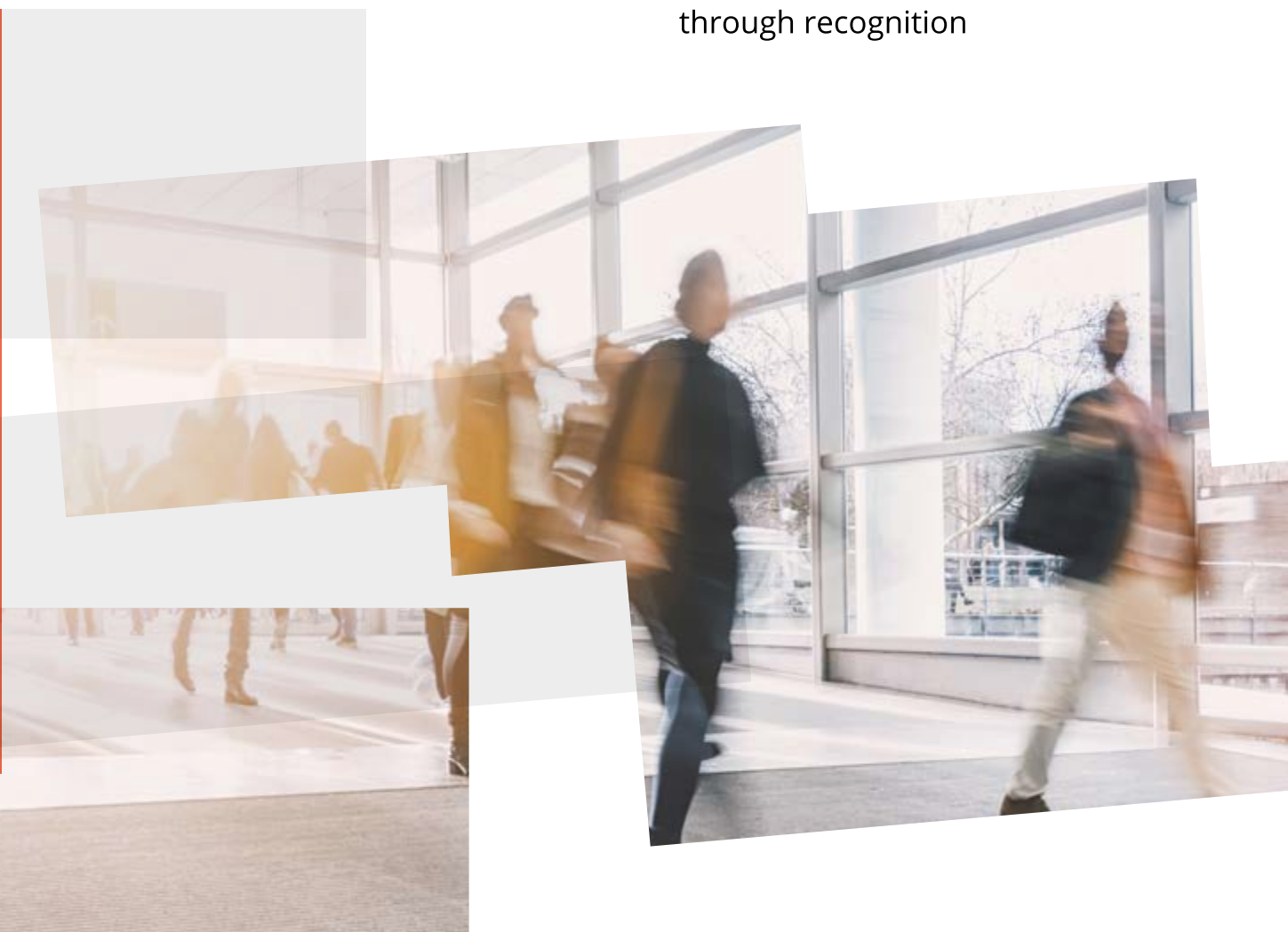


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Michaela Martin

Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education

Good Practices from an IIEP-UNESCO International Research



This article draws ideas and sections from the IIEP publication on “SDG-4: Flexible learning pathways in higher education – from policy to practice: an international comparative analysis” by Michaela Martin and Uliana Furiv (2022), accessible at: <https://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/publication/sdg-4-flexible-learning-pathways-higher-education-policy-practice-international>.

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Why are flexible learning pathways important ?

The rapid expansion of enrolments in higher education (HE) worldwide has led to greater diversity among students with more first-generation learners, HE returnees and disadvantaged groups participating in higher education. The number of students worldwide has more than doubled in the last two decades, reaching 228 million students in 2020. The diversification of providers has increased the complexity and fragmentation of HE systems, and in many contexts, resulted in increased rigidity.

The increase and diversification of providers has not been matched by an increase in the provision of equal opportunities for disadvantaged learners. Access to HE remains unfairly distributed and often inflexible, with the wealthier segments of the population much more likely to benefit from HE than the poorest. The Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report states that in 76 countries, 20 per cent of the wealthiest people aged 25-29 have completed at least four years of HE, compared to less than 1 per cent of the poorest (IIEP-UNESCO and GEM Report, 2017).

What do we mean by flexible learning pathways ?

This situation calls for more equitable and permeable HE systems that allow all learners to access, but also progress through and complete HE. This goal is highlighted by the United Nations Education 2030 Framework for Action¹, where flexible learning pathways are defined as “entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education” (UNESCO, 2016, p. 33).

There is a clear convergence between the definition offered in the Education 2030 Agenda and other concepts found in the literature that are close to the notion of flexible learning pathways (FLP). Seamless pathways, for instance, is a concept used in the literature which is in strong alignment with the Education 2030 Agenda as it recognises that improved articulation in education systems serve an important equity

1 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>

objective. It denotes “systems and processes that accommodate all qualification articulations and credit transfers at a national level” (Walls and Pardy, 2010, p. 15).

There is also a strong overlap of FLP with the concept of lifelong learning (LLL) that occurs at all ages and in a diverse set of contexts (formal, non-formal or informal). But LLL implies continuous learning that does not necessarily lead to a qualification, whereas FLP refer to flexible ways of gaining a qualification to move into the labour market. FLP also refer to ways of gaining access to formal HE, whereas LLL does not always happen within a formal learning setting.

An IIEP-UNESCO international multi-year research

To date, there is limited knowledge on policies and practices that work well to enhance articulation and flexibility in HE. Therefore, in 2018 the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO) launched the research project SDG 4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education². The project includes a stocktaking exercise of good practices, an international survey of FLP policies and instruments among UNESCO Member States, and eight in-depth country studies on Chile, Finland, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Morocco, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (UK). This project represents the first truly international research to examine policies and practices facilitating and creating FLP in HE. While the research was conceived and data collected prior to the COVID-19 crisis, it offers useful lessons on how flexibility can make HE systems more resilient and able to withstand future crises.

In IIEP-UNESCO’s research, ‘flexible learning pathways’ are defined as diverse pathways for getting into HE (e.g. open entry, recognition of prior learning), pathways for getting through HE (e.g. credit accumulation and transfer, flexible study delivery modes), and pathways for preparing for the labour market (e.g. combining work and study). This article presents a selection of good practices identified from the eight national case studies, to offer a source of inspiration for leaders and stakeholder in the German higher education system and beyond.

2 <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/our-expertise/flexible-learning-pathways-higher-education>

Creating a favourable policy environment for flexible learning pathways

IIEP's research has shown that a supportive policy environment is an important condition for FLP. This includes a comprehensive policy for an integrated post-secondary education sector, which facilitates pathways between vocational education and academic HE. Three of the eight countries studied as part of IIEP-UNESCO's research (i.e. the UK, South Africa and Jamaica) have developed such comprehensive post-secondary policies (Example 1 for Jamaica).

Example 1

Policy covering post-secondary education in Jamaica

The Government of Jamaica has created a policy framework for an integrated post-secondary education system by diversifying access and progression pathways between vocational and academic education, and improving the transition of students into the labour market. In 2010, the K-13 Strategy was adopted to integrate TVET and academic HE. It increased the duration of secondary education from five to seven years. Now during the additional compulsory two years, students can choose two pathways that can lead to HE: sixth form (which covers academic content) and the Career Development Programme (CAP) (which covers vocational content). CAP allows students to pursue an Occupational Associate Degree (OAD) and later to enter the final two years of study of a full Bachelor's degree.

Source: [Barrett-Adams, Hayle 2021](#)

IIEP-UNESCO's research has demonstrated that countries often do not have a single policy for FLP, but flexibility in HE is typically promoted through a set of policies. The IIEP-UNESCO global survey shows that of the 75 responding countries, FLP were supported by: information and guidance policies (in 49 countries), NQF policies (48) and lifelong learning policies (46). Slightly less frequent were RPL policies (41) and credit accumulation and transfer policies (40). Less than half (32) of the countries indicated the existence of a specific national policy for FLP (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Policy frameworks globally
supporting FLP (flexible learning
pathways)



Source: [Martin, Godonoga 2022](#)

The research therefore concludes and recommends that a holistic approach to policy on FLP is necessary: FLP should be accessible across the HE system and encompass all stages of the student journey – entry, progression and completion.

As disadvantaged learners face more constraints, flexible conditions for access and articulation are particularly important to them. IIEP-UNESCO's research has shown how South Africa and Chile use a series of alternative entry conditions, such as contextual admission and compensatory entry criteria, to benefit these learners (Example 2).

Example 2

Compensatory policies in South Africa and Chile

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa apply a disadvantage factor/score in admissions, which assesses an applicant's background against criteria, such as the parents' educational level, the language spoken in the household, whether the parents receive child benefits and/or other social benefits. Applicants can receive an increase in their admissions score of up to 10% for all programmes, which is calculated as a percentage of all the points required for admission to a degree programme.

Universities that belong to the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities (CRUCH) grant a bonus point to the overall admission score of students from low socio-economic segments who have low scores in the national entrance exams but have consistently achieved high grades in the last three years of upper secondary school.

Source: [Bolton, Matsau, Blom 2020](#); [Lemaître et al. 2021](#)

Constructing flexible learning pathways at different stages of the learner's journey

Open entry policies and recognition of prior learning (RPL) are alternative paths that promote flexible access to HE. Open studies are generally open to all applicants regardless of background or age and have no specific entry requirements. They can be organized as full-time, evening, weekend, part-time, or online courses. Thus, these programmes are flexible in terms of time, pace, and place of study. Typically, open studies attract learners willing to improve their qualifications for the workplace, acquire personal skills, or prepare for university as a future student. Open studies can be facilitated by single-mode institutions, such as open universities, or by dual-mode institutions that offer both traditional face-to-face degrees and open study programmes. The Finnish example (Example 3) shows how Open studies can promote access to HE in the context of a selective higher education system.

Example 3

Open studies in Finland

The Open Studies pathway in Finland is 'open to all', regardless of age, educational objectives or previous studies. This pathway aims to open an alternative route into HE and facilitate continuous learning. There is no legal obligation for Finnish HEIs to offer Open Studies, but many HEIs have created Open studies under their Open Universities and Open Universities of Applied Sciences departments. HEIs have the autonomy to decide on the quota, the criteria and the courses that are offered as Open Studies. Although Open Studies typically do not lead to a degree, the credits gained by this means are transferable and can be recognised when a student enrolls in a degree programme at the same host institution. Usually HEIs in Finland charge fees (15 EUR per ECTS) for credits in Open studies.

Source: [Moitus, Weimer und Välimaa 2020](#)

Some countries have created modalities for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to diversify entry to HE, but IIEP-UNESCO survey data show that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is less developed than that of formal learning. Under this modality, prospective applicants with previous study or work experience, paid or voluntary, can have their experience recognised for admission to a HEI. A comprehensive RPL procedure typically comprises a portfolio of evidence

and an aptitude test, which are reviewed by a panel of assessors, who take a decision on the award of credits or full qualifications.

RPL often benefits students from disadvantaged backgrounds who started to work early and could not join HE via the traditional route. For instance, in 2019 in Chile, 4.4% of HE entrants used the RPL pathway, of which 47.4% were students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Malaysia has also put in place an advanced RPL policy called APEL-A to support non-traditional and disadvantaged students (Example 4).

Example 4

APEL-A policy in Malaysia

The Malaysian Qualifications Authority has successfully introduced the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL-A) policy for applicants to gain access to HE programmes through learning obtained in non-formal and informal settings. APEL-A can be used as a way to access undergraduate and graduate programmes, diplomas and certificates as specified in the Malaysian Qualifications Framework, spanning vocational, professional, technical and academic sectors.

Source: [Sirat et al. 2020](#)

When learners are given choices allowing them to change and transfer credits from one programme or provider to another, HE systems are able to reduce drop out and repetition. The countries involved in the study tend to facilitate the progression of learners via transfer policies and credit transfer systems. The example of Jamaica (Example 5) shows how a seamless credit transfer between community colleges and universities can be operated under the so-called 2+2 model. Credit transfer systems, however, often suffer from regulations that limit the amount of transferable credits, or HEIs have no incentive to recognize credits obtained in another HEI as they are funded on a per student basis. Therefore, the study highlights the need to further support HEIs with enabling policies on credit transfer and funding.

Example 5

Credit transfer system in Jamaica

The Jamaican HE system uses the '2+2' credit transfer model. This means that students who complete two years of undergraduate study (60 credits) and gain an associate degree at a community college can transfer their credits to continue for two more years at a university to obtain a full bachelor's degree.

Source: [Barrett-Adams, Hayle 2021](#)

Open and distance learning (ODL) plays a key role in widening access and creating continuous learning opportunities. MOOCs and micro-credentials are offering flexible opportunities that make HE more accessible to a multitude of learners, including for upskilling and reskilling purposes. But the quality of MOOCs and micro-credentials are often questioned by accreditation bodies, HEIs, students and employers. The Indian example (Example 6) highlights the importance of national regulation and quality assurance to facilitate the full recognition of MOOCs and micro-credentials within degree programmes.

Example 6

SWAYAM platform in India

India has a national platform for online courses called the Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM). Nine National Coordinators have been appointed to control the quality of MOOCs under SWAYAM. The platform offers 2,150 courses from over 135 Indian universities. SWAYAM provides access to online MOOCs and distance learning via radio and television. An innovative aspect of MOOCs on SWAYAM is the possibility to obtain credits that can be recognised. According to current regulation, a student entering a HE programme can transfer up to 20%³ of credits from relevant online courses taken on SWAYAM.

Source: [Malik, Annalakshmi 2022](#)

Flexible pathways that enable students to prepare for the labour market were found to be the least developed in the eight case countries in terms of policy and practice. The country cases have shown that, by allowing students to combine work and study, HE systems enable truly integrated work-based learning in their curriculum. However, in order to promote this type of learning, it needs to be recognized to the same extent as formal learning (Example 7).

Example 7

Work-based learning practices in Finland and the UK

In Finland, HEIs apply the 'studification' of work approach to curriculum development. Studification is an alternative way of developing competences and skills. Students can combine work and study, earn credits towards their degree while working, or during work placements and student exchange periods, which are included in degree programmes.

In the UK, 'sandwich degrees' involve practical work experience in addition to academic learning. Sandwich degrees are usually longer

³ Increased to 40% during the COVID-19 pandemic.

than standard degrees because students spend additional time at a work placement. For example, a whole year of work experience may be spread over 4 years of undergraduate study. Some universities that offer sandwich degrees provide learners with a professional placement as well.

Source: [Moitus, Weimer, Välimaa 2020](#); [Brennan 2021](#)

Supporting flexible learning pathways with appropriate governance

Countries vary widely in how their HE governance structures encourage the creation of, or support, FLP. Some use a strong steering approach (e.g. through policy frameworks, QA, NQF, and funding), while others give HEIs more autonomy to implement FLP.

Regulation can play a crucial role in the implementation of FLP. For instance, regulation is useful to guide RPL, credit transfer and ODL/ MOOCs developments. However, regulations which are too detailed and rigid should be avoided, so that HEIs can adapt their academic offer to their local circumstances. Finding a balance between regulation and institutional autonomy remains a challenge.

Quality assurance (QA) can support FLP development, as it has the potential to create trust in the quality of programmes and courses across the HE sector, which in turn supports credit transfer. In addition, QA can guide HEIs in the implementation of ODL more broadly, and MOOCs and micro-credentials more specifically, as is demonstrated in Malaysia (Example 8).

Example 8

Guidelines for IQA of micro-credentials from the Malaysian Qualifications Agency

The HEI or provider must establish, maintain, and improve an effective Quality Management System (QMS) that covers all aspects of the design, development, delivery, assessment, monitoring, review, and improvement of the micro-credentials. For micro-credentials, HEPs may use existing programme development, design, approval, and implementation mechanisms. To ensure high quality, the HEI or provider should follow the following processes, which are appropriate to the complexity of the micro-credentials:

- Market Needs Assessment

- Outcomes or Competency-based
- Assessment of Learning
- Delivery – System and Resources
- Monitoring and Review
- Learner Experience
- Quality Assessment for HEP and Other Providers
- Learner Data and Records Management

Source: [Malaysian Qualifications Agency 2020](#)

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) form the backbone for flexible access, progression and completion. The South African example (Example 9) shows how a NQF policy framework for the post-secondary education and training (PSET) sector supports articulation, RPL and credit transfer. A comprehensive NQF which spans an education system, as it is the case in South Africa, also facilitates articulation between levels, institutions and programmes. When NQFs and QA work together in defining learning outcomes in alignment with level descriptors of the NQF, articulation and transfers are further facilitated.

Example 9

NQFs covering all education levels in South Africa

In South Africa, the system-wide NQF comprises three sub-frameworks managed by three Quality Councils – the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework, the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework. The NQF Act (2008, revised in 2019) was an important step in integrating sub-frameworks into a unified post-secondary education and training system in South Africa. The NQF structure allows for the use of FLP both within and across sub-sectors.

Source: [Bolton, Matsau, Blom 2020](#)

IIEP-UNESCO's research noted that government funding models can be a very effective mechanism for incentivising the implementation of FLP policies at a system level (Example 10). On the contrary, when funding models are student-based, the recognition of prior learning through the award of credits is not incentivised.

Example 10

Funding model in support of FLP in Finland

In Finland, a new funding model for the 2021-2024 planning period rewards universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS) for cross-study (i.e., students who take courses at other institutions). Under the

model, universities are allocated 5 per cent of funding, and UAS 9 per cent, for credits taken for continuing learning activities. This includes the provision of specialised courses, open learning, continuing education and preparatory courses for immigrants. In addition, the funding promotes cooperation between universities and UASs. A share of 1% is allocated to universities and UASs for credits based on cooperation and for students taking courses at other institutions as part of cross-study.

Source: [Moitus, Weimer und Välimaa 2020](#)

Furthermore, government project funding was found to promote the development of specific FLP policies. Government projects can fund the implementation of an integrated NQF system, ODL platforms, as well as non-formal and informal learning recognition procedures. In 2019, the Finnish government launched the TRY project that funded the piloting of an open study pathway for 34 subjects in 11 universities.

Conclusion

Drawing from the IIEP-UNESCO research, the present article has presented examples of good practices to illustrate how flexible learning pathways have been introduced in selected higher education systems internationally. Flexible learning pathways (FLP) move the attention to a more student-centred approach, emphasizing student choice with regard to diverse entry, re-entry and exit points for post-secondary qualifications.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL), open studies, credit transfer, programme and institutional articulations, have been in existence for already some time and to various extents in some HE systems. More recently, a trend accelerated during the pandemic, massive open on-line courses (MOOCs), micro-credentials and digital credentials have opened up additional flexible pathways for learners.

Micro-credentials, allowing for the accumulation of short learning experiences, are certainly the way forward in the discussion on flexible learning pathways. They are the response to the demand for continuous learning, professional development, and increased choice for learners. However, to be stackable and lead towards a qualification, our research has shown that a policy framework is needed for their recognition, based on quality assurance that puts them on path with the traditional academic offer.

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Imprint

MODUS Impuls 1
Michaela Martin:
Flexible learning pathways in higher education.
Good Practices from an IIEP-UNESCO International Research

Published by
HRK German Rectors' Conference
Leipziger Platz 11 | 10117 Berlin
Tel.: +49 (0) 30 206292-0
Ahrstraße 39 | 53175 Bonn
Tel.: +49 (0) 228 887-0
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Editorial Staff: Sven Seibel, Project Modus, HRK
Layout: Wilhelm Schäfer

August 2023 | 1. Edition

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