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Remembering the Student: Flexible Learning and Being Educated for the Twenty-First Century

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Aims of talk

Following the D-G's introduction with its resumé of the situation, I aim to:

- Identify issues
- Notice differences (across different kinds of flexible environments)
- Ask some questions (even awkward questions) and offer some cautions
- Introduce a distinction between a 'flexible learning *environment*' and a 'flexible learning *situation*' – and suggest that we are neglecting the latter
 - & point to a set of flexible learning situations that is much needed for an education for the C21
- Remember the student
- Conclude with a suggested set of conditions that might be heeded by all programmes of study.

Own background

- Part-time (APHE)
- IOE – average age 37
- Evening teaching
- Credit accumulation
- Work-based learning
- Week-based units
- Units (of a single programme) taught across the UK
- AEL
- Life-long learning
- Use of digital resources
- UoL – distance learning for 150+ yrs

What is the problem?

- A higher education that was appropriate to an age of limited access has become too limited in the contemporary age
- The relationship being higher education and society now fluid, with weak boundaries
- HE no longer a definite stage between school and the world, but now part of the world:
 - *a large number of students in higher education*
 - *'mature' students*
 - *Wishing to work alongside their studies*
 - *And to go at their own pace (faster/ slower)*
 - *Already digital natives and expecting that programmes will incorporate a high level of digital resources*
 - *society expecting more from higher education,*
- Higher education is unduly inflexible in meeting the needs of students
 - So how inject more flexibility?

Context

- Students are now heterogeneous
- A student is no longer necessarily a 'student' – fluid identities (work/ home/ learning situation – boundaries intermingle)
- Students have legitimate claims on institutions – as 'customers'
- Their learning situations to be designed so as to be outward facing
- No longer a condition of the nature of disciplines (knowledge modes 1&2)
- Full-time 3-yr programme tied to a single institution (inappropriately) rigid.
- New models required – to respond to students so that their learning is free of limitations of place, of duration, of institution ...

The debate

- ***In rough order of priority***, has addressed issues of:
 - *How?*
 - *Where?*
 - *When?*
 - *Who?*
 - *What?*
- Has not much addressed the matter as to '***Why?***'
 - As a result, focus on national and institutional systems
 - But little, if anything, on what it is to educate for the C21 and what it is to be a student.
 - A focus on *flexible learning environments* but has rather neglected *flexible learning situations*.

Awkward questions - 1

- To what degree is there evidence of 'demand' for (kinds of) flexibility?
 - It may be that many students today are seeking *more* structure.
 - After all, they are more highly investing in their higher education
- A greater interest in some forms of flexibility than others?
 - eg CAT across institutions – discussed in the UK for 40 years
 - But – as distinct from CA within institutions - it has not taken off:-
 - institutional inertia or lack of demand?

And awkward questions 2

- Suppose more/ some forms of flexibility (eg learning at a distance) lead to
 - (a) lengthier programmes of study – and so more inefficient (with students moving at different pace of study)
 - (b) higher non-completion rates? (The OU in the UK; digital learning.)
- ie What are the trade-offs? What are the risks? (UK – risk assessments)

NB: For past 30 years, a steady process of increased efficiencies (tightening of duration of programmes) – will the flexibility agenda put that process into revers?

Just imagine

Just imagine, a programme of study in which:

- Duration limits were minimal – the student could take as little or as long as she liked
- No face-to-face interaction, with tutor or other students
- All the materials were available digitally
- The student could assemble her programme from heterogeneous modules
- There were no requirements to be ‘on campus’
- There were minimal entrance requirements
- And the methods of assessment were open (& assessment not required).
- (ie, many of the elements of flexible learning were present)
 - What do we feel about this? Are there limits to the degree of flexibility, in order to be in the presence of a genuinely ‘higher education’?

Digital technologies

- Their effect – a complex matter
- Different platforms – some are simply matters of access and may not allow interaction
- Effect of screen-based learning – no clear picture
- But some evidence that reasoning and understanding change
- Helicopter scanning
- NB:– evidence that non-completion rates rise in direct proportion to:
 - (a) the degree to which a prog of study is reliant on them and
 - (b) the age of the student.

Missing a trick or two?

- But: we could be more imaginative in using digital technologies – in helping to realize ‘global citizenship’
- And in bringing the world into the classroom.
- ie, flexible curricula
- (I’ll come back to this.)

Effects of flexible learning

- So we need to put into effect more monitoring of/ research on effects of each form of flexible learning
 - Open pacing
 - Digitisation
 - Distance learning
 - Multiple locations
 - Part-time study
 - Work-based/ work-situated learning (distinguish them)
- Examine:
 - Costs
 - Learning
 - Non-completion rates
 - Across age/ gender/ socio-economic background/ ethnicity

Quality/ standards

- Is *quality* being affected?
 - The new students – from non-traditional backgrounds – require *more* structure and support ...
 - Students who have already experienced HE respond better to flexible learning systems
 - And distinguish quality of inputs and processes
 - From quality of ‘outcomes’ – of students’ understandings and capabilities
 - Are there differences across different kinds of flexibility?
- Are *standards* affected?
 - Under conditions of flexible learning, do we expect less from students?
 - (cf UK OU)

Flexible learning *situations*

Consideration: that the world is coming to expect more from higher education and of its graduates – and there are many indicators of imaginative changes:

- Aarhus – public library – fuzzy boundaries (students/ learning/ university/ public spaces)
- Lifewide learning
- Digital spaces – bringing the world into the classroom
- Global learning (putting classrooms in touch with each other)
- Flipped classroom
- The democratic classroom
 - Flexibility – in learning spaces, in pedagogical relationships

Remembering the student

- ***What is it to be educated for the C21?***
 - eg, The student as a global citizen
 - How bring the student to this level of personal development?
 - Where every assumption is questioned
 - Higher education – a matter not so much of knowledge or skills
 - But of the student as a person
 - Coping with complete uncertainty
 - Continual challenge
 - Human virtues – resilience, courage, empathy, criticality ...
 - Requires a ***totally flexible pedagogy*** – in which the teacher cannot know what is to happen in an encounter with the student(s)
 - To what extent can this much more demanding HE be brought off under conditions of FLEs?

A suitable programme of studies

- Curricula are still important – knowledge and skills
- But now, *pedagogy* – the teacher/ student relationship – becomes crucial
- The student – space, responsibility, judgement (in open-ended situations)
- A higher education of strangeness, risk, and personal response
- This calls for a highly flexible *learning situation*
- But a different form of flexibility
 - A flexibility in the pedagogical process
 - In which the pedagogical relationship is open, in which the student is not ‘spoon-fed’ but is given the openness and is required to come forward with her own judgements.
 - (‘There are no right answers’.)

It follows that

- *Flexibility is crucial but* forms of flexibility differ
- Each form of flexibility needs to be given consideration in its own right
- *Not an absolute good*
- & where several forms of flexibility are present, there may be risks to both quality and to standards
- The educational challenges of the programme of study have to be addressed
- Moreover, a danger that a 'flexible' learning *environment* may be accompanied by a much heightened set of inflexibilities in the learning *situation*
 - Curriculum, stages of progress, course requirements, learning outcomes, assessment regimes.

Conditions of flexible learning environments - 1

Every programme of study, no matter how many elements of flexibility it contains, should:

- 1 Lead to a qualification that contributes to major awards
- 2 Offer students access to suitable materials and appropriate cognitive and practical experiences
- 3 Offer regular 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 (academic; careers advice; etc)
- 7 Enable students to offer feedback on their total experience

Conditions of openness - 2

- 8 Be academically and educationally structured
- 9 Provide a pedagogical openness
- 10 Offer ladder(s) of progression
- 11 Be suitably robust and reliable
- 12 Be cost-effective
- 13 Have sufficient structure so that student completion is a likely outcome
- 14 Contain sufficient challenge so that the students are cognitively and experientially stretched (so as to count as higher education)

Conclusions - 1

- 1 Several important forms of flexibility – and they are distinct
 - But they have been concerned with systems, not educational processes (they have been answers to questions of when/ where/ how/who?)
- 2 Flexibility is a good – and we need *much more of it* across the EU
 - but it is not an unqualified good
- 3 Across EU, we're on different paths & different points on those paths
 - Time for an audit of FLEs across the EU?
- 4 Each form of flexibility should be taken forward with some care
 - and subjected to a rigorous evaluation
 - *Crucial that flexible learning isn't an impoverished learning.*



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Conclusions - 2

- 5 Put the student and her/his education for the C21 at the centre
- 6 Inject *more flexibility*, in particular, in relation to the educational process and both curricula and the pedagogy – and the latter is crucial.
 - (But danger that *systems flexibility* will occlude *educational flexibility*)
- 7 Let us not forget the student and let's bring some judgemental rigour to this important agenda.

Some (additional) questions

- In your country, which would you see as the most pressing forms of flexible learning environments yet to be developed?
 - And what are the difficulties and risks confronting the development of that particular form of flexibility?
- Could you envisage the realization of credit transfer *across* the EU countries?
- Do you think it possible to develop more flexible pedagogical situations, *while also* developing more flexible learning environments?