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How flexible is flexible learning, who is to decide and what are its implications?

5 In an earlier editorial comment (Naidu, 2017), I was reflecting on the growing popularity of the
concepts of openness and flexibility, suggesting that they were rapidly becoming the norm,
especially in higher education and in many parts of the world. And I credited distance educa-
tion for articulating and putting these concepts into practice as in the case of the design and
deployment of the learning and teaching transaction for learners separated in time and space
10 from their teachers and the educational institution. I am writing this editorial from my new role
as inaugural Pro Vice Chancellor, Flexible Learning and Director of the Centre for Flexible Learning
at the University of the South Pacific (USP), where I am driving this agenda causing me to reflect
on its operationalisation.

Flexible learning is a state of being in which learning and teaching is increasingly freed from
the limitations of the *time, place and pace* of study. But this kind of flexibility does not end there.
15 For learners, flexibility in learning may include choices in relation to entry and exit points, selection
of learning activities, assessment tasks and educational resources in return for different kinds of
credit and costs. And for the teachers it can involve choices in relation to the allocation of their
time and the mode and methods of communication with learners as well as the educational
institution. As such flexible learning, in itself, is not a mode of study. It is a value principle, like
20 diversity or equality are in education and society more broadly. Flexibility in learning and teaching
is relevant in any mode of study including campus-based face-to-face education.

At USP, a unique institution that is owned and run by 12 independent countries in the south-
west Pacific region, flexible learning is central to its ethos and culture. Its distributed nature
required the university to engage in flexible approaches to learning and teaching to open up
25 access to further enrich the educational experience of students beyond its conventional cam-
pus-based educational operations. But it is a regular university nonetheless, and so flexibility in
learning and teaching has boundaries at USP.

In the early days of this initiative, flexible learning opportunities at USP went by the name of
extension studies suggesting an effort by the university to extend credit-bearing learning and
30 teaching opportunities beyond the boundaries of its physical campuses. The print technology
and the postal mail service formed the backbone of this learning and teaching transaction. But
as information and communications technologies including electronic mail began to supersede
the use of print and the postal mail, the concept of written correspondence via the postal service
was no longer an adequate descriptor of the educational transaction that was taking place.

35 About then *distance education* emerged as a term that better captured the nature of this
learning and teaching transaction taking place away from the physical campuses. But that term
had issues as well, as an accurate descriptor of this activity, as the concept of distance implied a
physical separation, when that was not always the case. There were learners who would be living
in situ and on campuses, but for various reasons opting to study in flexible ways. Some of the
40 reasons for this had to do with being able to take on courses which might not have been offered
at the time students needed to, or wanted to take them. Other reasons included the opportunity
to take on additional courses and in doing so speeding up the duration of their study programs.
And then there was also the opportunity to take advantage of the far better set of study materials

that was becoming symptomatic of distance learning materials, due to its adoption of instructional design principles and rigorous course team processes.

5 So, as many more options for engaging in the flexible learning experience became available to learners and teachers, and as students chose to take advantage of the opportunities that these choices afforded, the nature of the educational transaction also changed. And depending on its composition and character, this form of learning and teaching activity has been labelled variously as *online learning*, *elearning*, *blended learning*, *distributed learning*, and *disaggregated learning*. The obvious questions in relation to this transformation are, how flexible does flexible learning need to be? Who decides, and what might be its implications for learners, teachers and institutional resources?

10 The determination of the nature and levels of flexibility in learning and teaching in a given context depends on several interacting variables, such as the nature of the subject matter, the level of study, location of students and teachers, and their readiness for flexible learning including their access to technologies and the necessary infrastructure. One size or approach to flexible learning does not, and will not fit all learners, teachers or disciplines. There is a need for different approaches to learning and teaching, with different levels of flexibility, structure and guidance for different cohorts and learning contexts, while the threshold principles of all approaches remain the same. And these principles are about open and equitable access to learning opportunities, flexible approaches to learning and teaching, and the adoption of open scholarship in its education practices (see Naidu, 2016).

20 A useful approach to embedding flexibility is to consider it in relation to how, and to what extent it is being integrated in leveraging key dimensions of learning and teaching, and these are as follows:

- 25 (1) *Learning experience design*: This is about the design and development of productive learning experiences so that each learner is able to make most of the learning opportunities they afford.
- (2) *Learner-content engagement*: This is about learners' engagement and interaction with the subject matter in ways that suit individuals, their styles and approaches to studying and its time, place and pace.
- 30 (3) *Learner-teacher engagement*: This is about choices learners have in relation to the mode and method of their engagement and interaction with their teachers and tutors.
- (4) *Learner-learner engagement*: This is about choices learners have in relation to the mode and method of their engagement and interaction with their peers in small and large groups, and in offline and online educational settings.
- 35 (5) *Learner engagement with the learning environment*: This is about adaptable access, interaction and engagement with the learning environment (such as with mobile devices, Wi-Fi access and innovative use of study space).
- (6) *Learner engagement with assessment activities*: This is about choices learners have in relation to the fulfillment of their assessment requirements.
- 40 (7) *Learner engagement with feedback*: This is about choices learners have in relation to access to feedback on their learning and assessment activities.
- (8) *Learner engagement with the institution*: This is about choices learners have in relation to their engagement with the services of the educational institution.

45 The contributions in this issue of the journal show how, with careful design, these key learning and teaching variables can be leveraged in relation to their flexibility. First up is the article by Cheryl Hanewicz, Angela Platt and Anne Arendt, 'Creating a learner-centered teaching environment using student choice in assignments'. This article focuses our attention on the widely, and often loosely used term *learner-centeredness* or *student centeredness* with an example of how

the concept can be operationalised with offering learners choices in relation to their assessment tasks. This is about the design of productive learning experiences for learners that are effective, efficient and engaging, and which include integrating flexibility in the assessment of learning outcomes. This study found that when given a choice of assessment tasks, learners actually did a lot more than they were required to do to earn top marks in the course, and they did it for none other than their own personal benefit.

Integral to the design of productive learning experiences including the assessment of learning outcomes is the provision of feedback to learners and especially in distance and distributed educational contexts. Careful design of explicit and timely feedback is central to the design of productive learning experiences. This requires rethinking around the provision of feedback using multiple channels of communication and at multiple points during the learning experience. The article, 'Facilitating student learning in distance education: A case study on the development and implementation of a multi-faceted feedback system' by Samantha Uribe and Michelle Vaughan reports on such a study and its impacts on student performance.

But learning experience design is about a lot more than getting right the design of assessment tasks and provision of feedback to learners. Learning is a complex process in which different learners and learning groups adopt various motivational and cognitive regulation strategies as part of their learning. And in the context of distance, online and distributed educational settings with the separation of learners in time and space, these variables take on new meanings and a new level of importance. The reflections in this issue of Ricardo Lumbieras, Jr. and William Rupley, '¡Si, se Puede! Achieving academic excellence online', illustrate this complexity with the help of one learner's experience in this space. See also Sanjaya Mishra's exhortations in his reflections in this issue on the contradictions and confusions among those who are supposed to be promoting the adoption of open educational practices.

The next article, 'Relationships between motivational strategies and cognitive learning in distance courses' by Sanghoon Park, explores the design of productive learning experiences in greater depth to point out their implications for teaching strategies, and especially the design of motivational and cognitive learning supporting strategies for different cohorts. And the article 'Pedagogical practices of NetNZ teachers for supporting online distance learners' by Kwok-Wing Lai shows how this might be possible. It reports a case study of the integration of successful pedagogical practices by online educators in the secondary school sector, where there is a paucity of evidence on best practices along these lines.

Along with the importance of learning experience design, another critical indicator of success for any educational enterprise is the flexibility with which its learners are integrating with the educational institution. Their persistence and attrition from programs are closely correlated with their design. The article 'Barriers to students with mental health disability studying online' by Dean McManus, Rachel Dryer and Marcus Henning highlights its importance in relation to the support and engagement of students with mental health disability in the online distance education context. This study explored the barriers to online learning that learners with this kind of disability face and what might be the best approach to their support and engagement with the learning organization. This includes an accurate understanding of why students fail to persist or choose to withdraw from programs (see Hülsmann & Shabalala, 2016).

The last article, 'Refining success and dropout in massive open online courses based on the intention-behavior gap' by Maartje Henderikx, explores this phenomenon and its implications for a better handle on the design of the student learning experience. This article proposes an alternative approach to understanding and determining success in open education courses which takes into account the intentions of learners and how they might influence their decision to persist, withdraw or choose not to complete their studies. The point here is about factoring individual goals and intentions and how they might differ from institutional goals, to be able to give a more accurate picture of persistence and attrition in open and distance learning contexts.

Enjoy the contents of this shipment. And I will look forward to hearing your own thoughts on the issues, questions and controversies raised by the contributions in this edition. Interestingly, a special issue of the journal is in the making on *dual and multi-mode educational provision: implications for theory, policy and practice*, which I am sure will pick up the conversations here. Look out for it!

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