Remembering the Student: Flexible Learning and Being Educated for the Twenty-First Century

Ronald Barnett, University College London Institute of Education
www.ronaldbarnett.co.uk

www.ioe.ac.uk
Aims of talk

Following the D-G’s introduction with its resumé of the situation, I aim to:

- Identify issues
- Notice differences (across different kinds of flexible environments)
- Ask some questions (even awkward questions) and offer some cautions
- Introduce a distinction between a ‘flexible learning environment’ and a ‘flexible learning situation’ – and suggest that we are neglecting the latter
- & point to a set of flexible learning situations that is much needed for an education for the C21
- Remember the student
- Conclude with a suggested set of conditions that might be heeded by all programmes of study.
Own background

- Part-time (APHE)
- IOE – average age 37
- Evening teaching
- Credit accumulation
- Work-based learning
- Week-based units
- Units (of a single programme) taught across the UK
- AEL
- Life-long learning
- Use of digital resources
- UoL – distance learning for 150+ yrs
What is the problem?

• A higher education that was appropriate to an age of limited access has become too limited in the contemporary age
• The relationship being higher education and society now fluid, with weak boundaries
• HE no longer a definite stage between school and the world, but now part of the world:
  ▪ a large number of students in higher education
  ▪ ‘mature’ students
  ▪ Wishing to work alongside their studies
  ▪ And to go at their own pace (faster/ slower)
  ▪ Already digital natives and expecting that programmes will incorporate a high level of digital resources
  ▪ society expecting more from higher education,
  – Higher education is unduly inflexible in meeting the needs of students
  ▪ So how inject more flexibility?
Context

- Students are now heterogeneous
- A student is no longer necessarily a ‘student’ – fluid identities (work/ home/ learning situation – boundaries intermingle)
- Students have legitimate claims on institutions – as ‘customers’
- Their learning situations to be designed so as to be outward facing
- No longer a condition of the nature of disciplines (knowledge modes 1&2)
- Full-time 3-yr programme tied to a single institution (inappropriately) rigid.
- New models required – to respond to students so that their learning is free of limitations of place, of duration, of institution …
The debate

- **In rough order of priority**, has addressed issues of:
  - How?
  - Where?
  - When?
  - Who?
  - What?

- Has not much addressed the matter as to **Why?**
  - As a result, focus on national and institutional systems
    - But little, if anything, on what it is to educate for the C21 and what it is to be a student.
    - A focus on *flexible learning environments* but has rather neglected *flexible learning situations.*
Awkward questions - 1

• To what degree is there evidence of ‘demand’ for (kinds of) flexibility?
  • It may be that many students today are seeking *more* structure.
  • After all, they are more highly investing in their higher education

• A greater interest in some forms of flexibility than others?
  eg CAT across institutions – discussed in the UK for 40 years
  • But – as distinct from CA within institutions - it has not taken off:-
  • institutional inertia or lack of demand?
And awkward questions 2

- Suppose more/ some forms of flexibility (eg learning at a distance) lead to
  (a) lengthier programmes of study – and so more inefficient (with students moving at
different pace of study)
  (b) higher non-completion rates? (The OU in the UK; digital learning.)

ie What are the trade-offs? What are the risks? (UK – risk assessments)

NB: For past 30 years, a steady process of increased efficiencies (tightening of
duration of programmes) – will the flexibility agenda put that process into revers?
Just imagine

Just imagine, a programme of study in which:
- Duration limits were minimal – the student could take as little or as long as she liked
- No face-to-face interaction, with tutor or other students
- All the materials were available digitally
- The student could assemble her programme from heterogeneous modules
- There were no requirements to be ‘on campus’
- There were minimal entrance requirements
- And the methods of assessment were open (& assessment not required).
  (ie, many of the elements of flexible learning were present)
- What do we feel about this? Are there limits to the degree of flexibility, in order to be in the presence of a genuinely ‘higher education’?
Digital technologies

• Their effect – a complex matter
• Different platforms – some are simply matters of access and may not allow interaction
• Effect of screen-based learning – no clear picture
• But some evidence that reasoning and understanding change
• Helicopter scanning
• NB:– evidence that non-completion rates rise in direct proportion to:
  (a) the degree to which a prog of study is reliant on them and
  (b) the age of the student.
Missing a trick or two?

- But: we could be more imaginative in using digital technologies – in helping to realize ‘global citizenship’
- And in bringing the world into the classroom.
- ie, flexible curricula
- (I’ll come back to this.)
Effects of flexible learning

- So we need to put into effect more monitoring of/research on effects of each form of flexible learning
  - Open pacing
  - Digitisation
  - Distance learning
  - Multiple locations
  - Part-time study
  - Work-based/work-situated learning (distinguish them)

- Examine:
  - Costs
  - Learning
  - Non-completion rates
    - Across age/gender/socio-economic background/ethnicity
Quality/ standards

• Is quality being affected?
  • The new students – from non-traditional backgrounds – require more structure and support …
    – Students who have already experienced HE respond better to flexible learning systems
      ▪ And distinguish quality of inputs and processes
    – From quality of ‘outcomes’ – of students’ understandings and capabilities
      ▪ Are there differences across different kinds of flexibility?

• Are standards affected?
  • Under conditions of flexible learning, do we expect less from students?
    – (cf UK OU)
Flexible learning situations

Consideration: that the world is coming to expect more from higher education and of its graduates – and there are many indicators of imaginative changes:

• Aarhus – public library – fuzzy boundaries (students/ learning/ university/ public spaces)
• Lifewide learning
• Digital spaces – bringing the world into the classroom
• Global learning (putting classrooms in touch with each other)
• Flipped classroom
• The democratic classroom
  • Flexibility – in learning spaces, in pedagogical relationships
Remembering the student

- **What is it to be educated for the C21?**
  - eg, The student as a global citizen
  - How bring the student to this level of personal development?
  - Where every assumption is questioned
  - Higher education – a matter not so much of knowledge or skills
    - But of the student as a person
      - Coping with complete uncertainty
        - Continual challenge
  - Human virtues – resilience, courage, empathy, criticality …
  - Requires a **totally flexible pedagogy** – in which the teacher cannot know what is to happen in an encounter with the student(s)
    - To what extent can this much more demanding HE be brought off under conditions of FLEs?
A suitable programme of studies

- Curricula are still important – knowledge and skills
- But now, *pedagogy* – the teacher/student relationship – becomes crucial
- The student – space, responsibility, judgement (in open-ended situations)
- A higher education of strangeness, risk, and personal response
- This calls for a highly flexible *learning situation*
- But a different form of flexibility
  - A flexibility in the pedagogical process
    - In which the pedagogical relationship is open, in which the student is not ‘spoon-fed’ but is given the openness and is required to come forward with her own judgements.
  - (‘There are no right answers’. )
It follows that

- *Flexibility is crucial but* forms of flexibility differ
- Each form of flexibility needs to be given consideration in its own right
- *Not an absolute good*
- & where several forms of flexibility are present, there may be risks to both quality and to standards
- The educational challenges of the programme of study have to be addressed
- Moreover, a danger that a ‘flexible’ learning *environment* may be accompanied by a much heightened set of inflexibilities in the learning *situation*
- Curriculum, stages of progress, course requirements, learning outcomes, assessment regimes.
Conditions of flexible learning environments - 1

Every programme of study, no matter how many elements of flexibility it contains, should:

1. Lead to a qualification that contributes to major awards
2. Offer students access to suitable materials and appropriate cognitive and practical experiences
3. Offer regular academic interaction with other students
4. Offer access to tutors, in real-time interaction
5. Offer prompt and informative (formative) feedback from tutors
6. Offer access to other academic services (academic; careers advice; etc)
7. Enable students to offer feedback on their total experience
Conditions of openness - 2

8  Be academically and educationally structured
9  Provide a pedagogical openness
10 Offer ladder(s) of progression
11 Be suitably robust and reliable
12 Be cost-effective
13 Have sufficient structure so that student completion is a likely outcome
14 Contain sufficient challenge so that the students are cognitively and experientially stretched (so as to count as higher education)
Conclusions - 1

1 Several important forms of flexibility – and they are distinct
   ▪ But they have been concerned with systems, not educational processes
     (they have been answers to questions of when/where/how/who?)

2 Flexibility is a good – and we need much more of it across the EU
   - but it is not an unqualified good

3 Across EU, we’re on different paths & different points on those paths
   ▪ Time for an audit of FLEs across the EU?

4 Each form of flexibility should be taken forward with some care
   ▪ and subjected to a rigorous evaluation
     ▪ Crucial that flexible learning isn’t an impoverished learning.
Conclusions - 2

5 Put the student and her/his education for the C21 at the centre

6 Inject *more flexibility*, in particular, in relation to the educational process and both curricula and the pedagogy – and the latter is crucial.

- (But danger that *systems* flexibility will occlude *educational* flexibility)

7 Let us not forget the student and let’s bring some judgemental rigour to this important agenda.
Some (additional) questions

• In your country, which would you see as the most pressing forms of flexible learning environments yet to be developed?
• And what are the difficulties and risks confronting the development of that particular form of flexibility?
• Could you envisage the realization of credit transfer across the EU countries?
• Do you think it possible to develop more flexible pedagogical situations, while also developing more flexible learning environments?