



Flexible Student Pathways - Which Way Next?

15 April 2021

We welcomed over 80 delegates to our event, held jointly with the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), providing an opportunity to explore the outcomes of the recent UNESCO IIEP study into Flexible Student Pathways, share practice and shape institutional policy.

A view from UNESCO

Dr Michaela Martin, Programme Specialist at IIEP-UNESCO, described flexible learning pathways (FLPs) as routes for getting *into*, *through* and *out of* higher education. She highlighted the key questions that guided the research, considering the policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments and practices that impact the development, application and effectiveness of the flexible learning pathways available in a number of countries. Michaela noted that providers in the UK generally benefit from greater levels of autonomy than providers in other countries and, as such, UK providers have a strong role to play in designing and implementing flexible pathways for students.

Emeritus Professor John Brennan, author of [Flexible Learning Pathways in British Higher Education](#), identified both the opportunities and challenges that accompany the UK's diverse institutional systems, programmes and experiences. He set out a series of questions for providers and students to consider in relation to student pathways, emphasising that the ever-increasing variety of opportunities and choices available to students made it more important to think about how students will inform their choices and where that information will come from.

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

Emeritus Professor John Brennan

Provider perspectives

- Focused on the creation of intellectual identity and practical expertise, Professor Diana Spencer introduced the University of Birmingham's Liberal Arts and Natural Science (LANS) model. Supported by academic and professional services resource, students choose from core modules in over 100 subjects to build on individual interests in years 1-2 (breadth), typically study abroad in year 3 (stepping back), before majoring in a specialist subject in year 4 (expertise).
- Describing a 400% gain in their number of online learners over the past year, Duncan Kemp (FutureLearn) explained that Gen Z are leading the charge in online learning - either seeking to change or enhance their careers. Sharing information from [The Future of Learning Report](#), Duncan emphasised how multiple pathways can make it easier for people to undertake self-directed learning, short courses,

micro-credentials or degrees in ways and at times to suit their work and life commitments.

- Professor Paul Crawshaw introduced the Teesside University College Partnership (TUCP), a place-based further education/higher education partnership for the design and delivery of higher-level skills across the Tees Valley. With 1938 individuals achieving higher education qualifications through TUCP over the past three years, this distinctive network approach offers courses in a diverse range of locations within Tees Valley according to student demand and employer need.

Policy panel

Governments across the UK are united in their enthusiasm for considering greater flexibility in student journeys. Our lively policy discussion was led by colleagues from Scotland, Wales and England and chaired by Vicki Stott (QAA). Panellists were James Dunphy (Scottish Funding Council), Cliona O'Neill (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales) and Jack Thomlinson (Department for Education).

- Colleagues emphasised the value of strong articulation models which aim to provide greater parity across provision in colleges and universities, making pathways coherent to learners at all stages and providing much needed clarity around their different benefits. All of the panellists expressed a desire to work with students, providers and employers in implementing their various approaches to stimulating greater flexibility.
- It was highlighted that DfE intended to consult on the scope of the proposed lifelong loan entitlement later in 2021.
- The panel highlighted the importance of quality assurance for all qualifications, irrespective of their size or mode of delivery. Institutional regulations need to be taken into account, particularly if credit is being transferred from different providers. Having a clear focus on quality provides students with security that flexible learning approaches are equivalent to more traditional degree study patterns.

Delegates raised a number of key questions during the event:

- How best to track student attainment data and ensure consistency, particularly when measuring small amounts of credit attained over a number of years? The panel recognised there are challenges around data collection and recording, with a potential need to measure data consistently so that the same credit values are being clearly recorded by all. The panel also emphasised the importance of collecting the right data at the right time.
- How can the 'currency' of credit be addressed when qualifications are built up over time? Panellists acknowledged that there are still a number of issues to address with regard to when and how qualifications might be consolidated into a single degree, for example. It is not necessarily the case that all students who study small volumes of credit over time are doing so with a view to completing a whole degree.
- How can the quality of the award as a whole be assured if it is studied over time and involving a number of different providers? Is it only ever possible to quality assure the individual short courses? This may be where approaches like the recognition of prior learning are engaged so the final 'awarding' provider has responsibility for assuring the quality of the qualification overall.

- How does the notion of flexible learning work for the 'typical' undergraduate cohorts of school/college leavers? Is there a danger that all the talk of low-value degrees will push students towards degrees for specific employment and work against flexible approaches? The panel emphasised that the drive toward greater flexibility is about widening access to higher education for different types of students. Some students in the diverse cohort might want the fastest journey to employment, but others will want to keep more options open. Flexibility leads to more options and it is important to ensure those options are of appropriate quality, experience and outcomes.

Next steps

Dr Suzanne Grant Lewis (Director, IIEP-UNESCO) and Dr Ailsa Crum (QAA) confirmed their intention to offer further joint events, linked to each organisation's future work streams. Further information about IIEP-UNESCO's research in this area can be found on their [website](#).

For QAA, the event links to an ongoing strand of activity focused on flexible delivery. A related [roundtable](#) discussion in December 2020 was held jointly with HEPI and attended by the Prime Minister's special adviser, Professor Alison Wolf.

The most recent edition of QAA's [Quality Compass](#) spotlights micro-credentials and QAA intends to produce a characteristics statement for micro-credentials to support the sector in designing and offering these qualifications. Materials from the February Quality Insights conference - including the keynote address by Emeritus Professor Beverley Oliver, 'Micro-Credentials: Connected to Value' - are also available on our [Membership Resources site](#) (*accessible to QAA Members*).

In addition, QAA is supporting a number of [Collaborative Enhancement Projects](#), two of which focus on aspects of flexible student pathways. One project, led by Bath College, explores a model for recognition and transfer of credit between providers of different types.

Resources from this event

A selection of resources related to this event are now available:

- IIEP-UNESCO: [Policies for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education - Taking Stock of Good Practices Internationally](#)
- National case studies and articles on flexible learning pathways are also available: www.iiep.unesco.org/en/our-expertise/flexible-learning-pathways-higher-education
- QAA: [Flexible Student Pathways - Which Way Next?](#) PowerPoint presentation (*accessible to QAA Members*)
- [The Scottish Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\) Framework](#)
- [The Future of Learning report](#)