

How technology can help meet the challenges of two-year degrees

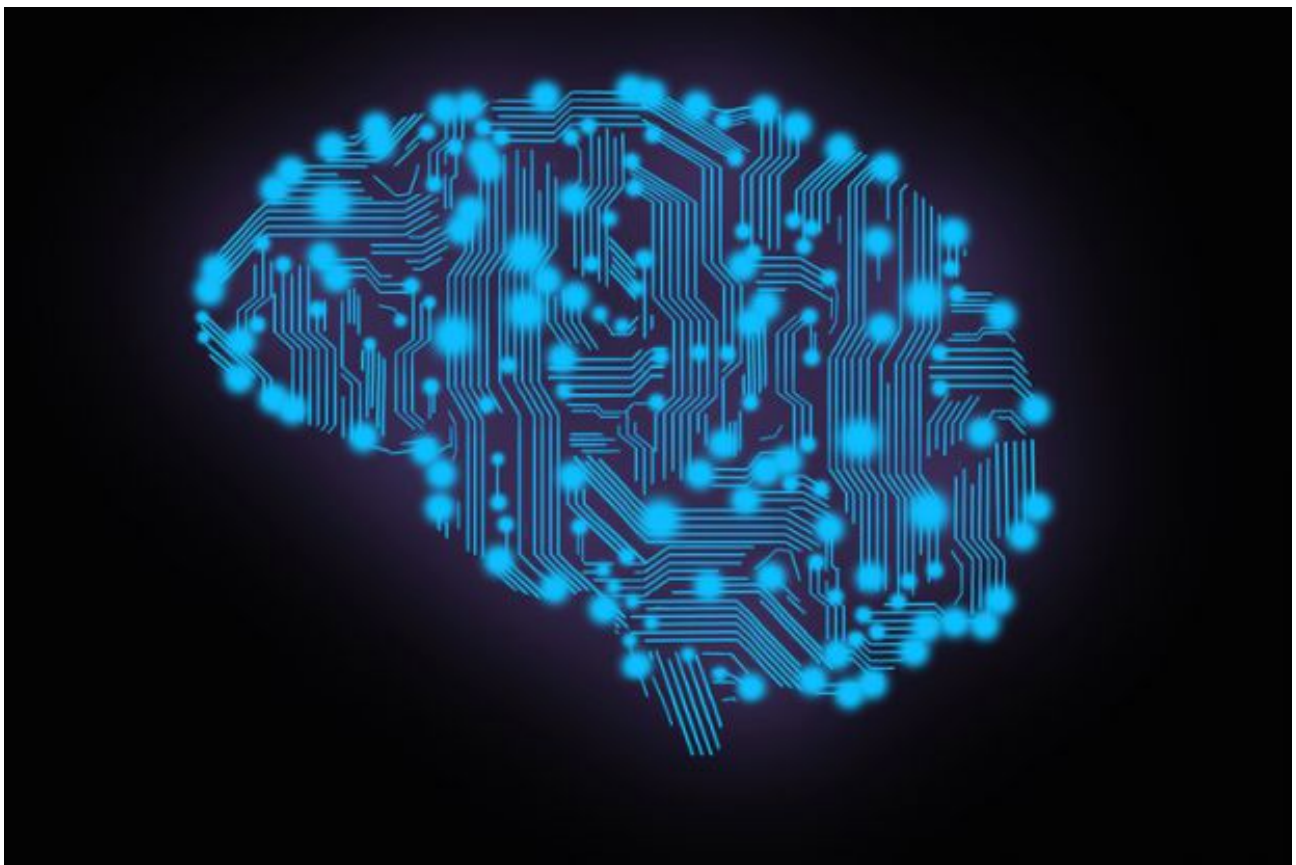
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Joel Mullan shares some of the ways that digital technologies could address the challenges posed by accelerated degree courses

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- By [Joel Mullan](#)



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As Phil Baty's [recent blog](#) makes clear, there is huge range of opinion in the UK higher education sector about the government's wish to see [more universities offering accelerated degrees](#).

To their proponents, they provide students, particularly mature students with existing work experience, with an opportunity to save on living costs and enter the labour market faster. To their detractors, they are [detrimental to the student experience](#) and academic quality, introducing time pressures that reduce opportunities for informal interaction with staff, subject societies and non-curricular seminars and lectures, not to mention social activities.

Regardless of your views of the merits or otherwise of accelerated provision, it is clear that delivering two-year degrees will, for many universities, involve overcoming significant practical challenges. The government's own [review](#) of the evidence on accelerated degrees, conducted by the Institute of Employment Studies and published last year, identifies many of the most pertinent barriers. At Jisc, the sector's edtech organisation, we have recently been exploring how digital technologies might be used to overcome some of these practical hurdles.

The most significant barrier reported by institutions has been the higher cost associated with developing and delivering two-year degrees. While the government has proposed increasing the maximum fee for two-year degrees to £11,000 to overcome this, making effective use of digital technology to deliver teaching could be another way to reduce costs.

[Our report](#), published with the Higher Education Policy Institute last year, highlighted research evidence from technology-powered curriculum redesign projects in the US that had simultaneously improved learning outcomes and reduced costs. In a similar vein, John Hennessy, the former president of [Stanford University](#), estimates that blended learning can reduce the cost of classes “by around 15 per cent...without an accompanying reduction in quality”.

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Another significant practical hurdle concerns how students will be taught over the long summer period between the first and second years – when many academic staff are focused on fieldwork, research and other non-teaching activities. Some institutions have overcome this by using such time for project-based work, where students collaborate with their peers on coursework.

There are other potential solutions. With the rise of global partnerships, could we see students given opportunities to study modules offered by partner universities in the southern hemisphere, who work throughout much of our summer? Regardless of the approach adopted, new or existing staff will be needed to lead provision outside of ordinary term-time.

In terms of access to and availability of facilities during the summer, technology can help. One example from further education is an augmented reality app used by [music production students](#) at [Leeds College of Music](#) that can be used outside of designated classroom activity, as well as during taught practical sessions in the studio.

Concern has also been expressed over the difficulty of covering three years' worth of content in a reduced timescale. We expect that this could be tackled by using “flipped classroom” approaches, whereby students work through online content ahead of classes. This allows lecture time to be used more effectively, with face-to-face sessions focused on exploring areas of particular difficulty rather than being used for the transmission of course content.

To date, accelerated provision has been concentrated in a relatively small number of institutions. As more universities offer accelerated degrees, there will inevitably be a period of

adjustment as universities discover what kind of teaching patterns and practices work best. For the growing number of universities who have invested in learning analytics capabilities, there will be an opportunity for using data to give insights at an early stage into the types of teaching and activity design that work best for accelerated provision.

If universities get two-year degrees right, there are likely to be spillover benefits for traditional provision. Digital elements that work in accelerated provision could be incorporated into conventional three-year courses.

Staffordshire University, one of the pioneers of accelerated learning in the UK, maintains that offering this type of course has enhanced the institution's digital provision in teaching more generally, acting as a "catalyst for the development of technology enhanced learning".

There are certainly challenges on the horizon with delivering accelerated degree programmes, but we are not coming to the table cold; universities already have a plethora of experience in using technology to circumvent barriers to learning. As a sector, we have the knowledge to make this venture into two-year degrees a success. Whatever the outcomes, we shouldn't shy away from the opportunity to let technology play a leading role in bridging the gaps.

Joel Mullan is head of policy development at Jisc.

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