Documentation and Recommendations

The New Student: Flexible Learning Paths and Future Learning Environments

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Flexible learning paths and customised learning environments in higher education contribute to widening participation, improving social inclusion and higher completion rates. They are a key to lifelong learning and essential to address increasing skills demand. With the Higher Education Expert Conference, the Austrian EU Council Presidency aimed at supporting the debate on these important topics.

Opening Session

Austrian Federal Minister of Education, Science and Research, Heinz Fassmann, opened the Conference with a comment on the definition of a *new student* as used in the title of the conference. Based on data from the *Eurostudent Project*, he highlighted the large variety of student characteristics and the high share of students entering higher education via non-traditional pathways. Acknowledging there may be some limits of flexibilisation, he emphasized the importance of new forms of flexibility in higher education and therefore the need of an intense discussion on that topic.

Tibor Navracsics, EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport

Tibor Navracsics, EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, stated that the conference topic meets the top priorities of the European agenda: In order to tackle current challenges in regard to the economical, ecological and social situation, it must be assured that students are prepared at the best. He argued for more flexibility of higher education making use of new technologies and the need for automatic recognition as well as recognition of prior learning, which is of high importance regarding the aim of making education more inclusive.

Finally, Beate Huber, the chair of the Academic Board of the hosting institution FHWien, addressed some welcoming words to the audience, presented FHWien as a university of applied sciences which is guided by the principals of lifelong learning and stressed the relevance of Vienna as a university city.

Plenary Session I: Different aspects of flexible learning

Elmar Pichl, Director General for Higher Education in Austria, gave a short introduction to the conference topic (referring to the background report of the conference) and concluded with flexibility being a possible answer to adapt higher education to its changing demands.

"A higher education that was appropriate to an age of limited access has become too limited in the contemporary age", Ronald Barnett (Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at University College London) stated in the Conference's Key Note. Hence, new models are required and he suggested designing them with focus on students asking *what it is to be a student in the 21st centu*ry? Flexible curricula supported by digital technologies play a key role in skills development, but Barnett argued it is flexible pedagogy that becomes crucial to help students develop competences such as criticality. Barnett finally described flexibility as a good that needs to be spread across

the EU – nevertheless, he recommended to implement flexibility with care, based on research on its effects to avoid unintended consequences.

The following Dialogue of various stakeholders illustrated different perspectives on flexibilisation in higher education: Robert Napier, European Student´s Union (ESU), criticized that progress regarding students' needs is made only in documents while reality shows a different picture. ESU aims at a shift towards student-centred-learning which considers students as co-creators of education. Christa Schnabl, Vice-Rector for Educational Affairs at University of Vienna, argued that flexibility can only be discussed in consideration

l.t.r.: Christa Schnabl (Vice-Rector at Univ. of Vienna), Stéphane Lauwick (President of EURASHE), Karin Riegler (Vice-Rector at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna), Ronald Barnett (Em. Prof. at Univ. College London), Robert Napier (ESU), Kinga Szuly (Head of Higher Education Policy Sector, EC)

of quality: Although she advocated flexible study structures, she emphasized that curricula must not compromise the common standards. Stéphane Lauwick, President of EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education), expressed concerns about the systemic approach and recommends working together with all stakeholders (including labour market) to achieve the goal of turning students into global citizens. As director of the University of Le Havre, he described the French system as very rigid with very high graduation rates, raising the question of failure and flexibility. Kinga Szuly, Head of Higher Education Policy Sector in DG Education and Culture, European Commission, pointed out the need to prepare students for fluid societies, to strengthen lifelong learning, automatic recognition and permeability between educational sectors and referred to relevant EU initiatives that contribute to these goals (e.g. Erasmus programme and European universities).

Breakout Sessions: Thematic inputs and solution storming

Flexibilisation in higher education can be approached from different angles, starting from the access to higher education, following the heterogeneous student population's needs, to institutional approaches to flexible learning environments and the support by national and European authorities. These approaches were discusses in five working groups.

Working Group I: Strengthening alternative access routes through validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL)

The urge to establish alternative routes to higher education through VNFIL has been on the agenda for years. According to the latest PLA on Recognition in Denmark, the development in Europe is uneven and (minor and major) gaps between policy and implementation occur. Hence, Working Group I aimed at identifying key challenges and develop possible solutions. In order to draw a picture of the variety of alternative access routes, practice examples were presented.

In Finland higher education institutions have a high degree of autonomy and are able to design their individual access procedures. Recent developments have led to a more

flexible access path to higher education. The so-called *open path* is characterised by the opportunity for all to enter higher education (no matter of their previous education or citizenship), a well-developed support system and the possibility to switch to the standard degree after having gained enough ECTS. Another programme at the UAS Haaga-Helia is focussed on synergies between *Work & Study* on the basis of VNFIL. For both examples, Marjaana Mäkele stated that all stakeholders' attitudes and the transparency of the process are key factors for success. The second presentation covered the status quo in Germany and Austria where alternative access routes are established, but particularly in Germany are rare exceptions. Anke Hanft described and explained this by legal restrictions, lack of interest of the universities and the increasing shift of students from vocational training towards higher education. She proposed to take a new perspective and think of access based on competences rather than school-leaving certificates. In this context, Hans Pechar, who was invited to give an expert input, referred to the necessity of resources and building up expertise of assessment at universities. Peter Schlögl stressed to focus on the validity and benefits of non-formally and informally acquired competences. Finally, Stéphane Lauwick gave insights to the French system, where a validation system was launched more than 30 years ago – but still, the number of validations does not increase substantially. He argued that the process of implementation is a highly complex endeavour and requires a strategic approach of collaboration of all stakeholders and wide-scale capacity building as well as guidance for students at all stages. Incentives such as specific or project-based funding could enhance VNFIL as well as national policies dedicated solely to this topic.

In the ensuing discussion, levers to improve recognition to broaden access were outlined that circled areas of society (rethinking refers to a broader context), framework (e.g. law, common goals and collaboration, funding) and procedures (e.g. assessment, counselling).

Working Group II: Identifying the needs of an increasingly diverse student population

An increasingly diverse student body challenges traditional higher education structures and urges change. Working group II explored different approaches on how to identify and address the diverse student needs.

Presenting some key results from the *Eurostudent* project, Kristina Hauschildt, researcher at the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW), provided a basis for discussion. She pointed out that more flexible higher education systems allow and support students entering higher education via non-traditional access routes, and also offer flexible organisation modes (i.e. part- or full-time studies). Gertraud Leimüller, director of winnovation-Open Innovation Research & Consulting, presented the project *Create your UNIverse*. Using social media, students were asked about their needs and expectations in regard to higher education. Questions covered the future university, how it will and should operate or change in order to meet students' needs adequately. The results show the importance of social learning, communication, cooperation in heterogeneous contexts, individual support and feedback on professional and personal development. Robert Napier from the European Students' Union (ESU) focussed on the importance of student-centred learning (SCL) and advocated that students become co-creators of their higher education experience. He argued that the fundamental Bologna tools need to be implemented fully and systematically and policies on national level need to support and facilitate SCL. In regard to recognition of learning experiences adequate assessment methods are required. Sunniva Braaten (Oslo and Akershus University College of

Applied Sciences) discussed different approaches to SCL, e.g. flipped classroom, student peer groups, personal academic tutors, student-centred examination. In line with Robert Napier, she pointed out that changing the ways of teaching requires a change of assessment practices. Christina Raab (University of Innsbruck) presented some best practice examples regarding student recruitment and addressed the importance of professional staff development and diversity among teachers (as well as students). She stressed out that fostering diversity is a social responsibility and a political priority.

All these presentations resulted in lively discussions. There was a wide consensus that flexibility requires a top-down stimulus combined with a bottom-up development and implementation approach. Furthermore, students should be involved in the process. Last but not least, flexibility is a great challenge for teachers as well; they need better support (i.a. competencies development) in a changing higher education system.

l.t.r.: Edith Winkler (BMBWF), Barbara Birke (AQ Austria), Maria Keplinger (BMBWF), Elisabeth Westphal (uniko), Helga Posset (BMBWF), Eva Erlinger-Schacherbauer (BMBWF), Gudrun Salmhofer (Univ. of Graz), Regina Aichner (OeAD), Sabine Koch (BMBWF), Martin Unger (IHS), Anna Schinwald (BMBWF), Gerhard Volz (OeAD)

Working Group III: Institutional approaches to flexible learning environments

This Working group sought to address the question of how to implement flexible learning on an institutional level, which was done by examining three examples of study programmes aimed at offering greater flexibility for the students.

Claude Müller Werder from the Zurich University of Applied Sciences presented the flexible learning format *FLEX*. *FLEX* programmes use the regular curriculum of their part-time counterpart, but offer extensive e-learning components and require less presence time, which is limited to two days every three weeks. Iris Kolan from the University of Applied Sciences Südwestfalen introduced *Studium flexible*, which covers 14 Bachelor programmes that can be completed within a longer time frame than usual through a four semesters introductory phase, making it possible to reduce the work load per semester. Also, this format offers special counseling and a more intense support by the teaching personnel. Finally, Margreet Engelhart and Linda Wissink showcased the Saxion University of Applied Science's approach *Flexleren*. *Flexleren* offers validation of informal competences, a modular approach allowing to individually choosing modules quarterly as well as the choice between full enrolment or the attendance in certain courses only, which can be transformed into full enrolment later if wanted.
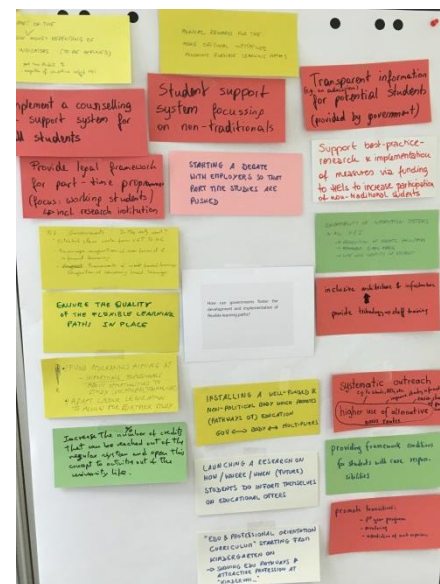
The conclusory discussion, asking for institutional motivations, framework conditions and obstacles connected to flexible learning, emphasized the importance of a common understanding on flexibilisation within the institution when it comes to implementation, the importance of involving, preparing and supporting the teaching staff and adequate support measures for students. Given that, it is necessary that institutions identify the aspects and extend of flexibilisation appropriate for themselves to implement, considering their particular institutional strategies and circumstances.

Working Group IV: National support for flexible learning environments

The first session of working group IV was organised as a "controversial dialogue" between Anke Rigbers from evalag (the evaluation and accreditation agency from the German state Baden Württemberg) and Bert Van der Zwaan (former Rector Magnificus of the Utrecht University and former chair of LERU, the League of European Research Universities).

Anke Rigbers mentioned that quality assurance (QA) is often understood as control, but it should be seen more as a reflection. In this sense, QA can strongly contribute to flexible learning – starting by curricula design. HEIs are eager to develop, so QA can help them, but a supporting political environment is needed. Bert Van der Zwaan was not convinced that university presidents want more flexible and open structures, but this is demanded by society, students, and the labour market. A research university has only one aim: top research. Thus, it must absolutely focus on quality in teaching. Rigbers demanded a consensus what quality is. The government has to set the criteria, but the interpretation is the task of institutions and agencies. Van der Zwaan added that high quality in teaching and research must be based on the diverse backgrounds of students and researchers, but research universities perform very poor in that. Therefore, admission systems should focus more on competences than qualification. He also predicted a strong shift to universities of applied sciences who contribute better to the task of flexibilisation.

Results of one of the World Cafés in WG IV

In the subsequent discussion with the participants, both agreed that not all possible forms of flexibilisation can be implemented by each HEI, therefore greater diversification of HEIs is needed to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students. A well done flexibilisation fosters creativity and provides customised individual learning, which will cost a lot of money to implement. In addition, both discussants emphasised that, due to a lack of experience in flexibilisation - especially with technical devices - the impact of digitalisation needs to be further researched.

The second part of the working group was organised in smaller group discussions ("world cafés"), each with a moderator and a note taker. The leading questions for the discussions focussed on how governments can develop and implement flexible learning paths, what educational objectives should be set for different types of HEI and if quality assurance systems can become an appropriate coordination instrument for more flexible higher education environments. The different contributions to the lively discussions were clustered by topics and led in the next step to the recommendations of the working group.

Working Group V: EU's initiatives to foster flexible learning

Working group V tackled the question how the European Union and the European Commission could support national governments and higher education institutions in implementing and supporting flexible learning (paths).

Stojan Sorčan, Director General for Higher Education in the Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, shared the perspective of a national government, addressing the challenges and necessities when it comes to flexible learning. He pointed out the complexity of this multi-level, multi-actor and multi-issue governance task and the problem of the persisting gap between policy and practice. In order to close this gap, national strategies on the social dimension in higher education could contribute to concrete measures in order to improve the situation. Kinga Szuly, head of the Higher Education Policy Sector in the European Commission, presented EU initiatives to foster flexible learning such as the European student card that should enable students to identify themselves easily and allow for secure exchange of student data between institutions. Also the EHEA flagship initiative to reach 20 *European Universities* by 2024 should contribute to flexible learning in Europe. Michael Gaebel, Director of the Higher Education Policy Unit at the European University Association (EUA), presented the results from the upcoming *Trends 2018* report, which shows that awareness of teaching and learning in higher education institutions across Europe has increased. HEIs report greater interest and demand for flexible learning which results in an increased need for student support and guidance. One of the most important issues according to the EUA is to change the role and appreciation of teachers: higher education teaching needs to be recognized as a profession including career perspectives.

Following these presentations, the working group discussed questions on which new and already existing European initiatives, programmes and tools could support flexible learning in higher education, how mutual learning and exchange could be fostered and how the impact of initiatives could be raised. It was emphasized that building a peer learning platform to exchange good and bad practices or the improvement of monitoring activities would be vitally needed actions in order to raise the impact of flexible learning measures.

Plenary Session II: Future Learning Environments

Dominic Orr, Institute for Education and Socio-Economic Research and Consulting (FiBS) and Co-Author of *Bologna Digital*, an expert paper on digital learning in higher education, aimed at pointing out the (possible) integrative function of digitalisation in terms of the Bologna Process. When digital technologies are not just considered an additional challenge, but a transversal aspect in higher education, digitalisation can especially be a facilitator for flexibility (organizational openness) and inclusion (social openness of processes), Orr emphasized.

Martin Ebner, Co-Chair of the Forum New Media (fnm-austria) and Head of the Department for Educational Technology, Graz University of Technology, emphasized that "the use of media for learning purposes is normal in everyday life for today's young people – an integral part of their learning environment. It is a daily routine!" Thus, students need a comprehensive central offer of digital accessible learning tools and content. However, there is still a lack of content, also due to strict copyright laws. Therefore, Ebner strongly advocated the use of Open Educational Resources (OER). Another important issue for higher education institutions is *how* to use educational

technologies. After showing some examples, Ebner concluded that adequate use of educational technologies increases the didactic diversity – it is now a matter of strategic implementation.

Plenary Session III: Blockchain in Higher Education

The last presentations were dedicated to the blockchain technology and raised the questions of whether or how it could represent a contribution to flexibilisation in higher education. Walter Dettling, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, introduced the main principles to guarantee a common understanding in the audience: in short, blockchain is a decentralised list of verifiable information which can be permanently and reliably recorded. Andreia Inamorato dos Santos from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, gave insights to the use of blockchain in the field of education – based on the JRC report on *Blockchain in Education* and the *Policy Recommendations on Open Education*. According to her comment, it can particularly foster issuing certificates, for instance by adding microcredentials to individual portfolios which highly corresponds the idea of lifelong learning. Also, Antonis Polemitis, CEO at University of Nicosia, a university which already makes use of blockchain in various institutional fields, highlighted its asset in certification procedures.

Plenary Session IV: Results of the conference

In the final session of the conference, the results of the discussions in the Breakout Sessions were presented by Elmar Pichl (DG of Higher Education in Austria), Martin Unger (co-author of the background report) and the chairs of the working groups. These **recommendations** for enhancing flexibility in higher education are (the elaborated version can be found on the following pages):

Key Insights

- **Empowering** flexible learners starts before HE and doesn't stop with HE.
- Ensure that **transition competencies** are imparted at all educational levels and for all groups of learners.
- Flexibilisation is most effective within transparent and coherent HE **structures** (study information, admission systems, study programmes, modes of delivery, student services etc.).
- Stimulate flexible learning environments. Increase and reward the **value of good teaching**.
- Stimulate **dialogue and collaboration** between all stakeholders.

@ EU

- **Funding**: Adapt current and future EU programmes to the demand of flexible learning.
- **Virtual exchange/information hub**: exchange good practice as well as failure (OER) and improve **visibility** of results.
- **Community** of experts and practitioners to develop guidelines/toolkits for flexible learning.
- Foster the variety of **Peer Learning Activities.**
- Improve consistent **monitoring and impact evaluations.**

@ Member States

- Ensure that **democratic values, transversal skills, global citizenship** are part of curricula throughout the educational life cycle.
- Adapt the **ESG** towards flexible learning environments.
- Create an appropriate **legal framework** (e.g. RPL and national QA regulations).
- Create **equal opportunities** for all students, especially non-traditionals, to obtain a higher education degree.
- Make use of national funding schemes to stimulate **research** on the effects of flexibilisation as well as pilot projects and the exchange of experiences.
- Improve **guidance and counselling** for flexible study paths at all educational levels and throughout the life cycle.

@ HEIs

- Foster **common understanding** within the institution and develop a coherent institutional strategy and a framework for implementation (e.g. processes, curricula design, QA).
- Involve, prepare und support the **administrative and teaching staff** to enable flexible learning.
- Flexible learning needs to be accompanied by adequate **support measures** for students (e.g. counselling) and **active involvement** of students to foster their individual learning experiences.
- **Monitor and evaluate** measures to support further enhancement of flexible learning.
- Learn who your **students** are and how they act (learning analytics), publish the results.

Link to the background paper and the presentations:
https://www.eu2018.at/de/calendar-events/political-events/thenewstudent.html

Recommendations

Key Insights

The **empowerment of flexible learners** starts in early childhood education and needs continuous efforts throughout the entire education biography.

Ensure that **transition competencies** are imparted at all educational levels and for all groups of learners in order to enable them to participate in a changing society.

Flexibilisation is most effective within **transparent and coherent HE structures**, regarding e.g. study information, admission systems, study programmes, modes of delivery and student services.

Stimulate flexible learning by raising its **visibility** (e.g. awards for innovative initiatives) as well as by increasing and rewarding the **value of good teaching**.

Stimulate **dialogue and collaboration** between all stakeholders (educational sectors, labour market and national authorities) and ensure it is based on a common language of equivalent terms (e.g. RPL).

Recommendations to the European Union

Adapt current and future EU programmes to the demand of flexible learning and teaching environments. Ensure that the programs are easily accessible also for smaller institutions.

Provide **funding** for research on flexible learning, especially on the impact of specific measures.

Initiate a **virtual exchange platform** based on OER for collecting and exchanging good practice as well as failure. The platform should address students, all levels at HEIs and policy makers to provide the basis for the portability of those concepts.

Initiate and support a **community** of experts and practitioners on flexible learning (paths) to develop guidelines and tool-kits for flexible learning.

Foster a variety of **peer learning activities** among HEIs (e.g. peer counselling, study visits) in order to identify general success factors for the establishment of coherent flexible learning measures at individual HEIs.

Implement or improve consistent **monitoring** in order to raise the impact of flexible learning measures and their sustainability with an emphasis on students' perspective.

Recommendations to the Member States

Ensure that **democratic values, transversal skills and global citizenship** are part of curricula throughout the educational life cycle.

Adapt the **European Standards and Guidelines** (ESG) towards flexible learning environments (institutions can interpret these objectives along their strengths and profiles and legislative tasks).

Create an appropriate **legal framework** that enables flexible learning paths (e.g. RPL of non-formal and informal learning competences and appropriate quality assurance regulations).

Create **equal opportunities** for all students to obtain a higher education degree, but consider that some groups (e.g. non-traditional students) require specific measures.

Develop a **national funding framework** which creates **incentives** for HEIs to open up to flexible learning and enables **research** on the effects of flexibilisation (e.g. different modes of delivery).

Stimulate **pilot projects** testing and implementing flexible learning approaches as well as the **exchange of experiences** among stakeholders and the professional learning communities, having in mind that there is no *one-size-fits-all* approach.

Improve **guidance and counselling** for flexible study paths at all educational levels and throughout the life cycle (e.g. through outreach and transition programmes).

Make **mutual and automatic recognition** a high priority objective.

Recommendations to Higher Education Institutions

Foster a **common understanding** of flexible learning within the institution, develop a coherent institutional strategy and provide a **common framework** for implementation (e.g. IT infrastructure, processes, curricula design, and quality assurance) and **involve students** actively in these developments. **Student-centred learning** should become an integral part of HE culture.

Involve, prepare und support your **administrative and teaching staff** in all processes of development and implementation of flexible learning.

Ensure flexible learning is accompanied by adequate **support** measures for students (e.g. counselling) to foster their individual learning experiences.

Monitor and evaluate measures to further enhance high-quality flexible learning, involve students in this process and make findings publicly available.

Strive for more information about your **students and their needs**, and adapt your programmes and support systems according to that knowledge. This also includes the use of learning analytics.

Provide information on the **heterogeneity of your student population** (e.g. on non-traditional pathways, completion-rates, study duration) and make it publicly available.