

Flexible learning summit report



Professor Freda Tallantyre, HEA Associate
December 2011



Contents

| Section | Page |
|--|-------------|
| 1. Introduction | 3 |
| 2. Focus and outcomes | 4 |
| 2.1 Defining flexible learning | 4 |
| 2.2 Outcomes and next steps | 4 |
| 3. Moving the agenda forward: Summary of recommendations for action | 5 |
| Government and funding bodies | 5 |
| National bodies | 5 |
| Senior institutional managers (SMs) | 6 |
| 4. Barriers and enablers | 7 |
| Annex I | 8 |
| List of delegates | 8 |

I. Introduction

This report sets out the conclusions and recommendations for action arising from the Higher Education Academy's Flexible Learning Summit, held at Weetwood Hall, Leeds on 31 October and 1 November 2011. It has been amended in the light of comments contributed at the PVC Network Special Interest Group, held in London on 30 November 2011, and was presented to the second summit meeting, attended by senior institutional managers in London on 19 April 2012.

The Leeds summit brought together practitioners with experience of pioneering different aspects of flexible learning from across the higher education sector. It focused on three main aspects of flexible learning which the HEA has been supporting: pace (accelerated and de-accelerated degrees); place (e.g. work-based learning and employer engagement); and mode (e.g. technology-enabled learning). A list of delegates attending the summit is attached as Annex I.

The purpose of the summit was two-fold:

- to enable practitioners from across the three dimensions of 'pace, place and mode' to identify the key enablers and barriers encountered in taking forward their particular aspect of flexible learning;
- to explore whether there are inter-related issues that are common across the three main dimensions of flexible learning which would benefit from being addressed in a more strategic fashion at institutional and national policy levels.

Section 2 of the report summarises the approach taken to defining flexible learning, and outlines the scope of the outcomes and next steps.

Section 3 of the report summarises a series of cross-cutting recommendations which are addressed to Government, funding bodies, national higher education bodies and senior institutional managers. The recommendations outlined in this section constitute one of the main outputs from the summit.

Section 4 of the report provides a summary of the main barriers, enablers and recommendations for action which were identified.

2. Focus and outcomes

2.1 Defining flexible learning

Flexible learning is a term which, despite its increasing prevalence, can be interpreted in various ways. It is important, therefore, to be clear about what it was intended to mean in the specific context of the summit, for which purpose the HEA has chosen to define flexible learning in terms of offering students choice in the pace, place and mode of learning.

- **Pace.** This includes accelerated and decelerated programmes, part-time learning, recognition of prior learning and the associated use of credit frameworks. For the purposes of this summit, there was particular focus on taking forward the learning from the Flexible Learning Pathfinder Projects. These projects have been supported by the HEA and have focused primarily on the development of two-year accelerated degrees. The final report on the Pathfinder projects was published by the HEA in 2011.
- **Place.** The primary domain here is work-based learning. While this constituted the main focus for discussion at the summit, other relevant dimensions of place include the role of private providers of higher education, and provision offered by FE colleges. It is also recognised that technology-enhanced learning enables flexibility of learning across geographical boundaries, both in the UK and abroad. The HEA has supported a variety of work-based learning programmes and projects, including those funded by HEFCE's Strategic Development Fund.
- **Mode.** This is essentially focused on the role of learning technologies in enhancing flexibility and enriching the quality of the student learning experience. Distance learning, blended learning, synchronous and a-synchronous modes of learning are all aspects of this dimension. The HEA has supported a variety of generic and discipline specific programmes in technology enhanced learning.

Each of these three dimensions of flexibility is shaped by the need to ensure that learning is responsive to the requirements and choices of an increasingly diverse and demanding body of learners. Although each dimension may be seen as distinct with its own set of specific drivers, there is also the potential for integration and a unifying thematic coherence. In broad terms, this is about the transition away from a traditional production led model to a more dynamic and responsive model of learning. This is a model in which the processes of learning and the associated institutional structures are driven by the requirements and preferences of learners or sponsors of learning (e.g. employers).

Further details about the HEA's work on supporting flexible learning are available at www.heacademy.ac.uk/flexible-learning.

2.2 Outcomes and next steps

The primary outcome from the summit is a series of cross-cutting recommendations to Government, funding bodies, national higher education bodies and senior institutional managers. These are set out in Section 3 of this report.

The recommendations were considered by senior institutional managers and national policymakers at a subsequent summit event which took place in April 2012.

Recommendations which are specific to each of the three dimensions of flexible learning, including those which relate to other stakeholder groups such as staff and students, are detailed in an earlier report of the summit prepared by John Pritchard for the HEA. For the purposes of this more concise report, the main barriers and enablers identified have been integrated into Section 4.

3. Moving the agenda forward: Summary of recommendations for action

The following recommendations take account of the various barriers and enablers which were identified at the summit across each of the main strands of flexible learning. They are relevant to all dimensions of flexible learning and are directed to government and funding bodies, national bodies and senior institutional managers.

These recommendations identify the key actions which, in the view of those working with flexible learners and flexible forms of delivery, are now required in order to recoup the significant investment made in flexible learning initiatives over the last decade, and to build upon the findings for the benefit of learners in the future.

Government and funding bodies

Recommendation 1. Government and the UK Funding Councils are encouraged to consider the scope for developing mainstream funding mechanisms which support institutions in promoting greater flexibility in the pace, place and mode of study.

Recommendation 2. Funding frameworks are encouraged to enable institutions to re-coup the full costs of undergraduate provision in the new context of tuition fees, regardless of mode of study. The phased introduction of credit, as opposed to time, based funding should be considered as a key enabling mechanism for achieving this.

Recommendation 3. Government are encouraged to consider how the current arrangements for controlling total student numbers might be adapted to provide greater incentives to those institutions seeking to increase enrolments on work based or accelerated learning programmes.

Recommendation 4. Government are encouraged to explore the scope to encourage participation in flexible learning programmes through the introduction of tax incentives, salary sacrifice and other related schemes.

Recommendation 5. Government are encouraged to provide models and illustrations to clarify how new student support/loans system might work for students on flexible learning programmes, in particular, for students on work-based learning, accelerated and part-time programmes.

Recommendation 6. Government are encouraged to ensure that evidence collected on the nature of the student experience includes that of all categories of learners, including students on work-based, part-time and other flexible learning programmes.

National bodies

Recommendation 7. National bodies such as UCAS, HEA, QAA and JISC are encouraged to collaborate to produce separate evidence based guides for potential learners and institutional staff on flexible learning provision.

It is clear that there is a need for potential learners, stakeholders and institutional staff to be much better informed about what flexible learning is about and what constitutes effective practice. It is therefore recommended that two different types of publication are produced.

The first is a guide for potential learners and other stakeholders such as schools, colleges, careers advisors and employers. This would provide an overview of the characteristics and options for flexible learning in the UK, answers to frequently asked questions and case study examples (including endorsements from employers). This guide might usefully be promoted by UCAS and the new national Information, Advice and Guidance/Careers Service.

The second is a guide for institutional staff which sets out key messages and good practice principles arising from a structured review of the evidence base. The guide would provide practical advice to staff who are seeking to develop holistic approaches to flexible learning, as well as information on aspects which are not already addressed elsewhere (e.g. accelerated degrees). This guide would include links to additional information, guidance and resources.

Recommendation 8. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Higher Education Academy should collaborate to provide targeted support for senior managers in leading the development of institutional strategies for flexible learning.

Recommendation 9. The Higher Education Academy should support the development of higher education CPD programmes which promote best practice in flexible learning pedagogies in alignment with the UK Professional Standards Framework.

Senior institutional managers (SMs)

Recommendation 10. SMs are encouraged to actively champion the value of the flexible learning agenda to politicians and policy makers, highlighting evidence of successful impact and the need for supportive funding policies.

Recommendation 11. SMs are encouraged to lead on effective resource allocation to, and realistic costing and pricing of flexible learning, taking into account changing market conditions, the new higher education funding context and the potential for income generation over the longer term.

Recommendation 12. SMs are encouraged to prompt the development of appropriate frameworks and policies which support the reward and recognition of those staff who choose to prioritise the development and management of flexible learning programmes, and ensure the celebration of examples of innovation.

Recommendation 13. SMs are encouraged to review the roles and workload implications for academic and professional staff who are involved in the delivery of flexible learning. In particular, consideration should be given to the scope to re-configure and modernise the working relationship between academics and professional support staff such as librarians, learning technologists, employer liaison managers and educational developers.

Recommendation 14. SMs are encouraged to ensure that diversity in the pace, place and mode of study is taken into account in strategic and operational planning, and in the development of mainstream policies and frameworks. In particular, the 'interests and voices' of diverse categories of learners (including distance, work based and accelerated learners) should be considered in relation to curriculum development and review, pedagogy, assessment and the development of student charters.

4. Barriers and enablers

This section integrates the key barriers and enablers identified by the three strands of flexible learning represented at the summit. They are tabulated because, as might be anticipated, the one is often the converse of the other.

| Barriers | Enablers |
|---|---|
| False perceptions of quality of and demand for flexible learning. | Gather robust evidence regarding academic standards, outcomes, satisfaction, student destinations/ career development, and its strong marketing. Repositories of case studies. Alumni testimony. |
| Lack of links to local communities. | Effective relationships with schools, colleges, careers advisers and recruiters. |
| | More targeted marketing and communications, e.g. CRM systems. |
| | Work with Sector Skills Councils, professional bodies, etc. Collaborative and strategic alliances with employers. |
| Lack of buy in at the top. | Support from senior managers to provide a strategic overview and clear institutional level commitment. |
| HEI staff are risk-averse, lack skills, confidence, competence. | Support networks which enable confidence, competence, information sharing at institutional and sector wide level. Discipline buddies, faculty champions, communities of practice. |
| | Ensure QA systems are supportive. |
| HR contracts too narrow. | Pilot new initiatives carefully. |
| | Amend or develop hybrid contracts. |
| Brand protection. | More innovative approaches to joint programmes. |
| Funding systems in which flexible learning appears anomalous. | Mainstream funding mechanisms which incentivise flexible learning, especially credit-based funding. |
| Apparent hegemony of full-time undergraduate model. | Learn how to use new part-time loan and student support facility, numbers controls exclusions, etc. |
| Unrealistic costing and pricing systems. | Over-arching institutional frameworks which support mode-free study. |
| Contradiction to mission and key drivers. | Coherence with mission and strategy. Integrate, for example, Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF), Continuing Professional Development (CPD), the Impact Agenda and Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) with other institutional strategies. |
| Lack of recognition within workloads. | Effective workload planning which recognises a range of responsibilities, including development time. |
| | Use central units and dedicated staff for initial outreach or specialised work. |
| Clashing staff cultures. | Partnership and team working across categories of staff and students. |
| | Reward and recognition systems. |
| Accessibility of technology and skills for students. | Effective management of student expectations about the nature of study and amount of effort required. |
| Diversification and marketisation of the sector. | Strongly market university unique selling points (USPs). |
| Slow and bureaucratic systems. | Flexible systems (for example). administration, timetable, QA, estate development, etc. |
| Adapting the existing curriculum. | Design the curriculum specifically for the mode. |

Annex I

List of delegates

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Dr Mahmoud Al-Kilani | Anglia Ruskin University |
| David Beards | Scottish Funding Council |
| Dr Nicky Druquer | De Montfort University |
| Dr Rachel Forsyth | Manchester Metropolitan University |
| Sue Graham | Northumbria University |
| Suzanne Hardy | HEA |
| Professor Peter Hartley | University of Bradford |
| Judith James | Swansea University |
| Ceredig Jamieson-Ball | HEA |
| Robin Lowe | Sheffield Hallam University |
| Steven Luke | Aston University |
| David Major | University of Chester |
| Dr Erica Morris | HEA |
| Jayne Mothersdale | Leeds Metropolitan University |
| Steve Outram | HEA |
| Elaine Payne | HEA |
| John Pritchard | HEA |
| Dr Alastair Robertson | HEA |
| Dr Caroline Sudworth | Cogent |
| Professor Freda Tallantyre | HEA |
| Chris Turnock | Northumbria University |
| Sharon Waller | Anglia Ruskin University |
| Sheila Wolfenden | HEFCE |
| Dr Steve Wyn Williams | Staffordshire University |

Contact us

The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York
YO10 5BR

+44 (0)1904 717500
enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk

ISBN: 000-0-0000000-00-0

© The Higher Education Academy, 2013

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is a national body for learning and teaching in higher education. We work with universities and other higher education providers to bring about change in learning and teaching. We do this to improve the experience that students have while they are studying, and to support and develop those who teach them. Our activities focus on rewarding and recognising excellence in teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice, and by helping to influence, shape and implement policy - locally, nationally, and internationally. The HEA supports staff in higher education throughout their careers, from those who are new to teaching through

to senior management. We offer services at a generic learning and teaching level as well as in 28 different disciplines. Through our partnership managers we work directly with HE providers to understand individual circumstances and priorities, and bring together resources to meet them. The HEA has knowledge, experience and expertise in higher education. Our service and product range is broader than any other competitor.

www.heacademy.ac.uk | www.twitter.com/heacademy

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Editor. Such permission will normally be granted for educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the communications office at the Higher Education Academy: 01904 717500 or pressoffice@heacademy.ac.uk

