3 and 4 describe the courses proposed and launched, and participation in them, while Chapter 5 focuses on the experiences of providers and Chapter 6 the experiences of the students and employers engaged. Overall findings against the evaluation aims are summarised in Chapter 7, along with a summary of lessons learned and recommendations about future provision of short courses.

3. Exploring the proposed projects and context

3.1 Implications of competition guidance on project designs

As context to the activities of providers, their progress and the challenges they encountered, it is valuable to revisit some aspects of the guidance they were offered while developing a proposal for the HESC programme. This constrained funding for successful providers to be spent solely within the period December 2021 to March 2022 inclusive. Funding was only available to support course development, not costs of marketing or other activities.

The competition intended to gather learning on how new forms of provision could enable greater choice for students currently under-represented in HE – especially mature learners with no previous experience of HE or returning to study. We interpret this guidance as encouraging a learner-centred approach, but there was also strong emphasis on courses being developed to respond to employers’ needs and with strong input from partner employers (which would not necessarily align with a learner-centred approach). Funded providers needed to consider how to balance these two approaches.

The guidance stated that funding for students, through the new SLC product, would be available for the courses developed, provided they consisted of 30 or 40 credits (or comprised clearly defined smaller elements that added up to a 30 or 40 credit course in a coherent way), and were of no longer than a year in duration.

3.2 Courses proposed

Table 3.1 illustrates key elements of the courses proposed, based on the proposals submitted by funded providers. In total this comprised 106 courses, with providers variously proposing that they develop between one and 16 new short courses. In total, 100 courses were proposed for launch during academic year 2022-23, almost entirely in autumn 2022.

Table 3.1 Key elements of proposed courses, by provider

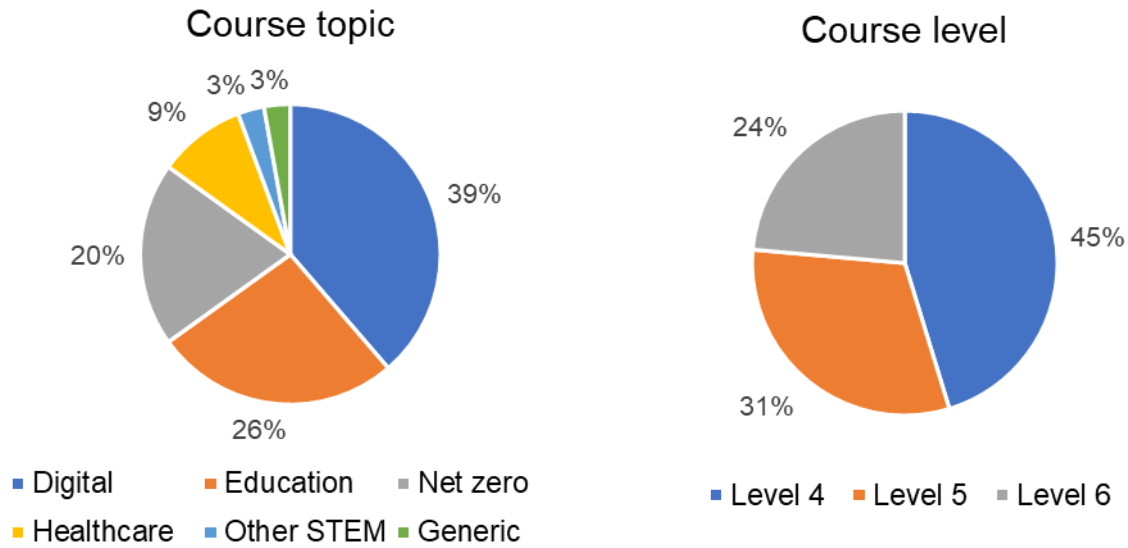
Provider	Broad theme	Courses	Level	Credits	Duration
Coventry University	Healthcare	1	4	30	12 weeks
De Montfort University	Digital	6	4	30	12 weeks
Keele University	Digital (data)	1	4	30	13-16 weeks
	Net zero	2	6	30 (40)	13-16 weeks
Liverpool John Moores	Digital (creative)	7	4,5,6	30	12 weeks
London South Bank	Net zero (built env)	6	4,5,6	30	13 weeks
Manchester Metropolitan	Education/other	4	4	30	18 weeks
Newcastle University	Healthcare (data)	1	6	40	1 year
Norwich University of Arts	Digital (creative)	3	4,6	30	Flexible <1yr

Provider	Broad theme	Courses	Level	Credits	Duration
Sheffield Hallam University	Education	1	5	40	1 year
	Healthcare (data)	1	5	40	1 year
Staffordshire University	Digital	1	4	40	12-24 weeks
	Net zero	3	4	30	12-24 weeks
	Healthcare	1	5	40	12-24 weeks
Teesside University	Digital	6	4,5,6	40	12 weeks
	STEM	2	4,6	40	12 weeks
	Net zero	4	4,5,6	40	12 weeks
	Healthcare	6	4,5,6	40	12 weeks
University Centre Weston	Education	7	4,5	40	< 1 year
University of Chester	Education	1	4	30	6 months
University of Essex	Digital (data)	4	4,5,6	30	10 weeks
University of Leicester	STEM (space)	1	5	30	6 months
University of Manchester	Digital	1	6	40	< 1 year
University of Plymouth	Digital (design)	2	4,5	40	13 weeks
University of Roehampton	Education	2	4	40	7 months
University of Salford	Digital (inc. data)	6	4,5	30	13 weeks
University of Wolverhampton	Digital	4	5,6	30	13 weeks
	Net zero (built env)	2	4,5	30	13 weeks
University of Worcester	Education	16	4,5,6	30	16 weeks
University of the West of England	Net zero (built env)	4	4,6	30	< 6 months

Table 3.1 shows that most (16 of the 22) providers elected to develop course/s on a single theme or topic area, with the remaining six providers proposing a wider range of topics. Categorised into the broad topic areas stated in the bidding guidance, courses comprised 10 in healthcare (with some emphasis on data and analytics), 41 in digital (including data and creative specialisms), 21 on Net Zero topics (including, especially, the built environment), 28 in education, 3 in other STEM subjects and 3 that were more generic (Figure 3.1).

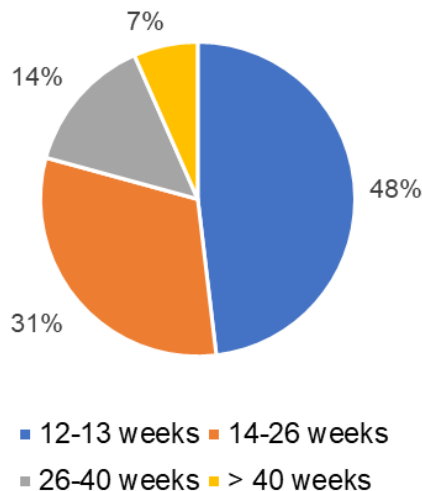
Study levels ranged from Level 4 to Level 6, with some providers electing to focus on a single study level and others proposing courses at a range of levels. Just under half of all courses were proposed at Level 4, just over one quarter at Level 5 and just under a quarter at Level 6 (Figure 3.1). Two thirds (71) of the courses were proposed as 30 credits, with the remainder (35 courses) as 40 credits.

Figure 3.1 Theme and study level of courses proposed



Proposed course durations varied from 12-13 weeks (essentially a term, which was most common) up to an academic year (Figure 3.2). Five of the providers intended course duration to be flexible, determined by the student, within a single year, while several others anticipated that the duration they originally proposed might change as they developed the course/s (and this proved to be so in practice).

Figure 3.2 Proposed duration of courses



In terms of delivery model, all but two providers proposed a blended face-to-face and online approach (with those two predicting wholly online delivery). However, the extent of face-to-face delivery proposed could be very limited, such as an initial bootcamp or other short introductory phase of learning on campus, followed by online tuition and self-study for the remainder (majority) of that block of learning. Other than one provider which offered six-week courses

comprising a single block of learning, courses comprised a series of these blocks in succession. Notably, although four providers suggested in their proposals that a flexible model would be offered, during a programme roundtable sharing development experiences many more said they would adjust the format during the course where possible according to what suited students best.

A final key characteristic of the proposed courses was the target market/s. In most cases, providers stated that they would promote course/s both to individual adults (including various groups under-represented in HE such as mature learners) and to employers who might encourage their employees to take part. Only five proposals suggested they would target only one of these markets (some of these electing to promote only to individual adults, and some only via employers). However, again, many providers stated that they might be flexible in this approach.

3.3 The new student loan product and study support bursary

The new student finance product (loan) designed specifically for UK students on the short courses was launched in April 2022, providing funding for tuition fees (not maintenance) up to a level of £2310 for a 30 credit course and £3080 for a 40 credit course. Students seeking a loan would apply to the SLC once accepted onto an eligible course, with the application process stated to take up to six weeks. Importantly, eligibility did not depend on previous qualifications, meaning that existing graduates could apply.

To align with the entitlement of adult learners in other forms of education, the Government announced in July 2022 that a Study Support Bursary could be made available to students on the new short courses who faced financial barriers. Guidance to providers wishing to offer this bursary suggested it could help with costs of learning materials or books, childcare fees or learning support for disabled students. It is important to note that the bursary was only available for those who had taken out an SLC loan to study their short course. Providers were invited by OfS in July to consider offering the bursary to students or prospective students. The Department for Education stated that a total of £2.5 million was available to fund these bursaries (through to 2025) and there was not a set amount of bursary allocated per student.

While implications of timings in relation to financial support are raised in subsequent chapters, we note here that announcement of the bursary opportunity was relatively late given that providers were aiming to launch courses in September 2022 and by then many had undertaken substantial marketing. This late timing, and the requirement to have an SLC loan, were reasons reported by at least two providers not to opt into the bursary scheme.

Three providers pointed out to us students on the short courses were not eligible for Disabled Students Allowance and felt this might have had some influence on take-up amongst disabled students including those with a learning condition.

4. Course launches and intakes

4.1 Course launches, applications and enrolments

A key aim of the evaluation was to assess whether the programme's aims were achieved, which included to test (a) whether and how providers could develop short courses and (b) the demand from students to access such provision. Information about the courses that were launched and the students who enrolled were key elements of evidence for these assessments, respectively.

In total, 96 new courses were developed and offered but only 17 enrolled sufficient students to be launched with an intake of students during the academic year 2022-23. Table 4.1 summarises the courses that were launched with an intake of students during the period of the evaluation, and the month in which they commenced delivery; 10 providers successfully launched a total of 17 courses. A second intake also took place during the year for one of these courses. Subsequently, two courses at one provider were discontinued due to all the (very small number of) students either deferring or dropping out. For context, 10 providers comprised just under half of the 22 funded projects, so over half (12) did not launch any short courses during the intended academic year.

Only three providers launched courses in autumn 2022, and most of the courses that were launched started later than originally intended, some as late as May 2023. One consequence of this overall delay was that many of the courses had not concluded delivery by the time fieldwork in this evaluation ceased, preventing collection of certain types of data from students.

The overall total of 17 courses launched was well below the 100 originally proposed (and 96 offered) by providers for launch during 2022-23.⁶ There was no discernible trend in terms of the profile of courses that were successfully launched, compared with those proposed, in terms of subject area, level or duration (as summarised in Table 3.1). For example, nine courses launched were at Level 4, broadly in line with the proportion of those proposed, and at least one course was launched in each of the broad topic areas of STEM, health and social care, digital content, data science and computing, education and Net Zero.

Provider team reports to us suggested a total of 240 applications were received across 17 providers offering courses during the evaluation period. Seven of these providers did not launch delivery of any courses they offered because they judged the potential cohort/s to be too small for feasible delivery. Five further providers received no applications at all to the courses they offered.

Across the 10 providers that did launch courses, there were just over 180 applications (ranging from three to 37 per provider, although in some cases they were split across several courses). In a few cases an application reported prior to course launch was subsequently withdrawn.

⁶ Six more were proposed for launch the following year.

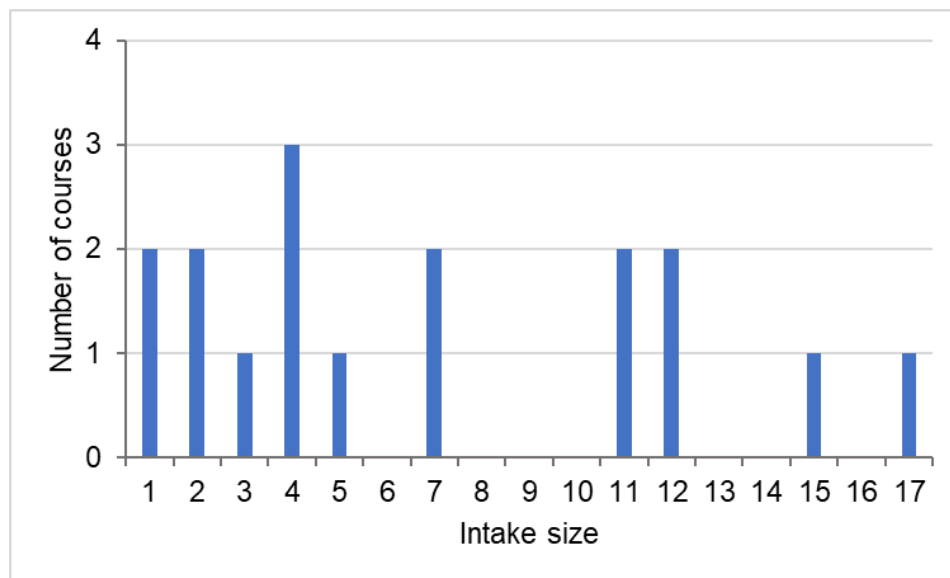
Table 4.1 Key characteristics of courses launched during academic year 2022-23

Provider	Broad theme	Course title/topic	Launch date	Level
London South Bank	Net zero (built env)	Leadership & management for net zero buildings	January 2023	5
		Designing net zero buildings	January 2023	5
Manchester Metropolitan	Education/various	Short course network (early years)	January 2023	4
		Short course network (design and 3D printing)	May 2023	4
Norwich University of Arts	Digital (creative)	Introduction to user experience design	January 2023	6
		Creative coding	April 2023	4
University Centre Weston	Education	Mental and emotional health	October 2022	5
		Supporting people on autism spectrum	October 2022	5
University of Essex	Digital (data)	Introduction to statistical analysis in R	September 2022	4
		Introduction to programming for data science	January 2023	5
University of Leicester	Space	Space systems, regulations and applications	March 2023	5
Univ. of Roehampton	Education	Supporting successful learning	January 2023	4
		Improving outcomes in special education	January 2023	4
University of Salford	Digital (inc. data)	Data analytics & machine learning	September 2022	4
		Data analysis for business	September 2022	4
Univ. of Wolverhampton	Net zero (built env)	Legal and regulatory frameworks in housing	May 2023	4
University of Worcester	Education	Autism and complex needs	January 2023	5

Much more systematic data could be collected about enrolments. Across the 10 providers and 17 courses launched, a total of 125 enrolments were reported to us.⁷ This total excludes seven students at one provider who only attended parts of that course and were not due to undertake the course final assessment. The overall total of 125 students was a long way short of the more than 2400 enrolments anticipated in project proposals.

Many course intakes were very small, including two instances of a single student. Over half of the courses (nine) had five or fewer students (Figure 4.1). The largest single course intake was 17 students (plus a further seven un-assessed students), while the largest number of students at a single provider was 26, across two courses.

Figure 4.1 Intake sizes for all courses (N=17) launched during 2022-23



Notably, two of the providers with the largest total enrolments, Leicester and London South Bank, waived tuition fees in order to run their course/s on a trial basis with employees of partner organisations (i.e. at no cost to those employers). Data on the profile of students at two other providers revealed that 21 students were members of university staff, who took part without fees to boost cohort size and make delivery feasible. Thus, it is thought that only half of all the 125 students paid fees.

4.2 Student profile and funding

Information about the students who took part on courses and how they funded participation, and specifically whether they took out the new student loan, provides evidence in relation to assessment of programme aims on testing student demand and the impact of the loan. We obtained systematic profile data for enrolled students for 14 of the 17 courses (N=111), from which the results in Table 4.2 are derived.

⁷ This includes three who dropped out or deferred, resulting in that provider discontinuing its courses.

While the total sample was small, these data reveal some insights about the student intakes. They encompassed a wide range of student ages but 58% were aged over 30 years, reflecting a programme aspiration that courses should appeal to mature students. On other hand, 69% of all the enrolled students (and 83% of those with known level of prior highest qualification) had a degree, which is significant for courses at Level 4 or 5, i.e. at a lower level than a degree, and not aligned with the target market of adults who had not engaged in HE.

Table 4.2 Profile of enrolled students in course intakes up to June 2023 (N=111). Unless otherwise shown, percentages are of those for whom the characteristic was known.

		N	%
Age	21 or under	3	3%
	22-25	15	14%
	26-30	28	25%
	31-35	19	17%
	36-40	17	15%
	41 or older	29	26%
Nationality	UK	102	92%
	EU	5	5%
	Other	4	4%
Gender	Male	39	36%
	Female	69	64%
Ethnicity (of UK nationals)	Black	10	10%
	Asian	7	7%
	Mixed	4	4%
	Other	8	8%
	White	76	72%
Disability	Yes	20	19%
	No	88	81%
Highest qualification	NVQ/GCSE	5	5%
	A-level	11	10%
	Undergraduate	46	41%
	Postgraduate	31	28%
	Unknown	18	16%
Short course student loan		*41	*33%
Provider staff member		21	19%

Note: * total from Student Loans Company records (and as percentage of 125 students)

Almost all students were of UK nationality (92%). Nearly two thirds (64%) were female, which is higher than in HE (57% of first year undergraduates in 2021/22)⁸ or the general population (51%). 18% declared a disability or learning condition (which is in line with the HE student population and the working adult population). Amongst UK nationals, 28% were of a minority ethnic background, again similar to the proportion of HE students but higher than in the adult population (around 18% for England and Wales).

A specific programme aim was to test the impact of the new student loan product. Just under one third of all the students were reported to have taken out the new loan (41 students, based on SLC data), although this represented nearly two thirds of students who had paid tuition fees. This suggests there was some demand for the loan, but it is not yet robust evidence due to the very limited sample of students to date. Some further insights into the impact of the loan and course funding are given in a subsequent chapter, based on survey results.

The number of students who obtained a Student Support Bursary to date was smaller still, at a total of 11 students (who were studying at three of the providers).

⁸ Higher Education Statistics Agency: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#characteristics>

5. Course development and offerings

In addition to the summative evaluation aims, more formative aims of the evaluation included identification of any approaches that worked particularly well, while one of the programme aims was to provide further understanding about short course provision. This chapter narrates some of the experiences of funded providers in the programme in addressing those aims. Given the formative intent of the evaluation, much of the learning described here is not reported on a quantitative basis, as any provider experiences are potentially valuable. Section 5.4, on the other hand, provides some specific insights into funding and the impact of the student loan.

5.1 Content development

Based on dialogues with provider teams and insights drawn from the first programme roundtable, we believe providers managed to achieve most of their course development aims as intended, even if they did not launch as many courses as hoped. In practice, providers reported they undertook events and workshops with employers and partners, both face-to-face and online, as well as focus groups and online surveys with prospective students (in one case engaging with 100 of the latter). They also revealed the extent of effort needed for multiple academics to work as a team developing content, commonly involving a combination of a steering group plus multiple working groups. Some had taken 'sprint' approaches to achieve development in the short time available.

Drawing on this range of information and reflections on lessons learned as included in monitoring reports submitted by providers to OfS in late March 2022, we make a number of observations. Quotations below are from providers.

- All the providers were able to 'convert' or redevelop existing modules to generate the curricula, content and learning resources necessary for the intended short courses. Most commonly, the content for a course was developed from material in more than one pre-existing module, and several providers commented why simple conversion from a prior module was not sufficient. For example:

“Simply turning an existing unit into a standalone course may not be the best approach; often units have implicit assumptions about progression into and beyond their content, their outcomes are not always ‘actionable’ enough to match the skills focus of the project, and assessments can be too conservative and presume a very conventional skillset and educational history to their students.”

- That said, a challenge reported by around a quarter of providers was some perceived tension between the content and delivery approaches that employers sought and the content, delivery and support that providers felt would be ideal for the learners they identified (especially those who had not engaged with HE before, who were stated as a target in programme guidance). The challenge was working out how best to frame the teaching and learning, and whether it was possible to square aspirations for it to be highly student-centred (to appeal to and engage wide student participation) with the demands of the employers who tended to want a more consistent approach:

“The challenge was the tension created by the limitations in how much the sector could change or add to the module learning outcomes. This was partly due to partners not fully understanding initially what was realistic as content in a 20-credit module and that the short course needed to provide a progression route to further study for students.”

- Again, around one quarter of the providers reported that their discussions with employers had led to a need to downgrade the amount and/or level of content within a short course element (and occasionally to redesign the content at a lower level altogether), compared with the initial assumptions of the academic staff. In a few cases this reflected a desire from employers to restrict content to somewhat fragmented but highly applied learning, whereas the academics preferred a more rounded approach including more fundamental underpinning knowledge and structuring. However, most commonly this related more simply to the sheer amount of content, with employers seeking lower amounts of content so it could be accessed in a shorter period of time, confirmed in reflections by some respondents to the employer survey about the attractiveness of the developed courses. In practice, these providers ended up either offering a course at a lower level than originally proposed or reducing the options for potential multiple learning pathways, or (temporarily) offering both credit-bearing and non-credit bearing options.

“Our industry partners and employers, new to the world of HE, have expressed surprise that something termed a ‘short’ course could still require 320 study hours over the course of a year. We have already incorporated a course design approach that breaks learning up into smaller sections, and we plan to reduce each course to 30 credits.”

“We have many modules that carry 15 credits and we have had to combine some of the adapted modules in order to create 30 credit modules; more choice and flexibility could have been offered with 15 credit short courses.”

One provider reported that they found the appeal to employers was easier where the content was drawn from modules which already aligned with occupational standards;

- A related issue was a challenge between the aspirations of the employers for course content to be able to evolve quite quickly with time, and the more static content that was required in a university course in order for it to be quality-assured.

“One challenge we have encountered is that although all of our employers struggle to hire people with appropriate higher level creative technical skills, their needs are all slightly different and rapidly changing.”

- As the delivery format for all courses included some online learning, all the providers had some requirement to translate content into a format suitable for online delivery, whether or not the prior modules had been available for online delivery. This format conversion work could require substantial effort, even once the content had been selected from the pre-existing modules;

- A practical challenge fed back almost universally was that providers found the short timescale for course development very challenging. Most remarked that the work took longer than anticipated and for many it had continued beyond the period of funding.

“The pace needed to spend the money meant that decisions had to be taken quickly regarding the design, which would have benefited from a more iterative approach.”

Reasons cited for this included:

- Some employer partners could not engage as quickly as hoped and the meetings or interactions (such as workshops) between them and those developing the curriculum/content physically took longer than anticipated.

“The tight timeframe required by the funding and pressures on our employer partners meant that it was difficult for some to provide the time to engage.”

“I think the main lesson is that real employer engagement takes time and can’t be compressed into tight timescales. Even with the best will and interest, employer partners have commercial realities and timescales to deal with that need to be taken account of when planning for involvement in course development. This is especially true for smaller employer partners.”

- In a few cases, quite large numbers of academic and other staff were involved (in one case 16 staff), so mobilising the team took time. Some providers had to acquire additional curriculum development staff with the right level of experience and specialism from other units or on a freelance basis, which took time to set up.

“The timescales for development were quite challenging as they appeared to assume that teams had existing capacity to develop new provision; additional staff capacity was needed to release from teaching those staff with the appropriate expertise. A longer lead-in time would be more realistic”.

- There were also practical challenges with the process required to turn a newly developed course into one that could be offered by the provider and onto which students could be enrolled. Many providers without substantive pre-existing short course provision reported one challenge was how to identify and implement appropriate eligibility criteria during admission, where such a wide variety of students were considered in scope. In a very few cases providers elected to have no formal eligibility criteria at all, which presented a challenge during approval (because the existing approach to validation assumed specific eligibility criteria), while the majority tried to accommodate a range of forms of recognition of prior learning. The awarding of credit and how it could lead to a qualification was also problematic when it came to validation. Around one quarter of providers struggled to obtain approval as their institution’s learning or credit frameworks were not flexible enough to accommodate elements of learning with small numbers of credits or that would lead to a non-standard qualification for the provider.

5.2 Course validation/approval

In our dialogues with the 22 project teams in spring 2022, and the experiences they shared at the programme roundtables, all reported that they had been able to get their new courses approved by their institution or were confident in being able to do so, so the course could be offered. However, at least one third of them reported that this had been more challenging and time-consuming than they had expected. This was predominantly because the short course/s did not fit the institution's systems and procedures used to approve new provision (which are designed to validate provision towards a whole degree and are based on elements of learning of a different extent than the proposed short courses). This meant a bespoke workaround had to be agreed in each case.

“The course approval process has been challenging for us because it sits part way between uncredited continuing professional development (CPD) and credited undergraduate (UG) courses. Students taking CPD courses do not need to be registered on university systems as full students, but because of the need to allow loans to be issued to students on the HESC course, we cannot use this same approach for this course. Thus, the set-up of the new course requires innovation at all levels of registration.”

“As we operate a 20 credit per module structure, detailed consideration will have to be given about how short courses of 30 credits are routinely integrated into our systems.”

In two cases, this could not be resolved immediately and approval was only given to offer the course during academic year 2022-23 on a non-credit bearing basis. From the information obtained, we observed that where an institution already had strategies through which they were providing other short courses or CPD to employers (listed in their proposal), approval was much more straightforward, whereas where the short course trial was a new venture for the institution it tended to be much more problematic.

A specific issue in the validation process highlighted by two providers was how to evaluate the provision, both in terms of identifying an appropriate learning assessment mechanism given the range of students (potentially including company employees) but also how the course would more broadly be evaluated in terms of outcomes.

“What specific measurable impact of a short course would be considered positive, where it does not deliver a standalone qualification but is positioned either to build towards a qualification (but not within a formal credit transfer or stacking framework) and/or to upskill employees or individuals to enhance their employment prospects?”

For the providers that experienced a somewhat protracted approval process, and/or a process which took longer than they had anticipated, there were knock-on effects on their promotions and marketing. Discussions during a programme roundtable suggested that around half of all the providers either started to promote upcoming course/s as 'subject to approval' or had to defer marketing altogether until after institutional approval had been secured.

5.3 Marketing and promotion

Understanding how projects went about marketing their new provision provides some context for the evaluation's aim of assessing demand for courses, as well as learning for those considering future provision of short courses. This topic was discussed in a programme roundtable and also addressed in providers' monitoring reports in spring 2022.

By the time projects reached the end of their funded period, all were expressing concern about promoting their courses, according to discussions in the programme roundtable, our dialogues with project teams and their project monitoring forms. Underlying these concerns were projections many had made in their proposals that they would have significant cohorts of students enrolled on new provision starting in autumn 2022. Almost all had cited student participation as a risk in their proposal, but most now felt the extent of that risk had increased markedly, which we identified was for one or more of the following reasons:

- Timing issues – the time available to market the course once they had institutional approval and elicited applications for an autumn 2022 intake had become very short or even non-existent in some cases. The novelty of the student loan product was also raised by many as an issue; although a set of FAQs had been developed and published by OfS in March 2022,⁹ some issues were not included in this until later, hence providers remained uncertain about how to answer some applicant questions during the key period when students were considering applying for an autumn course. The existence of the bursary not announced until July 2022;
- Programme funding could not be used for marketing, so the cost of promoting new courses had to come from existing budgets or, in a few cases, other internal sources if they could be tapped. The amount they could spend practically on promotions could be very limited;
- Many providers remained unclear as to whom the most fruitful target audience would be, as this was novel provision and programme guidance suggested two distinct markets. While the majority of providers had intended to promote their courses to both individual adults and also to employers seeking participation of their staff, in practice several shifted their focus progressively towards the employer market, in addition to those who had from the beginning focused almost exclusively on the latter market. Only two providers appeared to target solely the individual market;
- At the programme roundtable, there was a widespread view that the concept providers were selling was unproven and that they lacked the voices of prior students to evidence positive value or a return on investment in a course (other than for those who had pre-existing short course provision. Several project leaders lamented the absence of a national marketing campaign that could 'legitimise' (as they saw it) the short course concept,¹⁰ to counter what

⁹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/skills-and-employment/higher-education-short-course-trial/frequently-asked-questions/>

¹⁰ They were conscious that there was a national campaign supporting an OfS programme through which new postgraduate conversion courses were being developed and funded at broadly the same time.

they perceived to be an offer whose value was unclear in comparison with better known options such as apprenticeships or free options such as skills bootcamps;

- One of the weaknesses of the course offer perceived by project leaders was a lack of clarity about whether credits from a course could be combined or transferred to a different provider, which meant they could not assure prospective applicants of this aspect of course value. This concern was widely shared at the programme roundtables and seven providers raised it in their monitoring reports.

It is clear from the course enrolment figures presented earlier that, in retrospect, these providers had reason to be concerned in spring 2022. One response to these uncertainties was establishment of an informal consortium of six of the funded projects, based broadly in NW England. In addition to sharing learning as they developed and tried to launch their courses, they proposed an informal arrangement through which they would list each other's courses and also, potentially, each recognise credits from a short course at one of the other consortium members. However, given how few courses they launched, this reciprocity was not tested.

On the basis of their progress reports, dialogues with us and discussion at the programme roundtables, most providers tried a wide range of marketing activities to target employers, in the hope that they would consider sending their staff to enrol on a course for upskilling purposes. Those activities included:

- Engagement with the specific employers that helped them develop the course/s;
- Telemarketing to human resources departments in businesses;
- Social media campaigns;
- Emails to the university's existing employer contacts database;
- Attendance at regional or other trade fairs to reach other businesses.

Although only around half of the providers made substantive efforts to target individual adults (i.e. who were not staff of employer partners or other businesses), and many of these did not start doing so until well into or after summer 2022, their activities included promotions using:

- Social media campaigns;
- Posters for school staff noticeboards, for education courses (one targeted 700 schools);
- FE college partners, attempting to reach out to those who had not engaged in HE;
- Widening participation organisations, to increase outreach to under-represented adult groups.

In summary, providers did what they could to promote their new courses, albeit in many cases without substantial investment in terms of marketing expenditure. Most of the providers who had not attracted enough enrolments to launch courses in autumn 2022 continued to undertake promotions afterwards as they deferred potential intakes to January 2023 or later.

At the second programme roundtable several providers reported puzzlement that their promotions had drawn quite a lot of interest but that they had not managed to 'convert' this into many applications. They perceived that this was partly due to hesitation amongst the prospective students when they learnt of the uncertainties around the value of the credits gained or practical issues such as the process to obtain a loan. Providers subsequently reported to us

anecdotal student perceptions that the effort necessary to apply for a loan was high in relation to either the loan's value (the course fee) or the course duration. Feedback from one provider suggested some applicants had viewed the loan application process as cumbersome and, especially, that the turnaround time of six weeks was long in the context of a course of 12-13 weeks duration. However, we found very little evidence that systematic feedback from students enquiring about courses had been collected by providers.

Five providers received no applications whatsoever. They also put this down to doubts about the value of the course proposition, but also cited competing opportunities such as free skills bootcamps for individuals (or the much higher profile of apprenticeships, for those who were in employment). Two providers also commented that reaching individual adults who were by definition 'hard to reach' for universities was particularly difficult, and the ratio of effort required for that to potential reward (the modest fee for a single short course) was not in balance.

While the evidence from our student survey about how enrolled students found out about their course was very limited, seven of the 15 respondents had been informed by their employer, four by work colleagues and three had found out themselves through a web search. Only one stated that they learnt of the opportunity via promotion from the provider directly.

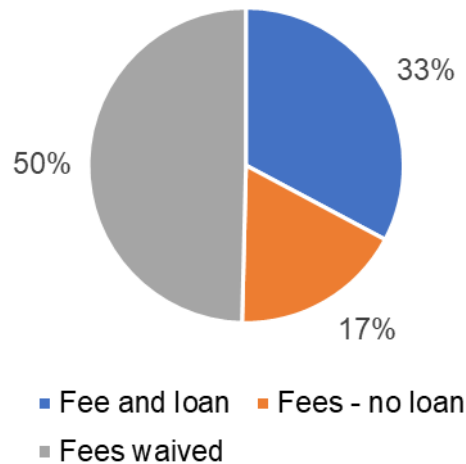
This relative lack of success in marketing the short courses could become somewhat counter-productive. Over 50 applicants to advertised courses were unable to participate because the course they applied for was not run as the institution required a minimum cohort size (that was not reached) or the intake was too small for viable delivery (for example, where it would require groupwork). This had the knock-on effect of a continued lack of student experiences or feedback that could be used in marketing. Only one provider had sufficient interest in a course for a second intake in spring 2023 (although each intake only comprised a handful of students).

5.4 Funding of participation

A distinct aim of the programme was to test the new student finance product. Data about students shared with us by providers suggested half of all enrolled students (62) funded their participation individually, with the remainder attending on a free-of-charge basis arranged with their employer. Focusing on those who did pay course fees, 41 enrolled students obtained the new student loan (according to SLC), i.e. two thirds of all those who paid fees (Figure 5.1).

Further details about perceptions of the loan were obtained from our student surveys. 13 of the 19 respondents – and all of those who paid fees – had been aware of the loan opportunity when they applied for the course and 10 had obtained the loan. All but two of those with a loan reported that they would not have enrolled on the course without it.

Figure 5.1 Funding of course participation (N=125)



In feedback from students to a provider that was shared with us, three out of five focus group participants (on a course where fees were waived) indicated they would have been reluctant to take out a loan as this would add to their existing undergraduate debt. However, these students said they would consider doing so for a Master's course, which presumably they perceived to have higher value.

As of July 2023, only 11 students were reported to have received a student support bursary. In the student survey responses, only two reported that they had heard of it when they had applied for the course and none had applied for one.

Responses in our survey of employers were unequivocal in that they expected to pay fees for staff members who attended a course (rather than the staff member paying, with or without a loan), with only one respondent expecting the employee to pay.

5.5 Sustainability

The overall picture, of lower and slower take-up of courses than expected, begs questions about the future extent of provision and/or sustainability of courses launched. This is important in relation to the evaluation's aims to inform the sector about future short course provision and policy-making in relation to support for lifelong learning. Most providers remained somewhat equivocal about the future when we last engaged with them (June 2023). One provider had decided in the spring to withdraw its intended provision entirely and one other told us they had elected not to continue beyond 2022-23. Although the latter had launched provision within the programme, they had subsequently decided that its likely financial return did not merit continuation.

Based on these conversations with us, the remaining 20 providers were intending at that point to continue either re-delivery of courses they had launched in 2022-23 and/or to continue to offer at least some of the courses they had proposed, subject to demand.

In addition to the providers that had solely targeted the employer market, there was some evidence to suggest other providers were expecting in future to increase their focus on the employer/CPD model, and lessen their targeting of individual adults as they had originally proposed and attempted, as they felt the employer market could be easier to sustain. While they emphasised that they were reviewing their future strategies, we gained the impression that around half the providers hoped to continue a 'mixed' target audience strategy, including potential attraction and enrolment of adult learners without experience of HE. The two providers that launched courses in 2022-23 on a trial basis without fees were planning to introduce fees the following year.

When questioned in more depth, we found that the providers planning to continue to offer the courses they had developed were not certain that they would be able to commit substantive investment in marketing them. While final decisions were yet to be made, some anticipated that they would only list their courses as being available, rather than actively promoting them. Two providers reported this uncertainty about the future reflected doubts amongst their senior management about the potential future return from these courses. At the heart of this were fears about a potential imbalance between the practical effort required to market and deliver the courses and the total fee income that would ensue (from what were now expected to be relatively modest or small cohorts, i.e. limited demand).

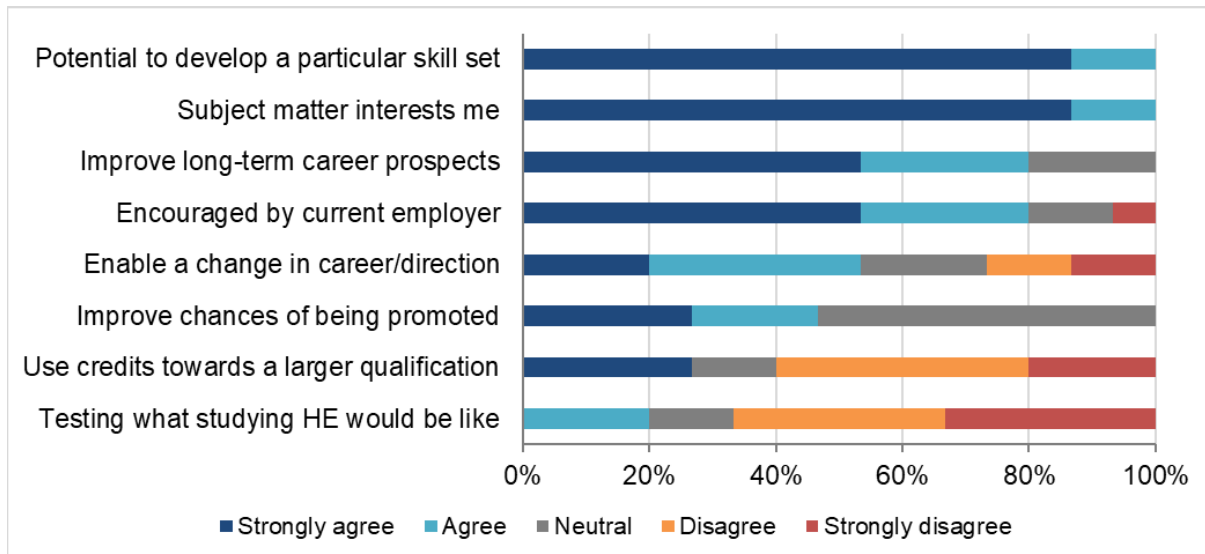
6. Experiences of participation and delivery

This chapter focuses on the perspectives of students and employers, providing further insights into student demand for short courses and more formative information about course development (including the concept of course co-development with employers) and provision. This is presented to support the programme’s objectives of increasing understanding about short course provision.

6.1 Prior circumstances and rationales for study

It was noted in Chapter 4 from student profile data that 83% of the 93 enrolled students whose highest previous qualification was known had a prior degree (including a substantial minority with a postgraduate qualification). Amongst the 20 students who completed our surveys (across courses at four providers), all but one had a prior degree. Survey responses provided deeper insights into the circumstances of this small sample (who comprised around one in six of all students enrolled on the courses). Of the 20, 16 were in full-time employment when they applied for their course, with three individuals in part-time work and one looking for work. The majority worked ($N=12$) in the education sector, perhaps unsurprisingly given that several courses were on education topics (and some of those intakes included some HE provider staff). However, there were also students who had been or were working in the public sector (two), accountancy and business services, and engineering (one each). Analysis of their job titles suggests most were in administrative or associate technical/professional roles.

Figure 6.1 Student survey respondents’ extent of agreement with statements describing potential motivations for undertaking a short course (N=15)



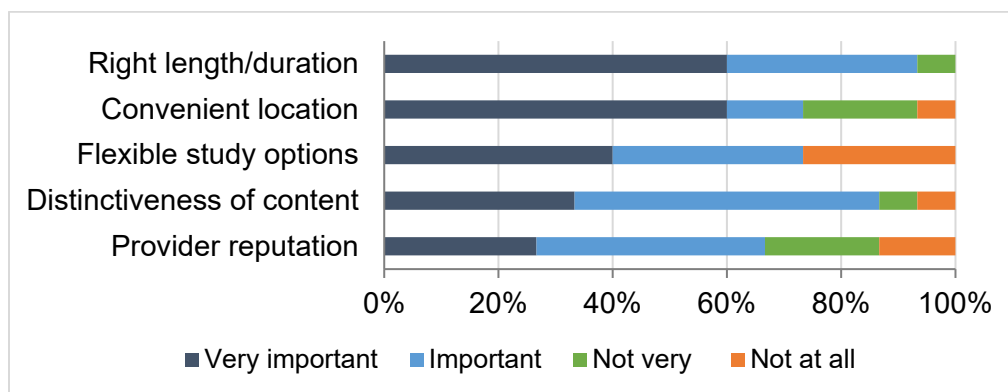
A range of motivations to undertake a short course were reported, despite the small number of responses (Figure 6.1). While all the respondents agreed or strongly agreed they had chosen to study a course because the subject matter interested them and for the potential it gave to develop particular skills, there was much more diversity in other potential motivations. Many

(12/15) had been encouraged by their employer, reflecting that nearly half of all students were staff of partner organisations taking part on a trial basis. A similar number (12/15) were at least partly motivated by potential career advancement, although fewer (6/15) directly linked the course to possible job promotion. Strikingly, only four were motivated by the prospect of using the credits to build a larger qualification, perhaps reflecting that almost all already had a degree.

The survey was deployed with students a few weeks into their course. Asked about their ideal next step if they completed the course successfully, 8/15 respondents to this question indicated they would stay in their current job, four might apply for a new role, while the remaining few might pursue a further course. All but one felt confident – at that stage – that the course would help them achieve that objective.

The students were also asked about why they had selected their particular course (Figure 6.2). Again, these results need to be seen in the context that many respondents were studying while also working (and with the encouragement of their employer), hence the convenience of location was very important along with duration and study options, in addition to the content itself. Provider reputation was not seen as one of the strongest driving factors, although was also significant to some extent for two thirds of them in their choice.

Figure 6.2 Student survey respondents' perceptions of importance of factors in choosing their short course (N=15)



6.2 Study experiences

Amongst the survey respondents who were a few weeks into their course, 12/15 were fully satisfied with their experience of the course at that stage and the remaining three partly satisfied. However, overall ratings of satisfaction were somewhat lower from the five respondents to a survey after course completion (three partly satisfied, two fully), with two fully satisfied with the teaching and three fully satisfied with the personal support they had received. In open responses across the two surveys, four respondents highlighted very positively about the support received from an individual staff member, although one felt it was insufficient. There were also comments from individual respondents that communication and structure were somewhat poor, and that there was more work than expected and too much was self-study, respectively.

Feedback from students at two providers who shared results of feedback sessions with us was largely similar, with broadly positive satisfaction overall, and relatively positive views about teaching, support and materials, but somewhat more equivocal views about whether they would recommend others to enrol on such a course. Mid-course feedback from six students at another provider was reported to be almost wholly positive.

Detailed feedback obtained by one provider,¹¹ through a post-course survey with 11 students and a focus group, and shared with us revealed a real mixture of perceptions in relation to different aspects of its courses. In terms of the content and materials, students were very split about whether the course was too technical or not technical enough, presumably reflecting their differing prior qualifications and working experiences, and this was reflected in their thoughts about learning materials. In the focus group, some felt that while parts of the course were too low in technical level, they also found some lectures very technical in areas where they had little existing expertise, stating they would have preferred more focus on practical knowledge. One aspect highlighted – as being both challenging but also with considerable benefit – was the groupwork aspect of these courses, which they said helped them develop a peer cohort which, in turn, they saw as a lasting benefit.

In terms of course structure and model, that provider's feedback from students suggested the students were also split between whether the length (around four months) was right or too long, with some suggesting further condensing of content would have been beneficial. The blended or hybrid delivery model, combining online and in-person teaching, was seen as strong, but there were mixed feelings about the use of a fixed block structure and challenges for those in full-time work of attending in-person elements in particular locations at fixed times. On whether the courses should be credit-bearing, there were also very fixed feelings amongst the students. This paralleled the views of employers in the survey and reports by providers, with some feeling credit was necessary to increase perceived value to a student, and/or to lead to a known qualification, while others saw little value in it. We might anticipate a wide range of perceptions from students where there is wide range of student types and circumstances, including professionals who themselves have a wide range both of prior education and of knowledge through varied working experiences, as well as varying personal constraints on their ability to study the course.

We believe many providers by now have, or will, run their own feedback mechanisms in various ways, most of which could not be shared with us due to their timing (after the evaluation fieldwork had finished). Sharing and reviewing that feedback will be important in order to establish more well-informed views of the experiences of students of this new provision.

6.3 Provider experiences

With the caveat that the evidence base to date is limited, due to the small number of courses completed during the evaluation period, the 10 providers who launched provision shared with us what they had learned during delivery of new courses. From this, a number of consistent

¹¹ This was the provider of a course with students drawn wholly from employer partners, enrolled without fees.

themes emerged, noting however that in some cases cohorts had been very small which will have influenced delivery experiences:

- Course delivery needs to be highly engaging (more so than for undergraduate tuition, for the most part) given the circumstances of many students, including those who attend on a part-time basis while having other commitments such as their day job;
- Classroom arrangements and technology that are optimised to support hybrid teaching are critical, given the blended/hybrid delivery models in use;
- Although all the courses had been designed to be somewhat flexible, there was demand for students to be present either virtually at a specific time or physically at a specific location and time, which was in some instances difficult for students who worked full-time. Two of the providers felt they had to assume not every student could attend every element of tuition, because of their expected employment commitments (or potential caring responsibilities). This suggested the proportion of asynchronous content delivery should be increased, but at the same it would be necessary to maintain high levels of engagement with such delivery;
- The extent of commitment needed on the part of the student was seen as too high (in some cases, especially where there had to be commitment to a whole academic year), particularly for non-traditional students who wanted to test whether they could cope with this style of learning and fit it into their lives. In practice, two providers offered more than one option for a course to test the market: a non-assessed variant which comprised only the in-person elements, in parallel with the 'full' variant which required self-study and assessment;
- Four providers reported that short course modules developed were too large and contained too much content. One provider stated:

“The messaging from employers (albeit limited to a small number of employers thus far) has been really clear – they want smaller, bite-sized chunks of learning for their employees; “short, sharp shocks” of learning, which will help staff upskill and enhance business operations, without untenable strains on capacity.”

Feedback from some students during the courses had suggested they disliked elements which focused on development of 'fundamental' knowledge rather than applied, and the providers of these courses were worried that such an imbalance could potentially discourage some prospective students from trying out a course;

- There was a challenge between having longer and thinner modules within the short course, that could decrease attendance intensity, and the benefit of relatively shorter overall duration in order to maintain engagement (and satisfy employers where their staff were attending, as they tended to prefer more condensed models);
- While obtaining student engagement was challenging during initial or introductory online sessions at the start of courses, these were found to work well if they included relatively small break-out groups, as these helped students to get to know each other and begin to benefit from peer-to-peer support;
- Having guest speakers from industry was very popular, particularly where they had lived experiences that they talked about and to which the students could personally relate;

- Students fed back that they appreciated clear lesson plans and strong structure, and pre-module tasks were seen as helpful to prepare them. Having lecture slides available in advance and recordings of sessions available afterwards was appreciated by students who could not attend and others who wished to re-access them;
- Some students needed significant additional support in terms of both content but also the learning skills needed to complete the course. This had been expected and was considered to remain common where courses were pitched towards those who had not engaged previously with HE, or to employees in organisations with wide-ranging backgrounds;
- Some of the more 'standard' approaches in undergraduate teaching, such as having a course handbook, a schedule in advance and a published mechanism for assessment, were absent as courses had been developed quickly, but needed to be developed to assure high-quality delivery in future and were likely to need to be bespoke.

6.4 Student outcomes and impacts

Reporting on the five courses that were completed during the evaluation period, providers indicated that around two thirds of enrolled students had successfully completed their course (although these courses comprised only 55 enrolments in total). They informed us that this rate of completion was due more to students dropping out early in a course rather than students reaching the end of a course and not succeeding in final assessment.

We obtained very little evidence directly from these students after course completion, with only five responses to the survey pitched at this point. One student who had been looking for work prior to the course was now considering further study options including the possibility of another short course. One of the four who had been working full-time prior to (and during) the course had now applied for a new job in a different sector. Both these students felt the course had been valuable to some extent for these actions. The remaining students remained in their current jobs and were not immediately seeking change, but two of them were considering whether to pursue promotion or a change in job in the same sector, with the course (again) considered to be of some positive value to them in this respect. One felt the course had been very valuable in their decision not to change job.

The feedback gained from their students by individual providers (cited in the last section) did not always include post-course actions, although one provider reported that almost all its students had said the course was very relevant to their career thinking. Feedback gathered in another post-course focus group of five students (who were staff of partner employers) suggested almost all had gained new or improved skills that they were implementing in their job but did not think it would improve their chances of promotion, while they were split on whether their employer would directly benefit. They were also less certain about whether it would improve their long-term career prospects, although some believed it could help in pursuing a different role or direction; one student said the course had helped them obtain a new job already.

The evidence to date on course outcomes is extremely limited as so few students had reached completion by the end of the evaluation, so would have been stronger with more time to implement post-completion surveys for other courses. We encouraged certain providers to

embed some of the post-completion survey questions in their future feedback gathering, to provide more evidence that might ultimately be shared.

6.5 Employer engagement

As programme guidance required projects to develop courses with strong input from employers, the extent to which they did so was a subsidiary aim of evaluating course development. In their proposals, the funded projects stated a total of over 120 employer or industry partners between them, whom they aimed to engage in some way in course development. While the number of such proposed partners per project was in the range of one to 10, most proposals cited five or six employer partners.¹² In response to our request for projects to state how many of the employer partners they had engaged with successfully in practice, in spring 2023, we obtained data from 12 of the projects. All those projects had managed to engage with most, and in many cases all, of the partners they had proposed, suggesting that overall across the programme there was substantial involvement from employers as intended.

Our survey of employers drew 18 responses, from organisations which had engaged with eight of the funded providers between them (four of which had launched one or more courses, and four that had not). Although a very small response sample, they represented 14% of all the proposed employer partners (and over one third of the partners of these eight providers). Employer partners ranged from SMEs¹³ to large corporations and were located in a range of sectors, including private sector organisations in engineering, manufacturing, IT/communications, creative and cultural, and logistics, as well as in health and education/training, and a public sector agency.

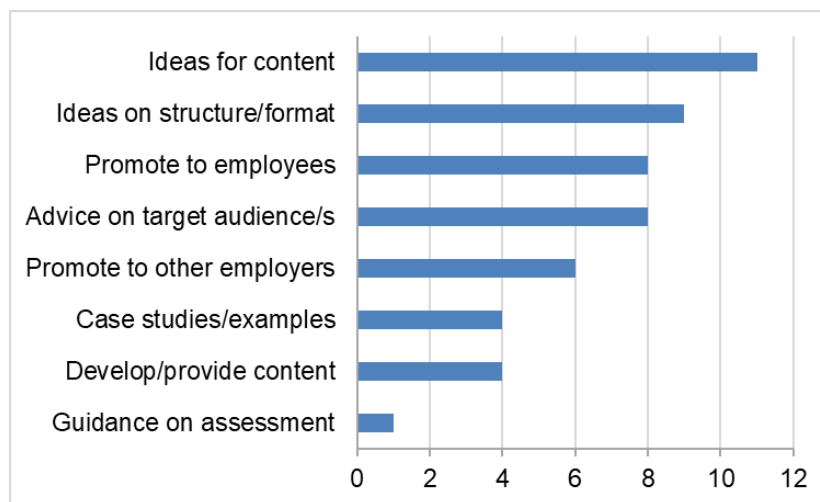
As shown in Figure 6.3, these employers played a range of roles in the projects, most commonly providing ideas about content and/or structure or format for a course, and promoting it to their employees as a potential opportunity for study. These results also show that most employers had multiple roles in projects, while in most cases their inputs to course development were largely advisory or guidance, rather than undertaking practical development work.

Two thirds of the employer survey respondents indicated their uppermost motivation for involvement had been hope it could ultimately help to upskill their sector's workforce or the local broader workforce. Only one respondent sought development of training specifically for their own staff, but 10 respondents anticipated they would encourage their staff to take part in a course as a form of CPD, once delivery was established. Although only three reported that their staff had taken part in a course to date, over half expected their staff would do so in future (which partly relates to the fact that some courses they helped to develop were yet to launch).

¹² Excluding education partners who would deliver aspects of a course

¹³ Small or Medium-sized Enterprise (up to 250 employees)

Figure 6.3 Roles undertaken by employers which engaged in funded projects (N=17)



Other motivations to engage included a desire for their organisation to have influence or be represented in course content more generally, to improve course provision or to develop better links with a university.

While these views were couched with some reservation where a course had not been launched, 8/16 respondents believed their objective in taking part had or was being achieved to a good extent, and 5/16 to some extent, with the remaining three uncertain (because the intended course had not yet been launched). Questioned about this more specifically, half of the respondents felt unable to comment on the extent to which they felt the course/s developed would satisfy their needs in terms of level or type of content, duration, fee and delivery mode. However, amongst the half who did comment, the majority professed full satisfaction in relation to the range and level of content provided and (potential) mode of delivery, and partial satisfaction with course duration, fee and the balance of content. None were dissatisfied with any of these specific aspects of provision or planned provision.

Their ratings of overall satisfaction with the course/s developed were 8/15 fully satisfied, 5/15 partly satisfied and one not very satisfied, the others reserving judgement until they had experience of seeing actual course delivery. Some were effusive about what they had seen or experienced, particularly in relation to course delivery by the project teams:

“The course so far has been absolutely brilliant – the lecturers are knowledgeable, passionate and generous with their time. The content is varied and interesting, meeting the needs of different people from different backgrounds.”

“The courses are high quality and relevant to our work.”

“Staff feedback for the course presenters was excellent – inspiring lectures and enthusiastic people.”

In terms of their overall satisfaction with their experience of working with the HE provider, 14/16 responses given were fully satisfied and two partly satisfied.

“The partnership is extremely valuable and we continue to work collaboratively to deliver the requirements of the organisation and local business community.”

“This short course is the first of its kind on offer in [our] sector which specifically targets professionals and new entrants, rapidly upskilling them to support a known skills gap in the sector. This course is extremely important in response to the sector’s skills needs and our organisation’s skills needs.”

“There is great value, we get exposure within the university and its students, we also get to show what we are looking for in future staffing.”

A handful of specific less positive comments that were expressed related to, respectively: disappointment that a course developed had not actually been run (three respondents); that the start-up process to engage with the university had been somewhat bureaucratic (two respondents); and that they had found the university’s development procedures somewhat inflexible and would have preferred them more streamlined so they could achieve more in the time they could give (also two respondents).

Asked specifically about whether they would engage on a future occasion with a university about potential short course development, all 14 of those providing an answer said they would.

7. Overall findings, learning and recommendations

The title of the programme reminds us that programme activities were trials, not all of which should be expected to be successful. The programme's aims were:

- To test whether short courses could be developed from pre-existing HE degree modules;
- To test the demand for such courses;
- To test the impact of the new student loan;
- To provide further understanding about short course provision.

This section draws together findings across the programme in relation to the evaluation aims:

- To assess the extent to which the programme's aims were met;
- To assess the programme's intermediate outcomes, i.e. the extent to which funded projects had progressed to or were progressing towards successful impact;
- Where feasible, to compare whether particular approaches to or types of provision work better than others, in particular contexts or for particular student groups;
- To support and catalyse the sharing of learning between funded projects and any appropriate wider dissemination;
- To provide recommendations for the sector and institutions about future provision of short courses and their contribution to workforce development and filling skills gaps;
- To inform further policymaking in relation to lifelong learning and support for it.

7.1 Overall findings

Did the programme achieve its aims?

- The first programme aim was largely achieved in that all the funded providers did manage to develop short courses and between them offered 96 new courses to potential students (slightly fewer in total than the 106 that had originally been proposed);
- There was limited demand for the courses that were offered. A total of 240 students applied for a course, enabling 17 of them to launch with an intake, although overall the demand was far below the extent anticipated and for many courses insufficient for launch;
- The new student loan product was introduced and taken up by 41 students. Eight out of 10 student survey respondents who had a loan said they would not have enrolled without it, so it was impactful for them in enabling participation. However, the scale of take-up was far lower than anticipated (because there were so few courses or students) so this was not a robust test of its impact.

Thus, the programme met its first aim, i.e. that short courses could be developed and offered. To date, the evidence for the second aim – to test demand – is that demand from students has been low, while there has been very limited evidence with which to consider the impact of the new loan. In relation to the fourth programme aim, however, much learning has been gained from activities in the programme. This is summarised as lessons learned; see section 7.2 below.

Progress and achievement of intermediate outcomes

Given the overall position of fewer course launches and much lower participation on them than anticipated, evidence of progress towards the programme aims (and/or achievement of outcomes that align with them, rather than of the aims themselves) became more important. The following findings provide some detail in relation to the extent of progress in delivering the aims of the programme, as well as providing context to the overall partial success achieved.

Development of short courses

- All project teams were able to develop short courses by reworking content from existing degree course/s, and employer partners were successfully engaged in guiding that work, helping to align content with their needs (for upskilling adults either within or who could enter their workforce). Development of content proved in practice to be more complex than simply 'conversion' of a single pre-existing module;
- Projects were able to obtain their institution's approval/validation of the new short courses so that they could be offered. In many cases this was more challenging and time-consuming than expected, because approval processes were set up for courses leading to a degree. In a few cases approval was only granted for delivery on a trial, non-credit-bearing basis;
- Due to delays with validation and other processes to support provision (such as handling admissions, which had to incorporate eligibility requirements bespoke to a short course), the time available to promote and market courses intended for autumn 2022 became very short or even non-existent. Many providers were also unclear about the best target market for their provision, which programme guidance suggested should be targeted to adults outside the mainstream HE market but also closely aligned with employers' needs to upskill their workforces. Those two markets required entirely different promotional strategies, and several projects that started promotions to both markets subsequently narrowed their strategy to only the employer market. These difficulties and delays limited the extent to which progress was achieved in relation to take-up of the courses and any consequent impacts from engaging and supporting adult learners to upskill;
- Employer engagement during course development was as extensive in practice as proposed, mostly in advisory and guiding roles rather than 'hands on' development work, and the vast majority of those surveyed were satisfied with that experience. Most employers who fed back afterwards anticipated that these courses would in time prove valuable in upskilling adults;
- The delays to most courses meant there was little evidence about student completion of courses and/or subsequent outcomes, as few students finished a course during the evaluation. The five providers that delivered a course fully within the period reported that around two thirds of their students successfully completed the course (and that non-completions were mostly due to students who dropped out during the course, rather than failing a final assessment);
- Study experiences were broadly positive, although this was based on evidence from only a few tens of students. There was only anecdotal evidence about any outcomes subsequent to a course, given that so few had reached completion during the evaluation;

- All but two of the funded providers stated they expected to continue to offer their courses in future (and some potentially to offer more courses if there was demand), although at the point at which the evaluation ended the extent to which they could commit to promoting them was uncertain.

Testing demand for short courses

- The courses physically launched to date have been fewer in number (a total of 17 from 10 providers) and later than proposed, largely due to far fewer applications being received than anticipated in response to the 96 courses offered:
 - Three providers launched a total of five courses with an intake in autumn 2022;
 - Five more providers launched a total of seven courses in January 2023;
 - Between March and May 2023, two more providers launched three courses between them and two of the earlier providers each launched a second course;
 - Launches of the remaining 83 courses proposed for 2022-23 delivery were deferred, and two were withdrawn;
- 240 applications in total were received (a minority of which were to providers that elected not to deliver a course because the number of applicants was too low). 125 students enrolled on the 17 courses that were launched with delivery, far below the demand that providers had assumed in their proposals. One provider included additional students on a parallel non-assessed option, to test that potential market;
- To trial delivery, two providers waived fees and opened courses up to partner employers' staff free, while two others included some HE staff within intakes to make courses viable. These accounted for half of all enrolled students (62), with the other 63 believed to be paying fees, of whom 41 took out the new student loan. Only 11 students obtained a student support bursary to date;
- The profile of many students did match some aspects of the intended target market in programme guidance, with 58% over 30 years of age and almost all of UK domicile. However, more than four out of five already had a degree. Our limited survey data suggested 80% of the students had been in full-time employment beforehand and continued this employment during the course, with a wide diversity of rationales for study, most prominently interest in the subject and the potential to develop a certain skill set; none were motivated by the prospect of progression to a full degree.

Identifying which approaches worked better than others

Given that less than half the funded providers launched delivery of a course, and a very modest number of courses in total were launched, there was almost no opportunity in practice to compare approaches to see what worked particularly well and/or better than others, which was an evaluation aim. This was exacerbated by the wide range of course topics, levels and durations encompassed by the provision that was launched.

- We found no evidence to suggest clear differences in the way that projects went about developing short courses, as all appeared to be relatively successful in this respect. There

is, however, some learning that emerges from how challenges like course approval and marketing were approached, which is covered in section 7.2.

- In relation to demand and participation, we have noted that three of the four largest intakes resulted from promoting the course exclusively to partner employers and waiving course fees (and these comprised half of all enrolments). There was no evidence to suggest that particular approaches to target markets or styles of marketing were more effective in drawing interest from individual adult learners who would pay for their participation.
- The low overall participation led to low take-up of the new student loan, but there was clear evidence from employers that the loan is not an appropriate funding mechanism where providers are focusing their courses as an offer of CPD activity for employers' staff.

7.2 Learning from the trial

Two of the formative evaluation aims (to support and catalyse the sharing of learning, and to inform further policymaking in relation to lifelong learning) are covered in this section, while the recommendations at the end of this chapter comprise the last of the evaluation aims. This section also addresses the programme aim of developing further understanding of short course provision, including to inform policy and sector knowledge. Thus, this section attempts to draw out successes, challenges and key learning points, based on the results in this report and dialogues with project teams. It is structured in relation to the original aims of the programme.

Programme aim 1: Testing the short course development concept

This evaluation shows clearly that appropriate content for short courses can be drawn from existing degree course modules, but project teams consistently reflected that this required more than 'cut and paste' from pre-existing content and materials. It was necessary to customise content not only to the lower level of many short courses (Level 4 or 5) but also to tune it to learners' contexts. This meant taking into account their prior learning and experiences, current circumstances (many were also working full time) and rationale for study (many wanted content that could be applied to their current or future work settings).

In practice, some content had to be modernised to be credible with employers, although this kind of enhancement (such as use of contemporary examples) could then be applied to the original degree module too. The amount of feedback we obtained directly from students or via their providers was very limited (comprising a few tens of students only) but tended to back up these views, while also suggesting that the extent of learning and especially self-study was greater than they had anticipated. Providers will learn more from the feedback exercises they run as more courses reach completion.

Overall, there was some tension between academic designs and employer aspirations; employers tended to want less content overall and, especially, less fundamental knowledge. However, the evidence to date suggests that co-design with employers was manageable. Practically, four of the employers in our survey felt the processes to engage with the HE providers in this work were somewhat bureaucratic, and would like more flexibility in the mechanisms and duration of their engagement to maximise the value of their inputs.

The most common delivery model was blended or hybrid learning (by all but two of the 22 providers), with some initial in-person teaching on campus and the majority of subsequent learning remote and online. Other than one provider with a very short course, providers planned a series of blocks of learning, each structured in this way, that together comprised the course. However, student feedback suggested some challenges with delivery and a desire for greater flexibility. Two providers reflecting on their delivery felt students could not be expected to attend all scheduled in-person sessions at a particular location, nor necessarily all synchronous online sessions. This suggests that more asynchronous options would be beneficial, and feedback suggested that providing materials in advance of sessions was also helpful (together with clarity in advance about structure and plans). That said, some synchronous online sessions and ideally some in-person tuition or learning was thought to be critical, to enable groupwork and to build the benefits of a student cohort and enable peer support. The optimum duration and intensity of blocks of learning is yet to emerge and requires further testing and evaluation.

There was more consistency in relation to perceptions about overall course duration and extent of learning. In summary, around a quarter of providers reported that their employer partners wanted courses to be shorter and more focused on applied key learning or skills topics than the providers had designed their courses to be (to varying extents). Several employers had commented that they did not consider a semester-long course (let alone one taking an academic year) to be 'short'. They felt a shorter duration would sustain engagement of the learner better and suit the rapidly changing work context.

There was divergence amongst the employers that we engaged, as well as amongst students, in relation to whether courses should be credit-bearing. Some felt credit was necessary to increase perceived value to a student, and/or to lead to a known qualification, while others saw little value in it. Either way, courses containing 30 or 40 credits of learning were widely seen as too large and too long. An emerging view by providers, informed by employers, was that discrete elements of around 10 credits would be preferable, from which students could potentially build (stack) the credit towards a larger qualification if desired. That more granular approach seemed favourable to most, but not all, employers, as reflected by some employers:

"We would advise others to think very carefully about the relationship between the hierarchy of awards-courses-units; specifically, around how the various levels 'stack' and what they 'stack into'."

"University systems are often not as flexible as we would like them to be and most [...] are geared up to handle traditional forms of delivery and academic year/term timeframes which are at odds with the delivery of short courses in a flexible manner."

Five of the employer partners whose staff had attended courses on a trial basis were reported to have said they would like to have both an assessed credit-bearing option and a more informal, non-credit-bearing option in parallel.

We infer there could be a further challenge for short course development, in the context of ongoing policy concerns about 'low value' degree courses. Institutional approval of courses includes consideration of potential career-related outcomes and how they are assessed. This begs the question of what an appropriate career-related outcome could be for a short course, to make it 'valuable' and that could underpin assessment of the quality of the course.

Programme aim 2: Testing demand for short courses

Overall, providers found it harder to sell places on their new courses than they expected: it was certainly not a case of “build it and they will come”. There is potentially a wide range of learning available from their experiences in relation to course marketing and promotions, although some of these issues reflect more strategic concerns.

Projects believed their course offer was weakened due to a range of uncertainties, largely outside their control:

- Many prospective applicants (students) were not aware of, or familiar with, the concept of a short course;
- Providers could not present any certainty about the future value of credits gained from a course, including whether they could be transferred to and recognised by another provider and/or accumulated and combined for a larger qualification;
- Issues of timing – the student loan was brand new (and providers did not know full details about how it worked in advance) and the student support bursary was only announced to providers in July 2022 (and several providers chose not to offer it).

For providers without pre-existing short course provision, there appeared to be uncertainty about whom they should target as the primary market for their courses during the trial. We inferred that in many cases their proposal had not been founded on substantive market research or understanding of potential demand, or at least not beyond the perceptions of immediate partners they had engaged. Identification of more specific segments of market – whether that was individual adults with certain specific educational or personal backgrounds, or subsets of adults in employment whose employer might wish them to participate as CPD or upskill – could enable them to design, cost and implement clearer marketing plans.

In addition to practical issues of timing highlighted in this report, all the providers offering and marketing short courses for the first time felt they were selling an unproven concept, with certain details yet to emerge and/or remaining unclear, into markets that they had not clearly identified, and without substantive backing in terms of marketing investment. It could be argued that on this basis the level of demand from students has not been robustly tested to date (and more may be learned where providers continue to offer the courses they have developed).

Programme aim 3: Testing impact of the new student loan

While the number of students who obtained the new student loan was much smaller than anticipated, eight out of 10 student survey respondents with a loan reported that it had enabled them to study the short course. However, there was anecdotal feedback reported by providers of perceptions amongst prospective students that the current loan application process was cumbersome and the six-week turnaround time long in relation to the duration of a short course. We infer that the current process would be even more ill-suited if loans are developed for the shorter courses that many employers and some providers think could be preferable in future.

What was very clear is that where employers are considering HE short courses as a means to upskill their staff (i.e. as CPD), they do not expect the individual to pay for the course, so a student loan is not relevant. Only one employer in our survey thought the student should pay,

with the strong majority expecting to pay to enable a staff member to participate, and several hoping such costs could be supported by a scheme such as the apprenticeship levy.

Programme aim 4: Other learning about short course provision and participation

An important aspect of the short course offer that providers need to convey and promote is the value of credits and/or the qualification arising from participation on a course. This year, providers reported that they could not guarantee to prospective students that the 30 or 40 credits they could achieve could be accumulated ('stacked') with those from any subsequent courses they might take, for example to build credit towards a degree qualification. In many cases this could not be guaranteed even if all the courses were taken at the same provider. There was more doubt still about whether such credits would be recognised by other providers, i.e. to enable credit accumulation across courses at different providers, in the absence of a systematic framework for credit transfer and accumulation. This lack of assurance about the value and transferability of credits was a serious weakness in the current offer, and was also highlighted in responses to the Government LLE consultation (see 'Credit transfer' section of its response¹⁴). The enthusiasm amongst employers and in student feedback for potential 10-credit short courses in future (known by some as micro-credentials) will only exacerbate this issue.

All the providers trialling short course provision for the first time found their institutional systems poorly suited to development and delivery of short courses, as the systems were designed for whole-degree programmes. This included course approval processes that were hard to navigate for a short course. More flexibility appears to be needed in such processes if alternative forms of provision, such as short courses, are to be approved and launched at reasonable speed. Our impression is that these issues were greater for providers who had not experimented with these sorts of provision before, whereas those with existing short course provision (and/or a clear strategic intent to introduce it) were more able to introduce the flexibility needed. Much the same applied to admissions systems which, in some cases, were insufficiently flexible to handle applications for a short course, and struggled with bespoke eligibility criteria and application requirements. Providers reported that in some cases local workarounds were needed because amending the systems required too much time and investment. The learning here, presumably, is that providers need to think through all the potential implications of introducing new forms of provision and ensure the institution is fully and strategically committed to investing in all the changes necessary.

A final challenge reported by providers was the resourcing needed to deliver a course physically. While this will have been considered when developing their funding proposal, in practice the availability of the right balance of staff to deliver the course once launched was more challenging than expected. One reflected that despite the relatively small extent of teaching on the short course, its intensity across a variety of key topics meant a range of specialised academic staff were required to deliver learning effectively (more than had been

¹⁴ Lifelong Loan Entitlement: Government consultation response. Department for Education, 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1140599/Lifelong_Loan_Entitlement_Consultation_Response.pdf

anticipated). This may be another example of the need, in hindsight, to consider even more thoroughly the resourcing and investments needed across the full cycle of course development, approval, marketing, admissions and delivery.

7.3 Process evaluation findings

Although process evaluation was not an overt requirement in the evaluation specification, we think it valuable to provide some comments of this nature. Process evaluation considers how a programme (rather than the projects within it) was designed and implemented and the extent to which its design and delivery contributed to the impacts and findings of the evaluation. These comments are our own observations, except where other evidence is explicitly cited.

First, we believe labelling the Challenge Competition as the ‘HE Short Course trial’ to have been helpful, positioning the funded activities as experimental. The programme aims of testing feasibility and demand supported that experimental framing. Such framing was helpful in encouraging providers to share their experiences, positive and negative, and supported the programme aims of developing more understanding and sharing learning about short course provision.

The Challenge Competition guidance stated that funding was available to cover “*the costs associated with developing new short courses from existing qualifications, including curriculum development and staff costs*” and subsequent clarifications confirmed that marketing or related costs, such as for approval, were not eligible. We believe that this meant testing of demand for courses was partly reliant upon additional investments made by the provider and hence the extent of testing achieved will not have been consistent between providers.

A criticism of the programme expressed by providers to us directly and in the programme roundtables was the duration and timing of funding. The funding duration was seen as very short (in relation to the all the activities required to develop new courses that could be offered), and as it started almost immediately after announcement there was almost no lead-in time for funded project teams to gear up resourcing. There were also practical implications of the timing of the funding in relation to the aspiration to launch courses in October 2022 (as noted in section 5.3). We assume that the timing requirements related to a need to complete expenditure in the 2021-22 financial year. We believe that greater notice of success in funding and a longer duration of funding would have been beneficial, as these could have facilitated timely start-up and a greater extent of progress (including more time to market courses), which could in turn have resulted in more participation and more robust testing of the programme aims.

The nature of the new student loan also affected projects’ outcomes. At least two providers explicitly designed their course to fit the 30 credit minimum required for the loan, as guidance indicated they needed to test take-up of the loan, although they would have liked to develop and test shorter courses (potentially of 5 or 10 credits) that they felt would appeal strongly to employers (which was confirmed in subsequent feedback from employers).

Practically, the combination of the timing of the programme funding and the six-week turnaround time stated for loan applications (which could only be made once a course offer had been obtained) made it inevitable that few loans were taken out by students in the autumn 2022

intakes. Announcing the loan and all details of its practical implementation further in advance would have helped providers. The very late announcement of the student support bursary meant it was not widely promoted in intakes covered by this evaluation and few students have obtained one to date. We also question why eligibility for the bursary was limited to those who took out a student loan.

The absence of a national or pan-provider framework for credit transfer was stated by many providers¹⁵ as a weakness in their short course offer, and likely to have reduced the level of interest from prospective students. Further development of methods for credit transfer and recognition would have been helpful in advance of this programme, and could have contributed to higher participation and more robust testing of demand for courses and the efficacy of the loan product.

We believe that some aspects of the guidance to bidders will have contributed to their evident lack of clarity about the intended target market. The guidance indicated a focus on *“how new forms of provision could enable greater choice for students who are currently underrepresented in higher education – especially adult learners”*. We suggest the introduction of a student loan product will have reinforced this impression, i.e. that provision should be for individuals who would pay course fees. At the same time, the guidance stated an explicit focus on co-developing provision with employers: *“courses will respond to local and national skills needs either through upskilling or retraining existing or prospective employees”*. It is clear from their proposals and monitoring reports, as well as in discussions with us, that providers interpreted this to mean courses should also appeal to employers wishing to upskill their existing staff – essentially a CPD offer. Some providers explicitly admitted to us that they found it hard to reconcile these two different potential approaches and markets, especially in the current HE context of desirability of learner-centric provision. As noted in section 5.3, although some providers focused solely on one market, most did not and had to promote the courses to two markets. Clearer guidance on the target market would have been beneficial.

There were also some implications of the programme design on the evaluation itself. The very short funding period meant very limited monitoring information was collected from providers by OfS, which is typically an important information source in this type of evaluation. There was no substantive final project monitoring exercise. Although the award letter stated that providers should continue to engage with the evaluators after the funding ceased, in practice the remaining year of evaluation activity relied on the goodwill of project teams to engage with us for dialogues on progress, to provide us with data about enrolled students and to circulate our intended programme-wide surveys for students and employers. Engagement with some providers fell away once funding ceased, despite our strenuous efforts to maintain it, reducing the extent of information we could collect. Engagement by students and employers in our surveys was unusually low, even considering the small target population numbers. We know that some providers elected not to circulate our surveys when requested, but instead solely conducted their own feedback exercises. We believe that engagement and data collection within

¹⁵ Seven providers explicitly stated this in their progress reports and it was more widely discussed in a programme roundtable, as well as emerging in the separate LLE consultation.

the evaluation would have been greater had the projects' funding been longer and covered a wider range of activities.

7.4 Recommendations

For the HE sector

- There is evidence that short courses can be developed from existing HE degree modules with the interest and support of employers, and can be offered with the potential to upskill current and/or future workforces in areas of skills need, but we recommend further experimentation;
- As overall demand to date has been weak, we recommend that any future experiments in short course provision are accompanied by some planned systemic awareness-raising of the short course concept;
- We believe a key weakness in developing the short courses was the lack of a systematic framework or mechanism to support recognition of credit from a short course and 'stacking' such credits to achieve a larger qualification, including transfer of credits between providers. We recommend progress on this in advance of any further trials of short courses or other provision similarly designed to foster flexible lifelong learning.

For HE providers

- We recommend further experiments in short course development and especially delivery, to trial and share learning from alternative models of provision, including shorter and more granular options, both credit- and non-credit-bearing, to assess their appeal to a fuller range of learners and potential markets;
- We also encourage providers to consider how to design delivery of courses flexibly enough to enable a full range of learners to participate, including those committed to remaining in full-time work or with caring responsibilities;
- In parallel, we recommend that providers cautiously think through all the investments necessary for short course offer and delivery including changes to support systems, as existing institutional systems and processes may not be sufficiently flexible to accommodate new forms of provision;
- We recommend that in any future experiments or proposals, more attention is paid to the sustainability of provision, including the underpinning funding models, appropriate resourcing of delivery and extent of marketing that will be needed;
- We recommend more evaluative studies on short course provision are carried out, to obtain case studies of positive student experiences with which to demonstrate course impacts, but also to investigate more deeply what constitutes value from a short course.

For funders

- We recommend that any related future funding programmes are timed and designed to minimise participant uncertainty, ensuring that as many underpinning policies or activities

are in place in advance, so there is less scope for contextual issues to impact upon potential outcomes;

- Practically, we recommend that the range of eligible activities for funding, and the timing and duration of funding, are carefully considered so that project outcomes are less reliant on providers' own investments (than in the case of this programme), or that those investments are clearly set out in programme guidance so that they can be addressed in proposals;
- We recommend that the duration of funding aligns with the activities necessary to achieve programme outcomes, and that evaluations are designed so as to enable greater assessment of key post-activity outcomes.