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Working Group 4: National Support for Flexible Learning Environments

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Introduction

For a common understanding I will start to lay out some premises:

- A (successful) study derives from the student-teacher-curriculum-interaction. For this reason, the predispositions of each "partner" have to be taken into account: For students it is his/her talents, aspirations, the personal and socio-economic background. For teachers it is the academic and didactic expertise and curriculum refers to academic content, teaching/learning arrangements and study conditions. Flexibility, thus, can be very diverse due to the given setting and other circumstances.

- Higher education institutions are responsible for their services, but have to respect the academic liberty of their academic members.

- In an age of widely autonomous higher education, institutions are supported from the national or federal political level through legislation and the allocation of resources.

Historical background

For decades, the number of students has been continuously increasing, in each nation and worldwide. This increasing participation in higher education is a consequence of the changing economy and society, and boosted by governments. Likewise parents as well as pupils/students look for an academic qualification since higher income and reputation are attractive.

Currently nearly 50 per cent of an age cohort start a study and a still growing diversity – with regard to age, cultural, ethnic, socio-economic background and personal circumstances – of students marks everyday life of higher education institutions everywhere – but often differently. Diversity may also influence the drop-out rates which have increased during the last decades and it is to question whether more flexibility will change this. Most probably not, but it raises questions with regard to requirements and the organisation of study programmes.

Challenges which higher education institutions face

The growing of the higher education sector was accompanied by a diversification with regard to disciplinary specialization, types and profiles of higher education institutions

and so on. Even the national education systems vary, but an overall trend to more autonomy of higher education institutions, at least in Europe, could be observed. Higher education institutions have undergone tremendous changes during the last decades:

- More autonomy requires taking over more responsibilities;
- this, in turn, requires resources and competent staff.
- The study programmes as well as research subjects have diversified.
- Not only "old" universities were able to meet these challenges; sometimes new or small HEI could react more flexible than old ones.

Higher education institutions have the responsibility for the quality of their study programmes and the ways in which they deliver them. But, whether public or private, they are dependent on the legislative framework and the budgeting conditions for which national or federal governments are responsible.

Moreover, we do not only observe an increasing diversity in the student population and their interests in higher education but also an ongoing differentiation between higher education institutions: On one side of the spectrum, there is the research-oriented world-class and well-equipped university and on the other, the regionally-oriented university which serves as the only higher education institution in a region and is often poorly funded.

Flexible learning paths and environments concern the individual as well as the organisational level and each higher education institution has to develop its specific set of measures and arrangements which suit the (preferred) student population.

With regard to the student-life-cycle, flexible learning paths and environments concern especially the admission, the study entrance and the study period.

Thus, the challenges for leading research universities are different from those of HEIs who provide academic programmes for very practically oriented students.

I have made different observations (than Bert) concerning the wishes of students and parents. I have long been concerned with the question of how students inform themselves about study programmes and how they select them and we have also analysed this at **evalag**: Many pupils/students do not care much about their talents and aptitudes and the requirements of certain study programmes. So they often do not know what a higher education institution expects of them if they choose a certain programme. Higher education institutions, on the other hand, often do not provide adequate information about their study programmes with regard to the needs of potential students. Moreover, pupils/students are in a period of personality development.

Moreover, the growing sector of HEIs also faces difficult developments: there is an increasing number of private institutions which offer an academic qualification without a real quality assurance; governments often do not take enough care.

I would only partly agree that the attempts to support flexible learning paths were not successful; due to my observation this is dependent on several factors; of course, resources are necessary. The development of adequate tools or measures is slow and diverse. For many years I have been hearing from HEIs that the student population is diversifying, firstly with regard to their intellectual competencies. This is due to the (diverse) education at schools. Moreover, there is migration and the fact that people decide to apply for an academic qualification later in their life. It is often dependent on the location whether HEIs are confronted with a diverse student population: for example; Freiburg in Germany has another situation than Duisburg-Essen.

Meanwhile I would suppose that every higher education institution has introduced measures/activities/projects to cope with the heterogeneity of students and I found also some studies about the effectiveness and the outcome of these measures. I would like to cite (see Key et. al., 2018, S. 58-60) the following success factors which can be

classified into strategic, organizational and personal factors (or institutional, programme, social (teacher-student-student interaction) level):

- First of all, developing measures or (extra-)curricula offers, especially for the beginning of the study, needs a close cooperation on all organizational levels of the higher education institution and a thorough analysis of the needs assessment.
- The measures or the project should be strategically linked to the development (plan) of the institution and incorporated in the strategies of the faculties.
- The funding of the measures or activities should part of the overall budget; third party funds should only be used for initiating projects.
- The measures or activities should be integrated in the curriculum to increase the (motivation for) participation.
- With regard to measures or (extra-)curricula offers which are intended to cope with the deficits of certain students it is questionable whether separate courses are really helpful; especially if the teacher are not very experienced.
- There should be a special focus of these measures or activities on soft skills to enhance the study capability of students.
- Consulting and support before the admission should especially addressed to non-traditional students, point to possible risks and inform about available measures and programmes.
- It is necessary to evaluate the measures continuously and establish an impact monitoring.
- Teaching should be done by the faculty to support the knowledge transfer and the relationship to the higher education institution. Moreover, it can be assumed that the teacher-student-relationship is very important and necessities highly qualified staff.
- Obligatory learning groups in the first years foster the social integration.
- Peer group elements foster also the social integration and motivation.

These general recommendations may have very different consequences and deductions for different higher education institutions.

Research universities face a very different challenge in comparison to other universities: they need highly qualified – with regard to theory and methodology and disciplinary as well as inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary – staff and therefore strive to select already the best apt students and train them as best as possible; with regard to Germany I would say that we do not really have enough appropriate tools to select these students or support them to become excellent. Diversity is a very important aspect. As Bert explains, it is necessary to focus more on competence than only on (traditional) qualification. We do not yet have the appropriate tools and are just developing them.

Selection and support of highly competent and qualified pupils/students is one facet, but there are others, for example helping the somehow handicapped or those with special conditions (child, job and so on). No higher education institution will be able or willing to create opportunities for every kind of flexibility requested by one or some students since personal and financial resources are always to a certain extent limited and there are also other necessities as research, for example. Thus, HEIs need to find a good, effective and efficient, balance and tensions may be an opportunity to reconcile the demands of students and the opportunities of a higher education institution. Since academic success means to transcend a given status, restrictions, and barriers, the question is: Which lack of flexibility is really unsurmountable for a successful study and which challenging circumstances may support personal development if one masters them?

Political support – needs and options

Governments at the European and national (or federal) levels have been making policy statements and pleas for flexible learning for a long time. This is caused by the growing higher education sector and is also due to the fact that the economy and society needs more highly qualified staff/workforce.

It is the law and resources which allow governments to support or to hinder higher education institutions in fulfilling their missions. And there have never been enough resources from the perspective of the higher education institutions. But we can expect that governments provide enough resources that higher education can fulfil the political demands and that the law provides an adequate framework. Without going into details, we could observe progress during the last years and this concerns issues like

- Admission: Nowadays even persons without a final secondary school examination can under certain circumstances start a study.

- Curricula: The provision of study programmes has become more diverse: full-time and part-time study, distance learning, e-learning, blended learning, study with certificates and so on.

- Recognition: The recognition of prior learning, internships, study time spent abroad at other higher education institutions is easier than before.

- Assessment: The assessment of academic qualifications has become more flexible and is also part of internal/external quality assurance.

- Consideration of individual problems: The examinations regulations take care of individual problems.

- Academic quality: External (and internal) quality assurance have meanwhile been accepted and help to avoid certain quality problems, but in some countries the private sector of higher education is still not really included.

The political support with regard to resources the higher education institutions need to realize the pleas is insufficient. This has been valid for a long time and is changing only slowly in Germany. It is necessary that the governments provide enormous financial support via contracts or via competitive programmes if they really want higher education institutions to offer more flexible learning paths and environments.

The role of quality assurance

One has to acknowledge that up to now there is no fully common or shared understanding of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. There are differences in perspectives and approaches which depend on factors such as: the purpose assigned to higher education; the balance between accountability and enhancement in the quality assurance system; and levels of trust, maturity, and self-confidence in the quality assurance system at the institutional and national level. Furthermore, there is still a gap between the theory of a quality assurance system and how it works in practice. Nevertheless there have been realized great efforts during the last decade and with regard to the increasing heterogeneity of students and the necessity of flexible learning paths and environments quality assurance is absolutely necessary to guarantee that the measures taken are adequate and contribute to a successful study.

Quality assurance concerns the following aspects:

- The choice, design, implementation and integration of measures into the study programme or the learning environment (quality of process and results)

- o It has to be checked if the process of the development and integration of certain measures into the study programme(s) or the learning environment are effective and efficient.
- The quality (academic level, learning experiences) of the study programme
  - o It has to be checked if the measure(s) are suited to support those student(s) which participate to achieve the intended academic level of the study programme.
- The performance and motivation/satisfaction of the student(s) as well as the achieved academic level
  - o It has to be checked if the measure(s) is adequate to address the need(s) of the student(s), results in study progresses and motivates him/her to complete the study and to reach the degree or intended academic level.
  - o Moreover, with regard to study decision and entrance, it has to be checked whether a well informed and deliberated decision.

The development of external (and internal) quality assurance is linked to the growth of higher education and concerns the programme as well as the institutional level. The main focus has been the academic quality of programmes and especially in Germany also the fulfilment of formal requirements; on the institutional level it was and is the establishment of effective internal mechanisms and procedures of quality assurance.

The quality assurance of flexible learning paths and environments concerns insofar other aspects as outlined above. With regard to external quality assurance it does, moreover, require that the criteria of external quality assurance procedures are applied and very carefully interpreted. Since most of the external quality assurance procedures are more or less outlined as standardized procedures, they do – to my knowledge – only take into account disciplinary differences or those which relate to the kind or profile of a higher education institution. The diversification of study programmes has with the introduction of measures which take care of the heterogeneity of students reached a new level. This concerns the conception of study programmes, but much more the implementation and the differing learning experiences of a heterogeneous student population.

As mentioned above, it has to be ensured that measures allowing flexible learning paths do not introduce different respective lower levels of academic qualifications with regard to the same degree. Moreover, quality assurance should have a look at the monitoring activities of higher education institutions with regard to measures taken or tools implemented. Are they effective? Are they adequately designed and implemented?

Leading questions:

What can national governments do to ensure the development and implementation of flexible learning paths and conducive future learning environments? Should these goals be integrated in the budgeting process?

As already mentioned, governments on the national and federal level have mainly two options: They determine the regular budget of higher education institutions or specialized programmes through law and through the allocation of resources.

Furthermore, they regulate the modes and ways of access to higher education (admission regulations, the acknowledgement of prior (academic and non-academic) learning), opportunities in the study entrance period (becoming able to study, overcome deficits, etc.) and of optional modes of study (part-time, distance learning, etc.) through law and other regulations.

Since higher education institutions should themselves decide which opportunities for more flexible learning are needed, they need of course sufficient resources. This concerns also further development opportunities for the staff when designing measures of flexible learning.

I would also vote for specialized programmes which focus on flexible learning paths and offer incentives to develop tailor-made measures. Baden-Wuerttemberg, for example, has set up several programmes in 2015 which focus on different modes in the study entrance phase and will now add a programme for admission procedures.

What directives for flexible learning pathways should governments set for the entire higher education system or individual types of higher education institutions? What aspects/issues should remain to be the exclusive responsibility of individual universities?

Governments should on the basis of the higher education law define general norms which concern

- Admission

- Curricula

- Recognition

- Assessment

- Individual problems of students and

- Academic quality.

Higher education institutions should be responsible for choosing and implementing adequate measures, but they should be free to prioritize the measures. For example, they should be able to develop diverse paths to admit qualified persons to an academic study. They should likewise be enabled to develop selection mechanisms and support services to allow persons with diverse backgrounds to enter the higher education institution if they are qualified and they should be enabled to develop appropriate measures for the study entrance phase in order to allow students to master the study.

Is the quality assurance system the appropriate steering instrument to ensure compliance with these directives and at the same time to avoid unintended side effects?

Quality assurance – external as well as internal – foremost looks at the appropriate level of academic study programmes with regard to academic content and the qualification of teachers. Moreover, quality assurance assesses whether the provision of study programmes allows a successful study and whether the degree is acknowledged.

External as well as internal quality assurance procedures gradually extend their criteria and the process of assessment to these changes in curriculum design and provision.

With regard to flexible learning paths and learning environments these procedural objectives require criteria which can be applied and interpreted appropriately. Moreover, it needs a monitoring of the effects of measures: Do they really support flexible learning and a better study success?

A systematic approach or a coherent strategy covering all dimensions and goals must be very general or abstract to provide enough leeway for the different actors involved (types of students, types of higher education institutions, their subunits, and disciplines) and the different levels. I would like to claim that the best possible realization of

flexible learning paths and future learning environments needs stringent, quality-oriented and adaptive legislative rules, sufficient resources – which will be the real problem – , engaged and incentive higher education institutions which look for taylor-made measures and responsible students.

Flexible learning paths and better customized learning environments are realized at the programme- or institutional level through the interaction of students, teachers and the institution. At this level the needs, requirements or wishes of students are enounced and it is the institution or teacher who has to deal with them. There are different interests (student: successful study, comfortable study conditions; teacher: eager, willing students, few drop-outs; institution: efficient study organisation, low drop-out rate, attractiveness for students) that need to be balanced.

Literature:

Key, Olivia; Hill, Lukasz; von Stuckrad, Thimo; Hawermann, Robert; Wallor, Laura: Modellansätze ausgewählter Hochschulen zur Neugestaltung der Studieneingangsphase. Fachgutachten im Auftrag des Projekts nexus (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz). Bonn, März 2018.