What is flexible learning?

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) believe that flexible learning is about empowering students by offering them choices in how, what, when and where they learn: the pace, place and mode of delivery.

How: offering a choice of studying face-to-face, online, or through a blended approach;
What: providing personalising learning approaches with a supported range of study options, enabling students to design programmes according to their needs and aspirations;
When: building a programme structure that assists choice of when to study, fitting it around work and home life; and choice about the intensity of their study, from full-time and accelerated, to part-time and at a slower pace, with opportunities for pace to vary during a programme and to take intermissions as required;
Where: facilitating opportunities for students to study in locations of their choice; this might be home, work-based, or overseas.

Flexible learning requires a balance of power between institutions and students, and seeks to find ways in which choice can be provided that is economically viable and appropriately manageable for institutions and students alike.

Who is this framework for?

Given that flexible learning requires a partnership between all stakeholders, including employers (where relevant), this framework is intended for a wide audience. In particular, it is for those working in higher education (HE) with responsibilities for decision-making in areas such as strategic planning, programme development, administrative systems and structures, technological infrastructures relating to learning and teaching, and employer engagement. It can be most effective if applied across an institution, as well as at the programme level.
Flexible learning is important because it is a key means of allowing students to combine different areas of their lives – work, study and leisure – in ways that suit them best. When well supported, this positively impacts recruitment, retention and progression; widens participation; and offers opportunities to learners of all ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and nationalities.

Flexible learning is student-centred and empowers students to become independent and autonomous, fostering graduate attributes that will enable them to manage the complexities of 21st century life.

In an age where employability is high on the agenda of most HEPs, flexible learning facilitates interaction with employers in mutually constructive ways, as a result of which students contribute to the national economy and maintain their financial viability while studying.
How is the framework structured?

The framework, represented on the diagram, maps the significant elements of the flexible learning terrain. It provides a way of reviewing an institution’s flexible learning provision.

By providing an overview of flexible learning, the framework offers a structure within which creative thinking and innovative approaches to learning and teaching can be considered. The areas of focus overlap and intersect, and hence can be combined to enhance the learning experience.

The framework can also serve as a prompt for ensuring that wider implications of intended action have been considered. An investment in mobile technologies, which offers students greater flexibility in when, where and with whom they learn, for example, may introduce the need to ensure students have the necessary digital literacies and that they are able to work independently and autonomously.

Areas of focus

Flexible learning lies at the heart of the diagram, from which four key areas of focus emanate. Learner choice and personal flexibility focus on students, while institutional agility and balanced pragmatism emphasise institutions. Together their message is one of a partnership between HEPs and students with the goal of providing accessible yet manageable learning opportunities for a wide range of people.

Flexibility is primarily a question of offering students choices about the pace, place and mode of their study, choices articulated in the next ring how, what, where and when. There are four further areas of focus highlighting important considerations as follows:

- **Technology-enhanced learning**: a high degree of mobile learning, and the design of learning spaces that support it; innovative pedagogies and collaborative working embedding appropriate digital literacies for both students and staff; and the use of learning analytics to provide as personalised an approach to learning as is possible.

- **Employment**: developing strong collaborations and partnerships with the employment sector, to include work-based and work-place learning, thus addressing a student’s long term employability; and a seamless intersection between employers and HEPs through flexible working which offers employees similar choices in how, where and when they work. This takes place in a context of increasing globalisation.

- **Institutional systems and structures**: the infrastructures that HEPs have in place and on which they depend for their efficient functioning. These include administrative and financial systems, as well as academic regulations and the availability of support services. Institutional systems and structures are designed for flexibility rather than homogeneity.

- **Pedagogical approaches**: the way in which learning, teaching and assessment take place and their underpinning philosophies and rationales. This may include (for example) the incorporation of techniques intended to foster independent as well as lifelong learning, and the ability for students to design their own programme of study.

Each of these has a number of component parts, all of which contribute to enhancing or hindering the degree of flexible learning available to students.

Values

- **Inclusivity**: HE is available to all enabling individuals to combine study, work, family and leisure in a way that suits them.

- **Equity**: HE is available to all who want to study, regardless of age, gender, race or circumstances.

- **Lifelong learning**: individuals learn and develop throughout their lives, formally and informally, personally and professionally.

- **Social responsibility**: people have a contribution to make to society, which is enhanced by ongoing education and development.

- **Collaboration**: humans are sociable beings who learn with and from each other, and are stimulated to achieve great things through interaction.
HEA frameworks series

This is one of a series of strategic frameworks on core sector priorities, developed by the HEA, the national body for learning and teaching in the United Kingdom (UK). They have been created in response to, and in collaboration with, the HE sector and draw on extensive evidence, expertise and experience.

The frameworks can be adapted by a wide range of HE stakeholders, individuals and groups, and applied to different disciplines, modes of study and institutional contexts. They may have more impact if adopted at an institutional level and embedded across all provision, with all staff. HEA toolkits can support you in this process. Frameworks are designed to enhance individual sector priorities or be interconnected to enrich policy and practice. They aim to improve learning outcomes by raising the quality and status of teaching in HE, across the UK and internationally.

Frameworks in the series include:

- Flexible learning in higher education
- Student engagement through partnership
- Embedding employability in higher education
- Internationalising higher education
- Transforming assessment in higher education
- Student access, retention, attainment and progression in higher education

How does this framework align with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF)?

Staff may want to consider how their engagement with flexible learning in higher education can offer an effective approach to areas of activity, enable deeper understanding of core knowledge, and demonstrate alignment with professional values. It is particularly relevant to the following dimensions:

- **Activity:** A1, A2, and A4
- **Knowledge:** K4, and K6
- **Values:** V1, V2, and V4

The HEA invites lecturers, teachers and learning support staff to evidence their use of this or other HEA frameworks in applying for HEA Fellowship in recognition of their commitment to professional practice.

- [www.heacademy.ac.uk/fellowships](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/fellowships)
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