

Flexible Learning

Shifts in demographics have led to a change in the student bodies of universities, with greater numbers of mature students, students with full time jobs or families, and international students. There has been a change in both student expectations for their education, with a greater emphasis on job preparedness and customizable or self-directed experiences, and employer expectations for their workforce, with a push for greater “flexibility and transferable skills” that will equip students for “more fluid working lives” (UBC).

Flexible learning is one way to address these shifts. Flexible learning gives students choices about when, where, and how they learn. This is often referred to as the pace, place, and mode of learning.

- **Pace** “encompasses accelerated and decelerated programmes, part-time learning, recognition of prior learning and associated credit frameworks.”
- **Place** refers to the physical location of learning, whether it takes place in a classroom, or is completed at home, while commuting, or as part of a work-based experience.
- **Mode** refers to the ways that technologies can be used to deliver learning in fully online, blended, or technology enhanced experiences (Gordon, 2014).

Learners, instructors, and institutions all have a role to play in flexible learning.

- **Learners** must take responsibility for their own learning, taking advantage of opportunities that are presented to them and being able to self-advocate for the delivery method that serves their learning best.
- **Instructors** must be able to identify opportunities for flexible learning, “with a growing emphasis on managing the learning process rather than being the primary provider of learning material.”
- **Institutions** must build flexible systems that provide students with choices in their learning, as well as maintaining the frameworks that ensure a quality learning experience (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

Flexible learning can “help meet the needs of a diverse range of students,” “allow students to combine work, study, and family,” and “enable students to develop skills and attributes to successfully adapt to change” (HEAC). By providing choices in learning delivery (online, face-to-face, blended), scheduling options (part-time, full-time, day, night), personalization of programs (degrees, certificate, just-in-time programs, career-based learning), options for experiential and community-based learning, and the inclusion of open content that is freely available, flexible learning has been shown to improve student learning outcomes and increase access to education (UBC).

Characteristics of Flexible Learning

In his article on flexible learning, Ian Hart traces the origins of the flexible learning movement. He quotes Nunan, who said:

“...there are progressive interpretations of flexible learning which are structured around competing social and humanist values, which have educational expression through concepts such as constructivism, open education, student centred learning, life-long learning, deep learning, and accessible learning structures” (Nunan, 1996, as cited in Hart, 2000).

This wide-ranging set of influences can make it hard to define flexible learning. Palmer points out that the range of elements in teaching that lend themselves to flexibility can “lead to the conclusion that nearly any teaching and learning configuration could claim to be flexible in some regard,” however he points out that we should be more cautious in our use of the term flexibility (2011). The lack of an agreed upon definition of flexible education or the use of a definition that is too broad has led to a confusing “conflation of educational typologies,” such as identifying any aspect of a course that is delivered in a non-traditional way as being flexible, or equating distance education with flexibility (Palmer, 2011). Hart also points out that it’s important to separate out “*flexible delivery*” (technology or economically driven strategies) from true “*flexible learning*” (an educational goal). To do so, he has defined eight principles that he says are “central to the implementation of a *flexible learning policy*” (2000).

1. Flexible access

- admitting students without a traditional educational background or qualifications,
- students are allowed to determine when they enter or exit from a course
- allowing students to work independently, attend classes, or a combination of the two

2. Recognition of prior learning

- giving credit for formal or non-formal learning, including work experience and training and using this individual experience to develop a suitable course of study

3. Flexible content

- Breaking courses into modules that students can take as they need
- “Problem-based—as opposed to managed—curricula enable students to operate at different levels”
- Allowing students to create a course of study that includes “units from other universities, extensions of offered units, supervised practical work or learning contracts.”

4. Flexible participation

- Instructors and support staff available at all times that are convenient to students
- Communication can be “face-to-face or asynchronous, one-on-one or open, timetabled or on-demand.”

5. Flexible teaching and learning methods

- The delivery mode is set using a combination of the “requirements of the subject and the needs of the individual learner.”
- “Learning is individualized, collaboration is encouraged, and metacognitive goals are pursued.”
- There is an incremental approach to independent learning “with the ultimate goal of developing a deep approach and learner responsibility.”

6. Flexible resources

- Access to all university resources are available both on and off campus
- “Modular self-instruction materials (remedial, revision, and extension) are available if students require them.

7. Flexible assessment

- Assessment is based on competency rather than time, “on achieving targets rather than normal distribution, on providing feedback as well as judgment.”
- Assessment matches the goal of the course and encourages students to be responsible for their own level of achievement.
- Assessment is an integral part of the course that evaluates students’ performance in “declarative, procedural, and contextual aspects”

8. Ongoing evaluation

- Ongoing formative and summative evaluations of flexible learning curricula and materials ensure that the necessary development or revisions of modular courses and course elements occur as needed (Hart, 2000).

Keep in mind that learning may not be flexible just because it integrates some of the characteristics above. The key elements of truly flexible education are the “adaptability of learning to learners’ needs and circumstances” and the instructor’s role as someone who “monitors, directs, and regulates actions towards goals of information acquisition, expanding expertise, and self improvement” (Paris & Paris, as cited in Bergamin et al., 2012).

Bergamin et al. connect flexible education to Zimmerman’s theories of self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning “corresponds with independently generated thinking, feeling, and connecting to the adaption of personal objectives.” In the beginning phase of self-regulated learning, learners are responsible for task analysis, defined as setting goals and strategic planning, and self-motivation, defined as “self-efficacy, outcome expectations, intrinsic interest, and goal orientation.” In Bergamin et al.’s view, this corresponds with the ability of students participating in flexible learning to determine what, when, and how to learn (Zimmerman, as cited in Bergamin et al., 2012). Flexible learning encourages self-regulated learning by allowing students to “set their own objectives and plan, regulate, and evaluate the process themselves” (Narciss, Proske, & Koerndle, as cited in Bergamin et al., 2012).

Flexible Pedagogy

Following up on Bergamin et al.’s focus on flexible learning as being connected to self-regulated learning, Ryan & Tilbury define the scope of flexible learning through the lens of six “pedagogical ideas.” In this model, the six “pedagogical ideas” are interrelated and overlapping, with one idea, “learner empowerment,” at its core (Fig. 1). In flexible learning, the “balance between instruction and facilitation is being revisited in fundamental ways, with implications for pedagogical dynamics and the learner-educator relationship.” This model of learning challenges “the authority of the expert educator and makes space for an enhanced contribution from the learner, by changing the dynamics of learning interactions as well as confronting the power frames that underpin the academic project as a whole” (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

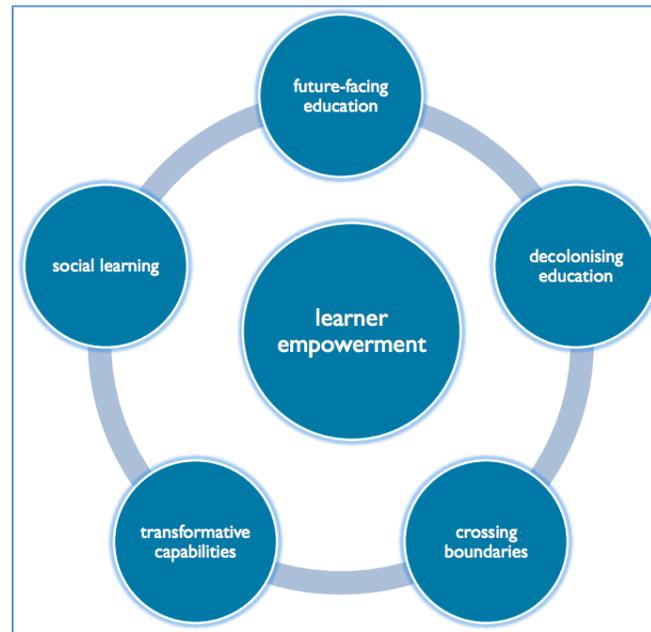


Figure 1: Flexible Pedagogies, Higher Education Academy

The six pedagogical ideas that form a framework for flexible learning are as follows:

1. **Learner empowerment:** works to involve students more “actively in the process of learning and thereby in the process of reshaping teaching and learning processes.” Here flexibility is about reframing the relationship between students and instructors as collaborative, and as co-creators of knowledge. Learner empowerment can be achieved through the use of “participatory, transformative and ‘active’ pedagogies” that position students “as peers with valuable contributions to make to curriculum design and teaching approaches.”
2. **Future-facing education:** enables students to think “creatively and flexibly about future prospects, to generate alternative visions of future possibilities and to initiate action in pursuit of those visions.” To achieve this, students need to be provided with the skills and confidence to address complex, uncertain, and changeable problems, to understand different perspectives, envision alternatives, uncover tacit beliefs and assumptions, and plan ways to work toward positive change.
3. **Decolonizing education:** involves diversifying curriculum, creating inter-cultural understanding and experiences, and giving students the “ability to think and work using globally-sensitive frames and methods” and different cultural perspectives. The goal is to provide a learning experience that enables students to “understand global-local connections and links between their lives and the experiences of other people worldwide, including the political, cultural, economic and environmental factors at stake and the wider implications for justice and equity.”
4. **Transformative capabilities:** reframes learning through a holistic lens, thinking beyond cognitive ability to take into account affective and spiritual dimensions, as well as the lifelong learning that takes place in adult and community education. By using transformative learning and critical reflection to engage not just the “intellect but affect,

identity, worldview, beliefs and values,” students are provided with the ability to challenge assumptions, to respond to complexity, uncertainty and change, and to “not only to see the world differently but to engage and act differently in it.”

5. **Crossing boundaries:** places the focus on inter-disciplinary and inter-professional learning, taking an “integrative and systemic approaches to knowledge and learning” that transcend the “disciplinary points of focus and specialist expertise that are embedded in the academic endeavor.” Whether through institutional initiatives or informal learning activities that engage students from multiple departments, these inter-disciplinary and inter-professional learning experiences help respond more effectively to “societal, economic, and industry concerns.”
6. **Social learning:** creates flexibility by acknowledging the “varied context in which learning takes places” beyond the formal curriculum. This area looks at spaces both physical and virtual to rethink how learning is shaped. Social learning can take place through co-curricular learning spaces, informal learning and social interaction, as well as by engaging with forms of technology that focus on interaction and collaboration (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

Integrating Flexible Learning

This document focuses on the parts of the educational process that instructors can control – meaning a focus on instructional approach and delivery. According to Palmer, instructors can create opportunities for flexible education in any of the following areas:

- **Time:** The pace of a course and the timing of assessments
- **Content:** The topics covered, the sequence of topics, the types of learning materials, the range of assessment methods
- **Instructional Approach/Design:** the “social organization of learning,” whether that means group learning, individual or independent learning, and the format of learning resources, and the “origin of learning resources” (instructors, students, library, Internet)
- **Delivery:** place of study (on campus, off campus, blended, flipped, work-based), opportunities for contact with instructors and/or students, methods of support, and content delivery and communication channels (Palmer, 2011).

To determine if the changes that you’ve made in any of the above areas are truly flexible, Bergamin et al. have set out some characteristics that are shared by flexible learning experiences. Ask yourself:

- Do your learners have greater control over their own learning? Are they “active and constructive learners, as opposed to passive recipients”?
- Are your teaching methods learner-centred rather than teacher-centred, and are your learning resources designed to meet the varied needs of the learners? (2012)

In their *Guide to Providing Flexible Learning in Further and Higher Education*, Casey and Wilson provide some important planning and design decisions that need to be made before trying to make a course more flexible (2005).

- In flexible education, the primary focus is on “designing and managing the activities of the students rather than the course content.” To be effective, flexible education needs “more attention in the design phase, and involves us in thinking more about what our students are going to do and the possibilities open to them which we might provide – and their implications” as well as “what constitutes teaching and learning of our subjects.”
- More than ever, it is absolutely crucial to have clearly stated learning objectives and assessment criteria. The types of assessment methods tell students everything they need to know about what educational values and attitudes are at the heart of their course.
- Create profile of your students – what is their current level of understanding, how much support do they need, and how much independent or self-directed learning could they manage?
- Chunk your course – break your content up into topical chunks that can be rearranged or recombined as needed.
- Don’t do everything at once – “build expertise, learn as you go, and scale up the operation with increasing experience and confidence.” Document everything in detail, and regularly evaluate to see what works and what doesn’t (Casey and Wilson, 2005).
- Help students develop the ability to be self-directed. Because flexible learning requires students to make choices and take responsibility for their learning, it is key that they have the necessary skills to succeed in a course in which they may have some measure of control over the time, pace, or content (Bergamin et al., 2012).

Remember that true flexibility goes beyond just replacing one learning format with another; it means providing students with an actual choice, whether it is in the way the course content is presented, or how they are assessed.

Flexibility in Assessment

Clayton and Booth have argued that flexibility in assessment is “one of the principles that underpins good assessment practice” (2000, as cited in Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012). Giving students some control of their assessment can also empower them to “exploit assessment to improve their learning,” rather than see assessment as just about the pursuit of grades (Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012).

Flexible assessment can take many forms, including “allowing individual students to decide the weightings applied to each assessment task, and the use of scored rubrics alongside peer- and self-assessment to offer engagement in the criteria and the result” (Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012). Final grades can be calculated based on the best scores from “a range of compulsory and optional tasks,” giving students the ability to avoid losing marks or gain higher marks (Asafu-Adjaye, as cited in Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012)

Mayes suggests developing computerized formative assessment systems that can provide students with a large number of interactive assessment tasks—“the number selected is under students’ control, and the tasks can be repeated as many times as students wish... combined with appropriate feedback, these systems become effective interactive teaching tools” (2006).

Irwin and Hepplestone also suggest that flexibility in assessment can mean setting clear learning outcomes and then allowing students to use a variety of formats to demonstrate how they've met those outcomes. By allowing students to select the format by which they demonstrate their learning, instructors can create a more authentic and engaging learning environment in which students can gain practice in a transferable skill that is relevant to them, or tailor their work toward their potential future careers (2012).

Providing students with some choice over the method of their assessment can also increase the validity of the assessment, as factors that would normally leave certain students' at a disadvantage in trying to demonstrate their learning in specific formats, are removed (Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012). This particularly benefits students with disabilities, reducing the need to make accommodations.

When giving students choice over the form of assessment, it is important to use criterion-referenced marking schemes so that no matter what format the student is choosing to submit, they will be graded against a consistent set of criteria. To avoid any accidental bias toward giving higher grades to specific formats, students could also be required to submit a reflection on how they feel their work has met the specific criteria, which "has the added benefit of getting student to engage more deeply with the criteria as part of the assessment" and starts "a dialogue around the assessment processes and any resulting feedback," another principle for encouraging self-regulation in learners (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006, as cited in Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012).

Keeping in mind the outcomes of your course, there may be certain key skills, like writing or research, that must be assessed in a specific format. Flexible assessment methods should therefore not be used as a default, but only for some assignments where appropriate. Students will also need guidance in selecting the methods that will be the most beneficial to them, and provided with "realistic and up-to-date knowledge about long-term skill needs." Students may also need guidance in taking a more active role in the assessment process, and support in learning how to "make, justify, and evaluate their choices" (Irwin and Hepplestone, 2012).

When implementing flexible assessment formats, Irwin and Hepplestone recommend that instructors:

- "Determine the degree of flexibility in format choice to build into assessments across the course"
- "Refine assessment criteria to ensure they are directed at demonstrating the desired learning outcomes instead of incidental learning outcomes that are specifically linked to the assessment format used previously"
- "Have an open and honest enquiry into any preconceptions of the worth of different assessment formats"
- Agree on marking strategies ahead of time
- "Discuss with students why you are introducing assessment format choice and what the implications are for them" (2012).

Continuum of Flexibility

Casey and Wilson have created a “flexibility grid” that can be used to determine where your course currently stands on the continuum of fixed ← → flexible and how to start thinking about ways in which you can make your course more flexible (2005). The aspects of this grid that focus on the pedagogical aspects of flexible education are excerpted below in a slightly modified form:

	Not flexible	Medium	Very flexible
Time			
Submitting assignments and interacting within the course	Assignment deadlines fixed and set times for interaction	Assignment deadlines and times for interaction are within stated brackets of time	Assignment deadlines and times for interaction are negotiable
Tempo/pace of studying	Materials and tasks fixed – revealed on a weekly basis to students	All tasks and material are available to students at start; studying happens within broadly stated phases, allowing some leeway	All tasks and material are available to students at start; pace of studying entirely up to students
Moments of assessment	Fixed	Adjustable within limits	Negotiable with students
Content			
Topics of the course	Fixed	Some choice/options	Broadly negotiable
Sequence of different parts of the course	Fixed	Some variability allowed	Can be completed in any sequence
Orientation of the course (for example, theoretical versus practical)	Fixed	Mixed, to suit the subject matter and institutional constraints	Students can choose the orientation that suits them
Key learning materials of the course	Fixed	Core materials with options, and students allowed/expected to use other materials	Students able to choose from a wide variety of sources and materials
Assessment standards and completion requirements	Fixed	Choice of assessment methods allowed, with reference to stated learning outcomes. Completion possible by a number of routes	Assessment criteria and methods negotiable, completion possible by a number of routes.

Delivery and logistics			
Time and place where contact with instructor and other students occur	Fixed time and place according to a timetable	Some flexibility, within limits – often related to mode of access	Course can be completed without every having to visit the institution
Methods, technology for obtaining support and making contact	Fixed and restricted range – academic office hours, tutorials	Wider range, including online peer forums, different student learning supports	Wide range and adjustable to student needs, access to frequently asked questions (FAQs) and previous cohorts' work
Location, technology for participating in various aspects of the course	Fixed place – face to face	Blended – some face to face and some online work; different locations possible	Location and technology for participating can be negotiated

Flexibility Dimensions

Nikolova and Collis have created a table of flexibility dimensions (1998), which is reproduced in a slightly adapted format below. Many of the dimensions are similar to the continuum above, with the notable addition of flexibility in the level of difficulty of the course and flexibility in the standards or criteria set for assignments.

Categories	Flexibility dimensions	Some possible options
Time of course participation	Times for participation within the course	Fixed hours, periods during the workday, weekends, blocks of released time
	Learner's tempo through the course	Fixed, flexible in pre-set boundaries, the learner decides
	Time when assessment occurs	Fixed, the learner negotiates with the instructor, the learner decides
Content in the course	Topics covered within the course	Fixed, the learner participates in content selection, the learner decides
	Sequence in which topics are covered in a course	Fixed content path, the learner makes choices among alternatives
	Amount of learning activities expected to be completed within the course	Complete all, possibility to not participate in some activities, the learner decides
	Level of difficulty of course content	Basic, intermediate, advanced

	Assessment standards relative to course content	Fixed by the instructor, negotiated between the learner and the instructor
Instructional approaches and learning materials	Social organization of learning	Follow the course individually, follow the course as part of a group
	Learning materials	Paper, multimedia, online resources, etc.
	Pedagogy of the course	Fixed, choice of the instructor as a consultant, collaborator, or facilitator
Course delivery and logistics	Times and places for support	Fixed, within pre-defined boundaries, learner's choice—"just-in-time"
	Method of obtaining support	Face-to-face, at a distance
	Types of support available	Individually, within a group
	Place for study and course participation	Individually, within a group, home-based, internet based
	Delivery channels for the course	Face-to-face, online

Flexibility Questionnaire

Bergamin et al. developed a questionnaire to measure flexibility in the classroom from the perspective of students. Participants marked their perception of flexibility for each item on a 5-point Likert scale where 1=not true at all and 5=completely true. The questionnaire was broken into three areas, flexibility of time management, flexibility of teacher contact, and flexibility of content. The table below reproduces below in a slightly modified format (2012), with the addition of a section on assessment based on the criteria listed by Clarke and James (1998):

Scale of flexibility	Item
Flexibility of time management	I can decide when I want to learn
	I can define my own learning pace
	I can repeat the subject matter at will
	I can arrange the learning time
Flexibility of teacher contact	I can contact the teacher at any time
	There are different ways of contacting the teacher
Flexibility of content	I have a say regarding the focus of the topics of the class
	I can prioritize topics in my learning
	I can choose between different learning forms, including on-campus study, online study, and

	self-study
	I can study topics of special interest
Flexibility of assessment	I can set the pace of my assessment
	I can select my method of assessment
	I can decide the value assigned to each assessment
	I can set the criteria for my assessment

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