

Shaping the Student Experience Together: 20 Years of Enhancement



Welcome to the Conference

Professor Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal Education,
University of Aberdeen

Heather Innes, President, Highlands & Islands Students'
Association



Increasing Flexibility & Diversity in Higher Education: does quality assurance help or hinder?

Speaker
John Brennan



The UNESCO project

Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education

- An English case study for an international project
- Other nations: Chile, Finland, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Morocco, South Africa
- Pathways involve crossing boundaries, of....
 - subjects, institutions, study methods (face-to-face & online), full-time & part-time, academic & workplace, & national boundaries
 - and learners heading to different destinations

UK HE Policy: 1 system, 4 systems, or no system

- Expansion, diversity and competition as key policy aims
- Traditions of institutional autonomy
- A vertically stratified system

“A more diverse system with considerable institutional autonomy and independence from government control is part of current development strategies which are intended to use market mechanisms to develop and provide diverse tertiary education to meet diverse economic and social needs. A resulting mix of institutions can help with providing flexibility.”
(Senior QAA staff member)



HE Policies for Flexible Learning Pathways in England


- Access and recognition of prior learning
- Articulation and credit transfer
- Crossing educational boundaries
- Part-time learning (numbers declining)

“We have a flexible system but with a number of break points or decision points, the real ones being barriers which result from the autonomy of institutions about who and when to admit, and what and how to teach them. But all of these factors can be overcome if deadline up and the curriculum is organized to permit flexibility. But you have to make choices.”
(UUK staff member)

Making informed choices



A lot of choices for learners

- What, where, when ,why and how to study
 - Prepare for a job? What job? Change job? Update skills?
 - Learn ‘A lot about a little’ or ‘A little about a lot’?
 - Full-time or part-time or a mixture?
 - Face-to face or online or a mixture?
 - Close to home or far away (maybe another country)?
 - Might need to change your mind? Find a different pathway?
 - *Will learners’ choices be ‘informed’ choices?*
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A lot of choices for higher education institutions

- Who decides? Senior management? Heads of Faculties? Staff? Boards of Governors? National Regulatory Bodies? Government?
- Relationships with other institutions? Compete or collaborate?
- Relationships with students? learners? customers? members?
- Business, educational and social factors?
- Recruiting local, national, international students, or a mixture?
- How much freedom to allow students – to cross subject boundaries, duration of study, part-time or full-time, face-to-face or online?
- Meet student needs? Meet social needs? Obtain high rankings?
- **Do what we want? Or Do what we're told?**

Diversity of HE Institutions

- Students: origins, aspirations, achievements, age
- Study methods: full-or part-time, online or offline
- Study content: single, multi or interdisciplinary, or work-based?
- Available pathways – choices, conditions, boundary crossing
- Who decides? – students? teaching staff? departments? senior management? professional advisors (careers? IT etc)?
- Reputations – high or low? Local or national or global?
- Partnerships – with whom? how many? who leads?

HE institutions: some common features

(UNESCO English case studies)

- Autonomous institutions
- Needing to change
- Anxious about reputation
- Business and education
- Blended learning – all providing some online teaching
- Increasing flexibility – what, when and how to study
- Growing importance of ‘professional services’ to support students




Some questions for higher education

- Who makes the key decisions? Are they well-informed?
- Does there need to be more or less diversity?
- If more diversity, who benefits, who provides & who pays?
- Should learning acquired outside of HE be certificated? Who by?
- Flexibility can involve boundary crossing, but there are dangers?
- Do all universities provide lifelong learning? Or just a few?
- What information about learning pathways do students need?
- Will flexibility reduce or reproduce or increase social inequalities?
- Will new HE providers provide new learning pathways?
- What will be the balance and relationships between academic and vocational pathways?



Some recommendations for higher education

1. More attention to the certification of learning
 2. More support for learning at different life stages
 3. More collaboration between individual HE institutions
 4. More collaboration between HE institutions & employers
 5. Student experience needs broadening. Crossing boundaries
 6. International student mobility brings benefits to all. More!
 7. More emphasis needed on 'horizontal differentiation' and less on 'vertical differentiation' of HE institutions
 8. Quality assurance increasingly important, but needs to diversify
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Quality Assurance: some questions

Internal and external QA : who does what?

Quality of what? content? transmission? learning?
outcomes?

Stratify HE: who's best and who's worst?

Regulate or innovate?



Quality Assurance: final questions

QA: policemen or social workers?

Control or support?

Conform or diversify? Innovate and improve?

Business or academic?

Processes or outcomes?



Conclusions from the UNESCO England case study

“Flexible learning pathways need to take learners to their desired destinations. Though sometimes learners may not be sure what their desired destination is. Therefore, they also need a good learning journey, an experience to enjoy.”


“In conclusion, people need flexible learning pathways that can be followed at different life stages. But the danger of flexible pathways is that the learner might get lost. Choices need to be informed choices and people working or studying in higher education need to be well-informed about higher education as a whole and not just the local ‘academic tribe’ of their department or course. But in making choices, whether individuals or institutions, it is important that ‘self interest’ does not always override ‘societal interest’. The concept of the ‘public good’ as central to the life of a university needs to be protected.”

(And is something which quality assurance can deliver.)



Conclusions from UNESCO international project

1. Creating a favourable policy framework for flexible learning pathways

- Develop a comprehensive policy framework for an integrated post-secondary education.
 - Approach flexible learning pathways as a coherent and holistic set of policies and practices
 - Emphasise equity concerns in the national policies on flexible learning pathways
 - Involve stakeholders in the development of policies for flexible learning pathways
 - Improve awareness about flexible learning pathways among stakeholders involved in their implementation
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More UNESCO project conclusions

2. Constructing flexible learning pathways at different stages

- Enable government support and collaboration between sub-sectors to enhance diverse entry pathways to HE
- Develop an overarching policy for the implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- Develop flexible progression of learners through effective transfer systems
- Improve the perception of open and distance learning as being on a par with regular face-to-face academic learning
- Allow MOOCS to bear credits in regular degree programmes
- Create a national credit bank to allow easier validation & storage of credits
- Strengthen pathways for learners to make flexibly transition from higher education to the labour market

More UNESCO project conclusions

3. Supporting flexible learning pathways with appropriate governance tools

- Balance regulation and autonomy to ensure a comprehensive introduction of flexible learning pathways
- Quality assurance should embrace flexible learning pathways as a policy objective
- Create an integrated national qualifications framework system with well-aligned vocational and academic studies
- Promote financial resources to incentivise the implementation of flexible learning pathways
- Use data to monitor and evaluate the implementation and impact of flexible learning pathways
- Guidance during progression can help students to move to higher levels of education and attain better outcomes

More information available from UNESCO's
International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)

IIEP project – Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways
in Higher Education

UK project – Flexible Learning Pathways in British
Higher Education: a decentralised and market based
system

www.iiep.unesco.org/en/institute

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John.brennan@open.ac.uk



Thank you

