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Flexible Learning Pathways Essential

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UEM Essentials
Flexible Learning Pathways

OLLSCOIL TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA BHAILE ÁTHA CLIATH
TU DUBLIN
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At a glance

Definition

"flexible pathways 'into', 'within' and 'across' higher education"

"entry points and re-entry points for all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education"

UNESCO

Key Points

This UEM Essential is about the challenges of providing flexible learning pathways in higher education. It discusses how funding may be a barrier to providing these pathways. It also describes how some countries are addressing flexible learning pathways.

FOR MORE INFO

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FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS

Global enrolment in higher education has more than doubled in the last two decades (UNESCO, 2019). This increasement in enrolment has raised many challenges especially in relation to providing flexible learning pathways. In Ireland, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) continue to plan to accommodate a surge in student numbers (HEA, 2022), with a number of competing needs identified by its stakeholders.

For example, industry has highlighted demands that all students have the opportunity to partake in work experience (Patrick et al., 2008), civic society has identified a desire for a greater attention to issues around social justice and environmental concerns (O'Connor & Ketola, 2018) and, by students who are increasingly calling to be positioned as co-creators or collaborators in the design of their education experience (Gravett et al., 2019). All have identified the need for more agile approaches which are both flexible in terms of learning pathways and provides alternative approaches to engaging with learners and recognition for learning.

The United Nations Education 2030 Agenda has called on Higher Education to develop "systems that offer flexible learning pathways for their students" (UNESCO, 2019). In addition, the EU (QQI, 2021) echoes that call, while also highlighting the role of Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) and how it might support more flexibility for learners. In an Irish context Hunt (HEA, 2011, p. 10) highlighted the benefits of more flexible approach and both systems and practical approaches. He states, *"Higher education itself will need to innovate and develop if it is to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts."* TU Dublin, through their strategic intent, and in the development of the University Education Model recognise this growing demand and have set the goal of engaging with stakeholders to develop flexible learning pathways and in particular re-positioning learners at the centre of the University.



INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Education 2030 Agenda encourages all countries to develop well-articulated education systems that offer flexible learning pathways (FLPs) for their students. They define Flexible Learning Pathways as "entry points and re-entry points for all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 33).

> **"entry points and re-entry points for all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education"**
>
> **UNESCO**

Providing multiple entry points to and progression routes between institutions, courses, or educational levels brings many benefits for individuals, HEIs and wider society, particularly in terms of equity, employability, or efficiency in the management of resources.
In terms of equity, they support a learner accessing HEI by reducing the barriers for entry and progression. They support employability by clearly mapping a learner's pathway of learning programmes to their chosen profession. In addition, they support the learner in taking programmes relevant to their needs. Additionally, they will support HEIs in being collaborative and eliminate duplication of provision (Lillis & Lynch, 2013).

UNESCO International Institute of Education Planning (2021) view is similar, insisting that flexible learning pathways are fundamental for meeting **SDG 4 Quality Education** in terms of promoting equity and lifelong learning opportunities. Martin and Godonoga (2020) reiterate these goals of FLPs and set out the following rationale for implementing them.

> Demand that Ireland's higher education system become much more flexible in provision in both time and place, and that it facilitates transfer and progression through all levels of the system
> (HEA, 2011)

FLPs reduce barriers to access allowing for more opportunities to access higher education particularly for non-traditional students thus promoting equity.

Successful implementation of FLPs will support institutions to meet their strategic plans in a more efficient manner. For example, it may be an approach to manage increasing enrolment numbers or duplication of provision.

A more successful education journey for each learner, by meeting their diverse needs leading to a student-centred approach.

Flexible learning pathways are often associated with student-centred learning, where teaching and learning processes are designed for, and often with, the student and they are intended to lead to *"high quality, flexible and more individually tailored education paths"* (Unger & Zaussinger, 2018, p.10). European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training(CEDEFOP) (2012) describes this as **'permeability'**, a flexible system that allows learners to build on their prior learning, irrespective of where this learning took place, formal, non-formal or informal context.

IRISH CONTEXT

The Irish National Strategy for Education 2030 reflects the international call for increased flexibility and agility to provide for increased mobility, equity of provision, lifelong learning and meeting the diverse learning requirements of learners. It recognises the challenges facing higher education, the continued increase in student numbers, due to peak in 2030 (HEA, 2022), the need to address the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the need to support non-traditional learners. This predicted growth and emerging needs

"demands that Ireland's higher education system become much more flexible in provision in both time and place, and that it facilitates transfer and progression through all levels of the system."

(HEA, 2011)

Meeting this demand will be achieved through the development of flexible pathways into, within and across higher education. The policy document suggests higher education institutions should:

1. Offer broad-based courses and more interdisciplinary learning opportunities for students in the first year of their undergraduate studies.
2. Improve responsiveness to local economic and social needs. People want to – and need to – move between employment and education several times during their lives
3. Encourage progression pathways for students. People want to pursue education in parallel with employment, so that their path to any educational goal could be considerably longer than that of a full-time student and people want to progressively build on their knowledge and experience, and want their achievements to be recognised.
4. Respond positively to the continuing professional development needs of the wider community to develop and deliver appropriate modules and programmes in a flexible and responsive way. This creates a demand for part-time and short courses at any time of the year, on any day of the week, at any time of the day. People want to study from home or from their workplace.

They conclude by highlighting implications of funding to enable flexible learning pathways and present many of the challenges of implementation including agile timetabling, multimodal delivery mechanisms and an increased demand for workplace provision.

FUNDING

As stated, funding plays a significant role in determining the policy direction for HEIs. Flexible Learning pathways present challenges in terms of funding arrangements particular in relation to equality between types of learners as well as the relationship between learners and HEIs. The Hunt Report (HEA, 2011) highlights the need to have full parity within Irish higher education funding policy.
The HEA also recognise the need for reform in this area and has detailed the need to provide equality for example between types of learners whether full- or part-time, on- or off-campus.

At present learners are funded by year and programme. The funding by year may make it difficult for learners to engage with flexible programmes that are not orientated through the traditional academic year. In addition, new short courses, for example micro credentials may not be recognised for funding as they may not be formally defined on the National Qualifications Framework. This would be quite common in terms of industry led training.
UNESCO (2021) recognised this challenge and proposed a solution suggesting a credit accumulation and transfer system In this case, learners would be allocated funding for a certain amount of credits based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ETCS) credits. The credits could be used to access appropriate education opportunities whether that be at FE, HE, or private institutions and in a mode that supported the learner. Judicious funding design, resulting in reform and learner equity, is needed to fully realise flexible learning pathways and the ultimate goal of lifelong learning.





FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS TU DUBLIN

TU Dublin recognises the international call of and national impetus for flexible learning pathways and have incorporated this need within its strategic plan 'Realising Infinite Possibilities - Strategic Intent 2030' (TU Dublin, 2021). It clearly states one of its priorities as 'Creating Priorities for All' with an accompanying milestone of 'we will have 1/3 of offerings delivered through multiple pathways'. The concept of flexible learning pathways is acknowledged in terms of entry to the University through Access programmes, links with local FET providers and Learn and Work type programmes.

There are numerous small-scale initiatives that aim provide for more flexibility for learners as they journey through the University. An agreed definition of Flexible Learning Pathways will emerge as the University develops enabling structures, policies, and procedures, for example, a new organisation design, university education model, university-wide timetabling system, and workload model. It will be important as the new structures embed that this recognised definition of flexible learning pathways is universally understood within the TU Dublin wider community.

As TU Dublin considers the options in delivering in flexible learning pathways, international comparisons might be useful. The following examples are specifically selected as they demonstrate a broad approach and would be unique in the Irish context. Daviss' (2016) characterisations were found as a useful tool to explore the similarities and differences between examples. When describing flexible pathways categorized on two characteristics. The first based on whether they are sequential in nature or non-linear. Sequential type insists on the order of modules within a programme, with non-linear allowing for the learner to choose the order. Secondly, he further categorizes learning pathways based either prescriptive or descriptive. Prescriptive, as in strict in requirement in order to progress and descriptive which suggests a more open, flexible approach allowing for learner agency.

TABLE 1 FLPs Approaches vs Types of Organisations

Organisation	Description	Approach	Type
Birmingham University	Responsibility for curriculum content is transferred to the student who can tailor it to their needs and interests by choosing modules across the university, according to their major or joint major (Brennan, Flexible Learning Pathways in British Higher Education: A Decentralized and Market-based Syatem, 2021)	Institution-Student-led	Non-linear Prescriptive
Florida HEI	A common course numbering system, which attributes the same number to courses offered by different higher education providers, but which are similar in content, similar courses offered in different institutions are considered comparable and provide the same credits. (UNESCO, 2018).	Goverment-led intervention	Sequential Prescriptive
Finland (Universities Act)	Universities Act states that universities must admit transfer students, i.e., student right to study is transferred from one higher education institution to another or within higher education institution from one degree programme to another (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2009)	Goverment-led intervention	Sequential Prescriptive
India	a student directed choice-based credit system (CBCS) to encourage interdisciplinary learning. Determined core credits, and elective or optional credits for different levels of academic programmes to enhance learning opportunities, match students' needs and aspirations, mobility between institutions and flexibility for working students. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2013)	Goverment-led intervention	Sequential Prescriptive
Purdue University	A traditional American University approach, groups of modules for major, minor and general education with various requirements based on mode of study. (Purdue University, 2021)	Institution- led	Non-linear Prescriptive
Quest University	The curriculum allows the learner to determine their own learning path steered by a question with guidance from a faculty mentor. A foundation programme for the years 1& 2 with the final 2 years a keystone project to answer an original question. (Quest University, 2021)	Institution-Student-led	Non-linear Descriptive
Victoria University	A block delivery approach with a focus on one module(subject) at a time. Each block is completed over 4 weeks. Blocks arranged based on programme of study. (Victoria University, 2021)	Institution- led	Sequential Prescriptive

Table 1 sets the Type based on the organisation and its approach; Interestingly Government-led approaches tend to be more conservative with the 3 identified in this table being of sequential, prescriptive type. The three universities presented are all non-linear with two thirds being prescriptive most likely due to the regulated environment they operate in. Quest University, nonlinear descriptive type is a private university and may have more flexibility in term of how it operates.

Find out more about the University Education Model (UEM) @ TU Dublin Intranet

CONCLUSION

Higher Education Institutions have received a clear call to develop more agile approaches which are both flexible in terms of learning pathways and provides alternative approaches to engaging with learners and recognition for learning.

There is a demand for the development of flexible pathways 'into', 'within' and 'across' higher education with clear guidance on how that might be addressed in terms of 'into' and 'across'. More challenging may be how flexible learning pathways might be developed within higher education with, arguably learner funding being the most significant obstacle. The MInister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has recently confirmed he will chair a new oversight group to drive these reforms. This will focus on creating a unified system and improving pathways between further and higher education.

Funding based on the premise that learners are allocated credits based the amount and level of ETCS credits may play part of the solution. With a continuing increase in student numbers, pressure from learners for increased flexibility, HEIs will need to meet the challenge of enabling Flexible Learning Pathways.

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