

# Conditions of Flexibility

Securing a more responsive higher education system  
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## Foreword

'Flexible learning' is in vogue. But what exactly is it, and what should those interested in or planning towards implementing it be aware of?

*Conditions of flexibility: securing a more responsive higher education system* is the culmination of a series of reports which have considered flexible learning from a range of perspectives. Each provides a flavour of flexibility from its own context and includes consideration of the pedagogies that contribute towards and enhance it. In this report, Professor Ron Barnett, Emeritus Professor at the Institute of Education, London, draws many of the threads together and offers a nuanced critical analysis of what flexibility may – and may not – mean, and the conditions under which a greater measure of flexibility is likely to flourish within, and benefit, the UK higher education (HE) system.

As this report invites us to recognise, different ways of thinking about flexible learning reflect the influence of sometimes complementary, and sometimes competing, drivers and value orientations. It is tempting to focus primarily on questions of flexibility of systems and structures, and these aspects of flexible learning are important – but it is very appropriate that a major report such as this, published by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the UK's leading body on learning and teaching, should principally highlight the intended outcome of flexible pedagogies: flexible graduates. Graduates who are able to engage with the uncertainties, complexities and demands of a rapidly changing world – some might even say a 'flexi world' – actively and constructively, from a position of what Professor Barnett identifies as epistemic flexibility. The report calls for serious attention to be paid to radical, imaginative educational innovation and experiment in order that HE providers do justice to the faith their students put in them in preparing them for living and working in such a world and for shaping its future.

Fifteen conditions of flexibility are proposed; 'conditions', here, referring both to the measures that need to be in place in order for flexibility to take root in an appropriate way, as well as to those that might lead to a greater responsiveness within the sector. The report emphasises that they are, at heart, conditions of a *bona fide* higher education regardless of where, when, how and at what pace this takes place. A 'steady gaze' on them – as advocated by Professor Barnett – will allow them to act as a springboard to propel new thinking and new practices for an emerging new age.

The reports underpinning this one each offer valuable contributions to this new thinking. *New pedagogical ideas* puts forward a rationale for six pedagogical approaches that aim to allow HE not only to move into a new era but also to determine and influence its characteristics. *Technology-enhanced learning* highlights some of the technological innovations that will facilitate an increasingly personalised learner experience. *Part-time learners and learning* emphasises the challenges faced by those students who in many ways require the greatest degree of flexibility in the HE experience and offers a pathway and an audit intended to assist HE providers to facilitate this. *Employer engagement and work-based learning* explores the relationship between HE providers and employers and considers the forms of flexibility that characterise this relationship and how it might be enhanced. Accompanying all of these is a report on credit transfer which highlights the importance of having a robust system of credit accumulation in place not only in the UK but also throughout Europe and potentially world-wide that will allow student mobility.

The 2011 HEFCE strategy statement, *Opportunity, Choice and Excellence in Higher Education* emphasises that each of those three elements is key to the achievement of its aims as UK HE forges its path in the 21st century. Flexible learning underpins all of them, and the HEA is delighted both to contribute to debate and to offer suggestions about how concrete and practical development might be accomplished. *Conditions of flexibility* contains recommendations directed at different levels within the sector. They are challenging and will require the ‘steady gaze’ the report calls for, but institutions, sector bodies, researchers and students are well placed to step up to the plate and begin making them a reality.

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## Acknowledgements

The compilation of a wide-ranging report such as this – stretching as it does across policy, strategy, management, operational and teaching and learning matters – has to draw on many sources of help and assistance. My thanks go in the first place to the steering group for the HEA's Flexible Pedagogies project, particularly Dr Alison Le Cornu, Academic Lead for flexible learning, who has given my efforts in producing this report enormous support in so many ways. Alison has always been ready to respond with unfailing generosity when I have doubtless tested her patience on many occasions. I also wish to acknowledge the work of Abi Player, who helped considerably with the bibliography resources for this work. I would observe, too, the substantial assistance afforded to me by the participants in a day-long HEA seminar in which a draft of this report was considered in some detail. Grateful thanks are therefore extended to: Mark Atlay, Harriet Barnes, Andrew Brown, Dominic Bygate, Elizabeth Cleaver, Sal Cooke, Kerr Gardiner, Catherine Hack, Simon Haslett, Ceredig Jamieson-Ball, Liam Jarnecki, Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, Martin Oliver, Aileen Ponton, Charles Ritchie, Alastair Robertson, Maggi Savin-Baden, Alan Spivey, Freda Tallantyre, Wayne Turnbull, Tobin Webb, Sheila Wolfenden, Steve Wyn Williams.

**Ronald Barnett** is Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at the Institute of Education, London (where he was both Dean of Professional Development and (subsequently) Pro-Director for Longer Term Strategy). In his academic work, he has been trying to advance a social philosophy of the university, in which he has been attempting to identify creative concepts and practical principles that offer ways of enhancing universities and higher education. Recently, he has begun to sketch out an idea of *the ecological university*.

# Executive summary

## This report

- 1** Through 2012-2014, the HEA put in hand a major programme of work on ‘flexible pedagogies’. That programme of work builds on earlier work of the HEA and has seen published four ‘strand’ reports on various aspects of flexibility (including part-time provision, technology-enhanced learning, employer engagement and so forth). Each of those reports is rich in case study material and fieldwork evidence focusing especially on the student experience.
- 2** This report concludes this programme of work. It remains concerned with pedagogical developments aimed at increasing flexibility, but it places its analysis in the wider institutional and sector context. It offers observations about flexibility in general and makes recommendations for national bodies as well as institutions.

## Flexibility in general

- 3** In a fluid, dynamic and global world, higher education systems cannot but exhibit flexibility and it is right that they should do so; but this dual observation cuts two ways. *Too little flexibility* and systems will lack the capacities adequately to respond to a changing environment and, ultimately, will start to wilt. *Too much flexibility*, on the other hand, and systems will lack internal integrity and ultimately might fragment; certainly, they will run risks of lowering standards and failing quality measures.
- 4** Flexibility is a good, desirable aspect of higher education and this report identifies a number of the benefits that can attach to flexibility.
- 5** However, flexibility is not an absolute good. Educational risks attach to the injection of a greater measure of flexibility and so its pursuance and moves in that direction have all the time to be subject to evaluation.
- 6** It would be an exaggeration to say that ‘flexibility’ can mean whatever its adherents wish it to mean. However, the term in itself is largely empty of content. Anyone proposing moves

towards greater flexibility should be put on the spot to explain what precisely they mean by their use of 'flexibility' and their reasons and justification for it.

- 7 This relative emptiness of meaning has the virtue that quite different groups – even with conflicting educational agendas – can come together under the banner of flexibility. It has come to be a universal concept. However, as implied, the 'debate' over flexibility harbours fundamental differences that are not being brought out into the open. Without such explicitness, presuppositions about moves towards more flexibility will go untested and assumptions as to what constitutes a valid student experience will go unexamined.
- 8 A fundamental distinction lies between *systems* flexibility and *pedagogical* flexibility and these two forms of flexibility play out in complex ways, being both complementary to and in tension with each other.
- 9 Differences and, indeed, conflicts are partly a matter of *value preferences* (for example, as between institutional responsiveness to students in a heightened marketplace and a concern to help to develop students' personal capacities as human beings in a challenging and, indeed, super-complex age). The presence of such contrasting value orientations should be acknowledged.
- 10 It follows that the evaluation of any particular move and 'progress' towards flexibility has to be a highly nuanced process, carefully weighting contending value preferences. It cannot be conducted simply as a value-neutral technical process, just narrowly focusing say on evident outcomes or the bottom line. Practical and value judgements are called for.

### The condition of flexibility in the UK

- 11 Moves towards greater flexibility in UK higher education are being conditioned principally by (i) the marketisation of higher education; (ii) the emergence of students-as-consumers, exerting wishes for new kinds of educational provision; (iii) the potential of new digital technologies; and (iv) the apparent potential (that new educational environments are opening) for widening higher education at reduced unit costs. It is these concerns and interests that are currently dominant in driving flexibility.



- 12** Certainly, and unsurprisingly (especially given that they stand in different market situations), institutions are responding differently to the flexibility agenda and are developing different *forms of flexibility* and are, in turn, evincing different *profiles of flexibility*.
- 13** Overall, the condition of flexibility in higher education in the UK is on a cusp. Especially at undergraduate level, moves towards greater flexibility are balanced between interests in growing markets and in securing a lowering of unit costs on the one hand, and creative – and sometimes highly imaginative – innovations concerned to derive new kinds of educational experience and forms of human development for students on the other.
- 14** The 21<sup>st</sup> century is calling for human beings who are themselves flexible, able to respond purposively to new situations and ideas. A focus – of the kind we are seeing in the UK – on systems redesign and responding to the student-as-customers may paradoxically act as a brake on developing the kind of flexible pedagogies that are necessary in this fluid age.
- 15** It follows that, in taking forward the ‘flexibility agenda’, and in having concerns for costs, for meeting students’ wishes and for systems efficiencies, there lies a heavy responsibility on decision-makers (at all levels of the sector) to give serious attention to the potential for radical *educational* innovation, concerned with students who have to make their way in a challenging world. And for that, space for imaginative educational experiment – and failure – should be opened.
- 16** Unless due care is taken, both standards and quality are at risk; and of these, it is the risk posed to standards that is the more serious.
- 17** Accordingly, a *set of conditions of flexibility* – 15 in total – are proposed as yardsticks by which any move towards flexibility might be evaluated. In moving towards greater flexibility in higher education, and to safeguard educational integrity, programmes should:
- 1** lead to a qualification that contributes to major awards (such as degrees or their equivalent);
  - 2** offer all students access to suitable materials and appropriate cognitive and practical experiences;

- 3 offer 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 (such as counselling, academic and careers advice);
- 7 offer financial services (appropriate to the cost to students in financing their studies);
- 8 enable students to offer feedback on their total experience;
- 9 provide a pedagogical openness;
- 10 be academically and educationally structured;
- 11 offer ladder(s) of progression;
- 12 be suitably robust and reliable (with built-in safeguards appropriate to the risk);
- 13 be cost-effective;
- 14 have sufficient structure so as to enable student completion to be a likely outcome;
- 15 contain sufficient challenge that students are likely to be cognitively and experientially stretched and to be informed by a spirit of criticality appropriate to each stage of a programme of studies (so as fully to realise the promise of a higher education).

Flexible provision has the potential to enhance student learning, widen opportunities for participation in higher education, and develop graduates who are well-equipped to contribute to a fast-changing world. This report shows how these conditions of flexibility provide the foundations for the implementation of robust, well-informed and thought-through structures and strategies that will lead the sector into the future.

## Recommendations

(Each recommendation, where appropriate, is followed in brackets by the numbers of key paragraphs in the main body of the report.)

- The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) might:
  - consider whether its understandable wish to see, and encouragement for, more flexibility (that is, a heightened *systems flexibility*) across the sector might be leading institutions to adopt a lesser concern for *pedagogical flexibility* (46-7, 51-52, 144);
  - go on investigating ways in which it can extend support for part-time learners (132-135).

- The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) might:
  - consider for adoption the 15 conditions of flexibility (186, 189, 191);
  - audit each institution's 'flexibility profile' (152-54);
  - explore the extent to which an institution's curricula and pedagogies are likely to sponsor 'personal flexibility' within students (46);
  - in its institutional reviews, review the extent to which curricula exhibit 'epistemic flexibility', with students able intellectually to explore knowledge in a relatively open-ended way (45);
  - especially against the background of moves in the direction of 'flexibility', examine the forms of student support, their speediness and their accessibility and transparency (93);
  - conduct an inquiry into ways in which drives towards greater flexibility in the system are possibly having an impact both on standards and on quality (179-85);
  - in its institutional reviews:
    - consider adopting the set of 'key questions' suggested here, in any exploration with institutions of more flexible provision (62-63);
    - explore the extent of students' pedagogical isolation (86, 89, 115), the (possibly limited) scope of students' educational experience and challenge (89) and the (possible) fragmentation of that experience (95-96).
  
- Funding Councils might consider, as a lever in promoting more experimentation in the system, adopting an initiative – with a limited but dedicated tranche of monies – deliberately aimed at sponsoring initiatives from institutions with a view to increasing flexibility.
  
- The HEA might:
  - commission research to identify institutional profiles of flexibility and, on that basis, to attempt to discern models of flexibility across the sector (155);
  - continue to keep the theme of flexibility high in its agenda. This might include putting in hand a project to identify the varying perspectives on flexibility of the different interest groups (25-26);
  - develop a set of student attributes that could be a template for institutions wishing to help their students to develop forms of personal flexibility in themselves (47, 170-74);
  - work with QAA to develop further its institutional guidelines on flexibility, in the light of the proposed QAA audits of institutions' flexibility (see above under QAA);

- ensure that the UK Professional Standards Framework is worded in such a way that pedagogical and learner flexibility are recognised and valued (92-104, 164-78);
  - put work in hand to examine, and explore with institutions, implications both for leadership and for management of efforts to enhance flexibility (82, 126-27, 156-63);
  - work with the sector in encouraging institutions to be even more reflective as to their individual stance towards flexibility;
  - work alongside other sector bodies and relevant credit networks to encourage and help embed a UK-wide credit framework and a more even take-up of credit accumulation and transfer (141-42, 146-47).
- Institutions might:
    - conduct a self-scrutiny of the extent to which an institution is responsive to its environment (35, 152);
    - conduct an audit of the extent to which an institution's provision is genuinely flexible (drawing on the 12 forms of flexibility (152) and so establishing a flexibility profile (154);
    - review and evaluate the extent to which, and the ways in which, an institution's provision at course and programme level is meeting the 15 conditions of flexibility proposed here (186, 188);
    - review the extent and character of its student support, especially in relation to the immediate student experience and the level of support that students receive in their work (93);
    - conduct internal self-studies of the student experience with regard to more flexible provision (22-23, 86-92).
- Student Unions might review – with institutional management – students' needs for greater flexibility (72).
- The 'Research into Higher Education' community (including the HEA, the BIS, the HEFCE, research councils such as the ESRC, think-tanks, and learned associations (such as the Society for Research into Higher Education) might build on the existing research and literature base. Specifically, it might:
    - inquire into ways in which flexible provision affects students' experience of higher education (88-90, 92, 95-96, 102);

- study the effects of new technologies on students' experiences and their optimisation (106-07, 112-16, 118-20, 137);
- research the relationships between flexibility, educational outcomes and costs (54, 83);
- conduct a fundamental inquiry into student support, especially in the context of more flexible provision (93, 117, 124);
- explore the relationships between more flexible forms of provision, student engagement and non-completion (116-17);
- investigate linkages and interactions between different components of flexibility (curricula, pedagogies, student development and institutional strategies and systems) (172).

## Introduction

- 1 This report has been commissioned by the Higher Education Academy. In approaching this task, an open canvas was kindly extended to me by the HEA and, in discussion, it was agreed this report might usefully offer an analysis of the conditions under which a greater measure of flexibility is likely to flourish within the UK higher education system.
- 2 The idea of ‘conditions’ here points to two tasks ahead of this report. *Firstly*, the aim is to identify conditions under which greater flexibility can be achieved *securely*, so as to maintain the integrity and good standing of the higher education system as a whole. *Secondly*, the aim is to point to ways in which the system might be afforded even more responsiveness and to identify conditions that are likely to sponsor such greater flexibility. The first is about the conditions for securing a sound *platform* for flexibility; the second is about the conditions that will inject *momentum* towards flexibility.
- 3 These two tasks compete against each other: the first set of conditions might constitute a *restraint* on flexibility whereas the second set of conditions is concerned with its *flourishing*. This report will ride both horses at once, with an eye to conditions both of the system’s integrity and of its developing.
- 4 More specifically, the *overall objectives* of this report are:
  - to examine the overall condition of innovations being conducted in UK higher education under the banner of ‘flexibility’;
  - to identify broadly the *benefits* that a greater measure of flexibility could offer higher education;
  - to conduct an audit of the *challenges* that ‘flexible pedagogies’ pose to the sector as a whole, given various presuppositions and ideals concerning higher education;
  - to offer an analysis of the various *meanings* attaching in higher education to ‘flexibility’, and their associated *values*;
  - to specify the *responsibilities* that befall the sector, at all levels of orchestration and provision, in furthering ‘flexibility’;
  - to identify, in a broad-brush way, features of the higher educational environment that *impinge* on flexibility;

- to identify *conditions* to which attention should be given – to ensure educational *integrity* of offerings – in moves towards greater flexibility;
- to offer *proposals* by which more flexible provision might actually *flourish*.

- 5 This is a considerable set of objectives and perhaps no single report such as this can be expected fully to do justice to all of them. To that extent, this report can be seen as an attempt to lay out the ground for further such analytical and evaluative work in the near future.
- 6 The context here is complex, and works at student, course, institutional, national and even international levels. These levels can work to complement each other but they can also work against each other. (Institutions can promote flexible course provision but they may also impede their development. Faculty within departments can open up the teaching situation and so permit each student the flexibility to flourish but faculty can also stand in the way of such pedagogical developments.) Partly at issue is power: *where lies the power to exert leverage in the system either to open or thwart the way to a more flexible environment?*
- 7 It should not be presumed that resistance – if that is a suitable term – is to be found only at faculty or course levels. In a seminar looking at a draft of this report, it was suggested that there can sometimes be a keen will at programme level to open up lines of innovation but which find a reluctance at managerial levels to be so adventurous (a point made also in the summary of ‘barriers’ to flexibility in the HEA’s report of its flexible learning summit). Deep assumptions as to what constitutes a *bona fide* higher education – ‘assumptive worlds’ (Sabri 2010) – may be found at all levels of an institution.
- 8 Part of the context here, too, is the continuing development of higher education markets, including the enlarging of the number of private providers. Not only are they wishing themselves to work within, and to play their part in, a flexible environment but that understandable stance is encouraging public sector providers to seek a more open environment such that they themselves can be more flexible in responding to market opportunities.

## HEA Flexible Pedagogies project

**9** This report is part of a suite of reports commissioned by the HEA on the theme of ‘flexibility’ forming a large two-year project on the matter, and this particular report has been positioned so as to provide an overarching narrative to the HEA project in its entirety. Those other reports, therefore, form – as it were – annexes to this report, having engaged each with a particular strand in relation to flexibility. They are:

- *Technology-enhanced learning* by Neil Gordon [TEL];
- *New pedagogical ideas* by Alex Ryan and Daniella Tilbury [NPI];
- *Employer engagement and work-based learning* by Jane Kettle [EE];
- *Part-time learners and learning in higher education* by Michael McLinden [PTL];

Additionally, a number of other reports have recently been published by the HEA that have focused either directly on aspects of flexibility or are closely connected with it, including:

- *Flexible learning summit report* by Freda Tallantyre [FLS];
- *Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education* by Manuel Souto-Otero [CAT];
- *The pedagogy of the Massive Open Online Course: the UK view* by Sian Bayne and Jen Ross [PedMOOC].

**10** While those other reports provide detailed accounts of contemporary developments on sub-topics, this report deliberately has its own level of analysis, namely that of the higher education system as a whole. This point bears a little explanation.

**11** An overarching question for the project as a whole was adopted by the strand leaders, namely ‘*Why and to what extent might flexible pedagogies be promoted – and in what ways?*’ The four strand reports have, in effect, provided detail that responds to the final part of that question (‘*in what ways?*’). Each one is rich in empirical data and contains numerous case studies that illustrate ways in which the sector is already exhibiting different forms of flexibility (in relation to part-time provision, employer engagement, technology-enhanced learning and so on); and each report goes on to make a raft of recommendations for action in relation to its particular topic. This report, in contrast, focuses especially on the first two parts of the project’s overarching question (‘*Why and to what extent?*’). Taken together, the



HEA considers that the reports as a whole offer a powerful and particular contribution to the emerging debate on the matter of higher education responsiveness.

- 12** Unlike the strand reports that have emerged from the studies connected with it, this report does not seek to provide primary data but instead builds upon the data contained in those associated reports as well as evidence and thinking in the wider literature. It is pitched at the sector and systems levels and it seeks, accordingly, to offer an *analysis and evaluation* of moves towards greater flexibility, and to set out *general principles* for the UK higher education system as a whole.
- 13** It follows that those other reports should be read alongside this one, since they provide empirical backing for this report. Readers who would understandably wish to have evidence and exemplifications of possible actions within and across institutions – of the points made here – are encouraged to delve into those reports. (*References are made here in this report to those other HEA reports by means of the acronyms inserted above*).
- 14** The task of this report is deliberately somewhat provocative. It is to challenge, and to invite critical reflections on, assumptions that may lie within the developing debate on flexibility, and within institutional and national policies and strategies, and to glimpse additional possibilities not yet fully on the horizon.

## Overlapping of dimensions

- 15 There is both a multiplicity of dimensions to the matter of flexibility and those dimensions overlap and intersect in multitudinous ways.
- 16 So far as its *dimensions* are concerned, flexibility may be present – as the associated HEA reports bear testimony – in time, in space, in educational processes (pedagogies), in curricula, and in institutional and national systems.
- 17 Such dimensions of flexibility intersect in all manner of ways. For example, modern technologies may come into play at the level of the experience of the individual student [NPI] and at the level of national and institutional systems. [TEL] They may also assist in making more flexible the provision of higher education to part-time students and to full-time students. [PTL] Also, flexibility in educational timeframes may be enhanced both for students on campus and for those in workplaces. [EE] ‘Flexibility’ is not only a matter of the teaching environment within the immediate purview of institutions.
- 18 It may be tempting to essay a kind of matrix in diagrammatic form, for example, with levels of higher education provision along one axis (the levels of the individual student, institutional and national systems); and with forms of flexibility along the other axis (such as pedagogies, curricula, technologies). Such a matrix diagram would seem to offer the potential straight away of plotting patterns of flexibility for any one situation.
- 19 But that temptation should be resisted because things are not that simple! Firstly, as we have seen, flexibility is apparent in all manner of ways, and in ways which extend beyond a simple two-axis matrix. As well as being in evidence in different forms and levels, flexibility can extend in time and space so opening at least four dimensions (forms, levels, time, and space). Secondly, for any one example of flexibility – say, flexibility for the learner in a work setting – all four moments of flexibility (forms, levels, time and space) – will criss-cross each other in manifold and even bewildering ways.
- 20 Why does this – possibly arcane set of points – matter here? *Firstly*, and rather prosaically, there is no single ordering of the topics of a report such as this. Since all the ingredients

intermix, the cake can be sliced in a variety of ways. There is, therefore, and there must be, a high degree of interdependence across the sections of this report. Consequently, some themes – such as pedagogical flexibility and the use of digital technologies – will continue to bubble through this report, as they are taken up on different occasions.

- 21 *Secondly*, an understanding of the matter of flexibility in higher education calls for some adroitness in holding in the mind a variety of possibilities and interconnections. In speaking of any element of flexibility – in relation say to the responsiveness of a single institution – all manner of its actual and potential interconnections will be present, if only in the shadows. This point has practical implications for it follows that in engaging in policy terms or in systems design with any one element of flexibility, there will be (*not may be*) ramifications for a host of other elements of flexibility.
- 22 A corollary is that, all too often, management and policy decisions may be taken – at various levels through the sector – concerning ‘flexibility’ that are perhaps not always accompanied by a thinking through of the unintended consequences of action. An innovation intended to reduce costs by introducing more ‘flexible’ systems could have an unintended consequence of fundamentally altering the student experience and possibly, in turn, leading to higher non-completion levels, so in effect raising costs in the system.
- 23 *Thirdly*, it follows that in enhancing some elements of flexibility in a situation, there may be awkward and even negative effects on other elements of flexibility. For instance, an effort to allow students greater choice in their chosen programme of studies may just lead – if such choices are concentrated in particular areas – to an ultimate *reduction* of the total curriculum offer across an institution (and so a diminution in the ways in which that institution can ‘flexibly’ meet the challenges of an education for a modern society).
- 24 This is not to say that there is a zero sum game at work, that greater flexibility in one area must lead to a diminution in another area. But it is to say, as stated, that decision-makers need to be alert to *unintended consequences* of particular moves towards greater flexibility and be prepared carefully to sift through and to analyse those consequences. That analytical work is essential. While desirable, flexibility can *never* be an unqualified good.

## Perspectives and audiences

- 25** An interest in flexibility in higher education is shared by *multiple constituencies*. These include students themselves (and their student union leaders), teachers and curriculum and learning managers in institutions, institutional leaders, employers, national bodies and the national government, and even cross-national agencies.
- 26** We may assume that these constituencies will each have its particular perspective and that those perspectives will overlap but will also show differences and, further, that those differences of viewpoint will, on occasions, erupt into *conflicts*. For instance, an employer's wish to see programmes of study (over which it partners with a local institution) get off the ground rapidly may conflict with the determination of its partner institution to ensure high quality and so subject course approvals to a measured process of evaluation and validation. A student's wish to be able to have access to his or her programme of study 'anywhere, anytime' may conflict with the programme team's wish to introduce more collaborative work among students (calling for a measure of uniformity in place and time). An employee's wish to have access to a very broad range of educational experiences – whether for personal or for long-term professional development – may conflict with an employer's views that the organisation should support only learning and skills development of immediate and manifest relevance. [EE]
- 27** Again, this is not to repudiate calls for flexibility; to the contrary. After all, this report is part of a major HEA project that seeks to encourage greater flexibility. But it is to point up the *relational* aspect of flexibility. As intimated, flexibility has its place amid a complex web of relationships and interests – across providers, students and stakeholders (including taxpayers). Accordingly, in introducing greater flexibility into the system – at any level, in any direction – work needs to be put in hand to examine likely implications for the legitimate interests of the manifold interest groups of a particular proposal and their inter-relationships (and this report therefore contains a significant section on just such 'relationships').
- 28** This report is pitched, in the first place, at the level of *institutions and national systems*. This is not to neglect the matters of the student experience and pedagogical and curricula issues. Indeed, they have to be at the heart of this report; and it is they that have been the focus of

this HEA project and its various strands as a whole. But the judgement has surely to be that it is at the national and institutional levels that the major sources of power and influence lie, so far as injecting greater flexibility into higher education is concerned. Further – for example, in the development of a national credit accumulation system – some major possibilities for greater flexibility are precisely to be found at the national and institutional levels.

- 29** *Curricula and pedagogical issues, as well as the student experience, must come strongly into view in this report, but – in the relational spirit just suggested, therefore – those matters will be explored within their institutional and national contexts. In examining flexibility in higher education, the educational processes have to be at the heart of any serious examination of the topic but they have to be understood as significantly influenced and, indeed, shaped ('mediated') by their institutional and national contexts.*
- 30** It is therefore at the institutional and national levels that, in the first place, this report is pitched.

## Flexibility: a continuing issue?

- 31** Flexibility in higher education is not new. In 1858, the University of London opened its degrees to any (male) student who could take them, irrespective of where in the world he studied. Subsequently, this provision grew into the University of London external system (enabling British prisoners of war to take exams in the camps in both world wars and helping to provide the foundations of several universities across the Commonwealth; Kenyon Jones 2008). The mid-1960s saw in the UK the establishment both of greenfield universities (several of which attempted to form new kinds of inter-disciplinary curricula), technological universities and the polytechnic sector of higher education (which, with the new Council for National Academic Awards, quickly established large modular courses and part-time courses). Soon afterwards, in 1969, the Open University was established, an initiative so radical that its financing fell outside the then University Grants Committee.
- 32** These examples prompt the question as to whether radical new forms of flexibility are unlikely to be initiated *within* established institutions and systems but are rather more likely to be born in entirely new forms of provision. (Perhaps the contemporary entry of private providers can be seen partly in this light, as offering forms of flexibility unlikely to be readily available in the current dispensation).
- 33** As a theme, too, in the literature, flexibility is not new. Indeed flexibility has been an explicit subject of inquiry and investigation for 20 years or more, for example in relation to learning strategies, curricula and academic staffing arrangements (eg, Bligh 1982; Mortimer, Bagshaw and Masland 1985; Thomas 1995).
- 34** What is new about the present situation is a set of features that together push the matter of flexibility into a totally new era. These features (many of which are world-wide but some of which are especially prominent in the UK) include:
- the deliberate creation of markets in higher education (especially in England);
  - the quickening of the emergence of private providers;
  - the coming of the digital age, with new interactive and global technologies;
  - a continually increasing demand for higher education which outpaces the capacities of the public purse, so placing more onus for the financing of higher education upon students;

- continuing challenges on universities to take on an ever wider array of functions, not least that of ‘widening participation’, so exerting more pressure in regard to teaching to ‘do more with less’;
- more sophisticated expectations from employers and the labour market generally as to the skills and aptitudes of their graduate entrants;
- heightened expectations from students that their higher education experience should match their particular wishes and situations;
- rapid change in society and in the world, calling for new levels and forms of responsiveness on the part of universities;
- a recognition that there are many constituencies who wish to have access to higher education that are not well served by traditional forms of provision (those in work, individuals whose lives are mostly ‘at home’, the disabled, and those geographically distant from university campuses);
- the coming of an age of contested frameworks for comprehending the very world itself, such that individuals are called upon to exhibit (and to possess the capabilities for) a measure of *personal flexibility*.

**35** These changes together constitute a formidable set of challenges to institutions and herald a situation in which the theme of flexibility is bound now to be part of the higher education debate. In turn, this set of challenges prompts *a need for each university to engage in a serious self-scrutiny as to the extent to which and the ways in which it is suitably responsive to its total environment*.

## Wider considerations

- 36** Beyond the immediate challenges (just identified), there is an even wider set of considerations that bear upon the matter of flexibility.
- 37** Universities and higher education are caught up in profound *global dynamics*, to which terms such as ‘globalisation’, ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘cognitive capitalism’ can hardly do justice. It is a world characterised by rapid and incessant technological change, of the proliferation of profound conceptual and value dispute, of near instantaneity (in which, for instance, massive global financial processes occur in micro-seconds through inter-connected and automated computer systems), of digital (social) networking and communication, and of a compression of spaces (in which ‘the global village’ comes alive as a daily experience for many across the world).
- 38** This is a *fluid, unstable world* and a world marked by a competitive ethos. In such a world, speed is power: ‘the greater the speed, the greater the control’ (Virilio 2005). It is a world, too, in which connections are crucial (between individuals, institutions and systems). And it is a world that calls for continuous learning, at the levels both of individuals and institutions. ‘*The learning university*’ is no longer an option but a necessity.
- 39** Challenges befall universities in this milieu. A major challenge is that of responsiveness: *can measures of flexibility be injected into educational systems and processes to provide the necessary levels of continuing responsiveness?* This is a flexibility borne not merely out of institutional survival but of a proper desire to see institutions realising the potential of the new spaces that are opening for higher education.
- 40** Placing the key issue before us here at this high level of generality opens all manner of further challenges at all levels of higher education. Paths beckon towards educational provision that is less bounded by timeframes, less located in particular places and with more open relationships between teacher and taught. These are considerable challenges for large institutions that have over time developed their own procedures, regulations and ways of going on. *Ethos and collective understandings are not easily modified.* Hardly surprisingly,



organisations are emerging (especially in the private sector) that are ready to establish new educational systems infused with an ethos of responsiveness.

- 41 Accordingly, the matter of flexibility brings complexity not just in systems and technologies but in ways of understanding just what an institution of higher education might be and *what a valid student experience might look like*. More than mere complexity, this is a *supercomplexity* (Barnett 2000) in which our very concepts of ‘higher education’, ‘teaching’, ‘learning’ and ‘student’ are all challenged fundamentally and (now) continuously. Just as higher education systems, structures and technologies need continuously to be adaptive so too, it appears, there should be a flexibility in our ways of thinking about higher education. There can be no freezing of key concepts.

### Flexibility and innovation

- 42 A distinction should be made here between *flexibility* and *innovation*. There is perhaps sometimes a tendency to point to examples of innovation – in systems, in technologies, in institutions – as if they themselves are examples of flexibility. Such a conflation should be avoided: *flexibility and innovation are sharply different ideas*. After all, an innovation may itself lead to *inflexibility*. Having taken on, say, a new digital platform or delivery system or mode of communication with students, its adherents may be so wedded to it that it becomes sedimented, a fixed part of the landscape not to be tampered with. Or, and even more perniciously, it comes to embed ways of thinking – about educational processes or about what it is to be a student – that themselves come to lock in fundamental ideas. Especially when driven forward as a matter of fiat, innovations can quickly become ideologies that act as a brake on thinking and action. Simply to point to ‘the need for innovation’ or to innovations or to systems redesign – even if actually in progress – is not in itself, therefore, to point to instances of flexibility.
- 43 Correspondingly, a *conflation between flexible learning and technology-enhanced learning should be avoided*. While much flexibility is, today, significantly enhanced through technological innovations, it is entirely possible for programmes and modules delivered online to offer little if any flexibility to learners, especially if similar enrolment and completion dates, together with assessment deadlines, to parallel face-to-face delivery are imposed. At the heart of the flexible

learning agenda is the notion of student *choice* in how, when, where, what and at what pace they learn (something echoed in HEFCE's 2011 Strategy Statement, *Opportunity, Choice and Excellence in Higher Education*) and although, as this report indicates, affording students such choice is a complex matter, it is not to be felt to be a *necessary* concomitant of online provision.

## Knowledge changes

- 44** This report focuses on flexibility in relation to educational processes but a contiguous part of the context here is that of emerging forms of flexibility in relation to *research processes*. Here, too, flexibility is found – or is urged – at all kinds of levels. Not only is flexibility a matter of the ways in which disciplines might open themselves to each other (in transdisciplinarity; in pluridisciplinarity) and of the ways in which researchers are expected to work (in transnational teams, in new forms of ‘publication’) but it is a matter evident at different levels of *knowledge production*. For example, the European Commission is envisaging new forms of research collaboration across Europe so as to form a ‘European Research Area’, to become ‘a byword for creativity, excellence and efficiency – and the catalyst for a new Renaissance in the way we think, act and research globally.’ (European Commission 2009).
- 45** Such seismic changes occurring in knowledge production, knowledge management and research processes are bound to have implications for higher education, even if we can barely glimpse what they may be. It is not just that programmes of study are increasingly seeking to bring research explicitly into undergraduate curricula (with a language of ‘research-led’ and ‘research-based’ teaching and so forth); more broadly, it is that as research processes become more fluid and more international, so the higher education experience will itself need to be responsive to this more liquid character of knowledge creation. These phenomena call, we might say, for a heightened *epistemic flexibility* within curricula.

## Personal flexibility and systems flexibility

- 46** These observations (both those about fluidity in knowledge creation and circulation and earlier considerations about the instability and fluidity of the contemporary world) lead to a key point. Matters of flexibility cannot be confined to talk about systems (including

institutional, national and even global systems). *Systems flexibility* is not an end in itself but more properly becomes a means to assist in helping students to take on **personal** forms of flexibility so that they may be better equipped to face and, indeed, contribute to a fluid and unstable world. This single observation – and this distinction between systems flexibility and personal flexibility – has profound implications for this report.

- 47 There is a huge educational challenge lurking here, for there may be an unwitting temptation to remain within systems and technical modes of thinking and action. In speaking of students becoming more flexible, what has fundamentally to be included is a sense of *students as persons*, not merely as handlers of (changing) knowledge or as the (adaptable) possessors of skills (even ‘complexity skills’). Rather, what is called for is a sense of students developing as the bearers of certain kinds of dispositions and qualities (Barnett 2007) that, together, are likely to enable graduates to be oriented towards the world by a *spirit of flexibility*. If the world is presenting graduates with all kinds of unpredictable situations, ideas, conflicts, value predicaments and so on and so forth, any amount of knowledge and skills is not going to be sufficient for an adequate response. What is necessary is that graduates be flexible people able and willing to respond to a world of uncertainty and personal challenge.
- 48 These considerations are given added point by the challenges and the opportunities being opened by digital technologies, especially with ‘second-life’ personas (Warburton 2009; Savin-Baden 2013) and the re-presentation of educational tasks in the form of games. Opening here are profound issues of the identity of the student and of the relationship of the student to ‘the real world’ (and, more formally, the matter of subjectivity in cyberspace, a matter that Slavoj Žižek among others has recently been tackling (Pelletier 2005).
- 49 Accordingly, in addressing the matter of flexibility in higher education, this report will hold in view – perhaps uneasily at times – both the spaces of systems and structures and also those of personal qualities and dispositions, for flexibility needs surely to be evident in both territories. And these two sets of considerations – *systems flexibility* and *personal flexibility* – may at times be in conflict with each other.
- 50 As suggested, this seemingly innocuous point has a major implication. It is that a concern for *learner flexibility* – as we may term it – will raise particular issues for *pedagogical flexibility*. We

cannot hope to bring about the personal transformations required to enable graduates to prosper in an uncertain and challenging world unless the attendant pedagogical processes themselves exhibit forms of flexibility.

- 51** However, the reverse does not hold. *It is not the case that flexible pedagogies and curricula or flexible institutional arrangements will, in themselves, bring about learner flexibility.* For that, some measure of educational control and together with the direction and the maintenance – or even the imposition – of boundaries and rigid frameworks may be necessary. Otherwise, flexible education systems may produce unduly *limited* educational outcomes, with graduates narrow in their capabilities and ill-fitted to cope with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 52** Accordingly, in pursuing an agenda of flexibility, tensions may arise. A concern to bring about learner flexibility may call for autonomy and professional responsiveness on the part of the teacher – and so a heightened degree of *teacher flexibility*. But such flexibility right at the heart of the teaching process – such *pedagogical flexibility* – just may on occasions conflict, say, with a drive to establish new systems aimed at a greater flexibility at the national or institutional levels. An extensive use of video-streamed professorial lectures – so enabling students more to study in their own time and place – may have the effect of *reducing* interaction among students or of *lessening*, on the part of students, a need to confront and engage with material or situations in which students' dispositions and qualities for learner flexibility might be challenged.
- 53** There just may be, accordingly, tensions between flexibility within *students-as-persons* and flexibility within *students-as-consumers* of a programme of study.
- 54** Such tensions – and consequent differences in decision-making – arise in part as a result of *value conflict* within higher education. For some, the flourishing of *students-as-persons* is central, and 'flexibility' should be worked through so as to help students-as-persons realise their full potential in a world itself marked by value conflict. For others, key is the maximising of *students-as-consumers*, with an eye to their economic performance. For yet others, it is the efficiency of institutions that counts, bound in as they are by national audits, the promulgation of performance data, and an ever-tighter qualifications framework. And for others, reducing the unit costs of higher education may be the main consideration in promoting more flexible

provision. *It should not be assumed – or suggested – that all of these values are realisable simultaneously.* To the contrary, that they will conflict with each other has to be acknowledged. *‘Flexibility’ cannot be all things to all persons, interests or institutions.*

## Meanings of flexibility

- 55** 'Flexibility', it is apparent, is an umbrella term – and even a diffuse term – that seeks to do justice to a family of concepts.
- 56** As noted, flexibility may be exhibited on a number of levels, and we may distinguish four levels of flexibility:
- *sector flexibility*: to what extent does the sector as a whole (including state agencies) offer and/or encourage flexibility in the ways in which students gain their higher education experience?
  - *institutional flexibility*: in what ways and to what extent might an institution itself be flexible, in responding to students' emerging needs and wishes?
  - *pedagogical flexibility*: in what ways might teaching processes evince greater flexibility in their engagement with students as learners? To what extent do academic teachers have personal control to respond to students as individuals and to vary their pedagogical stances? How open, how flexible, is the pedagogical relationship between teacher and taught?
  - *learner flexibility*: to what extent do students have choice over the *modes* of their learning? In what ways might learners as future graduates be encouraged and enabled to develop their own forms of flexibility, in engaging with the wider world?
- 57** As noted, there will be tensions in the ways in which these levels interact with each other. A determination to drive up sector flexibility or institutional flexibility may actually work to *reduce* pedagogical flexibility or learner flexibility. A teacher's desire to so orchestrate the pedagogical environment that his/her students may develop certain kinds of capacities flexibly to respond to a challenging world may conflict with her/his students' own study preferences as to where, when and how they learn.
- 58** But still, just how might flexibility be understood in itself? Three concepts of flexibility can be distinguished according to their orientation:
- *'flexibility' as in flexing*: to what degree is a system or entity able to bend, or respond in other ways, to a changing and perhaps a turbulent environment, without itself being imperilled? Can the system maintain its own integrity while also being flexible? This might

be termed a *structural flexibility* (abandoning the caps either on student numbers or fees – or both – might *prima facie* inject more flexibility of a kind into the UK sector but possibly at a cost of reducing the collective ethos of the sector as a whole, as institutions become ever more competitive one-with-another);

- *'flexibility' as enterprising*, being innovative and being entrepreneurial, and even embarking on deliberately 'disruptive' teaching and curricula strategies and student-institutional relationships. As mentioned, innovation in itself cannot be a sign of flexibility; it becomes a sign of flexibility when being innovative becomes part of the ethos of the system. This idea has application at the level of a student, for students themselves can come to form qualities and dispositions that enable them to be innovative or enterprising as part of their character. In this idea of flexibility, too, there lies a sense not only of learners as agents but even of *universities* as agents (cf List and Pettit 2011) as they engage flexibly – with purpose and adroitness – with their environment. At both the individual and institutional levels, this might be termed an *agentic flexibility*;
- *'flexibility' as responding to situations in the world empathically and appropriately*. Here lies a sense of the world presenting all the time with different situations, each calling for its own levels of attunement (for example, the doctor in his/her transactions with patients, where patients with the same malady will present with their individual circumstances and anxieties and so require and deserve a very particular response). We may term this an *empathic flexibility*. Such flexibility comes into its own in the ways in which institutions connect both with students and with their teachers: to what extent is there present – for example, in developing measures of 'student support' – a suitable level of personal understanding and empathy?

**59** Each of these three concepts of flexibility interact in complex ways with all four levels of flexibility. (The exploration of those inter-relationships lies outside the scope of this report.)

**60** The idea of flexibility is still far from exhausted, for it has application in different dimensions, in space and time.

- In *space*, we can inquire as to the extent institutions or processes permit flexibility so far as the *location* of learning is concerned and we can also examine the flexibility present in the *configuration* of all the elements that make for a student experience within an institution.

- Spaces, it should be noted, can be global (for instance, in talk of ‘the student as global citizen’), immediate (for instance, in the learning spaces of the classroom itself) or virtual (students conducting themselves in virtual learning environments in which they can meet each other and can explore all manner of places, both ‘real’ and virtual). (cf Boddington and Boys 2011) In relation to classroom spaces, there is evidence that reconfiguring classrooms into flexible learning spaces can have a profound effect on the level of student engagement (Neill and Etheridge 2008). In other words, quite local and, in a way, small-scale and somewhat invisible, innovations can significantly alter the character of pedagogical space and intellectual space.
- In *time*, we can inquire as to the extent to which institutions permit flexibility in the pacing of a student’s programme of study, in its congestion or otherwise (there is a contemporary concern with the apparently few face-to-face curriculum hours in UK higher education), and in the rhythms of the student experience (how long might a student wait to receive feedback on an assignment?). But we may also inquire into the rhythms of a programme of study: does it allow the student flexibility in learning speeds with time, say, for reflection as well as having to press on to meet assignment deadlines?

**61** These three facets of flexibility – *levels*, *orientation* and *dimensions* – indicate that flexibility is a highly fluid, not to mention ambiguous, concept. This is a dynamic and unstable situation, with multiple processes criss-crossing each other, and all the time taking on new configurations, as different interest groups spot possibilities. Four points arise.

- Who could not be in favour of ‘flexibility’? It is an hurrah concept: in general, flexibility is felt to be a valuable quality and one to which individuals and groups will wish to align themselves (whether in relation to systems, persons or ideas). Who, after all, would want to be thought of as *inflexible*? (As it happens, some are happy to assume this very label; Baggaley, J. 2011). But the general predisposition positively to identify with the term ‘flexibility’ results in its becoming a somewhat empty concept (an ‘empty signifier’ indeed; Laclau 2006). The question therefore should always be pressed: just what kind of ‘flexibility’ is being proposed or is on offer? Which or whose interests does it serve? And what are its effects?
- Flexibility being such a fluid and indeed inchoate and elusive concept, with rather loose attachments to specific settings, it can be – and is – called up to meet many if not all of the alleged shortcomings in and challenges facing higher education. Some vigilance is called for



to combat this tendency to over-endow flexibility with expectations. In particular, *'flexibility' should not be called in aid to supply some simple technological fix to highly complex educational, policy and resourcing challenges.*

- The very complexity of this field enables groups with different interests and perspectives to talk enthusiastically about flexibility when they have contrasting and even conflicting ideas, expectations and values. Such conflicts are rarely brought out into the open and may go unrecognised, so vitiating efforts to change matters on the ground in a coherent fashion. Institutional managers have a responsibility to bring out such differences of viewpoint so that they may be properly brought into a constructive dialogue with each other.
- Being an open and emergent field, the matter of flexibility can never be exhausted. New possibilities will continually arise. New horizons will open. New situations can be glimpsed. What it is to be flexible in higher education, accordingly, is as much a matter of the *imagination* as it is about bringing about a particular change in actions and systems in given situations. (We must return to this point.)

## Key questions

- 62** Against the background of the considerations so far raised, some key questions surely arise in relation to any development, project, initiative or policy being heralded under the banner of 'flexibility':
- What exactly is being proposed?
  - Precisely what form(s) of flexibility does it offer?
  - Who is proposing the initiative or development in question?
  - For what purpose?
  - Is what is being proposed a matter of achieving traditional ideas of higher education in new ways, *or* is it a matter of realising quite new ideas of higher education?
  - What interests does it serve? What are its associated values?
  - What is its likely outcome? In particular, how does it advance or what effect is it likely to have on the educational experience of the students concerned?
  - Are there any possible unintended outcomes?
  - Might the proposed initiative even close off other forms of flexibility?
- 63** A list such as this might be taken up by national bodies and so forth in any evaluation of flexibility either across the sector or within individual institutions but it might also help to inform institutions' own internal self-reviews.

## Key issues

### Markets

- 64** The marketisation of higher education in the UK exerts a double requirement for flexibility. New providers – particularly new *private* providers – look to be able to offer both access to higher education and forms of learning experience that are more flexible than traditional patterns (among public sector institutions). At the same time, as they are drawn into ever more competition, both among themselves and with private sector providers, *public sector* providers also seek to be more flexible, both to respond to students-as-customers and to establish a distinctive pedagogical brand in a more marketised system.
- 65** The development of higher education markets, accordingly, is bound to generate a demand from providers to be free to offer more flexible patterns of provision; and they will, in any case, experiment to – and test – the limits of any existing regulations and audit requirements.
- 66** The following question arises therefore: where drives towards greater flexibility derive from an interest in taking advantage of – and competing in – wider student markets that are opening, to what extent is the potential for *educational* benefit being underplayed?

### Demand from students

- 67** We may conjecture that students will also exert their own demands for greater flexibility. While students are often quite conservative in their expectations of higher education, there is nevertheless evidence that they are looking for more flexibility in the ways in which courses are made available, especially given (in the UK) students' heterogeneous situations. In increasing numbers, individuals while in employment are likely to want to take advantage of higher education; others will want to take a break in their studies or want to maintain their studies while living away from their registered institution; yet others will have particular learning needs; and yet others want to study at a faster – or more steady – pace than their peers. Consequently, that students might exert their wishes for *more flexibility* is entirely understandable. In general, however, it appears that students are looking for more flexibility

in ways that are integrated with the conventional offer (Green 2002; Phillips et al 2004); in other words, for a so-called blended approach.

- 68** Since most students in the UK are already paying a substantial level of fee – and the fee levels may rise, possibly significantly in the future – it would hardly be surprising, too, if students felt that they had some leverage in expressing their preferences for the higher education experience that most suited them. They would, therefore, be looking for a higher level of optionality (in choosing the curricula and learning arrangements most suited to their needs and wishes).
- 69** In this situation, flexibility becomes a matter of *push-pull*, a territory in which the perspectives of institutions-as-suppliers and students-as-customers will engage. It cannot be assumed in advance that those perspectives will always coincide. Students may want the flexibility of having more or less open access to their tutors (for increased feedback) while institutions, intent on efficiency gains or cost reductions or determined to give research an even higher priority, may seek to drive forward with platforms and arrangements in which teacher and taught are held at ever greater distance.
- 70** There are, therefore, limits to flexibility and where those limits are to be placed is a matter of judgement; and different institutions will place those limits differently.
- 71** Partly, such institutional differences – in responding to students' wants – is a reflection of the market situation, for institutions and their students stand in varying market relationships to each other. In some situations, neither may an institution feel a need to be as responsive as some other institutions *nor* may their students be pressing for wide forms of flexible provision.
- 72** The question arises, therefore, as to whether, in supplying students with greater flexibility so as to meet their *wants*, institutions are paying less attention to students' *educational needs*. Are students necessarily well-placed to determine their own educational needs, if higher education is fully to realise its potential in forming life projects and life capabilities?

## Higher education and the world of work

- 73** In societies characterised by increasing dependency on a dynamic economy marked by high-level cognitive powers (a shorthand for which is that of ‘cognitive capitalism’; Boutang 2011), the relationships between higher education and the world of work change apace. Two movements are in evidence.
- 74** Firstly, employers come increasingly to look to employees to possess not merely high-level technical skills but also a wide range of human qualities and dispositions connected with interaction, criticality, resilience, integrity and engagement, as well as the capacities to cope with complexity, uncertainty and newness. Questions arise, therefore, as to the potential for flexible pedagogies to be able to help in students acquiring such demanding qualities and capabilities, especially where those pedagogies sponsor segregated learners taking short-term units of study, attuned perhaps to the interests of a particular occupation or even the interests of a single employer.
- 75** Secondly, employers and employees are keeping an eye on the continuing development of capabilities through the span of the working life. Such a perspective is given added momentum by fluid labour markets and fast-moving patterns of work, in which individuals may hold more than one part-time position and move successively from one kind of work setting to another. In such a milieu, employers are increasingly going to want to see their employees build on their existing skill set. At the same time, employees in any event will be wanting to advance their qualifications and skills so as continually to improve their position in competitive labour markets.
- 76** *Prima facie*, these interests may seem to coincide but, at a deep level, they may diverge. [EE] Employers may be looking for sector-specific skills and aptitudes while employees may be looking to develop capabilities that will carry them not only through work across their whole careers but even for capabilities for life.
- 77** It can be hypothesised that employer and employees desire for evermore flexible provision of learning opportunities which will develop at the level of higher education, such that learning can be achieved outside of formal frames of (a particular) location, (a tight) timeframe during

which learning should be accomplished, and mode (advantage being taken of modern technologies).

- 78** In all of this, some employers will look to work in partnership with higher education institutions. While this is not new (sandwich courses having been established for 60 years), such developments are likely to issue in new patterns of connectivity, and new patterns of responsibilities, between employers and higher education institutions.
- 79** A key question arising from these reflections, therefore, is this: *just how might employers' (quite legitimate) rather specific and local interests be reconciled with students' sometimes desiring – as part of their lifelong development – a wider range of cognitive and experiential opportunities?*

## Values

- 80** As suggested (54), under the banner of 'flexibility' will be found many kinds of travellers with rather different educational values and hopes. Some may see in flexibility an opportunity to drive up co-ordination across institutional, national and even cross-national systems (partly to enable higher education to work more effectively in the interests of hyper-globalisation (cf Lipovetsky 2005)); some will be looking – through flexibility – to derive greater efficiencies in the higher educational system; some may see flexibility as widening life chances, opening towards a 'universal' system of higher education, to many who would otherwise not be able easily to have access to it; and yet others will see ways through, via flexibility, to an empowering and even liberating educational process, putting students much more in the driving seat in framing their own higher education experience. And even here, there is a fundamental difference between students-as-customers being accorded the flexibility to exercise economic choices and students-as-persons being helped, through their higher education experience, to become full persons in a challenging world.
- 81** 'Flexibility' embraces, accordingly, overlapping and contested value systems oriented alternatively across instrumental, social, economic and personal priorities. There will, therefore, be multiple and somewhat differing and even conflicting hopes behind pleas for 'greater flexibility' in the higher education system. Not all hopes that pass under the banner of flexibility can, in any one situation, be met.

- 82 'Flexibility' thus becomes a site of value conflict, a matter explicitly to be taken on board in its management and in the leadership of any such reforms. Such conflicts cannot be managed away. The *management of flexibility* becomes in part the management of *conflicts* of flexibility.
- 83 The degree to which hopes and values are buttressed by evidence and worked through is a further matter. On the one hand, it may turn out that expected efficiency gains are vitiated by up-front design and investment costs; indeed, it may even emerge that some forms of flexibility are especially resource intensive. On the other hand, it may also become apparent that there are trade-offs to be confronted as between, say, access to some elements of higher education and – as it might be put – an educational shortfall. It simply may not be possible in a mass delivery system, or an anywhere/anytime platform, to provide students with the access to tutors and to the support they seek (especially if any hoped-for lower unit costs are to be derived).

## The student experience

- 84** 'The student experience' is a weasel phrase of our time, being vague and tendentious (implying perhaps that all students have a similar experience and leaving open what is to count as an experience). Nevertheless, it may serve as a helpful shorthand here.
- 85** *Choice and added educational value*: introducing more flexibility into a system can often – but by no means always – provide students with greater choice. An implication is that, in some form, academic control over a programme of study is likely to be lessened. (This indeed is part of the intention behind a more market-led system, namely to reduce the power of universities as providers.)
- 86** Such a shifting of the pattern of power between teacher and taught may lead to an *educational value-added* if, for instance, an upshot is that students are empowered and encouraged to search more widely for sources of information, to take more risks in their learning endeavours, to be more creative in their deployment of multimedia, and to explore a more open epistemological terrain. On the other hand, as suggested, there lie risks both in students becoming solipsistic (their communicative powers being only narrowly stretched, if at all) and in their focusing on their own educational wants (which may not be in their broader developmental interests).
- 87** It follows that efforts to assess the impact of greater flexibility on students and their learning should attempt to embrace the student experience as a whole; and much of that experience is somewhat intangible (and not easily captured, for example, in financial calculations).
- 88** *The student's pedagogical situation*: the balance sheet, accordingly, has to be drawn up in quite a sophisticated and far-reaching manner. Depending on the innovation in question, opportunities may be opening for students to view and/or listen to lectures by experts, to draw on several media in attending to their learning tasks, to be able to engage with their studies wherever they may be, to plan and orchestrate their programme as their personal circumstances change, to participate in a much wider array of experiences (perhaps in fieldwork or other off-campus settings) than hitherto, to interact with a large number of people in conducting projects and so on and so forth.



- 89 At the same time, there may be implications for the student's learning situation (he or she may become unduly isolated), for the student's pedagogical relationships (especially where the link between teacher and taught is so weakened that the student is unable to sense that they have access to pedagogical support of a personal kind), for the range of students' cognitive challenges (which may become rather limited), for the student's learning progress (where the milestones of his/her learning are few and far between, if indeed they exist at all), and for the assessment of the student's learning (where, even if there are formal summative assessments, more developmental assessments are rather thin on the ground if they are provided at all).
- 90 *The student experience:* in all of this, legitimate questions may be raised not only about the evident features of the student's learning environment but also about the student's *felt response*. In an open pedagogical situation, of the kind afforded by moves to flexibility, students may feel *exhilarated* (at the control they have over their studies and at the ways they can fit it in with their life-wide challenges and at the ways in which they are seeing themselves develop as persons). *Simultaneously*, they may feel some level of *anxiety* at having a large array of pedagogical choices opened to them – over the way in which they approach a project, the manner in which they interact with other students on the programme, the timing of their tackling their assignments, the modalities (text, sound, vision, colour, voice, action) with which they pursue a learning task and so on (cf Cybinski, P. and Selvanathan, S. 2005).
- 91 An implication of these points – not perhaps often observed – is that a flexible learning situation may approach the experience of 'real life'. Indeed, the boundaries between the two are increasingly likely to weaken: in a flexible learning environment, students may be thrown much more into the world and required to fend for themselves to a large extent. This is already happening to some extent, not least through some institutions encompassing students' proclivities in using social media.
- 92 Accordingly, pedagogical flexibility can herald an *emotionally complex* environment. There may be no clear pattern here – of either exhilaration or anxiety: all manner of emotions may be found together. The student experience may turn out to be itself highly variegated.

- 93** It follows that, in a situation of pedagogical flexibility, *the matter of student support – its extensiveness, its character, its timeliness, its scope, its location, its quality – becomes crucial* (and warrants investigation). It is paradoxical that moves towards more flexible provision are sometimes accompanied by less student support when such moves cry out for *more* student support (and at a time when the matter of student support, especially in the quality and character of feedback to students on their assignments, has become a matter of national importance).
- 94** *Pedagogical flexibility* also calls for fine judgements to be made about the educational soundness of the ensuing offer. As implied, flexibility may lead to students developing widely as persons, in ways not easily possible on more conventional programmes (for under conditions of flexibility, the student may be expected to juggle reflective and action components of learning, or work and academic perspectives, and to accommodate simultaneously different learning spaces in employment, family life and university and to take a heightened measure of responsibility for their studies).
- 95** On the other hand, judgements may also be called for as to a possible fragmentation of learning encounters that thwart serious and solid personal development; and such fragmentation may be spotted either synchronously, as students are bombarded with an array of simultaneous experiences, or asynchronously, as students try to engage with discrete learning units over time (perhaps over several years).
- 96** *Fragmentation* may actually have a pedagogically valuable function in that it obliges students to grapple with their disparate experiences and to find some moments of authenticity among them (perhaps even threading them into some coherent pattern). However, fragmentation too can exceed the student's capacities to find any connecting tissue, such that potential educational benefits of flexibility may be vitiated and students may come to feel themselves to be at sea.
- 97** Pedagogical flexibility may also lead to contrasting outcomes in the pedagogical relationship. Students may become much more 'co-producers' of their learning (Kotzé and du Plessis 2003), or even themselves 'producers' (Neary 2012), being significantly involved in the shaping of their educational programme, both its content, its modalities and the timing and placing of

its being taken up. [NPI, 16-17] Flexibility may herald quite beneficial transformations of student learning.

- 98** There may, however, be quite *contrary outcomes*, for flexibility may have the counter-intuitive result of students being placed much more in the situation of recipients of pre-framed learning packages which they are expected to consume. 'Flexibility' may also herald a greater individualisation on the part of students (as institutions attempt to respond to students as individuals), so diminishing the likelihood of students developing their propensities for collaboration and receptiveness to others.
- 99** Certainly, this apparent dichotomy – between 'student-as-recipient' and 'student-as-co-producer' – should be treated with care. There will be multiple positions between the two, opportunities may be offered to students whereby they find their own most equitable pedagogical situation, and the two polar positions – 'recipient' and 'producer' – may be found with educational advantage within a single student's programme of study (depending on the proximity of a unit in question to the student's main learning goals). Nevertheless, there are surely matters here that deserve vigilance from curriculum planners.
- 100** A further opportunity that flexibility opens is that of enabling students to connect their main programme of studies with their 'life-wide' experiences. The concept has emerged out of a recognition that, in a fluid world, students often have almost parallel lives while being students (in the pursuit of all kinds of interests) and that that 'lifewide' domain may offer genuine learning experiences (Barnett 2011). This insight is also being given added impetus in that students are increasingly choosing for a variety of reasons to work alongside their studies and/or to undertake voluntary work in a huge variety of community settings (in the UK and abroad).
- 101** In the UK, indeed, some 80+ universities have opened paths, with varying degrees of formality and credit-bearing opportunities, to allow students to reflect on those experiences and – perhaps with certain additional learning tasks – gain credit for them (Barnes, H. and Burchell, R. 2014).

- I02** Arising here, in these various forms of flexibility, are issues of transition and the capacity opening to students to move easily across educational, institutional and life experience boundaries. *To what degree, and in what ways, do and should students' experiences come together, across study, work and life? Or do they rather clash against each other?*
- I03** Students themselves will differ here, some wanting to hold these experiences separate while others will want to feel and see that there are connections between at least some of them. Flexibility can act here as a *doubly advantageous* code allowing, *on the one hand*, an individual student flexibility within his/her programme of study, in determining to what extent his/her varying experiences might be brought together and, *on the other hand*, to permit flexibility across students, allowing them to make their own judgements and decisions to enable them to develop an educational career that is appropriate to each of them as individuals.
- I04** A summary observation here might be that flexibility and openness present a situation of some risk to students. Accordingly, a question befalling providers is this: *just how are the learning and developmental opportunities to be maximised while at the same time providing students with sufficient both in the way of cognitive challenge and in the way of support?*

## New technologies

- 105** Computer-based technologies have been in use for some time. It is the global scope of technologies that is new, together with their capacity to permit and indeed encourage communication (lecturer to student, student to lecturer and student to student, and student to students, plural), their multimodality (with a single text or act of communication being susceptible to exposition in several modes, including sound and vision; Kress and Leeuwen 2001), and their capacities to connect with databases (in universities, libraries, museums and government and other agencies) and extending to users their powers of self-authorship. Such technologies – together with the mobility they afford – potentially put learning power in the hands of the student such that students can be more in command of what they might learn, how they might acquire such learning, and from which sources they might acquire information, data and materials, and be themselves to a large extent the authors of their own learning.
- 106** Taken together, these are formidable changes and arguably herald a new stage not only in learning arrangements in higher education but in the pedagogical relationship between teacher and taught. We may be now heading towards a new era of auto-didacticism, in which students become much more responsible for their own learning and in which students are becoming embryonic researchers in their own right. (This latter move – towards student-as-researcher – is any case being deliberately promoted by some universities).
- 107** A possible unintended consequence of such a recipient and solipsistic learning situation is there may arise a propensity for students to find difficulty in engaging in dialogue with others, either with their tutors or with other students (Demetriadis and Pombortsis 2007).
- 108** It follows from these reflections that the matter of flexibility raises matters of regulation, quality and standards: are there to be limits to flexibility? Is it to be countenanced only under specific conditions? Might flexibility be regulated in such a way that it retains and indeed embraces and extends its potential for students' learning and wider development?
- 109** Technologies are not *in themselves* forms of flexibility but they are indications of – and sites of – potential flexibility. Technologies extend potentialities *for* flexibility. For one writer, indeed,

they herald the coming of ‘the edgeless university’ (Bradwell 2009). To use a modish term, technologies bring *affordances* for flexibility: they afford opportunities for flexibility not easily otherwise available or, indeed, not otherwise available at all.

- I 10 A reason that technologies have become so associated with flexibility – sometimes as if they were almost synonymous – is that technologies can offer substantial extensions of flexibility, in time, in space, and in the modes of learning.
- I 11 In the process, technologies as an instrument of greater flexibility have the potential radically to disrupt – and valuably so – established patterns not just of teaching and of learning but, *en passant*, of the pedagogical relationship. However, especially through the most modern digital technologies, the link between the provider (the teacher) and the recipient (the student) may be unduly weakened.
- I 12 The resulting disjunction between the teacher and the taught places more control and autonomy in the student’s way. In principle, the potential exists – and is increasingly realised – for the materials, resources and messages to be asynchronous with the student’s appropriation of those facilities. The fault line that this asynchronicity sets up in the pedagogical relationship has both benefits and – possibly – disbenefits.
- I 13 Its *benefits* are often said to be that it enables each student to attend to their studies at times of their choosing and in places of their choosing. While true, there is an even larger story here, namely that behind those evident features of the technological landscape now opening are considerations not only of access to higher education (and of a possible right to the experience of higher education) but also of a student’s liberty. The learning environment opened by the new technologies is one of enhanced liberty for students as such. In turn, so the reasoning might run, students are likely to feel a higher sense of ownership of their learning and that learning – as a result – is likely to be more authentic. For some, such outcomes are especially happy here, since part of the promise of a genuine higher education is that it is an education in which students give increasingly of themselves and so come ultimately to form – and even to re-form – themselves.

**114** It is hardly surprising, then, that a feature of the present moment in UK higher education – as we have noted – is increasing talk of a co-curriculum and students as co-designers of their learning for the latest technologies are especially well equipped to facilitate such a development. However, that weakening of the immediate link between teacher and taught may also bring in its wake some difficulties.

**115** A looser pedagogical relationship has four immediate consequences.

- Firstly, the student is obliged to make *learning choices*. In a technologically-led environment, choice is central, the student may have to choose when to study, how often to study, in what mode to access the resources, in which mode to respond to them, how to make contact with tutors and peer students, and in what form the assignments might be produced and submitted.
- Secondly, the student will be embarked on a rapidly rising curve of *learning about learning*, learning about the technological platforms, the protocols, the procedures and so on that make possible his/her full participation on the course. Processes of ‘metacognition’ may also come into play too, students being prompted to reflect on their own cognitive orientation and their learning preferences and so come to know themselves better as learners.
- Thirdly, there may well be a large degree of what might be termed ‘*pedagogical solitude*’, in which students have to depend to a significant extent on their own resources and be willing to pursue their programme with a relatively high level of personal independence.
- Lastly, students may enjoy a much reduced opportunity – if indeed it exists at all – for face-to-face interaction with their tutors and lecturers. Claims are being made for the emergence and development of technologically-based substitutes but careful research is needed to ascertain the extent to which they offer an equivalent student experience.

Each of these four consequences acts as a source of potential anxiety and disquiet, yet also potentially offers educational benefits.

**116** It is hardly surprising then that in keeping with increased flexible pedagogies we are witnessing – and not just in the UK – increasing levels of non-completion. (Non-completion is a complex matter and is a topic of global concern and study and it has multiple causes. The point here is simply that a large reliance on a technologically-driven environment has a propensity to compound a student’s existing anxieties and difficulties, at least, or especially, in

the early stages of a programme of studies). It is hardly surprising, too, therefore, that it seems that students who prosper in such an environment are often older students who have the personal resources to sustain themselves emotionally and psychologically (and practically) and that such an environment can raise particular difficulties for younger students on first degree courses.

- I 17** Certainly, several of these consequences can be reduced – with more student-student interaction, better and more timely feedback to students and so forth, and explicit guidance to students. But it remains the case that the more such consequences are present in any one pedagogical environment, so we may conjecture that a high non-completion rate is likely to be proportionately more evident.
- I 18** There is a further feature at work here. As noted (105), higher education is moving increasingly into a pedagogical setting characterised by *multimodality*. Such an environment is characterised not only by the presence of several media in the student experience but by the presence of several such media in any one student text. The student can make truth claims through a variety of modes in the one argument. Again, student choice is heightened here as the student makes judgements about the range and the manner of the presence of and the relationships between the different media being drawn upon to form the total text in question.
- I 19** This multimodality opens the student's *cognitive options*, a matter that can have profoundly liberating and transforming effects for the student can open and enter new cognitive worlds for themselves. It could, though, for some students present a somewhat daunting prospect.
- I 20** It is apparent from this overview that digital technologies can help the provision of higher education not just to be more flexible but to offer educational benefits. However, the judgement overall must be that *digital technologies are not always optimised for effective learning* (Laurillard et al 2013). This is perhaps not entirely surprising since it is likely that, especially where technology is being deployed to meet system and cost agendas, and where there is an undue emphasis on the structural aspects of innovation (perhaps with rigid deadlines and regulations that allow learners few opportunities to flex according to their own needs and



circumstances), opportunities for the student's personal transformation and self-flexibility are likely to be neglected (cf Swan and Fox 2009).

- 121** One interviewee, quoted in one of the strand reports in this HEA project [NPI 1.3], said: 'There is a danger that flexible learning is restricted to a debate about effective means, and very little about ends'. It could be said, however, that this suggestion rather *underplays* the situation since changing the means actually affects the ends. The sheer introduction of digital technologies is in itself 'transforming' contemporary practices (Weller 2011). Without due thought and care, therefore, the introduction of new learning environments can have an undue and possibly deleterious effect on students' development. Accordingly, a large responsibility befalls institutions to be clear as to the purposes for which technologies, and especially digital technologies, are being deployed and the ways in which they are being put in place, so that the *educational yield* of such innovations are maximised.

# Relationships

## Students and institutions

- I22** As remarked, in moves towards greater flexibility, the pedagogical relationship between students and institutions is loosened. Such a looser pedagogical frame opens educational possibilities as the student moves in a more fluid cognitive and educational space and these elements can intersect in unpredictable ways. Looser frames in time and space open windows for other experiences to come into play. Cognitively and experientially, the student may be brought into choppy waters that may be all the more challenging and even exhilarating.
- I23** Perhaps, though, the fluidity and instability may be too much for some students – especially younger students – to bear, if they have little in the way of cognitive or value frameworks with which to anchor their studies (cf Samarawickre, R. G. 2005).
- I24** Challenges arise, therefore, on institutions to ensure that students have sufficient boundaries, markers, supports and tutor access to provide each student with the stability they need in order to make progress with their studies.

## Academics and institutions

- I25** Moves towards greater flexibility are rarely without implications for the relationships between academics and institutions. Where greater flexibility arises spontaneously from efforts of the academics – in their structuring of the curriculum (perhaps with a local business) or in their teaching approaches – such academics may sense that they are realising for themselves a new measure of pedagogical freedom (that was probably always there within the institution but seldom fully exploited).
- I26** Where greater flexibility is primarily the result of initiatives and led or prompted by senior managers – such as the introduction of a new institution-wide credit accumulation system or procedure for assessing entrants' prior experiential learning or new digital platform for storing and making available course materials or the videoing of 'star' lectures – there may be a sense of a loss of power and autonomy on the part of academics. The framing of much of

the student experience is here being ceded by academics to other staff and their powers directly to engage with students may be being lessened. Any such sense of a loss of control and engagement on the part of academics may be accompanied by the evident presence of new staff positions – of curriculum managers, systems designers, platform coordinators and so forth – which enjoy a hybrid situation between the academic sphere and management.

- I27** Not surprisingly, moves to greater flexibility that are driven entirely as top-down initiatives usually find difficulty in making headway (cf Stensaker et al 2007).
- I28** These are important matters – essentially matters of academic identity – and are not perhaps fully addressed in the current debate (though see McInnis 2010). Crucial to the student’s well-being and success lies the pedagogical relationship between teachers and students, and so maintaining the felt engagement of academics – in any institutionally-led moves towards greater flexibility – is surely a necessary condition in ensuring the integrity of new arrangements.

## Teaching and research

- I29** Contemporaneously (and independently of moves towards ‘flexibility’), there are two powerful movements at play in the evolving relationship between teaching and research. *On the one hand*, there is a weakening of the relationship between teaching and research in higher education (as the UK becomes ever more selective in its research policies, as staff are apportioned into ‘research-active’ and ‘non-research active’ and as research continues to attract both an enlarging pool of public resources and remains as the major component in the design of global league tables). *On the other hand*, as noted (45), there is work in hand across the world that is intent on bringing research much more evidently into the undergraduate curriculum.
- I30** These latter moves – in research explicitly forming a part of the undergraduate curriculum – can themselves act as a prompt towards flexibility. Where students are expected to conduct research or engage with primary research materials or evaluate existing research, both the curriculum and their attendant pedagogies are bound to be relatively loose (although still within the bounds of the disciplines and their epistemological norms). Such fluidity will receive

added momentum from the fluidity that is attaching to knowledge-rich activity (‘Mode 2’ knowledge), which is increasingly characterised by cross-disciplinarity, attention to real-life problems, in-situ working, and new technologies that are disrupting conventional forms of research (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2001).

- I31** The dynamism present in the teaching-research milieu, accordingly, opens possibilities of radical kinds of educational flexibility and therefore challenges too – of boundaries, focus, and pedagogical relationships – that deserve careful attention.

### Full-time and part-time programmes

- I32** As increasing flexibility in programmes brings a loosening of time-frames (as well as a freeing of locations and an intermeshing of work and learning), the boundary between full-time and part-time programmes in the UK is tending to dissolve. [PTL] Partly, it is maintained by differential fee systems for the two kinds of programme (which is, arguably, one of the explanations for the recent and major fall-off in part-time student numbers, where part-time students are faced with substantially increased fees but rather little in the way of loan arrangements).
- I33** The artificiality of the distinction between full-time and part-time students is given added point by the recognition that a significant proportion of ‘full-time’ students – perhaps approaching 50% – engage in paid employment alongside their studies.
- I34** This distinction in the UK between full-time and part-time students – which is possibly unique in the world – is surely ultimately unsustainable and educationally unjustifiable (and is a vestige of an age in which the norm was that of full-time students attending a residential university away from home). Its educational unsoundness is reflected in the belief on the part of some part-time students that they are subject to an impoverished experience compared with that of full-time students (especially where part-time programmes are provided, characteristically in the evenings, in parallel to full-time courses).
- I35** Nevertheless, the entirely justifiable desire to extend higher education opportunities in the direction of part-time study – that is, those for whom their studies would constitute just part

of a busy life and work pattern – does raise issues in front of more flexible provision of structure and support (we may note that the fall-off in part-time numbers was evident even before the recent fee rises) (cf UUK 2013b, recommendation 3a).

### Students, tutors and course materials

- 136** Flexibility characteristically brings in its wake a looser relationship between teacher and taught (the most extreme example being perhaps that of MOOCs [pedMOOC]). This is especially the case where a greater reliance is placed upon course materials – whether in hard or digital form. In such a circumstance, a corresponding greater distance appears in the pedagogical relationship. The student is expected, after all, in the first place to attend to the materials being made available rather than directly to the voice of an academic. (This is not a new feature of ‘distance learning’ but the digital revolution is making available an increasing array of resources – in information acquisition, accumulation and exploitation of materials and skill development – that is imparting momentum to such a pedagogical separation.)
- 137** Such a distancing of teacher and taught, however limited (and in ‘blended learning’, that distancing may be quite limited), will place a higher level of responsibility on students in making progress with their course of studies. Whether in preparing for classes or other kinds of formalised (perhaps digitally conducted) teaching sessions, or in tackling assignments, a student may be being asked to engage with an array of materials in varying formats, and to do so through a range of ‘voices’. In attending to materials in the public domain, the student is also being asked to make discriminations and judgements as to quality, not to mention to avoid plagiarism, and to exercise greater care in composing their ‘own’ texts. In all of these forms of flexibility, students may be stretched out of their comfort zones and that discomfort may actually be *pedagogically efficacious*.
- 138** It just may be that ‘flexibility’ may be serving as a watchword for a shifting of pedagogical responsibility onto students and in the process diminishing the ‘class contact’ and the cognitive demand being placed on students (there being evidence to suggest that, in both respects, less is already expected of UK students than their European counterparts, with UK students spending comparatively fewer hours on their studies; Bekhradnia 2013).

- 139** A key matter that faces providers arises out of these reflections: *in a fully 'flexible' learning situation, just how is it intended that students will be encouraged to engage authentically with the myriad of experiences and resources before them?*

### Institution and institution

- 140** With greater pedagogic flexibility arise some large issues in connection with relationships between institutions. (Such issues can only be flagged here, there being little research on them.) Are moves towards greater flexibility *across* institutions now emerging (even across continents)? In a competitive environment, are institutions *less* ready to share with each other their experience – say, in developing a new 'learning environment' or a new digital platform or a radical pedagogical approach? Or, on the other hand, are moves towards greater cross-institutional co-operation being driven mainly (and merely) by the hope of finding reductions in programming costs? (On this latter, see Anderson, T. & McGreal, R. 2012).
- 141** Such questions gain added point when placed against the context of credit transfer. There has been debate about developing a UK-wide credit transfer system for over 30 years (prompted by work within the former Council for National Academic Awards) but, as a parallel report here shows [CAT], UK institutions continue to differ not only in the extent to which they subscribe to the very idea of a national system for credit transfer *across* institutions but also *within* institutions (with different departments varying in the ways in which they respond to this agenda). In both cases – within and across institutions – perhaps any reluctance might now be explained in part by perceptions that cost reductions are *not* on the cards (since it may be perceived that transferring students are going to bring less in the way of fee income).
- 142** Such variations – institution by institution – across the sector speak to the strength of institutional autonomy in the UK and to the experimentation and innovation that that autonomy encourages. There opens here, however, the consideration that perhaps some greater measure of pedagogical co-ordination across the sector at least might be placed on the table.

## Institutions and government

- I 43** Flexibility may be seen against the background of a desire on the part of UK governments (over the past decades) to see both more elements of a market in higher education and greater competition between providers. In such a milieu, as institutions look to expand their services and functions within tightly managed budgets and to respond to intakes that are – potentially at least – increasingly heterogeneous, efforts to develop more flexible offerings are but a rational response (even if some institutions deliberately opt not to go in this direction).
- I 44** If that is so, it follows that there is a responsibility at governmental level, to have an eye to what is transpiring in the name of ‘flexibility’. Flexible pedagogies are not only a matter of initiatives spontaneously embarked on by institutions but are, as stated, in part, a logic of the steering of the higher education by successive governments; and being steered from the centre are likely to be oriented towards systems forms of flexibility rather than educational forms of flexibility. The drive in the direction of flexible pedagogies should, therefore, not be seen simply as an internal matter for institutions.

## Levels of flexibility

### Sector flexibility

- I45** Flexibility at the level of the sector comes into play in two ways: firstly, the sector may itself exhibit flexibility directly; secondly, the sector collectively can help to establish the conditions through which institutions can themselves develop more flexibility.
- I46** An example – just touched upon (I41) – of a way in which the sector can itself *directly* exhibit flexibility lies in that of credit transfer across institutions. The report on credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) makes clear that while some progress has been made in the UK, it appears that while probably being the first country in Europe to form an interest in developing system-wide credit transfer, other European countries have overtaken the UK with a much higher proportion of students benefiting from this form of flexibility. It just may be that, as that report intimates, European-wide policies and initiatives may help in breathing new momentum into the movement in the UK, rekindling system-wide efforts that facilitate credit transfer across Europe and, in the process, increase its provision across the UK. (See also Watson 2013).
- I47** The sector has it also in its power indirectly to influence institutional moves in the direction of greater flexibility. Here, in the UK, across national bodies – such as the QAA, HEA, HEFCE and UUK – that are either representative of the sector, or that rely upon the sector for its overall co-operativeness, each has its particular part to play. Each such body, accordingly, might examine the extent to which it is doing what it might to help in establishing a collective culture of flexibility across the system or, whether, *to the contrary*, particular policies, regulations or processes have the unwitting consequence of freezing systems, of making institutions risk averse and of resulting in borders being erected with debatable assumptions attaching to them.
- I48** Flexibility at the sector level calls for cross-institutional co-operation. However, there is reason to suspect that sector-wide co-operation may be in jeopardy. After all, it has been part of government policy over recent decades to see develop a competitive milieu, in which institutions compete against each other (to secure contracts, to gain students, to promote



their knowledge services). Such a competitive environment may be placing at risk opportunities for the sector to work collaboratively together. In the process, sector-wide possibilities of flexibility may be being discouraged.

- I49** Such a situation can already be glimpsed in that there is considerable unevenness in which institutions demonstrate their flexibility credentials. Some institutions, for example, are choosing not to be part of credit transfer schemes or participate in MOOCs. We may conjecture that – without countervailing collective efforts – opting-out may be an increasing element in potential system-wide moves towards greater flexibility.

### Institutional flexibility

- I50** At its core, this report is concerned with institutions' *pedagogical* flexibility and their capacities in this domain may be evident in numerous directions. In the first place, it will be apparent in their capacities to vary their curricula and pedagogical arrangements in response to changing markets and to the increasing heterogeneity in student cohorts (such that individual students can enjoy a degree of 'personalisation').
- I51** That simple observation (I50) actually contains two forms of institutional flexibility: *firstly*, an ability on the part of an institution quickly to adapt *through time* to a changing environment (for instance, the flow of international students from a single country may suddenly change, so placing challenges on the educational viability of some courses) and *secondly*, an ability to vary the educational offer at any one moment in time *across its students*. (These two forms of institutional flexibility – across time and across students – may run into each other: for instance, institutions are being challenged by students' pedagogical wishes themselves changing through time. An individual student may start as a full-time student but wish to transfer to a part-time programme during the course of the programme of studies).

### Twelve forms of institutional flexibility

- I52** Examples of an institution's pedagogical flexibility include enabling its students:
- to receive credit of some kind for their *prior* learning and/or experience (so requiring flexibility in the making of admissions' judgements);

- during the course of their studies, to vary and even to switch the *disciplines and/or professional fields* of their studies;
- to have some optionality over the *pattern of their studies* (some students may wish to have physical access to the library during the night; others may wish to have digital access to the pedagogical resources associated with their programme of study);
- to have a degree of choice over the *modalities* in which they present their assignment (in combinations of text, sound and vision, in three-dimensionality, in performance);
- to have some *epistemological control* over their programme of studies (some students prefer to study theoretical aspects of phenomena; others prefer to study practical aspects);
- to adopt a *learning strategy* best suited to their own learning style (whether, for instance, starting with concrete instances or discrete facts warranting a surface-level approach but broadening into a deep and synoptic understanding or starting with a deep grasp of general principles and filling in the interstices over time);
- to have choice as to the *level of interactivity* of their own approach to their studies (some students thrive on interaction with others; other students much prefer, at least initially, to work things out in their own way);
- to change the *mode of their registration* – as between full-time and part-time;
- to *interrupt* their studies;
- to acquire *credits* and be able to leave mid-way with a portfolio of credits;
- to provide for students to choose or to influence the way – and potentially time and frequency – in which they will be *assessed*;
- to allow students to alter the *contents* of their programme so as to heighten their professional or personal relevance (which might even allow students room to switch their main subject of study completely).

**I53** Most if not all institutions offer *some* of these 12 forms of flexibility but probably few, if any, offer all of these forms of flexibility.

**I54** It follows that, for any one institution, a *flexibility profile* could be drawn up, illuminating the pattern, and the extent of, its flexibility.

**I55** There may be *a role for the HEA* to explore with institutions their own flexibility profile. In turn, it may be that those institutional flexibility profiles will be seen, across the sector, to

cluster around a limited number of *models of institutional flexibility*. The identification of such models of institutional flexibility could prove helpful to institutions in finding benchmarks against which to self-examine their own pattern of flexibility.

### Leading and managing flexibility

- 156** It is apparent that the management of flexibility in general and the development of technologically-based innovations cannot sensibly be understood purely as technical exercises. Neither moves towards greater flexibility nor the deployment of technologies are neutral (cf Clegg, S., Hudson, A. and Steel, J. 2003).
- 157** Expanding an institution's flexibility profile calls not just for systems investment but calls attention also to an institution's values, ethos and priorities. (Especially but not only in research-intensive institutions), managerial attention will need to be paid to pedagogical reward structures such that academics are encouraged to invest of themselves in the development and redesign of curricula and pedagogies. (cf Tucker, R. and Morris, G. 2011.)
- 158** Even so, attention will also need to be paid to institutional investment in systems as such, notably in digital platforms and in relevant administrative support systems (for instance, in recording the developing profile of each student's attainments) while also being sensitive to the educational possibilities (in the development of students-as-persons) that enhanced flexibility may bring. As noted, too, the management of flexibility calls for multiple levels of an institution's functioning to be integrated, not least in staff at the sharp end forming their own engagement with projects as they unfold. These simple observations point to the development of highly complex and *interactive* systems that have to withstand severe tests of their integrity and robustness. It is doubtful if we have at the present time an adequate understanding of the complexities of such management and *leadership* challenges (cf Salmon 2005).
- 159** Further matters arise, too, regarding the proper extent of curriculum management at the institutional level. For instance, a modular system may appear at institutional level to offer pedagogical and managerial flexibilities but, in its operation at departmental or programme level, may actually confront students with unintended barriers to cross-disciplinary border crossings.

- 160** A corollary of this observation is that – as was observed in the seminar that considered a draft of this report – students in the *same* institution may find themselves in situations bearing quite different levels of flexibility. Flexibility may vary across departments, disciplines, professional fields and individual lecturers. Attempts, therefore, tightly to orchestrate from the centre moves towards greater flexibility will be fraught with difficulty.
- 161** There is, after all, a likelihood that, *in a multi-faculty institution, departments will vary in the degree to which they ‘buy into’ flexibility.* In this sense, institutions may be little more than a collection of sub-institutions with their own *flexibility cultures*. This is not a matter of differences across science and the humanities: it may well be that departments that are (epistemologically) adjacent to each other may have developed over time quite different orientations towards flexibility; and these different orientations may not be immediately apparent but may be deeply part of the internal educational cultures of departments.
- 162** Pedagogical flexibility cannot be dependent solely on the perspicacity and skills of an institution’s senior managers. To the contrary, much will depend on the insight of those at the sharp end of the student experience themselves to be vigilant and to be exerting initiative in bringing forward innovations in response to changing conditions.
- 163** Clearly, issues arise here both of an institution’s structures *and* systems: are they such as to provide for an institutional responsiveness? Issues arise, too, of an institution’s leadership at all levels: is it sufficiently articulated such that there are proper connections between teachers of students and an institution’s senior leaders and managers?

### **Pedagogical flexibility**

- 164** We have noted that pedagogical flexibility is nested within wide environments at institutional, national and even global levels. In fact, to use the metaphor of nesting here is unduly weak for those wider environments – which include matters of values, structures and systems and set up conditions that affect the probity, integrity and indeed the very presence of pedagogical flexibility.

- 165** There is a fundamental distinction to be made between *two ideas* of pedagogical flexibility; and really they form two clusters of meanings.
- 166** There is a cluster of meanings concerned with the immediate *experience being extended to the student* in his/her curricula and teaching: to what extent do the curricula and teaching practices offer the student forms of flexibility? We may term this a *learner flexibility*.
- 167** Embedded here are rather intangible aspects such as the pedagogical relationship: to what extent is it sufficiently open such that students feel able to enter into it on their own terms? For example, do students have some say in the number of times and the time of the day and the manner in which they might approach the tutor?
- 168** There is, though, a *vitaly different sense of flexibility* here, namely the extent to which the student is enabled, through his or her educational experience, to develop a measure of flexibility in the way he or she encounters and engages with the world. For example, does the student feel comfortable in speaking up in the classroom setting? Is space accorded to students to express their own point of view? Can a student follow through in any depth on issues that concern them? Is notice taken of the student's wider experiences?
- 169** Here, we return to our observations at this report's outset. A fluid and contested world calls for *personal flexibility* if individuals are going to be able to prosper. Under these circumstances, a higher education out of which graduates are *inflexible*, unable to respond to strangeness – to the challenges and new experiences that the world presents – is short-changing its students. *This form of flexibility is arguably the most important form of flexibility and yet it is largely overlooked in the present debate about institutional responsiveness.*
- 170** While these two ideas of pedagogical flexibility are distinct, there is a link between them. After all, it can hardly be expected that students will emerge from their higher education imbued with personal flexibility, able to respond deftly to the unexpected, unless they have encountered something of the kind in their educational experience. In other words, students' educational experience should itself contain some elements of *learner flexibility* if they are to acquire the wherewithal to engage seriously – and flexibly – with the world (and so acquire their own *personal flexibility*).

- 171** However, *an entirely flexible offering* – where students are able to assemble their educational programme (its order, its topics, its learning arrangements, its manner of assessment) -is most unlikely to provide the kind of personal flexibility that a changing world calls for. For that, educational judgements and the framing of a challenging pedagogical environment by committed educators is required. The development of a personal form of flexibility among students calls for the exercise of professional responsibilities on the part of educators that cannot be ducked.
- 172** Arising here are all manner of aspects of flexible teaching and learning, including the flexibility that teachers enjoy in the shaping of their approaches to teaching and in the flexibility that attaches to curricula (in a student’s navigation across the units of a programme of studies) and all these matters intermesh. The mapping of these linkages – between curricula, pedagogical, learner and personal flexibility – is a large matter and goes beyond the bounds of this report. But it is work that needs urgently to be put in hand if the full potential of the idea of flexible pedagogies is to be realised.
- 173** *The idea of the flexible student* raises, in some quarters, the spectre of a student whose development lacks substance, who is simply able to respond to exigencies without either a cognitive or a value foundation. Such a consideration prompts the idea of T-shaped students, who have both a substantial core of the kind imparted by a deep immersion in and engagement with a discipline or a professional field and yet have the flexibility to be able to engage with the wider world and the challenges; ‘depth and breadth’ was a former way of putting it. The rationale here would be that that deep encounter with a discipline or a professional field, in a suitably open pedagogical environment, will nurture a range of personal dispositions and qualities out of which arise, in turn, capacities for responding flexibly to the world (cf Subic and Maconochie 2004).
- 174** The key components of such a flexible pedagogy – that in turn are likely to sponsor personal flexibility *within* the student – are four in number:
- *Immersion*: the struggle to get on the inside of – and to be able autonomously to move around – a form of thought or a professional field and, through its disciplines, develop personal dispositions and qualities that impart personal flexibility.

- *Reflection*: the student's capacity to dwell deeply on their pedagogical experiences, to make something out of those experiences and so achieve their own authenticity.
- *Criticality*: the student's capacity to evaluate seriously their pedagogical experiences and to be able to exhibit – in thought, in action and in their human being – the powers of critical engagement. (Evidence is accruing to suggest that digital technologies are encouraging 'power browsing' and are witnessing a decline in deep understanding and powers of criticality; Watling 2009).
- *Interaction*: the student's capacity to listen to the world, to engage empathically and collaboratively with others in the world.

**175** Such components of the makings of personal flexibility call for elements of *pedagogical space* being accorded to students. Flexible arrangements can often do just that, offering spaces to students to take up their own stances towards their learning experiences. Equally, however, they may be rather closed spaces, with limited epistemological horizons and negligible encouragement to the student to form critical judgements.

**176** A strength of the UK's higher education system lies in the autonomy that institutions enjoy and, indeed, the freedoms that individual teachers and course teams enjoy in determining their pedagogical stance. There lies, therefore, considerable space for educational decisions – with flexibility in mind – to be made very close to the students. Nevertheless, it is surely apparent from the analysis in this report that *a measure of responsibility lies at all levels* of the higher education system if flexibility is to be pursued with the seriousness and thoroughness that it warrants.

**177** Without such attention at all levels, it follows that policy and strategy moves that may have *prima facie* legitimacy may unintendedly promote a *reduction* in pedagogical flexibility. Tight audit regimes, concerns about 'student satisfaction', the specification of curricula in 'learning outcomes', efficiency drives (that for example narrow options within modular schemes), limits placed on student access to tutors, learning tasks that sponsor a surface learning rather than a 'deep' and critical approach, a more litigious environment leading to risk averseness in the pedagogical setting, a separation of institutions' research and teaching functions, higher student fees (leading to a heightened determination on the part of students to gain a good (2:1) honours degree), and even cross-national moves to 'unify' systems across borders: all

these are simply examples where the development of the student's personal flexibility may be unwittingly being jeopardised.

- 178** It emerges from this overview that moves towards flexibility may pose a paradoxical set of questions to institutional providers: is the framework that emerges one of undue *tightness* (in that the student is locked with regulatory systems of pacing, interaction and assignment submission) or is it, to the contrary, one of undue *openness*, in which the student is overly left to their own devices (in choosing their materials, the pacing of their work, and the timing of their assessments)?



## Standards and quality

- 179** Both standards and quality have to come into play in any efforts to inject flexibility into the higher education system; and the two concepts are distinct, having separate parts to play.
- 180** ‘Standards’ here refers to the criteria and general considerations (held to constitute a valid student experience and set of attainments) that might come into play in *any* flexible environment. ‘Quality’ here refers to the likelihood that those criteria – those standards – are actually in practice going to be met and, thereby, to the institutional processes and arrangements deployed to that end in particular settings.
- 181** Standards and quality play against each other in intricate ways. *On the one hand*, we have identified situations in which quality and standards may run a risk of being jeopardised. Taking advantage of new technologies so that higher education becomes readily – and even freely – available to huge numbers of potential students may herald a limited higher education experience; and it may be evident in high – and even very high – non-completion rates. *Quality* is here impugned but not unreasonably, it may be felt: the gain of wider access warrants a more limited student experience and so loss in quality of that experience; and in that case, different – and even a lowering of – standards would be coming into play. In short, *there may be a tendency in any drive towards flexibility to permit an altering of standards*.
- 182** *On the other hand*, we have just been observing situations in which legitimate concerns with standards may unwittingly impede efforts to inject greater flexibility into the system. A (quite proper) concern to safeguard the ‘controlled reputational range’ (Watson 2009) of institutions in the UK higher education system (in which milieu ‘a degree is a degree’, no matter from where it is gained) may unintendedly act to limit the degree of flexibility in the system. Such a tacit sense (of degree worthiness) within the higher education sector may be part of the explanation for the influx of private providers, willing to attempt forms of flexibility – in the pedagogical relationship, in the provision of resources, in the control of the learning situations of students – not readily available in the (public) system.
- 183** This is an environment not entirely of the UK’s making. The UK higher education is held in great regard across the world, attracting well over 250,000 students from other countries

(Universities UK 2013). Its collective reputation is not lightly to be put at risk through moves towards greater flexibility, where they just might herald a lessening of quality of the student experience or an altering of standards (or both). There remains surely at least something of a collective responsibility on each institution to uphold such tacit standards.

- 184** It is at least arguable that greater pedagogical flexibility – including moves at institutional and sector level – necessarily involves ultimately some ceding of control of the educational process (from teacher to student). Such moves may be highly desirable, in permitting the student greater autonomy and so encouraging a heightened level of engagement and authenticity on the part of the student. But, still, an eye should be had to any implications of such moves on quality and standards; they may not be immune from untoward impact.
- 185** Summarising here, we may say that matters of standards and quality are key to the development of more flexible provision but yet it is doubtful if they are receiving their due attention. Both policy and regulatory matters wait to be addressed (and research to be conducted). There are here issues around which surely the whole sector can join, to address them collectively.

## Conditions of flexibility

**186** In the wake of these considerations, we may essay a set of *conditions of flexibility*. In moving towards greater flexibility in higher education, and to safeguard educational integrity of offerings, and, no matter what kind of flexibility might be being contemplated, consideration might be given to certain desiderata, namely that programmes might:

1. lead to a qualification that contributes to major awards (such as degrees or their equivalent);
2. offer all students access to suitable materials and appropriate cognitive and practical experiences;
3. offer 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 (such as counselling, academic and careers advice);
7. offer financial services (appropriate to the cost to students in financing their studies);
8. enable students to offer feedback on their total experience;
9. provide a pedagogical openness;
10. be academically and educationally structured;
11. offer ladder(s) of progression;
12. be suitably robust and reliable (with built-in safeguards appropriate to the risk);
13. be cost-effective;
14. have sufficient structure so as to enable student completion to be a likely outcome;
15. contain sufficient challenge that students are likely to be cognitively and experientially stretched and to be informed by a spirit of criticality appropriate to each stage of a programme of studies (so as fully to realise the promise of a *higher* education).

**187** It may be said that there is nothing special about these 15 ‘conditions’ for they apply to traditional programmes just as much as to instances of ‘flexible’ provision. They are conditions of *a bona fide* higher education. Exactly so: there is no reason, *prima facie*, why flexible provision should be let off the hook of satisfying the general conditions as to what counts as a genuine higher education.

- 188** Clearly, not every instance of ‘flexible provision’ will meet all of these 15 conditions of flexibility and/or not to any particularly high level. It follows that, for any instance of flexibility, there can be constructed a *flexibility analysis and evaluation* which illuminates and reviews the manner and extent of the educational soundness of the initiative in question.
- 189** Two implications arise from a list of conditions such as just proposed. Firstly, the conditions are conditions in the sense that they are *quasi-standards* that might be held in view in any moves towards flexibility. Initiatives passing under the banner of flexibility can be brought before the tribunal that such a set of conditions would in effect constitute. They would provide a test of the manner and soundness of the initiative in question.
- 190** There is, though, a second sense in which these 15 elements constitute conditions of flexibility. A steady gaze on them may just prompt some thinking – new thinking indeed – as to *possibilities* for flexibility in the future. In attempting to live up to those demanding conditions, surely work will be called for to attempt to glimpse possibilities under the heading of ‘flexibility’ that *both* take advantage of new pedagogical spaces that may be opening, *and* that enable students to develop their powers of flexibility that provide them with the human wherewithal for the challenges they will assuredly face through their lifespan. These 15 conditions, therefore, should not be seen merely as restrictive of moves towards ‘flexibility’ but may be seen as a springboard to propel new thinking and new practices, in working out their implications for a liquid age (Bauman 2000).
- 191** But how, it may be asked, do these general *conditions* of flexibility – which have also to be general conditions of higher education itself – relate to the earlier list of possible *forms* of flexibility? (152) The possible *forms* of flexibility are just that: forms of flexibility that are to be observed across the system. The *conditions* of flexibility (186) are criteria against which any form of flexibility may be examined. Does any *form* of flexibility embarked upon by an institution enhance the likelihood that a student’s experience of higher education will meet the general *conditions* of flexibility *or*, to the contrary, does it even diminish that likelihood?

## Recommendations

(Each recommendation, where appropriate, is followed in brackets by the numbers of key paragraphs.)

- BIS might:
  - consider whether its understandable wish to see, and encouragement for, more flexibility (that is, a heightened *systems flexibility*) across the sector might be leading institutions to adopt a lesser concern for *pedagogical flexibility* (46-7, 51-52, 144);
  - go on investigating ways in which it can extend support for part-time learners (132-135);
  
- QAA might:
  - consider for adoption the 15 conditions of flexibility (186, 189, 191);
  - audit each institution's 'flexibility profile' (152-54);
  - in its institutional reviews:
    - consider adopting the set of 'key questions' suggested here, in any exploration with institutions of more flexible provision (62-63);
    - explore the extent of students' pedagogical isolation (86, 89, 115), the (possibly limited) scope of students' educational experience and challenge (89) and the (possible) fragmentation of that experience (95-96);
  - explore the extent to which an institution's curricula and pedagogies are likely to sponsor 'personal flexibility' within students (46);
  - in its institutional reviews, review the extent to which curricula exhibit 'epistemic flexibility', with students able intellectually to explore knowledge in a relatively open-ended way (45);
  - especially against the background of moves in the direction of 'flexibility', examine the forms of student support, their speediness and their accessibility and transparency (93);
  - conduct an inquiry into ways in which drives towards greater flexibility in the system are possibly having an impact both on standards and on quality (179-85);
  
- Funding Councils might consider, as a lever in promoting more experimentation in the system, adopting an initiative – with a limited but dedicated tranche of monies deliberately aimed at sponsoring initiatives from institutions with a view to increasing flexibility;

- HEA might:
  - commission research to identify institutional profiles of flexibility and, on that basis, to attempt to discern models of flexibility across the sector (155);
  - continue to keep the theme of flexibility high in its agenda. This might include putting in hand a project to identify the varying perspectives on flexibility of the different interest groups (25-26);
  - develop a set of student attributes that could be a template for institutions wishing to help their students to develop forms of personal flexibility in themselves (47, 170-74);
  - work with QAA to develop further its institutional guidelines on flexibility, in the light of the proposed QAA audits of institutions' flexibility (see above under QAA);
  - ensure that the UK Professional Standards Framework is worded in such a way that pedagogical and learner flexibility are recognised and valued (92-104, 164-78);
  - put work in hand to examine, and explore with institutions, implications both for leadership and for management of efforts to enhance flexibility (82, 126-27, 156-63);
  - work with the sector in encouraging institutions to be even more reflective as to their individual stance towards flexibility;
  - work alongside other sector bodies and relevant credit networks to encourage and help embed a UK-wide credit framework and a more even take-up of credit accumulation and transfer (141-42, 146-47);
  
- Institutions might:
  - conduct a self-scrutiny of the extent to which an institution is responsive to its environment (35, 152);
  - conduct an audit of the extent to which an institution's provision is genuinely flexible (drawing on the 12 forms of flexibility (152) and so establishing a flexibility profile (154);
  - review and evaluate the extent to which, and the ways in which, an institution's provision at course and programme level is meeting the 15 conditions of flexibility proposed here (186, 188);
  - review the extent and character of its student support, especially in relation to the immediate student experience and the level of support that students receive in their work (93);
  - conduct internal self-studies of the student experience with regard to more flexible provision (22-23, 86-92);

- Student Unions might review – with institutional management – students’ needs for greater flexibility (72);
- The ‘Research into Higher Education’ community (including the HEA, the BIS, the HEFCE, think tanks, and learned associations (such as the Society for Research into Higher Education) might build on the existing research and literature base. Specifically, it might:
  - inquire into ways in which flexible provision affects students’ experience of higher education (88-90, 92, 95-96, 102);
  - study the effects of new technologies on students’ experiences and their optimisation (106-07, 112-16, 118-20, 137);
  - research the relationships between flexibility, educational outcomes and costs (54, 83);
  - conduct a fundamental inquiry into student support, especially in the context of more flexible provision (93, 117, 124);
  - explore the relationships between more flexible forms of provision, student engagement and non-completion (116-17);
  - investigate linkages and interactions between different components of flexibility (curricula, pedagogies, student development and institutional strategies and systems) (172).

## Conclusion

**192** The conclusion of this report can be stated briefly. The analysis here – of the evidence and of the justifications offered by proponents and critics of flexibility – is that flexibility in UK higher education is *on a cusp*. Forms of flexibility are leading to an enhancement in students' experience of higher education *and* to an impoverishment in that experience; and it is by no means clear as to how, in general, matters might proceed from here. This, therefore, is an especially timely moment for systematic reflection and concerted action by all concerned.



## Coda: a place for the imagination

- 193** It is surely evident that the idea of flexibility is a way of opening considerations as to the potential of higher education in the contemporary world: how might it change? How might it be more responsive? How might it meet the legitimate desires of students? How might it be more open? How might it take advantage of new technologies and new systems for collaboration? How might it help to develop students as flexible persons, equipped to take on the challenges and uncertainties of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How might it offer a higher education experience attuned to students-as-individuals, but with sufficient structure to stretch students cognitively and experientially?
- 194** But to ask questions such as these is to extend an invitation to the imagination, to glimpse new possibilities for responsiveness. The interplay of dimensions, levels and meanings of flexibility is far from fixed. To the contrary, much is to play for. Under the banner of flexibility, new conceptions of the university might emerge, new senses as to what it might be to be a student, and new ideas as to what authentic learning and personal development might look like. But such new conceptions and ideas – and ultimately new practices and new institutional forms – can only emerge through the play of the imagination.
- 195** Flexibility, then, can be understood as a theme – a ‘trope’ – for imagining and then realising quite new potentials that may be glimpsed for the student as a *person-in-the-making*. For example, just what might be meant by the idea of the student as ‘a global citizen’ and just what forms of flexibility might *that* call for? Does it not invite a pedagogy of some daring, of openness, and of challenge, and even of some risk, in inviting students to become citizens of the world, a pedagogy that is imaginative at once in curricula, approaches to teaching and in the manner opened up for student development? [NPI, 20]
- 196** Perhaps, too, under the banner of flexibility opens the possibility of a new sense of the student not just taking a programme of study but as a member of an institution (a university, a college) with all the wider educational and personal opportunities that that membership may bring. The old idea of the student as a member of a community may resonate here but this all has to be re-imagined for the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and in that re-imagining, all

manner of flexibilities – personal, institutional, regulatory, cultural, educational – will surely have to come into play.

- 197** It remains to be seen just how far there are spaces for the imagination in the contemporary world of higher education. It may be that those spaces are unwittingly closing and, in turn, the chances of imaginative possibilities for flexibility (that at the same time maintain standards and the global reputation of UK higher education) may be being jeopardised.
- 198** Nevertheless, transformations in what it is to be a student – and to be a graduate – are in prospect here. Flexibility may bring challenges of its own but it surely opens worthwhile possibilities not yet even glimpsed. There lies ahead much work for the imagination, judgement and action.

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