

Higher education short course trial – Challenge Competition

The Department for Education (DfE) has asked the Office for Students (OfS) to launch a Challenge Competition to trial higher education short courses. This is a key part of the government’s approach to delivering the Lifelong Loan Entitlement.

This note provides initial information for OfS registered providers and other stakeholders, including employers, on the aims of the Competition, available funding, an indication of likely competition criteria, and next steps and timelines. Further information will also be available in a webinar at 1100 on 26 July. You can register for the webinar on our events page:

www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/events/of-s-challenge-competition-higher-education-short-course-trial/. Full guidance will be issued in August 2021.

Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, said:

‘Regardless of their age or personal circumstances, many learners need to access courses in a more flexible way.

‘We want to empower individuals to take control of their learning by giving them real choice in how and when they choose to study. To fit study around work, family, and personal commitments. To retrain and upskill as their needs and the needs of the economy changes.

‘We are excited to be trialling higher education short courses across Levels 4 to 6 in an important step as we build towards the Lifelong Loan Entitlement.

‘Around 20 providers will have the opportunity to participate in a unique trial bringing together employers, providers, and learners to test a truly ambitious and world leading system.’

Background

The Prime Minister announced in September 2020 the introduction of a Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE). The LLE will be introduced from 2025, providing individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime. It will be available for studies extending from individual modules to full years and programmes of study at higher technical and degree levels (Levels 4 to 6), regardless of the type of further or higher education provider.

Under this flexible system, the intention is for people to be able to build up learning over their lifetime and choose how and when they study to acquire new skills.

In preparation for LLE delivery from 2025, the OfS is launching a Challenge Competition that will distribute funding for the development of new, short courses at Levels 4 to 6, which will be able to capitalise on the LLE. This is an innovative new opportunity for OfS registered providers to offer

prospective students greater choice in how they study, with more flexible options to develop their skills.

The trial is part of the government's piloting of access to a new student finance product especially designed for learners studying shorter, flexible provision in support of the development of the LLE. The government is keen to gather learning from students, providers and employers during the development of the LLE, including reflecting on providers' experiences of adapting and developing flexible and modular courses like the ones proposed as part of this trial.

The trial will test the interest of both students and employers in shorter provision aimed at developing skills needed by employers in key parts of the economy. It will also allow the OfS to understand and test whether the current regulatory system works for this type of provision and whether we would need to adapt our approaches.

A total of up to £2 million will be made available to around 20 providers across the competition. Students studying on short courses developed through the Challenge Competition may be able to access tuition fee loans from the start of academic year 2022-23 through the new student finance product developed by the Student Loans Company (SLC), subject to eligibility criteria.

Eligible providers

OfS registered providers in the Approved (fee cap) category will be eligible to bid for funding through this competition, though a wider range of partners will be able to participate through consortium arrangements. Funding for successful providers will commence in December 2021 and end in March 2022, with the aim that this will support the development of provision that will be delivered from September 2022. Provision developed through and students supported by this competition will fall within the scope of the OfS's existing regulatory requirements.

Funding expectations

We will be seeking to fund high-quality provision across a range of provider settings that will suit the needs of a diverse student body and workforce. We anticipate looking to fund a diverse mix of short courses at Levels 4 to 6 that:

- Support individuals to upskill or reskill while enabling progression to full qualifications (for example, an undergraduate degree at Level 6)
- Meet employer skills needs.

We expect to fund new and innovative short courses that enable flexible, blended learning that co-exists alongside existing employment or other commitments, in a way that has not been possible to deliver within the existing student finance arrangements. We will provide further details on the definitions to be used for short courses in the guidance we publish in August.

Bids to develop provision should respond to clear and evidenced skills needs. We will expect to see evidence of employer partnership, input or support in curriculum design, development or delivery, or other evidence that demonstrates explicit employer support.

We will be looking to fund a wide range of subjects during the trial, through both technical and non-technical courses in areas such as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), education, digital innovation, and healthcare. We will aim to support a balance of different levels of

courses, including courses developed from degree programmes, higher technical qualifications (HTQs) and other Level 4 and 5 qualifications designed to align with occupational standards. We will be keen to consider courses that will help meet the skills needed for Net Zero and will welcome bids to highlight how proposed courses meet this aim. This broad specification is intended to allow providers the scope to develop short courses using their knowledge of local demand and skills needs. The subjects prioritised within this pilot will be aligned with wider government priorities around skills, Net Zero, and public services in key areas. A list of subject and sector priorities will be included within the full guidance published in August.

Following submission, bids will be assessed by OfS officers against the criteria we will publish in August, after which an external panel of experts will review the assessment and make recommendations for which bids to fund. The published assessment criteria are expected to include, but not be limited to, evidence of employer support and active involvement, the extent to which bids address skills needs, and the extent to which providers satisfy the OfS's regulatory requirements for quality and standards. We will also expect funded projects to put in place a robust evaluation plan that will evaluate the effectiveness of the specific courses developed, as well as contribute to the evaluation of the programme as a whole. Detailed bidding and assessment criteria will be published in August as part of the full guidance.

Access to student finance

To support access to short courses developed in this trial, students registering on them may be able to access tuition fee loans through a new student finance product. This will be enabled by the Secretary of State, who will be responsible for designating a list of short courses eligible for student finance.

There will be no upper or lower age limit or prior qualification restrictions (equivalent or lower qualification – ELQ) placed on access to student finance for the purposes of this trial. Students must, though, meet other criteria to be eligible for higher education student finance in England (including that they normally live in England).

Students can access student finance for up to a maximum of four courses, and using their entitlement will not typically impact upon their ability, at a later date, to take out a higher education student finance tuition fee loan (e.g. for an undergraduate degree) as long as they continue to meet the eligibility criteria for that loan.

Trial providers will be required to comply with the SLC requirements for the provision of complete, accurate and timely information for the purpose of student finance administration.

Trial providers will need to meet their obligations in terms of providing accurate information, advice, and guidance to prospective students, and those registered on short courses developed through this competition.

Further guidance on the availability of tuition fee loans will be made available alongside the full guidance we will publish in August.

Next steps and expected competition timeline

We will be holding a webinar on 26 July where we will provide more information about this competition and how to bid for it. The webinar will also invite providers to ask questions about the competition, which will inform our frequently asked questions (FAQs)¹ and the final guidance. To register for the webinar, please visit the event page on our website.²

The funding competition will open in **late August**, with the publication of the full, detailed guidance, and is expected to close in **late September 2021**.

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/funding-for-providers/higher-education-short-course-trial/frequently-asked-questions/.

² Register for the webinar at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/events/ofs-challenge-competition-higher-education-short-course-trial/.