

Este reporte fue elaborado por Deakin University (Australia) como un recurso de apoyo para los docentes y directivos participantes en el proceso de revisión de opciones de flexibilidad en el aprendizaje de los alumnos.

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Introducing flexible learning

1 Overview

This module is designed to serve as a resource for academics and course managers involved in or considering flexible learning options. It aims to:

- provide a clearer understanding of what flexible learning means;
- describe the benefits and discuss the consequences of adopting flexible learning approaches; and
- deliberate on the development of flexible learning opportunities in the context of a multi-campus Australian university.

Following the linear format of the module is not mandatory. However, the module is interspersed with questions for reflection which build upon the previous questions and reflections. These questions have been intentionally designed in order that the module is relevant to each user.

Additional readings are suggested for those users who desire more detailed and further information.

2 What is flexible learning?

Flexible learning is multi-layered and multi-faceted. In its broadest sense it is a continuum of approaches in terms of time, place, pace, content and mode of learning applied in varying degrees. Its overarching purpose is to increase opportunities and options available to learners and give them greater control over their learning through a variety of learning modes and interactions. It is not an alternative mode of education but an overarching driving force that provides learners greater choice.

2.1 Pedagogical philosophy

Flexible learning is learner-centred, encouraging greater independence and autonomy on the part of the learner. Its ethos is to enable and empower learners and give them greater control of their learning and become more self-directed. It increases choices available to both learners and teachers resulting in a 'blurring of traditional internal/external boundaries' (George & Luke, 1995).

Conceptions of flexibility also include flexibility of admissions and enrolment processes, flexibility in assessment and assessment times. Introducing flexibility or increasing flexibility is not necessarily 'good' in itself. The key issue is how it impacts on student learning and the quality of that learning experience. It is about improving learning outcomes and maximising learner engagement using appropriate learning approaches.

2.2 Some definitions

There is no common definition of flexible education (Casey & Wilson, 2005; King & Kenworthy, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Jakupc, 1999; Nicoll, 1998). The following selected definitions are meant to convey an overview of the term.

‘Flexible learning expands choice on what, when, where and how people learn. It supports different styles of learning, including e-learning’ (DEST).

‘. . . a generic term that covers all those situations where learners have some say in how, where and when learning takes place – whether within the context of traditional institution-centred courses or in non-traditional contexts such as open learning, distance learning, CAT schemes, wider-access courses or continuing professional development’ (Ellington, 1997 p. 4).

‘Flexible provision of higher education refers here to a mode of provision that provides learners with guided choice, in a number of domains, achieved through employment of various strategies including the use of learning and teaching techniques and technologies and the adoption of policies affecting choices for learners.’ (‘The Effectiveness of Models of Flexible Provision of Higher Education’ (2001), DEST, Australian Government) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008)

‘Flexible learning is a movement away from a situation in which key decisions about learning dimensions are made in advance by the instructor or institution, towards a situation where the learner has a range of options from which to choose with respect to these key dimensions.’ (Collis & Moonen, 2001, p. 10).

‘Flexible Learning is a set of educational philosophies and systems, concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalisation to suit the learner. In particular, flexible learning provides learners with choices about where, when, and how learning occurs. Sometimes also referred to as personalized learning. Flexible learning is a term often used in New Zealand and Australia (Shurville et al, 2008).’ (Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flexible_learning)

Suggested reading

A useful interpretation is provided by Ted Nunan on flexibility, flexible delivery, flexible learning and its place in higher education in his paper titled ‘Flexible delivery: What is it and why is it a part of current educational debate?’ found at:

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/flexible-learning/nunan.cfm>

In giving greater control to the learner in the learning process, the teacher becomes the manager and facilitator of that processes by building suitable resources or facilitating access to them. Technology plays a central role in this process. Therefore, flexible learning is not a distinct educational mode but it embraces, extends and combines a number of familiar, existing and evolving approaches to learning and teaching. Flexibility can be found in –

- On-campus classroom learning
- Distance education
- Open learning
- Independent learning
- Resource based learning
- Teleteaching
- Computer managed learning
- Computer assisted learning

Reflection 1

Consider your own unit and the course you teach. What aspects of the above 19 dimensions do you offer in your (a) course and (b) unit? To what extent do you offer those dimensions of flexibility? How do you provide it?

We will draw on these ideas in Reflection 2.

3 Why flexible learning?

Flexible learning is a pedagogical approach that is sound, purposefully selected delivery approach resulting from fundamental moves and changes in the socio-economic contexts of the times we live in and has been adopted by higher education institutions for a number of different reasons.

Economic pressures:

- Government funding of higher education has declined over the years and flexible education is seen as having the capacity to respond economically and efficiently (Kirkpatrick, 2001; Morrison & Pitfield, 2006); and therefore becomes a cost effective solution (Bates, 2000).
- As universities become less dependent on government funding, they are obliged to enrol more fee-paying and overseas fee-paying students (Bigum & Rowan, 2004).
- Flexible delivery methods increase efficiencies in delivery of education (Katherine Nicoll, 1998).
- Flexible education provides a marketing advantage (Kirkpatrick, 2001; Sappey, 2005).
- A response to government policy which views flexible education as a means of achieving economic progress through up-skilling of people (Katherine Nicoll, 1998; Sappey, 2005).
- An increased accountability of public funding in higher education (Kirkpatrick, 2001).

Cater to different learner groups:

- To reach non-conventional students.
- Students request for greater flexibility related to time, place and mode of study (Casey & Wilson, 2005).
- Institutions provide a range of options for students to study (Nicoll, 1997).
- Flexible options cater for a larger and diverse student body (Normand & Littlejohn, 2006).
- A response to perceived needs of industry and employers and to boost the supply of graduates to particular occupations and professions where shortages of practitioners have been identified (Morrison & Pitfield, 2006).
- To respond to changing circumstances and provide just-in-time learning for students (Nunan, 1996).
- To extend learning opportunities to conventional school leavers who may not enter university (Casey & Wilson, 2005).

Contextual imperatives:

- Universities are pressured into adopting flexible modes of teaching and learning. '... you can't not do it' (Collis & Moonen, 2001, p. 29) for fear of being left behind.

- The ideas of 'having no choice in the matter' and 'surviving in the present age' have also been emphasised (Wilson, Sherry, Dobrovolny, Batty, & Ryder, 2002).
- An element of the general 're-making' of the universities (Bigum & Rowan, 2004).
- Logical consequence of change in higher education (Sappey, 2005).

This conveys a sense of inevitability and urgency to keep up and to look modern in order to convey a public image that attracts students and also position the institution in the university fraternity, regionally and nationally.

The recent Bradley review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) contributes to the conceptions of flexibility by articulates several other ideas such as:

- Flexibility as a means of reaching otherwise uneconomic student markets;
- Flexible systems of higher education required to rapidly respond to stakeholder wants;
- Flexibility derived from the use of information and communication technologies (ICT);
- Flexibility in institutional staff working arrangements;
- Development of graduates that think and operate flexibly;
- More flexible and less bureaucratic higher education legislation;
- Institutional strategic plans with built-in flexibility to respond to opportunities;
- Flexible articulation of study pathways between the technical and further education (TAFE) sector and the university sector; and
- More flexibility on the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) that defines qualification types and learning outcomes

Reflection 2

Consider your response to Reflection 1. What were the imperatives that made you offer those aspects of flexibility in your unit or course? Can you classify those factors under any overarching headings (for example: pedagogical need; satisfying faculty/school policy; meeting student demand etc)?

Explore your reasons for providing flexible learning opportunities. What specifically were you trying to achieve? What were your reasons and how does it connect with your goals for student learning?

Further reading

Moran and Myringer foreshadow many of these issues in their chapter written as early as 1999.

Moran, L. & Myringer, B. (1999) Flexible learning and university change. In K. Harry (Ed) *Higher education through open and distance learning*. London: Routledge. pp. 57-71.

4 How is flexible learning implemented?

Implementing flexible learning will require teachers to make choices in a range of areas.

- Modes of delivery of material and interaction: Developing a curriculum will require teachers to make selections related to resources and how they might be delivered to the learners.
- Structure and content: Choices will have to be made about the program content and how that content would be structured.
- Pace: An appropriate pace of learning would have to be considered that is not overwhelming to the learner.
- Contact and interactions between learners and teacher and among learners: The alternatives available to conduct the interaction between learners and learners as well as learners and teachers would have to be considered and structured into the program.
- Type and mix of media used: Teachers will have to draw from a selection of media options that suit the structure, content, interactions and learner needs.
- Extent of self-direction of learners: Teachers would have to make decisions on the degree to which they allow learners to be autonomous and direct their learning.
- Constraints: There are always constraints on time, space, access to learning resources and experiences and these realities will moderate the choices and levels of flexibility. It also gives rise to a number of student support, staff and resources issues including staff development and HR issues.

Reflection 3

Continuing on from your response to Reflection 2, what factors did you consider when you launched into setting up and implementing your unit or course? What issues (for example, pedagogical, contextual, accreditation etc) impacted on your decisions and influenced the choices you made? What were your constraints and why?

5 Flexible learning at Deakin

Deakin University's commitment to the development of innovative and flexible approaches to teaching and learning is embedded in its teaching and learning strategy that is dedicated to providing a student-centred learning environment which provides high quality teaching, leading to an enhanced student learning experience.

Its overall objective is to give students more choice and control over the structure, sequence, method and timing of their learning activities by

- Providing an enhanced student-centred approach to learning;
- Encouraging independent learning by giving greater control to learners in order that they are innovative, creative and capable of problem solving;
- Opening up learning opportunities for a wider range of prospective learners;
- Reducing barriers to accessing learning;
- Providing a better mix of learning situations, broadening learners' scope and range of experience; and
- Applying the most appropriate and effective learning and teaching methods, technological approaches such as e-learning and blended learning, experiential and problem based learning to promote learning and enhance the learning experience.

Deakin University attempts to provide opportunities for flexible learning through incorporating and combining a number of elements such as:

- access to learning resources via contemporary technologies (e.g. the use of a learning management system, internet technologies);
- flexible delivery of learning experiences and assessment, (e.g. iLectures, podcasting, online portfolios);
- collaborative and interactive activities (e.g. via learning management systems, social software, online 2-way real time communication tools); and
- face-to-face and distance education.

The following extract from the Deakin University Teaching and Learning Plan (Deakin University, 2008) articulates this more clearly.

A new conception of flexible education based on educational choice

Deakin University's teaching and learning agenda dictates a new approach to the integration of traditional classroom teaching, distance education and online education in ways most appropriate to the needs of its diverse student cohorts and the changing student environment. Deakin's vision of an integrated approach to flexible education is an environment which includes, where appropriate, choice in:

- the *time* (including flexible entry and exit points) at which study occurs;
- the *pace* at which the learning proceeds;
- the *place* (both physical and virtual) in which study is conducted;
- the *content* that is studied;
- the *learning style* adopted by the learner;
- the forms of *assessment* employed;
- the option to *collaborate* with others or to learn independently;
- how teaching is *staffed*; and
- the *mix* of the above used in any given course or unit.

These choices must be made within a framework which maintains sound and consistent academic standards.

This broadened notion of flexibility is consistent with a study commissioned by the federal government in 2001 ("The effectiveness of models of flexible provision of higher education", Ling et al) and builds on Deakin's established strength in its approaches to, and infrastructure supporting, distance education. With an impressive range of educational pedagogies and strategies drawing on a broad range of well supported technologies, the University is poised to deliver much more timely, customised and personalised learning experiences, whether they be face-to-face, online, or some combination thereof, for students in its diverse student population.

The key to such an approach to flexible education becoming a distinguishing feature of Deakin is to adopt the broadest possible interpretation of flexibility wherever it can lead to an improved student experience or increased efficiency of operation, while maintaining academic integrity and the quality of the student learning experience. This approach must be adopted across the University in both the Faculties and the Divisions.

Source: Deakin University Teaching and Learning Functional Area Plan (2009, p. 6)

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/vice-chancellor/assets/resources/teaching-and-learning-plan-2009.pdf>

Reflection 4

Going back on the notes of your previous reflections, how closely aligned is your work with the university policy? How does this policy fit with your teaching and the work you do?

Further reading

For a comprehensive view of Deakin's teaching and learning plan and how flexible education fits within it, read:

Deakin University Teaching and Learning Functional Area Plan (2008) Found at:

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/vc/docs/teaching-and-learning-plan-2008.pdf>

6 Technology and its role in flexible education

In a recent Australia-wide study Scott, Coates and Anderson (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) describe how the broader social, political, economic, technological and demographic changes have impacted on higher education institutions in Australia which have in turn interacted with institutional contexts and cultures. One key change force they identify is the impact of the information and communication revolution and its 'exponential growth of computing power and the rapid expansion of internet speeds' (p. 31). This is naturally changing the expectations of learners and the opportunities offered for learning.

The need for education and training are growing. In order to meet this growing demand, higher education institutions are increasingly turning to e-learning as they view it as a convenient way to provide flexible access to learning (Buleen & Janes, 2007). E-learning is seen as improving quality of teaching but institutional responses to e-learning are varied. While it is a growing phenomenon adopted by most higher educational institutions in Australia and the developed world, organisational arrangements, policies, staff and student support, funding vary widely from institution to institution. This said, there are many good examples of strong organisational structures, well developed policies, well thought out pedagogical approaches and excellent e-learning resources.

Reflection 5

What is your rationale for the technologies you used in your unit? How does this use support the unit goals and objectives?

Further reading and examples

Contemporary online teaching cases (Deakin University) <http://www.deakin.edu.au/itl/teach-learn/cases/index.htm>

MERLOT: <http://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm>

Learning Designs (University of Wollongong) <http://www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au/index.html>

7 What is a flexible learning environment?

Aspects of what might be found in a flexible learning environment are discussed in this section under the following areas:

1. Time
2. Pace
3. Place
4. Content
5. Learning style
6. Assessment

7. Collaboration
8. Staffing
9. Mix of the above

Selected aspects are discussed individually as they are incorporated and balanced to enable and achieve quality learning (we assume that understandings of time and/or place flexibilities are well understood having formed the basis of the value of distance education from its inception). Some of these aspects of flexibility may not be overt in units and courses but they are nevertheless implicit. Depending on the context, learner cohort and specific requirements, these aspects are used to drive learning and achieve core aspirations.

7.1 Pace

Flexibility in the pace of learning allows the learner to control the pace of the learning process. This may include study load and whether learners chose to be either part-time or full-time students. These are largely decisions made by learners. Universities also suggest course loads suitable to undergraduate learners and postgraduate learners and recommend a number of units per semester. Universities also exercise maximum and minimum course loads as a method of regulating the pace of study.

Any accepted pace of learning will have its parameters. For example, learners may be required to achieve certain goals (such as submit an assessment) at given times. The pace is learner-centred but the goals must be achieved.

Advantages

- Allows learners to make their decisions about how quickly to learn
- Assuming control and responsibility of the learning pace can be motivating for some learners

Disadvantages

- Learners may lack the experience to pace themselves appropriately
- Control and responsibility can be uncomfortable to inexperienced learners
- Poor time management could lead to procrastination and the whole learning experience ineffective
- Managing students could be resource intensive

7.2 Content

Flexible education provides opportunities for presenting content in new and innovative ways often using a combination of media and delivery modes. While the use of text is still widespread, content is drawn from a wide variety of sources that include (but not limited to), graphics, multimedia, interactive videos, audios, fieldtrips and animations. It allows learners to work with simulations, learn from their peers, engage in projects, or explore programs of study that are grounded in real problems. Content is also created by learners. Social media such as blogs and wikis require learners to learn to write, and more important, to read and be read. They can work in groups, collaborate, co-create content and share their work with an online audience.

Content might also be drawn from the individual learners by having them engage in learning material in a way that is personally significant to them such as using personal experiences and contexts or their own workplace experiences and skills and increase the relevance of the learning experience to the learner. Teachers take the role of facilitators of that learning.

Flexible content is often offered as a series of topics from which learners select a required number based on individual interest and focus of study. Learners expect content to be logically structured, with plentiful guidance leading to an incremental gain in knowledge supported with constructive and encouraging feedback.

Further reading

Oliver, R. & Herrington, J. (2001). *Teaching and learning online: A beginner's guide to e-learning and e-teaching in higher education*. Mt Lawley, Western Australia: Edith Cowan University.

7.3 Learning style

Flexible learning approaches can be designed to accommodate a variety of learning styles as well as learner types and learner cohorts. Learners differ in their levels of motivation, interest, experience, prior learning, learning style, language capability and ability to self-regulate their study. It also allows for serving students with special needs, and accommodating the increasingly varied cultural dimension in learning. To add to this complexity, different kinds of knowledge also favour different ways of understanding. It is therefore never easy to design for every learning style, particularly when class sizes are large. The least one can do as a teacher is to be aware that every student will not learn the same way and it is therefore only sensible to adapt one's teaching strategies accordingly. It is hoped that the mere act of paying attention to learning styles provokes teachers to pay more attention to the kinds of teaching they are delivering which in turn might lead to a boarder mixture of lectures, discussions, group work and laboratory work – and that variety of instruction might be better for all students, irrespective of designing for a wider ranging set of learning styles.

Also to be remembered is that when students get out into the real world, whatever they do, employers are seldom likely to accommodate different learning styles because the ability to adapt is what they expected from graduates. The selected learning styles should therefore also enable learners to be adaptive.

Reflection

Consider your own learning style. How does your own learning style affect the way you teach? Have you considered some things that you can do in the classroom than just lecturing? Have you considered some things that you can do so that learners can bring in their experiences or learn from each other?

Further reading

Sinha and Chaudhary in the suggested reading below attempt to explain relationships between online behaviours and learning styles but though theirs was an exploratory discipline specific study only, it serves as a reminder that learning styles online are as varied as they are complex.

Sinha, A.K & Chaudhary, B.D. (2004). An investigation of relationship between learning styles, methods of instruction and performance of learner [online]. In *Creating flexible learning environments: Proceedings of the 15th Australasian Conference for the Australasian Association for Engineering Education and the 10th Australasian Women in Engineering Forum*. C. Snook & D. Thorpe (Eds). Toowoomba, Qld. Australasian Association for Engineering Education. pp 1-8.

7.4 Assessment

The most common understanding of flexibility in relation to assessment is when students have the opportunity to negotiate the assessment. It is a move away from the customary forms of assessment to student-centred, negotiated assessment. In this approach, interpretation of the task and the criteria applied to judge that assessment task, also become central.

Assessment can be viewed as a continuum where at one end is the lecturer-designated assessment where the learner has limited or no control over the task nor the criteria and at the other end where the learner has full control over both the assessment task and the criteria used to judge it.

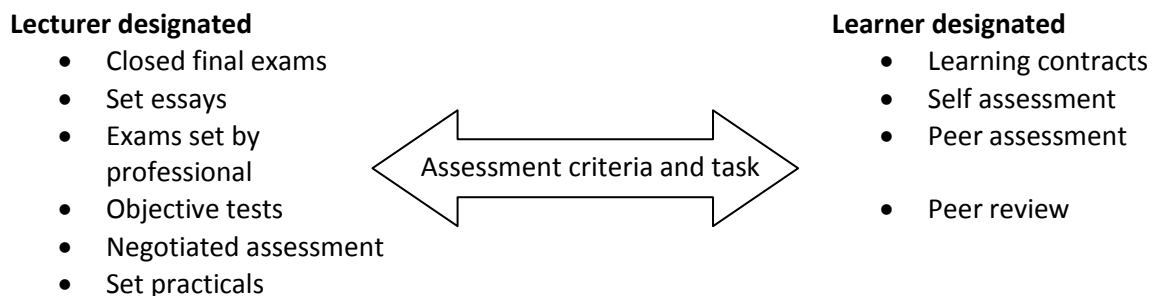


Figure: Assessment continuum (adapted from McNamara & Webster, 1999)

Flexible, negotiated assessment is most common when teachers use authentic assessment where learners bring their own needs, strategies and goals as well as their skills and knowledge to engage in real-life learning tasks. These learning tasks are designed to take individual learner differences into account. Authentic assessment is not about testing knowledge summatively but about the assessment process being a continuation of the learning process which requires students to negotiate the assessment and formulate criteria on which the assessment tasks would be based. This requires students to consider the relationship between teaching and learning and performance and outcomes and the notion of 'measurement'.

While it is not an approach suitable for every course or every unit of study, negotiated assessment has a significant place in the tertiary environment because it can:

- Involve students in the formulation and conduct of assessment;
- Be relevant to the learner;
- Develop partnerships and learning teams;
- Be suitable for mature students and those with professional commitments who have contexts to draw from.

Rather than a tightly structured set of topics that make up a unit, much of the content structure is dynamically generated from the students' own interests and across the period of the unit.

Assessment of this nature generally forms the core of the unit and is time consuming because of the negotiation and discussion of projects, monitoring progress as students' knowledge and understanding evolves and progressively develops over the semester.

However, flexibility in assessment is not without its problems and has been critiqued for the following reasons.

- Only possible in small groups;
- Mostly suited to advanced students, not for inexperienced learners who are not risk-takers;
- Resource heavy in terms of teacher time and input;
- Time consuming as it takes longer for learners to work things out for themselves rather than be told;
- Concerns about validity and reliability of measures;
- Not suitable for every unit or course;
- Varying degrees of quality;
- Student resistance possible.

In relation to flexible learning and assessment:

- The principles of good assessment should still apply at all times.
- Learners still expect fair assessment irrespective of where and how they learn.
- Good assessment must be valid, reliable and appropriate for its purpose whether it is to facilitate understanding or to measure learning to enable certification.

Reflection

What are the assessment practices in your unit or course? Is flexible assessment relevant to your student cohort, their level and what you teach? If you (are not already doing this) decide to apply flexible, learner-negotiated assessment, what will the implications be for (a) you, the teacher, (b) the learner and (c) the learning process? Also, consider the following questions:

- What types of learners would benefit most by flexible negotiated assessment?
- How should quality be determined?
- How much guidance is necessary and how much is too much?
- How much learner-control is 'good' in assessment?
- What are the best ways of applying 'human' and 'technology' support in flexible assessment?

7.5 Collaboration

Effective collaboration requires shifting teaching practices to enable the sharing of ideas, designs which encourage and value user/student-generated content and harnessing the collective intelligence of learners. This is a large topic of concern covered in depth in other modules offered on the Institute of Teaching and Learning website, namely: Working in groups, Group assignments, Assessing group assignments, Peer assessment, Self and peer assessment, and Online Collaboration.

7.6 Staffing

Flexible staffing is a resource management opportunity for the organisation. Providing flexible learning calls for a range of technical and pedagogical skills. Some courses and units need to accommodate work practices and industry requirements. Learner support in varying forms, content development and managing content in addition to general teaching are other requirements. This calls for effective staffing that engages staff according to their knowledge, skills and experiences.

Deakin University offers several types of contracts of employment and flexible staffing arrangements in teaching programs to accommodate such a variety of needs. While tenured staff, senior professors and experienced lecturers design curricula and carry out the key teaching, the University also involves temporary help in the form of sessional staff to teach undergraduate students, tutor students online, supervise industry placements and for a host of other functions that facilitate learning. These sessional staff also help to accommodate fluctuations in workload or absences in staff which is common in any workplace. Flexible staffing arrangements have definite advantages, particularly when sharing workloads and when teaching in partnership.

7.7 The mix and need for contextual choices

Palmer (2009) highlights the need for academic teaching staff to exercise thoughtful choices on the valued forms of flexibility in their own local contexts. These choices are not totally open, but bounded within institutional commitments and external requirements:

...the real meaning of flexible education emerges in and from the context-dependent lived experience of teachers and students engaged in the endeavour of flexible teaching and learning in their specific discipline milieu. In practice, the need to comply with a range of internal policy requirements (often with no explicit connection to flexible education) and a range of requirements imposed by external stakeholders (such as program accrediting professional bodies) enforces practical boundaries on the dimensions of flexibility. The explicit choices made by academic staff in the design and operation of their learning environments also crystallise many of the possible options into real limits on the parameters of flexibility. Flexibility is often presented as a good in its own right, however there often real trade-offs required in and between particular aspects of flexibility that mean that, in practice, the variously identified dimensions of flexibility are not fully and independently variable. Simply pressing a generic policy template for flexibility, or a model of flexibility distilled from one specific context, onto a different teaching and learning situation may not be productive, or even possible. Policy and exemplars are useful, but need to be thoughtfully translated to have practical meaning in a new context. (p.19)

Reflection

Consider your own unit. What is your rationale of flexibility that you have applied in your unit? How have you balanced flexibility related to time, pace, place, content, learning style, assessment,

collaboration and staffing to suit your student cohort, your disciplinary needs and unit objectives?
Would you be able to place this information in a matrix?

8 Evaluating flexible learning environments

Evaluating flexible learning environments is an important way of ‘closing the loop’. There is a significant volume of literature that describes the effective attributes of a flexible education environment which is useful when setting up an evaluation. Oliver and Herrington (2001) propose a framework for consistently judging the potential effectiveness of an online learning environment which is also relevant to flexible learning environments. Their framework is a checklist that is elaborated under three key areas to be used for assessing quality of pedagogy, the resources and the delivery strategies:

Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authentic tasks • Opportunities for collaboration • Learner-centred environments • Engaging • Meaningful assessment
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility • Currency • Richness • Purposeful use of the media • Inclusivity
Delivery strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliable and robust interfaces • Clear goals, directions and learning plans • Communication • Appropriate bandwidth demands • Equity and accessibility • Appropriate corporate style

Further reading

Oliver and Herrington (2001) discuss this idea in detail in their book *Teaching and learning online: A beginner’s guide to e-learning and e-teaching in higher education*. The manual is available at <http://elrond.scam.ecu.edu.au/oliver/2002/TALO2.pdf>

Pages 112-115 are of particular relevance here.

Evaluating the flexible learning environment is possible at different levels. Some evaluations are mandatory while some are useful to monitor progress. Mandatory surveys that are used to judge teaching and learning at Deakin are Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU), Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), and Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). These are discussed in detail below.

Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU)

Deakin University evaluation policy requires all units and the teaching of those units to be evaluated using a University-wide survey which gives all students the opportunity to give feedback of their experience of the units they study. The generic instrument used to collect data for this purpose is the Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU) survey. The SETU administration, analysis and reporting is conducted by the Planning Unit, and reports are available on their survey website:

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/planning-unit/surveys/index.php>

For the purposes of reviewing one's teaching, as well as for promotion, probation and teaching awards, the SETU data provides general information that is useful for trend analyses. The Mean and Standard Deviation for each item is provided, though it may be more useful to check the raw data in terms of number of responses and distribution patterns, and to look at items across semesters and years. Results from SETU will not provide detailed information about an individual teacher's performance. Small evaluations designed with a specific purpose using open-ended questions or small group processes can provide the more detailed, qualitative data that informs changes in practice.

Further reading

This suggested reading provides a comprehensive overview of the instrument, about using SETU results, and an analysis of each of the questions.

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/itl/pd/tl-modules/scholarly/setu-ceq/index.php>

Considering all units taught at Deakin have to undergo the standard SETU survey, familiarising oneself with it is worthwhile.

Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) administers the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). It is designed to provide universities the opportunity to assess students' engagement of university study, experiences of university services and university life. This information plays an important role in helping institutions monitor and enhance the quality of education they provide, and to fine-tune services to students.

The instrument measures the following key areas of student engagement:

- Academic Challenge - Extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn
- Active Learning - Students' efforts to actively construct their knowledge
- Student and Staff Interactions - Level and nature of students' contact and interaction with teaching staff
- Enriching Educational Experiences - Participation in broadening educational activities
- Supportive Learning Environment - Feelings of support within the university community
- Work Integrated Learning - Integration of employment-focused work experiences into study (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009)

Further reading

The AUSSE instrument is available from the Australian Council for Educational Research site.
<http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse/index.html>

This site offers a range of resources including AUSSE enhancement materials, reports, ideas for using AUSSE data and frequently asked questions.

Deakin has its own Student Engagement support site for teaching staff at:
<http://www.deakin.edu.au/itl/student-engagement/index.php>

Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)

The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) is a national survey sent to graduates of coursework programs in Australian universities approximately four months after the completion of their course. The survey is sent with the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) and is administered jointly by individual universities and Graduate Careers Australia (GCA). CEQ is analysed by the Australian Council for Education Research and a report is published annually by the GCA.

While all these instruments give useful statistical data, they also have open-ended questions giving valuable, rich information. However, the extent to which each instrument captures and measures flexibility is a consideration.

Since the major instruments are common to all users, the need to get additional information on valued forms of flexibility and the effectiveness of what is provided is necessary. Also the disciplinary variations would have to be explored if viewed as relevant. The feedback in the open ended questions is likely to give more information but it is worthwhile to seek specific information with specific probing questions.

There is also a need to become more sophisticated users of student evaluations of teaching. Faculty members, administrators and faculty developers who serve on evaluation committees need to be well trained to interpret data produced by SETU, CEQ, AUSSE. In addition to drawing on these instruments, relevant data that will give further information on the effectiveness of flexible learning would be exam results, reports, comments indicative of student achievement, including out-of-class data. In short, any student evaluation systems that encourages students to think about their 'student experience' metacognitively will be valuable evaluation data.

9 Issues and challenges

Like most things, providing flexible education is not without its issues and challenges. A recent study of flexible education at Deakin (2009) highlighted the following areas of challenge and recommendations for action:

- Develop well articulated and coherent program and course level policies that would aim to deliver consistent teaching and learning material for students by:
 - allowing for flexibility for academics to teach their units as they see fit
 - allowing for flexibilities that accommodate industry and accreditation requirements
 - articulating the benefits, limitations and constraints on flexible design to students so that expectations are managed.

- Ensure student readiness for flexible modes of study by:
 - scaffolding students undertaking flexible learning effectively
 - defining levels of flexibility to manage student expectations
 - offering non-compulsory wholly online units in the later years of courses rather than in the first year.
- Define clear teaching and learning support mechanisms to assist academic teachers in advancing their teaching and learning strategies by:
 - providing centralised resources and one point of contact area for staff to turn to for leadership assistance and support
 - facilitating a decentralised mechanism for ITL staff to work with and support faculties
 - ensuring faculty-based teaching staff know who to consult for assistance
 - ensuring that all staff have assistance to both central and decentralised assistance.
- Encourage staff to be innovative and experiment with, designing and developing flexible models of learning by:
 - explicitly recognising and rewarding their efforts in this area
 - publicising opportunities for reward and promotion pathways up to and including professorship through teaching excellence
 - publicising opportunities for teaching improvements supported with the award of teaching sabbaticals.
- Strengthen pedagogies related to collaboration and networked learning by:
 - developing faculty interest and knowledge in constructive and participatory learning and the social construction of knowledge
 - developing technological infrastructure to network and facilitate online and mobile connections seamlessly.
- The new Online Learning Environment (OLE), replacing the current DSO, should be:
 - accessible – able to operate across platforms and browsers and work with screen readers and other assistive technologies
 - able to be accessed and used via mobile devices including laptops, notebooks and mobile phones
 - able to be accessed and used by students studying remotely with poor bandwidth (dial-up speeds)
 - modular and configurable to promote adaptation appropriate to the unit context
 - capable of supporting peer review
 - able to provide a simple and easy to use process for creating and managing online assignments including the ability to complete marking entirely online that integrates seamlessly with existing Deakin processes
 - able to allow students to upload and share multimedia artefacts that demonstrate their learning and publish them for review and critique by any subset of Deakin students, staff and external parties.

- Develop an integrated strategy of policy, guidelines and exemplars complemented by tailored face-to-face professional development phased in over the next two years to coincide with the implementation of a new OLE at Deakin.
- Charge the Institute of Teaching and Learning with enhanced responsibility for undertaking evidence-driven improvements in flexible education in order to provide leadership in the area, including:
 - providing innovation funding to conduct investigations into teaching and learning practices including online and mobile teaching
 - piloting and evaluating emerging new technology to explore its educational affordances
 - examining and evaluating innovative and blended learning models
 - investigating the potential for partnerships between industry and community in adding value to teaching and learning at Deakin University.

Reflection

How relevant are the above described challenges to your situation and the work that you do in your school? What are your concerns and issues? How have you managed to overcome them?

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