

**LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #21**

Flexible learning and  
teaching

Thematic Peer Group Report

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# What is “flexible learning and teaching”?

In recent years, demand for more flexible learning and flexibility in learning paths has become a major trend at European higher education institutions (HEIs). According to the European University Association (EUA) *Trends 2018* report, 80% of HEIs surveyed across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) see a need for more flexible provision for degree programmes, and 62% of them confirm a growing demand for short-term (non-degree) learning opportunities. Moreover, more than half of HEIs surveyed have observed increased participation in flexible learning offers over the past three years.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, with some countries (such as Norway and Finland) promoting lifelong learning and continuing education as a national priority, there is a pressure, if not an obligation, for HEIs to engage with (more) flexible learning. However, implementation at institutions may still prove complex: there are no universally agreed standards, and little guidance can be found for HEIs that are struggling to identify what would work for them. Approaches may vary between HEIs in the same country and even between study programmes at the same institution.

The Thematic Peer Group “Flexible learning and teaching” (hereafter “the group”)<sup>2</sup> explored how institutions’ policies and practices, as well as literature, have addressed the concept of flexible learning. Flexibility in education is found to be multifaceted and encompassing various dimensions, such as the use of time, instructional content, entry requirements, delivery, instructional approach, assessment, resources and support. The common denominator among a wealth of existing definitions is the aim of such learning: to provide learners with autonomy over when, where and how they learn.

The group found that multiple aspects, narratives and perspectives about flexible learning are present in the higher education sector, and even within the same institution it can be difficult to reach a shared definition. Two main aspects should be underlined:

## 1. Flexibility for learning, within a (traditionally full-time) study programme

This would entail, for the institution:

- ◆ flexible ways to achieve a study programme’s learning outcomes (in terms of time-to-degree, workload, obligation for students to be on-site, etc.),
- ◆ flexible learning and teaching approaches used (synchronous/asynchronous modalities, hybrid learning, assessment of student learning, etc.). Importantly, flexible learning cannot be reduced to one approach over others.
- ◆ managing students’ individualised study paths,
- ◆ managing the teaching workload and how teachers can accommodate flexibility.

<sup>1</sup> Gaebel, M. & Zhang, T., 2018, *Trends 2018. Learning and Teaching in the European Higher Education Area* (Brussels, EUA), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> The list of group members can be found in Annex 1.

## 2. Flexibility in the format of non-degree credits or learning provision, which may or may not be stackable to a degree

HEIs that offer such learning paths engage in continuing education and, generally, lifelong learning offers when doing so. This endeavour may also relate to the institution's inclusion agenda, with a commitment to widening access for students from diverse backgrounds (working students, students with caring responsibilities, and so on). Such offers can take the form of short courses, micro-credentials, learning certificates, etc.

To the group, curricular and extra-curricular arrangements for flexibility intertwine, with no clear demarcation line nor contradiction between the two. For instance, HEIs may find it easier to build up flexibility in learning from existing degree programmes, but the pedagogical approaches developed in this context can also be used in extra-curricular, non-degree offers. Therefore, the group decided to explore flexible learning and teaching in the context of study programmes and non-degree learning offers, as both contribute to make flexibility in education a means of achieving tomorrow's vision for education (and not a goal per se). In a context where more and more demands and offers for skills arise in society and the economy, it is crucial for HEIs to address flexibility in learning and teaching and to give full value to it as a development path for designing their education offer.



### WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

The group reviewed a selected number of publications available in scientific and practice-based literature (see list in Annex 2), and identified the following common points of interest:

- ◆ The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the demand for flexible learning in higher education, emphasising the importance of the adaptability of education systems.
- ◆ Flexible adult learning provision is essential in supporting individuals, enterprises and societies to adapt to labour market changes and manage disruptions. HEIs are well placed to provide it.
- ◆ Financial support, but also policy frameworks and lifelong learning policies, can facilitate the implementation of flexible learning paths and encourage participation, especially among low-skilled adults.
- ◆ Flexible learning entails a “multi-modal” provision (online, onsite, hybrid, blended learning), hence it does not mean online learning only. It relates to how HEIs manage digital learning and organise part-time education.
- ◆ Teachers play a crucial role in making flexible learning a success, and teacher training courses should consider pedagogical aspects to make flexibility a reality, as well as approaches to inclusive education, to address the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.
- ◆ High-quality student support, such as career guidance and study orientation services at HEIs, is essential in helping individuals navigate flexible learning options and make informed choices. More generally, support from HEIs' administrative services and their adequate training are crucial in making the students' learning experience truly flexible: it is a matter not only of teaching, but also of how teaching is organised.



## WHAT STUDENTS SAY

In order to further understand what is expected from flexible learning, group members conducted a survey among students from their respective institutions. The survey collected a total of 455 individual answers (see Annex 3 for more information on the profile of the sample).

For students, flexible learning should mostly entail:

- ◆ flexibility in the choice of topics and subjects of study,
- ◆ a hybrid way of learning,
- ◆ remote learning options,
- ◆ multiple modes, methods and technologies, such as online learning platforms, video lectures, interactive simulations and blended learning approaches.

Students see that their institutions already provide flexible learning (average of 3.6 on a scale of 1 to 6). Nevertheless, they would recommend that their institution improve flexible learning by offering more individualised schedules and electives/options of subjects, online classes (especially for traditional lectures), short modules, and more blended and flipped learning approaches (recorded lectures and use of contact hours for questions and practical work, interactive simulations, etc.).

Students are vocal about the benefits of flexible learning: for them, the focus is on easier and more flexible management of their time and the opportunity, for instance, to combine their studies with a job. They also appreciate a more personalised learning experience, as well as the opportunity to engage in a way that suits their learning style and to take more control of their education.

The challenges of flexible learning for students lie mostly with time management and scheduling, self-motivation and discipline. This matches exactly what teachers believe would be challenging for students. It is noticeable that students from all degree cycles answered in a similar way; there is no significant difference between, for instance, bachelor's degree students and doctoral candidates.



## WHAT TEACHERS SAY

Following the collection of feedback from students, the group conducted another survey to compare teachers' views. The survey gathered a total of 70 responses (see Annex 3).

Teachers tend to agree with students that flexible learning should entail multiple modes, methods and technologies, and grant importance to flexibility within a study programme. In addition, teachers consider that exchanges between universities can contribute to making learning more flexible. In their view, flexible learning should also comprise continuous review and feedback so that they can identify areas of improvement and adjust learning strategies accordingly.

Interestingly, teachers are slightly less positive (2.8 on a scale of 1 to 6) than students regarding their institutions' provision of flexible learning. They recommend that their institution improve flexible learning by offering more individualised schedules and electives/options of subjects, online classes and short modules.

Teachers agree that a more personalised and engaging learning experience is a benefit for students. To them, students are better prepared for a lifelong journey of learning and growth.

But teachers see to a lesser extent the need for some students to take a job at the same time as studying.

When asked what the benefits of flexible learning would be for them, teachers mostly see the opportunity to continuously learn themselves (by keeping up to date with new technologies, for instance), and the improvement in their own engagement and motivation to teach.

Teachers are also concerned about a potential challenge of flexible learning, namely work overload. Adjusting teaching to the needs of a heterogeneous student group requires more time and preparation.

To summarise, students and teachers seem to agree on important points, that is, what flexible learning may entail and how it could be improved. However, there are also differences in perceptions that point to a need for better interaction between the two groups, so as to better understand each other's needs and expectations. Flexibility for students means that institutions and teachers need to organise flexible learning, possibly resulting in work overload and organisational dilemmas. For students, flexibility also means the opportunity to better combine study with other aspects of their lives. It is crucial for institutions to consider this point, as it is directly connected to student retention, but also student recruitment.

# How to address flexible learning and teaching: challenges and examples of practices

Based on their exploration of the multiple meanings of “flexible learning” and on their institutions’ practices, the group identified the following challenges for HEIs.

## 1. Managing “flexibility” as an institution

This challenge relates to the way(s) HEIs design and implement learning and teaching strategies. How can the institution achieve a shared vision of flexible learning that meets expectations, and identify resources and responsibilities that align with this vision? Managing flexibility means that many members of the university community need to be involved in making it happen: leadership, academic staff, students and administrative staff. Better coordination may be required from administrative services. The different levels of engagement from faculties can also be a challenge.

Becoming more flexible implies increased demands for different needs (up to the individualisation of learning paths). This is not easy to set up and manage for institutions, in terms of organisation, schedules, functional tools, etc.

The “business model” or “funding model” for flexible learning paths also needs to be thought through. Public funding for higher education is traditionally based on the headcount of full-time students, which is challenged when the concept of the “full-time student” becomes blurred by more flexible provision.

Quality assurance (QA) regimes and internal QA processes are usually well established for “traditional”, full-time education provision at HEIs, but can either be under another QA regime or be non-existent for non-degree education provided at universities.

### ➔ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

#### **Designing a part-time bachelor’s programme at Hochschule München University of Applied Sciences (HM) (Germany)**

HM Hochschule München established a part-time bachelor’s programme in social work to meet an increasing demand for flexibility from students with profiles different from those of traditional students (parents, working students, mature students, etc.). The programme combines practical and theoretical skills. Currently, 73 students are enrolled in the programme; they can complete their bachelor’s degree with 15–20 ECTS per semester, as in a full-time programme, but with more time-to-degree. When designing the programme, the institution realised that offering such part-time provision would require much more than spacing out an existing degree, and that more attention should be given to part-time students. A separate branch of student services has been established to deal with the specific needs of part-time students. Collaboration has increased between administrative units, such as student services and the admission office.

There is still potential for further improvements, such as simplifying the procedure for switching from a full-time to a part-time degree. But based on this experience, HM has already established a set of [guidelines](#) for supporting teachers and departments in designing part-time bachelor’s programmes, and several part-time degrees at HM now follow a unified structure.

#### EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

##### **Navigating between flexible degree programmes and continuing education at the University of Skövde (Sweden)**

The University of Skövde addresses needs for flexible learning through opportunities for degree students to personalise their degree programmes (notably through electives), and offering courses for industry professionals in a continuing education perspective. Degree students are supported by a system of student advisers and programme coordinators to guide them through the choices available in their study programmes. Courses for professionals are shorter and are offered online, with pre-recorded material, with the opportunity to attend physical seminars with teachers, and flexibility in pedagogical approaches and assessment formats. In addition to upskilling professionals, the university sees such courses as an opportunity to transfer knowledge from research to the broader society.

Support for all teachers is offered in the form of 15 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System credits (ECTS) dedicated to pedagogy (including innovative approaches to tackle flexible learning), and a bootcamp for teachers responsible for courses for industry professionals. All teachers benefit from having 20% of their time dedicated to teaching competence development. Follow-up on training and competence development takes place through dialogues with teachers. The bootcamp is also recognised as a good way to share knowledge and define a standard for education offered to industry professionals.

In implementing these practices, the university has realised how important it is to define new and clear administrative processes (for admission and student affairs, for instance), to boost capacity and capability for lifelong learning. Handling such an endeavour requires commitment from university leadership and management – it cannot rely on individuals alone.

#### EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

##### **Making lifelong learning courses and quality assurance work together at Masaryk University (Czechia)**

Masaryk University is considering how its existing QA system, which was established for degree programmes, could handle lifelong learning courses and programmes. Coping with both types of education provision is not easy, as they may follow quite different design and delivery processes. (Traditional) degree programmes are part of a stable system that is structured and has defined processes for curricula, subject to approval by an Internal Evaluation Board, and clear procedures for creating, changing and terminating programmes. By contrast, lifelong learning courses and programmes follow different assessment criteria, and have often been created for different reasons and to fulfil different objectives. One difficulty is the number of disparate courses across the institution: faculties can offer quite different types of lifelong learning activities, and their total number across the institution may even be difficult to ascertain.

The university QA office is currently planning a three-step process for QA to better address lifelong learning: working on common terminology (covering various ways to understand what falls under “flexible” or “lifelong” learning); bringing together people with responsibilities in lifelong learning; and communicating the benefits of incorporating lifelong learning offers into the existing QA system.

Masaryk University is certainly not the only institution addressing this challenge. EUA’s Trends 2018 study found that lifelong learning provision is quality assured in the same way as traditional provision in only 35% of HEIs across the EHEA.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gaebel, M. & Zhang, T., 2018, *Trends 2018: Learning and teaching in the European Higher Education Area* (Brussels, European University Association), p. 52.



## 2. Designing flexible learning modes and supporting teachers

Designing flexible learning and learning offers in an appropriate way poses questions in terms of learning design, management, and education accessibility and attractiveness. HEIs may struggle with organising hybrid or blended learning, and with managing the cultural shift from classroom teaching to different ways of managing time and infrastructure. Advocating for the value of each learning mode (being together in a classroom, doing asynchronous work, etc.) is still new in many places. The common view at HEIs may still be that physical teaching is more “reliable” in terms of quality and expected outcomes.

### ↻ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

#### “Engineers of the Future” at Eindhoven University of Technology (Netherlands)

Self-directed learning is an important element of Eindhoven University of Technology’s Vision for Education. Providing options for students to select courses and develop competencies supports self-direction. The redesign of the bachelor programmes in engineering, “Bachelor College 2.0 curriculum”, encompasses these educational concepts. With the new curriculum, students acquire deep(er) disciplinary knowledge and expertise, but also reflect on their learning and capacity for lifelong learning, develop their ability to work and collaborate in an interdisciplinary setting, and define and develop a professional and personal identity. The curriculum was revised to provide Thematic Learning Areas (TLAs) so that students can broaden their scope from other disciplines. In addition, the focus on multi- and interdisciplinary projects is emphasized in open-ended challenges where students work in collaborative and multidisciplinary teams. Another example of flexibilization of education at TU/e is the extra-curricular activities of the “Student Teams”. TU/e Student Teams are interdisciplinary organisations of students that challenge themselves to tackle significant societal challenges by developing innovative technology. The university now looks forward to seeing the results and impact on the students’ self-directed learning.

### ↻ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE

#### Transforming assessment in mathematics teaching at the University of Agder (Norway)

Final assessments in mathematics education at the University of Agder used to have a failure rate of more than 40%. One attempt to change the culture of maths teaching has been to replace the high-stakes final assessment with a much more flexible approach, where assessment is more formative and built into the course design. The aim was also to encourage the students to start working on mathematics earlier in the semester of the course. Under this approach, four individual and digital tests per course have been developed, and students can take each of them several times, with the idea that students should take their exam “when they are ready”. As a result, the failure rate dropped from 44% to 12%. Lessons learnt from the experience point to the overall question of how institutions design and implement systematic approaches to enhance learning and teaching, while engaging a critical mass of teachers, if not all of them, in change processes. University leadership responsible for deciding on resource allocation need to be involved, as do strategic decision-makers with a say in curriculum design.

Embarking on (more) flexible learning also means that the relations between students and teachers could change. How should teachers be prepared and trained for this shift? Is training needed for all teachers, or should HEIs define priorities (and which ones)? Teachers would need training in digital competences,<sup>4</sup> learning design (for courses, study programmes, lab practices, etc.), and generally understanding how different students learn in different learning environments. How can institutions best provide such training, and support teachers?

<sup>4</sup> This was the focus of a Thematic Peer Group in 2023: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/1063:digitally-competent-teachers-thematic-peer-group-report.html>

**EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE****Small steps towards flexibility at the Universidade de Tras-os-Montes e Alto Douro (Portugal)**

The university has started to engage with flexible learning through a number of measures, including the following:

- Students can go part-time (30 ECTS per year, with a reduction of 50% of annual tuition fees).
- Students can take any additional course and have it added to their diploma supplement or credited in another degree programme that the student takes.
- Support is provided for extra-curricular activities (some of which can be included in the diploma supplement).

In addition, the university provides two online degree programmes jointly with the Universidade Aberta (the Portuguese open university), which are mostly based on asynchronous learning activities. There are also attempts to introduce more flexibility into the learning journeys of degree students. However, the university recognises that these measures have an impact on only a limited number of students, and mostly at master's and doctoral levels.

One clearly identified challenge for increasing engagement with and the impact of flexible learning is that it takes additional time from teachers and requires teacher training – in a context where the number of academic staff is already insufficient in some subject areas. The university is currently building capacity, notably by creating a technical support team for asynchronous and online teaching, introducing mandatory courses (provided by the Universidade Aberta) for teachers involved in joint programmes, and organising online modules to address teachers' needs.

As an additional challenge, national QA procedures for programme accreditations are currently not flexibility-friendly. Curricular changes towards flexible arrangements entail resubmission for accreditation, which takes time and resources. For flexible learning to be a national priority, procedures for external QA and for curriculum design must support it.

### 3. Managing expectations and demands from society

Flexible learning offered by universities yields potential for increased and better interactions with actors in society and the economy. The current policy context gives a lot of attention to upskilling and reskilling, and generally to universities playing their part in responding to the skill demands of the labour market and society. However, HEIs feel pressure from students, the labour market and policy makers, while they often lack additional/appropriate resources to address such demands. Consequently, universities try to accommodate the demands within existing frameworks and with existing resources, which may be unfit for properly addressing flexible learning (e.g. public funding model, lack of support for increased needs in digitalisation). The dialogue with external stakeholders (local authorities, companies) may be uneasy: the immediacy of skill needs may conflict with the HEIs' concept of curriculum/course design.<sup>5</sup> Existing practices such as work-based learning (in partnership with companies) and community-based learning<sup>6</sup> could serve as examples for developing more flexible learning modes/paths.

At the same time, there is an open field for competition between HEIs and private, for-profit operators. It can be complex to publicly explain the difference and the added value that a university offer makes in terms of recognition and learning gain. This raises the overall question of the role of universities in lifelong learning.

<sup>5</sup> A 2020 Thematic Peer Group worked on "Skills and employability demands" for learning and teaching: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/962:meeting-skills-and-employability-demands.html/>

<sup>6</sup> One example among others in Europe is the Campus Engage initiative, based at the Irish Universities Association: [www.campusengage.ie](http://www.campusengage.ie).

**↻ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE****Revising study programmes with inputs from the social and economic environment at the Wrocław University of Economics and Business (Poland)**

At the university, the interplay between two types of bodies has facilitated the revision of study programmes based on inputs from students, academic staff and business representatives. The faculty councils, as part of their responsibility for monitoring the quality, developing learning outcomes and preparing changes in curricula, analyse potential and actual issues related to the implementation of curricula, and how compatible the learning outcomes are with the needs of the labour market. In addition, [the Business Cooperation Center](#) assists students in identifying their professional and personal potential, and in finding employment opportunities. By using the full potential of the two bodies, the university has been able to better integrate the considerations from companies and the business world into education pathways, and to introduce new learning modules in some study programmes. One remaining challenge is to train and prepare teachers, supervisors and tutors in an appropriate way. The university is currently considering internships at other universities with similar study programmes.

**↻ EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE****Addressing the country's need for teachers by offering micro-degrees at Tallinn University (Estonia)**

Estonia faces challenges in school teacher education: it is difficult to attract young people into the profession, and there is currently a number of subject teachers in schools who do not have formal qualifications to teach, especially in mathematics and science. To contribute to solving these challenges, the School of Educational Sciences at Tallinn University offers the opportunity for practitioners without a teaching qualification to acquire this, while taking into account their work experience and previous education. Admission procedures consider prior experience and provide for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). Studying while working at the same time is possible through individualised learning paths for each student. Learning takes the form of a series of "micro-degrees", with flexibility in terms of subject choices, digital learning, work-based learning, part-time studying opportunities, etc. Students can graduate upon completion of a series of "micro-degrees", with a choice of options to complete their final assessment. The university has observed strong motivation among students and has learnt from the practice the importance of trusting the students in their learning journey.

# How to get ready for flexible learning: recommendations

The group sees the development of flexible learning as an essential condition for the future of learning at universities. Thus, the group offers the following recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATION #1: THE INSTITUTION'S STRATEGY AND CAPACITY BUILDING FOR FLEXIBLE LEARNING**

**Institutions should promote a culture of flexibility and adaptability that is fit for their purpose, and accordingly encourage innovation and experimentation when and where possible, while keeping the institution's missions and values in focus.**

**To do so, institutions should allocate appropriate time and resources to define what "flexible learning" means for them, in a way that promotes ownership among key stakeholders (students, academic and administrative staff) and can be worked on throughout the institution.**

- "Flexible learning" may hold different meanings, each of which leads to different priorities and implementation approaches, even within the same institution. It is crucial that institutions and their constituencies (staff, students, leadership, faculties) work together towards gaining a full picture of what the institution already offers (activities, policies, infrastructure and resources), and what it aims to offer in the future. In this regard, institutions should make clear what exactly "flexibility" offers to students, and what it does not.
- In order to overcome fragmentation of services and policies within institutions, the demand for flexible learning (from students, prospective students and society) needs to be identified through feedback from current students and alumni, and by engaging with external stakeholders to understand their perspectives on flexibility (employers, industry representatives, governmental agencies, etc.). This review needs to take into account the different standpoints and concerns of different stakeholders. Teachers and administrative staff may have concerns that are not visible to students, and vice versa.
- Input from all stakeholders helps the institution to define clear, identifiable priorities, and develop an appropriate and comprehensive strategy that highlights what flexible learning means for the institution and its stakeholders. This strategy should outline the institution's vision and goals, and a roadmap for implementation. Areas that require enhancement or adaptation should be identified.
- The conversation on appropriate resources, structures and processes needs to take place in full partnership with academic and administrative staff who are already involved in flexible learning, or who are in some way connected with flexible learning (student administrative services, IT support staff, etc.).



## How to do it?

Here are some concrete suggestions for curriculum design and delivery:

### Establish an institutional task force

- With representatives from academic and administrative staff, students, leadership, etc.
- Responsible for defining flexible learning and developing the strategy

### Engage the community for review and strategy building

- Surveys, focus groups, workshops involving all constituencies and stakeholders
- To understand their perspectives, expectations, concerns, priorities
- Same for external stakeholders

### Benchmarking best practices

- Look at what other institutions do for flexible learning
- Study best practices to grasp different approaches and their outcomes (what works, what does not)

### Communication and transparency

- Throughout this process, keep all stakeholders informed about the progress and decisions
- Engage in regular dialogue to address concerns and gather additional feedback

### Don't forget the feedback and enhancement loop

- Implement feedback mechanisms from all constituencies, including external stakeholders
- Flexible learning may evolve over time. Establish a process for continuous review and enhancement, to ensure that the institution remains aligned with its defined priorities

- Institutional QA mechanisms need to give proper attention to flexible learning, with regular review and adjustment processes based on the evolving needs of teachers and students.
- Existing national regulations or frameworks, notably for QA and the funding of non-degree courses and lifelong learning provision, may not support flexible learning. Institutions should establish a constructive and collaborative dialogue with policy makers and responsible authorities to communicate their needs and concerns, but also to present their solutions.
- What “flexibility” means to the institution needs to be visible across it and to external audiences (including prospective students), as do the personal benefits (for students and staff) associated with it

## Recommendation #2: The students' agency

**Institutions should address students' agency to make best use of "flexibility". To this end, student partnership should become more systematic, and students should be empowered to make informed decisions about their learning paths.**

- The level of autonomy and maturity in managing their own learning paths may vary widely among students, depending on their personal and prior experience, and study cycle. Students need to develop agency to make informed choices offered by flexible learning in their study programme. Learning outcomes addressing autonomy, time management and self-regulation should be integrated into their curriculum in the form of workshops, project-based learning or other activities. Students should be encouraged to reflect on how each course contributes to their overall skill development.
- Students also need to learn, and reflect on, what their future job may look like and what skills it may require. Clear learning outcomes for each course and career guidance and counselling services are useful in supporting students to explore potential career paths and the skills needed for these, as well as to identify suitable learning paths.
- Students need to recognise the importance of developing transferable skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving and communication, which are useful for any future career choice. Such transferable skills need to be clearly identified in the description of learning outcomes in their curriculum.
- Institutions should encourage students to support and mentor each other in making informed choices and managing their learning paths. They may support (peer-)learning communities where students can share experiences and insights.
- Students need handy resources to develop their study habits and self-directed learning strategies. In addition to peer mentoring, tutoring and coaching opportunities, a proper learning management system will help. Another resource is to help students create personalised learning plans, to make them reflect on the alignment between their learning choices and their education and professional goals. Such plans could include their choice of elective courses, extra-curricular activities, internships and any other skill development opportunity.

## Recommendation #3: Curriculum design and delivery

**Processes for curriculum design need to fit the purpose and expected outcomes of flexible learning paths that may differ from traditional study programmes.**

- The student voice is crucial in designing any curriculum that integrates flexibility. Curriculum design needs to be student-centred, focusing on student needs and learning outcomes; involving students in the design; creating feedback processes on course structures, content and assessment; and offering a variety of courses and learning pathways to allow students to make choices aligned with their interests and professional goals.
- Curriculum design processes include assessment: approaches such as universal design for learning (UDL) may help enable collaboration with students, and at the same time embed flexibility into assessment. Students should be offered a range of assessment options to choose from (exams, projects, essays, presentations, etc.), so that they can take advantage of their strengths and are not hindered by obstacles in an unnecessary way. Assessment could also become more competence-based, with students earning credits based on demonstrated competences and skills rather than time spent on a course. This will allow students to progress more quickly through areas that they master, while dedicating more time to areas where they need to improve.

The principles of **universal design for learning (UDL)** could be useful for implementing flexible learning. This is an evidence-based approach that emphasises the diversity of learners in terms of their background, physical abilities and neurological make-up. The key focus of UDL is to embed equity, inclusion and accessibility into the initial development process of curriculum, assessment, activities, resources and building design for learning. Building in inclusivity in the early stages of design not only provides support for students with specific learning needs, but enhances the educational experience for all students.

EUA held a previous Thematic Peer Group on the topic of curriculum and assessment for digitally enhanced learning and teaching: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/1009:learning-teaching-thematic-peer-groups-2021.html>



## How to do it?

Here are some concrete suggestions for curriculum design and delivery:

### Define clear learning outcomes

- Specific, measurable for each course/programme
- Aligned with the goals of flexible learning (why should it be flexible?)

### Identify core competences

- Competences and skills that students should develop in a flexible learning environment
- Incl. self-regulation, adaptability, digital literacy, problem-solving skills, etc.

### Clear and detailed communication

- About course expectations, learning outcomes, resources and assessment criteria
- Use technology to facilitate communication between staff and students (discussion fora, email, virtual office hours)

### Engage students

- Focus groups, surveys, interviews to gather feedback on their expectations for flexible learning
- Student advisory boards regularly meeting to provide input on curriculum design and improvement
- Encourage students to share experiences on what works best for them in a flexible learning context

### Continuous improvement

- Regular review and update based on feedback
- Stay attuned to technology and educational practices development
- Use clear metrics for evaluating the success of flexible learning (student retention rates, course completion rate, student satisfaction, employability rate)

- Increasing modularisation within the curriculum may also provide a path for increasing flexibility. Courses could be broken down into smaller, autonomous modules or units of learning, with defined topics or skills, learning outcomes, assessment modes and resources. This would allow students to choose and complete modules at their own pace for a more personalised learning experience. Modules could also be clustered towards a specific focus.
- Flexibility through curriculum means that students should be able to tailor their learning paths, but also benefit from smooth transitions between institutions and study programmes or other learning paths. Processes in place for rewarding and recognising credits should be transparent, with students able to access information about how their previous learning experiences align with the institution's requirements. Institutions should develop clear policies and procedures for credit transfer and the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for courses or training taken at other places, or online.
- Granting credits for short(er) courses touches upon a reputational question for institutions. Credit accumulation leading to a degree must be validated considering the overall coherence of the learning journey, not just the number of credits. Institutions should explore the possibilities of using existing courses or credits as building blocks for new learning paths, thus mutualising resources across the institution. Such paths could also be certificates/credentials for shorter learning experiences in a specialised field for non-enrolled students. Academic advisers or counsellors may guide students through the credit-earning and transfer process.

#### Recommendation #4: The use of flexible support and resources

**Flexible learning means increased responsibility in designing learning experiences and ensuring seamless use of infrastructure and technology tools. Institutions need to cater for such flexibility in dedicating appropriate resources and capacity.**

- Institutions need to make best use of existing resources (budget, infrastructure, tools, support services and human resources), and assess their fitness for purpose.
- The use of digital technologies is crucial for enabling flexibility, as it allows alternative routes with regard to time, space and pace of study. HEIs should make clear what tools can be deemed of common use and accepted by everyone – staff and students alike. In defining this, HEIs need to be aware of students' and staff's usual use/understanding of technology. The technological resources that are developed need to provide benefit to the teachers' community, beyond their use by individual teachers. Students may use technology in different ways from those that IT services or teachers would expect (mobile devices vs in-built computers, asynchronous uses, etc.). Their needs and limitations need to be considered in the way learning experiences are designed.
- Resource availability is key in a context where flexibility may mean different times or ways to access them. Institutions should ensure that all the course material needed is easily accessible online.
- HEIs may look into the best ways to mutualise resources within, but also across, institutions (e.g. the use of Open Educational Resources – OER), while emphasising the distinctiveness of their offer, the discipline or the teachers themselves.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) may support learning in becoming more tailored to individual needs, and accessible regardless of location or situations. For instance, through analysing students' performance and learning preferences, AI can suggest customised paths, automated tutoring systems to complement existing tutoring and counselling, or the use of learning analytics to support course and curriculum design. Institutions should consider how to set up the most appropriate and ethically sustainable environment for such uses.



## Recommendation #5: Teacher training

**Flexible learning entails proper development offers for teachers, in order to train, support and motivate them to handle flexible learning.**

- Institutions should provide professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills in designing and delivering flexible learning: training in online teaching, technology integration, pedagogical approaches suitable for the flexible environment, student engagement strategies, enhanced collaboration with educational developers, research in teaching and scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), etc. It may be useful to make a minimal standard training module mandatory for entry-level teachers or new teachers at the institution. Training courses should be aligned with the institution's priorities for flexible learning.
- Such training could be usefully complemented by schemes where experienced staff mentor those new to flexible teaching, encouraging peer support and collaboration to share best practices, and generally by communities of practice where teachers exchange ideas and collaborate in a trust-based environment.
- A prerequisite for developing teachers' ability to address flexible learning is public appreciation of the diversity of teaching styles among academic staff. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching: flexibility and adaptability are assets, and respecting this paves the way to engagement in teacher training.
- Institutions should consider incentives that motivate staff to engage with and excel in flexible teaching, possibly including monetary rewards, research funding or reduced teaching loads. Such incentives should be part of a system that recognises and rewards excellence in teaching. Another part of this system could address retention of talented teachers who have a demonstrated record in flexible learning initiatives.
- Institutions need transparent and well-defined policies and criteria for teachers' evaluation, promotion and tenure in the context of flexible learning, ensuring that teachers understand what is expected of them. This could also include opportunities for leadership roles in flexible learning initiatives.
- Last but not least, teachers may experience an additional workload, especially as setting up flexibility requires additional time and effort. Institutions should give value to a culture of mental and physical health for teachers that recognises and conveys the message throughout the institution that teaching in flexible environments is as valuable as it is in a more traditional setting.

## What next? Ways forward

In its work, the group addressed flexible learning as an essential development that needs to be addressed at universities, as it paves the way for enhancing learning and teaching, for offering a better and more inclusive student experience, but also for addressing the needs of society and the economy. For universities, flexibility addresses both the curriculum and lifelong learning offers; to the latter, it is indispensable.

However, it is also clear that a number of framework conditions play a role in how well institutions could tackle flexible learning and adapt to changing student needs. The difficulty of finding a proper business model, or ways to fund non-degree offers, is linked to some extent with limitations of existing (public) funding models, which are mostly designed for traditional, full-time degree education. Likewise, adaptations to the curriculum may hit the limits of what the regulations for higher education allow. The purpose here is not to claim that all such limitations should be abolished at once; rather, a constructive dialogue should take place between HEIs, policy makers and all those concerned with changes that may affect several policy areas (education, but also employment and social policies for better funding of working students, for instance).

Lastly, the group sees constant evolutions – notably in digitalisation – as an opportunity and not only a challenge for advancing higher education, AI being just the latest manifestation, though probably not the last. The group strongly believes that addressing more flexibility in learning and teaching goes hand in hand with addressing future evolutions with an open mind. HEIs should and can find their own unique ways to make the best of changes, provided that they manage and organise themselves in a way that fits their purpose and missions, and with the greatest consideration for members of their community (students, staff) and beyond. It is the group's modest hope that the recommendations in this report can contribute to that.

# Annexes

## ANNEX 1: EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

As part of its work on learning and teaching, EUA carries out activities with the aim to engage with university communities in charge of learning and teaching. One of these activities is coordinating the work of a set of Thematic Peer Groups. The groups consist of universities selected through a call for participation to:

- discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European universities;
- contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key recommendations on the selected theme.

The 2023 Thematic Peer Groups, active from March 2023 to February 2024, invited participating universities to peer-learning and exchange of experience, while at the same time they contributed to EUA's policy work as the voice of European universities in policy debates, such as the Bologna Process.

Each group was chaired by one university and supported by a coordinator from the EUA secretariat. Each group had three base meetings, either online or at a member university, to discuss 1) key challenges related to the theme, 2) how to address the challenges through innovative practices and approaches, and 3) what institutional policies and processes support the enhancement in learning and teaching. Outside the three meetings, the groups were free to meet online for shorter meetings or organise their work independently. Members of the groups also attended a final workshop, where they had the opportunity to meet and discuss the outcomes of other groups and address synergies. The workshop was hosted by Ruhr University Bochum in Germany on 7 February 2024 and followed by the 2024 European Learning & Teaching Forum from 8-9 February, where focus groups based on the work of the Thematic Peer Groups were organised to obtain feedback on their results.

### Composition of the Thematic Peer Group 'Flexible learning and teaching'

(starting with the group chair, then proceeding by alphabetical order of the country name):

- **University of Agder, Norway**
  - Morten Brekke (then Vice-Rector for Education; Chair)
  - Geir Torstveit (Head of Section for Education Quality and Lifelong Learning, Academic Affairs Office)
  - Maiken Køien Andersen (Officer for Academic Affairs, Student Union)
  - Lisa Kjosnes Fredsvik (Officer for Diversity, Student Union)
- **University of Rijeka, Croatia**
  - Aleksandar Mijatović (Dean)
- **Masaryk University, Czech Republic**
  - Michal Bulant (Vice-Rector for Studies and Quality)
  - Katerina Oleksikova (Director, Quality Office)
  - Natalia Antalova (Student member, University Board of Internal Evaluation)

- **Tallinn University, Estonia**
  - Tiia Õun (Director, School of Educational Sciences)
- **HM Hochschule München University of Applied Sciences, Germany**
  - Klaus Kreulich (Vice President for Innovation and Quality in Education)
  - Christina Schindler (Professor of Microsystems Technology)
  - Lucie Anzi (Student), replaced in September 2023 by Bettina Hanrieder (Student)
- **Eindhoven University of Technology, Netherlands**
  - Sonia Gomez Puente (Education Policy Advisor and Strategic Advisory for Innovations in Teaching and Learning)
- **Wroclaw University of Economics and Business, Poland**
  - Natalia Szozda (Assistant Professor, Head of Logistics Programme)
- **University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Portugal**
  - Carla Maria Amaral (Pro-Rector for Teaching and Quality)
  - José Cravino (Pro-Rector for Pedagogical Innovation)
  - Diogo Machado (President of the Academic Students Association)
- **University of Skövde, Sweden**
  - Tehseen Aslam (Deputy Vice-Chancellor for External Collaboration)
  - Ainhoa Goienetxea (Senior Lecturer, Subject Responsible for Production Engineering)
- **Coordinator:** Thérèse Zhang, Deputy Director for Higher Education Policy, European University Association (EUA)

## ANNEX 2: SELECTED LITERATURE (REVIEWED BY THE GROUP)

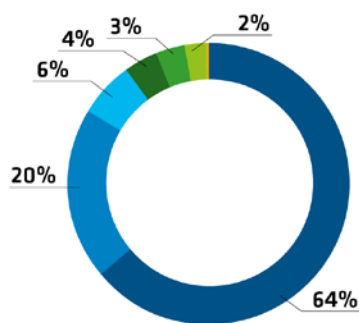
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## ANNEX 3: SURVEYS FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

The group warmly thanks Natalia Szozda (Wroclaw University of Economics and Business), Christina Schindler (Munich University of Applied Sciences) and Natalia Antalova (Masaryk University) for handling both surveys, from questionnaire design to data analysis.

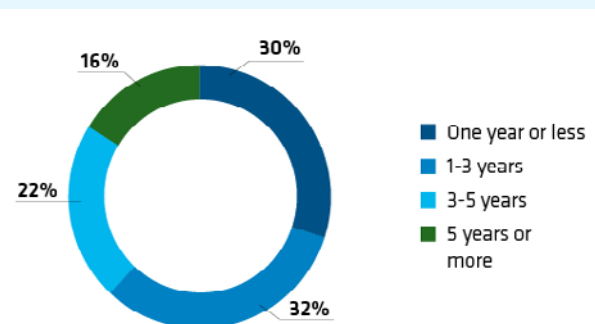
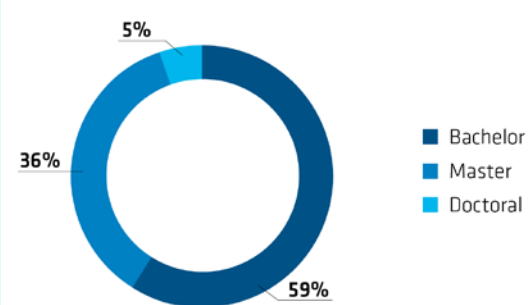
### Survey for students

The survey for students took place between June and September 2023. It collected 455 responses, with the following geographical coverage:



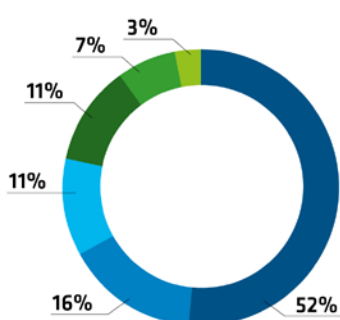
Note: There was one response from Sweden.

Respondents were mostly bachelor's and master's students, with a good spread between first-year students and more senior students.

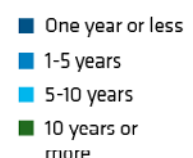
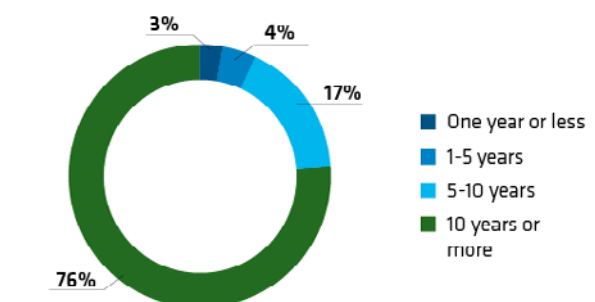


### Survey for teachers

The survey for teachers took place between October and November 2023. It collected 70 answers, with the following geographical coverage:



Respondents had mostly been teaching at the university for 10 years or more.



The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 49 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.