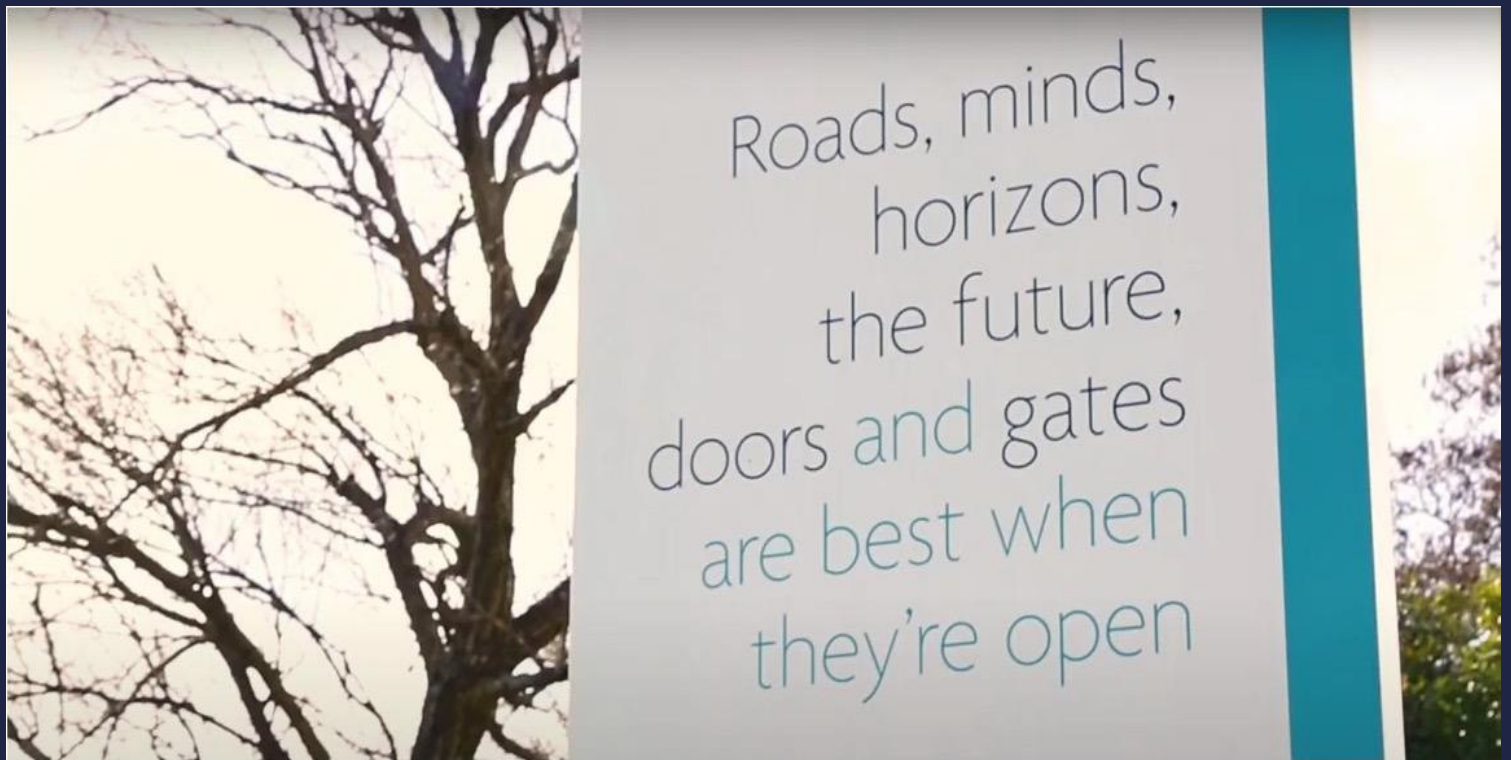


# ICDE LEADERSHIP SUMMIT 2021

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**SUMMARY REPORT: LEADERSHIP FOR  
RESPONSIVENESS: HOW FLEXIBLE ARE WE?**



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Open Polytechnic of New Zealand**

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- Professor John Arul Phillips
- Shai Reshef

### THEME TWO: Flexibility in approach

- Professor Mpine Makoe
- Dr Caroline Seelig & Alan Cadwallader
- Dr Paul LeBlanc

### THEME THREE: Flexibility in practice

- Dr Sanjaya Mishra
- Dr Lynne Brice
- Professor Laura Czerneiwicz

Links to all presentations are available on [YouTube](#).

## FOREWORD



ICDE's 2021 Leadership Summit digitally hosted by the Open Polytechnic in New Zealand and ICDE was an exceptional example of how ICDE members come together to create and collaborate in advancing the state of practice for Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (OFDL).

Building on those challenges identified in the 2020 Global Presidents Forum, the outcomes of the 2021 Leadership Summit are a strong validation of the dedication, commitment, and passion of ICDE members towards creating an accessible, equitable, and equal learning opportunity for everyone - globally. By tackling difficult questions, strong solutions were generated through the Summit.

The information shared and discussed is a true testament to the strength of the Global OFDL community and immensely validating of ICDE's strategic goal of increasing the impact of our member's advocacy of quality OFDL environments. It demonstrates the strength of partnerships and collaboration toward creating impact in numerous regions around the globe.

Regardless of whether you were able to attend the 2021 Leadership Summit, this summary document should be a valuable tool to support your local efforts toward creating exceptional OFDL environments and provide a strong foundation for future discussions.

Dr Neil Fassina  
ICDE President

# INTRODUCTION

[Welcome Video](#)

Whakataka te hau ki te uru  
Whakataka te hau ki te tonga  
Kia mākinakina ki uta  
Kia mātaratara ki tai  
E hi ake ana te atākura  
He tio, he huka, he hauhū  
Tihei mauriora!

*Cease the winds from the west  
Cease the winds from the south  
Let the breeze blow over the land  
Let the breeze blow over the sea  
Let the red tipped dawn come with a  
sharpened air, a touch of frost, a promise  
of a glorious day.*



The topic for the ICDE event previous to the ICDE Leadership Summit 2021 was the ICDE Presidents' Forum 2020. The theme of that event was "Recalibrating educational leadership for resilient education." The Forum, attended by international experts in open and distance education, highlighted flexibility as one global response toward more resilient education. The ICDE Leadership Summit 2021 carried the theme of flexibility toward resilience as the basis of its coverage.

"Are we flexible enough?" This is the question wrestled with by ten international presenters, six student representatives and over ninety international delegates who attended the ICDE Leadership Summit 2021. Flexibility is seen as a key means of improving the resilience and learner experience of education, in ways that mirror advances in client-centeredness already apparent across all other elements of students' lives. The theme is a timely one, with implications that readily resonate with the expectations of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. With some irony, Dr Neil Fassina (ICDE President) quipped during the event that "Could you imagine if the theme of this conference was, 'Are we rigid enough?'" Flexibility is a key means of resilience and access to education, with multiple practice opportunities. In a world disrupted by Covid 19 and access to education yet to become universal, we must ask the question: "Are we flexible enough?"

The concept of flexible education is far from new, and its premises still resemble those discussed in the 1980s and 1990s (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Flexible learning is defined as "a set of educational philosophies and systems, concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalization to suit the learner,"<sup>1</sup> particularly as to where, how, and when study takes place. As such, flexibility is a spectrum from less to more. No flexibility is too rigid; all flexibility is too loose. The level of flexibility provided in education is ultimately a choice about how teaching and learning will take place. "Are we flexible enough?"

From a pedagogical perspective there are many possibilities for extending flexibility, but unless that flexibility is meeting the needs of the learner it may be misguided. Similarly, institutional

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dictionary.sensagent.com/Flexible%20learning/en-en/>

leaders might seek to create flexibility in structure and delivery, but unless the flexibility meets the expectations of the learners, we are again potentially misguided. By starting with the frame of learner first, we can test whether the flexibility we are creating as pedagogical experts and institutional leaders is aligned with the needs and expectations of learners. Are our decisions related to flexibility the right ones? "Are we flexible enough?"

The world is changing. Flexible approaches to education are increasingly possible. Changes point toward more scalable, innovative, and efficient learning that is better equipped to the demands of modern life. Resilience is a natural outcome.

The objectives for the event were as follows:

- To engage participants to contribute to the global conversation around what it means to be flexible enough in Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (OFDL), and summarise and document the key themes and insights into a final report.
- To consolidate recommendations discussed in relation to the three sub-questions considered during the Leadership Summit event: How are learner expectations changing? What limitations do our organisational structures place on flexibility? And, How flexible are our teaching and learning approaches?

This report is provided as a summary and consolidation of the valuable perspectives shared during the event.

**Dr Mark Nichols**

ICDE Board Member and Event Chair

## OVERALL THEME: “Are we flexible enough?”

More than ninety delegates across the world gathered virtually through three regional events for the first time in ICDE history to share their expertise and perspectives on a common theme: “Are we flexible enough?” This timely question explored the OFDL leadership’s place in establishing a community and supporting and improving flexibility as a way of developing a resilient education system for the future.

The term ‘flexibility’ emerged as a key element of ICDE Presidents’ Forum 2020. The multifaceted and open-ended nature of ‘flexibility’ and the lack of clear understanding of its dimensions made it a desirable and necessary point of focus for this Leadership Summit. The questions whether we are flexible enough, whether if we become more flexible, and whether we could we become more resilient are important ones to explore. Answering the latter two affirmatively could reduce unequal access to quality education.

The level of flexibility experienced by all contemporary learners across the individualisation and personalisation of goods and services, for example, the personalised entertainment, financial services, mental and physical services, draw attention to the desires and needs of the individual client. Yet, the underlying model of education delivery around the world may lead us to believe that higher education is somewhat immune to the trends of individualisation and personalisation. It is proposed that we need a transformative change in higher education towards flexibility – questioning why certain structures are in place, critiquing the conditions that gave rise to them so that they can be reconsidered. The current global health crisis has not only amplified the many divides among and between individuals and communities, but also brought to our attention new challenges.

The sub-themes of the event, which framed three of the four sessions, were as follows:

1. **Flexibility in scope** – How are learner expectations changing?
2. **Flexibility in approach** – What limitations do our organisational structures place on flexibility?
3. **Flexibility in practice** – How flexible are our teaching and learning practices?

In the next section we take a closer look at what flexibility means to learners and leaders in the OFDL environment.

## PRESENTATIONS AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES

The overall ICDE Leadership Summit 2021 theme was “Leadership for responsiveness”. The opening presentation provided the background for the conference sub theme: “Are we flexible enough?”, and introduced the dimensions of flexibility.

For the purposes of the Summit, flexibility was defined as a ‘set of educational philosophies and systems, concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalization to suit the learner’. In particular, flexibility explores where, how and when learning takes place. Although the definition of flexibility outlines the key elements of the concept, it raises more questions than it answers. While increasing flexibility in education is admirable, there are several barriers to achieving it. In an [opening keynote](#), Dr Mark Nichols (conference chair, Open



Polytechnic of New Zealand Limited) proposed four considerations complicating the pursuit of flexibility.

- Firstly, there is an issue of **subjectivity**. For example, the word 'increased' implies that flexibility is a spectrum from less to more. The spectrum of flexibility can extend from completely fixed, where the learner has no choice of what they study, where they study it and when they start their studies or when they learn to completely open where student can enrol anytime with anything and hand in whatever they want, whenever they want by way of assessment.
- Second, there is an issue of **compliance**. For example, funding rules, or educational requirements that forces us into certain ways of operating. This limits practical options for more flexibility.
- Third, the issue of **balance**. For example, due to the spectrum of flexibility in relation to access, level of study, motivation, personalisation, progression and scalability, it can be difficult to agree on the optimal level to provide.
- Fourth issue is related to **change**. Any change in the level of flexibility a higher education institution seeks to implement will likely require a major change programme. As an example, allowing a student to enrol at any time will require changes to recruitment and results processes, teaching roles, student communications, virtual learning environments, course tutoring, tutorial structures and likely assessment and curriculum changes.

Dr Nichols suggested that if we are to best understand flexibility what it might achieve, we are best to begin with learners themselves.

A series of learner perspectives were included in the event to provide a grounding to the conversation.

### **Keynote: Learner perspectives**

- [Aiman Zhafran Bin Salluddin](#)
- [Larian Nkomo](#)
- [Jenaia Clarke](#)
- [Kaeyshia L Kesh & Kareena Krisha](#)
- [Omar Abushabab](#)

**Flexibility is a subjective concept:** The learner perspectives acknowledged that the term flexibility is a subjective one and that the variation of interpretations is quite general. However, their overall view of flexible education was flexibility as a method of learning where students are given the power to choose how, what, when and where they learn, aligned with the definition the conference adopted earlier. For them, it is about having a choice, access and freedom to choose the environment and provide a customised solution in the form of pace, place and mode of learning.

**Flexibility is associated with personalisation:** The learner perspectives consider flexibility as being closely associated with personalisation of learning, where students can pursue their own interests at their own pace and within their own capacity. Flexibility saves time and offers learners the option to continue their studies alongside their lifestyle and in response to their life

circumstances, for example, changing employment, moving to a different geographic location, working part time, and becoming a parent.

**Flexibility offers more life opportunities:** Learner perspectives mentioned that more life opportunities open up if learners are given the option to engage in courses they are interested in; have opportunity to continue extracurricular activities; and can engage in part time work such as tutoring, research assistantships, managing their own businesses and other jobs that might provide them with income and more experience. OFDL, done well, extends to learners the opportunity to engage in additional activities to study. In addition, catering to their curiosity by improving subject and qualification choices aids them in finding better employment prospects after graduation.

**Institutions must adapt to be more flexible:** The learners evaluated flexibility in terms of how well the educational system itself is capable of adapting. For example, the ways in which educational institutes were able to tailor their teaching according to environmental changes or situations like the Covid 19 pandemic gives insight into how flexible these institutes are. As such, student perspectives made the link between flexibility and resilience. Students also acknowledged that undergraduate studies are structured differently to that of postgraduate studies such that an undergraduate student will likely need more structure to their learning than would a student pursuing a research degree at a postgraduate level.

The learner perspectives were provided by highly motivated students capable of effectively structuring their work and life around their studies. Learners acknowledged that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to flexibility and suggested that their voices should be the loudest when it comes to deciding on flexibility. From the learner perspective, there is much more that can be done to improve flexibility to education provision.

We will now focus on the sub-themes identified in the breakout rooms in relation to the theme: Learner perspectives. A set of guiding questions were shared with the participants in relation to this theme:

Flexibility factors:

- Is it possible to be too flexible?
- What is the optimal level of flexibility?
- How well do we understand the issues of flexibility in education?

Student perspectives:

- What were the main themes and most important points made by the students?

## **REGION 1: OCEANIA AND ASIA**

A poll presented during the initial presentations indicated that half of event delegates agreed “some flexibility” should be provided to students studying at degree level. Only 1% of delegates believed there should be “no flexibility”, the balance indicating “a lot” should be provided. Some 90% of delegates stated that their learning institution provides “some” to “a lot” of flexibility in relation to offering optional classes, lectures made available as recordings and more choices offered to students and no scheduled classes to attend. Key themes from the Oceania and Asia delegate discussions are as follows:

**It is possible to become too flexible:** All groups in the Oceania and Asia region agreed that it is possible to be too flexible, commenting that too much flexibility will likely lead to lack of structure and hindering student efforts to complete studies successfully. Event delegates highlighted that the student perspectives were reflective of a highly motivated student cohort with good time management skills, and that it is important to appreciate that not all students are like that. Many students want teachers to teach in the traditional sense of the word, and have content explained to them.

**Flexibility requires a shift in mind set of both students and faculty:** Providing more student freedom and flexibility comes with responsibility and requires cost and discipline. Therefore, flexibility needs clear boundaries and a clear structure and guidance. Delegates commented that education is “a multi-varied business”.

**Flexibility is still an evolving concept:** Delegates highlighted the importance of exploring flexibility in all its aspects, across every dimension of the student experience. For example, term structure, payment schedules, hold policies, and time taken to step out and step back in with an expedited application progress should all be subject to reconsideration.

Since flexibility is not well defined or has clear boundaries, it is difficult to look for the optimal level of flexibility. An initial objective for those wanting to improve flexibility is to identify just what the right mix might resemble. Without a system, framework or structure, flexibility will fail for various reasons including the requirement for the student body to adjust to the changes more flexibility requires.

**Achieving the right balance is a challenge:** Another key issue related by delegates related to how much guidance and structure is really necessary for students to be successful in their learning. The balance between appropriate levels of interaction, independence, structure, and guidance is determined by a range of factors including level of study, the nature of subject matter, the makeup of students, the type of organisation, funding structures and accreditation requirements. Corporate buy-in is another factor. Providers need to evaluate what they can offer in terms of the constraints they face and the context they are in.

**Evolving demographics aggravate the situation:** The massification of higher education must cater to an evolving student demographic with various educational dispositions and a variety of cultural, social, and economic factors. Each of these elements influence how institutions calibrate flexibility. Eventually providers of education will be differentiated on what kind of flexibility they offer; flexibility is a means of future differentiation.

**The interdisciplinary workplace:** The world’s problems are interdisciplinary. In a world marked by global competition and as employers seek more skill-based hiring, institutions are faced with increasing need to provide smaller skills-based courses as a further indication of flexibility. Delegates commented that there is an oft-unspoken threat to current practices of education by non-higher education providers offering smaller skills-based courses in response to changes in employer demand. One delegate asked, “What will higher education look like in 50 years if we do not respond to these trends?”

## REGION 2: EUROPE, AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The initial poll results indicated the participants in Europe, Africa and the Middle East have a strong preference for providing more flexibility to students studying at degree level. All participants stated that their learning institution provides some flexibility in relation to offering optional classes, lectures made available as recordings, more choices offered to students and no scheduled classes to attend. Key themes from the Europe, Africa and the Middle East delegate discussions are as follows:

**It is possible to become too flexible:** Group members agreed that it is possible to be too flexible and commented that face-to-face learning may be compromised as flexibility is increased. Increasing flexibility can result in students losing focus and not taking time to study things at the level of detail needed, or they may move too quickly through their courses to reach the end. In a flexible scenario, teachers must balance a class learning things at different rates, with learners at different stages. There are risks of teaching becoming too fragmented and of learners losing their sense of unity or belonging. Whilst acknowledging that flexibility does not suit every learner, delegates suggested that flexible learning needs a clear structure, progress indicators and deadlines, and the promotion of skills including study techniques and self-management.

**Flexibility is a process:** Delegates considered flexibility as a process and identified multiple factors that contribute to it including social, economic and legal context; the culture of the institution; institutional process and systems; learner expectations; teachers' perceptions and their confidence; decision makers' willingness to be flexible; technological infrastructure; and globalisation. The overall context is considered a very important determinant of flexibility. Delegates also highlighted that learner expectations must be privileged across all these variables.

**Achieving the right balance of flexibility must start with the student:** When it comes to the question of what level of flexibility is optimal, Europe, Africa and Middle East delegates proposed student needs as the starting point. Balance is achieved when students' needs are met in the context of their real-life commitments, and when constraints to flexibility are balanced with the possibilities of those facilitating education. One of the key elements in deciding on the level of flexibility is that of learner motivation. Flexible options must be aligned with the 'life load' of learners, because it is that which motivates them to learn flexibly in the first place.

**Understanding 'flexibility' is a complex task:** Region delegates agreed that we are only beginning to understand the issues of flexibility in education. There are too many factors in play when it comes to understanding the nature of flexibility, ranging from learner expectations to institutional readiness to be flexible. By way of example the restrictions posed by current monitoring systems by regulatory and organising bodies can lock teaching practice in place and so limit the opportunities of online pedagogies. On the other hand, there are gaps in our knowledge about student circumstances and their life situations, their access to technology and their access to those basic resources needed for study online. This leads to the issue of ethical balance: how much more do we need to know about students to best support them?

Focusing on the most important points made by the students, regional delegates highlighted that none of the student participants mentioned collaborative learning – which workplaces may prefer. Education can prepare learners for the workplace through having students collaborate in teams, participate in online study groups and online discussion forums, work together on projects, and engage with live chat sessions as part preparation for professional and personal life.

Regional delegates also understood the differences of learners' online readiness for flexibility. For example, younger undergraduates tend to be more dependent on tutors and time tabled sessions, and were not generally as studious with prerecorded materials, whereas graduates are more confident in studying asynchronously and independently, and appreciate the use of recorded material.

### **REGION 3: AMERICAS**

The poll results indicated delegates from the Americas agreed strongly to providing "a lot" of flexibility to students studying at degree level. As with the Oceania and Asia region, 90% of the participants stated that their learning institution provides "some" flexibility in relation to offering optional classes, lectures made available as recordings, more choices offered to students and no scheduled classes to attend. Key themes from the Americas delegate discussions are as follows:

**It is possible to become too flexible:** Delegates from the Americas agreed that it is possible for educators to be too flexible, advising that too much flexibility will likely create negative outcomes or harm for students that may need support. The group commented on the importance of knowing the student population and designing flexibility to suit, mentioning the examples of undergraduate students, postgraduate students, international students and home-schooled students as benefitting from different levels of flexibility. Primary and secondary school students go through a rigid and structured form of education, and when they come to the tertiary education with so much flexibility, they might get lost in finding their way. Other factors mentioned that might affect the level of flexibility that can be offered to learners included differences in age, culture, learning style, personal circumstances, influences and experiences, and access to infrastructure.

**Flexibility is about inclusion:** The Americas region delegates mentioned inclusion and gender issues as a key theme. Flexibility should promote inclusion of students with different access issues and capabilities in ways not necessarily characteristic of the traditional higher education system.

**Achieving the right balance must start with inclusion:** Americas delegates defined the 'optimal level of flexibility' as the state where students in any group are not left behind.

**Accreditation and funding regimes constrain flexibility:** Restrictions posed by accreditation agencies and state funding have been common constraints across the Americas. For example, some regions in the United States are governed by very conservative accreditation agencies. Delegates highlighted that instructors have always had 'micro-flexibility' even in highly structured systems of course, curriculum and timetable and from within rigid teaching models: a good instructor will always seek to adapt the course and their teaching to assist a student who needs some form of flexibility. Individualised effort is always possible in ways that, for example, teach students how to be lifelong learners; appreciate their learning preferences; and how to adapt learning opportunities for themselves. Institutional change ought to be centered around support for teaching and learning and adopting Universal Design of Learning (UDL) practices. Delegates also commented that the barrier of change within the organisation must be dealt with first because systems and processes become hard wired over time, making it very difficult to convince an institution to become more flexible.

Delegates identified the closing gap between online and face to face learning. The Covid 19 pandemic has contributed to disrupting how institutions perceive education and has positioned distance education as an effective alternative to traditional classroom teaching. Responding to

Covid 19 conditions paved the way for educational institutes and state agencies to change their mindset about distance education.

**Solutions for flexibility are needed:** The Americas delegates mentioned they have a reasonable understanding as to what the issues related to flexibility in education are, but that solutions are remote. Organisations such as ICDE become a focus for leadership.

## **SUMMARY**

Flexibility is a subjective and multi-faceted concept. As such, there is no common meaning as to what flexibility means for everyone. Issues of compliance, achieving the right balance and appreciating the level of change required to improve flexibility are key considerations at individual, institutional and overall system levels.

The learner's perspectives provided during the Summit suggest that students want their learning to be personalised, and for flexibility to offer them more opportunities in relation to work and life. They also want institutions to adapt according to student needs.

All delegate groups agreed that it is possible to be too flexible and so harm the student, disrupt the teaching process, and make the education experience too fragmented. Optimising flexibility requires knowing the student population and understanding the contexts they are embedded in. Flexibility is perceived as a process, with many factors contributing to it.

The changing demographics of the students, restrictions posed by accreditation agencies and fixed mindsets all act as challenges to furthering flexibility in institutions.

# 1: FLEXIBILITY IN SCOPE – How are learner expectations changing?

This second Summit session focused on the first sub-theme: Flexibility in scope. There were three keynote presentations related to this theme. Additional observations related to presentations were shared by the participants during the breakout sessions.

Presentations were as follows:

- [Minister Hon. Chris Hipkins](#)
- [Professor John Arul Phillips](#)
- [Shai Reshef](#)

**The first presentation** (Minister Chris Hipkins) looked at the changes in the vocational education system currently taking place in New Zealand. The reform, a major one, focuses on developing a unified sustainable vocational education system that is more adaptable and learner focused. The objective is for a system with industry-informed need identification, easy transitioning between workplace and provider-based learning, and adaptability to challenges like Covid 19. In the New Zealand vocational sector, political decision makers are interested in improving access to education and improving flexibility for learners.

**The second keynote presentation** (Professor John Arul Phillips) looked at the changing profiles and expectations of new generation learners. The presentation outlined seven challenges identified by the Vice Chancellors of Commonwealth Open Universities in Asia and Africa in 2019: The changing profile of learners; learner support; harnessing technology; staff development; skills development and employability; assessment of competencies; and quality assurance. The presenter highlighted that Open Universities are now attracting younger working adults born into the digital world driven by the internet, communication tools and digital content. These, said the presenter, are not your typical, traditional learners. For these learners, technology is not a tool anymore but an integral part of their lives.

According to the presenter, these new generation learners expect to learn from authentic situations; they want to know why they should learn; they want to know context; and they need to experience real-world tools to learn practical skills. Content has to be simple but not simpler; these learners have a short attention span and expect short bursts of information and information, broken down into manageable blocks which are stackable. Furthermore, these learners prefer to work in groups and collaborative learning; they expect a sense of accomplishment; they want their prior experience and learning to be considered; they expect immediate feedback and learning to be a seamless experience, entering and re-entering their learning journey fluidly; they prefer audio and video in place of text; and they prefer gamification and game-like content. New generation learners also prefer fewer high stakes closed book exams, preferring alternative assessment methods.

The presenter suggests that flexibility is the future of education, enabling learners to be free of the limitations of time, place and pace of study. It was also pointed out that there are emerging examples of increasing flexibility, including the Malaysian Qualification Agency beginning to recognise MOOCs in education. It is interesting to note that learners prefer both the structure of formal education and alternatives to it.

**The third presentation** (Shai Reshef) was concerned with the operational philosophy and model of the University of the People (UOP). The UOP is the world's first non-profit, tuition free, accredited American online university. The presenter shared student stories from United States, Haiti and Syria demonstrating that students who otherwise could not study due to political, economic, or environmental reasons could start their learning journey toward a new life. A UNESCO study has predicted that in 2025, some 98 million students will not have seats in existing universities.

The UOP is structured around open-source technology, open educational resources, and the new internet culture. UOP courses are flexible in that students can access them anywhere, anytime. The university has 23,000 volunteers from all ranks of other well-known universities. At UOP, from 57,000 students 600 are refugees, the world's largest cohort of such students. It is the mission of UOP to not to leave anyone behind; *any* student with a high school diploma, sufficient English and access to internet can start their studies at UOP. Every student must take two foundation courses to test out the university's pedagogy and to learn if they like the approach and can meet UOP academic standards.

The university promotes peer-to-peer learning by using small classes, creating a personalised space. Group membership is regularly mixed to facilitate the exchange of peer-to-peer ideas. Typically, there are students from over 20 countries interacting with each other, which serves the further goal of opening the minds of students, creating a shift in their attitudes and teaching them that those who may be considered enemies outside of the class are close to them in terms of learning.

The presenter highlighted that in the days of Covid 19 online education has become mainstream. Online learning and teaching require skills and expertise. Online learning can be isolating by nature, therefore it is important to create courses that are engaging and have human touch points across students and advisors.

The third presentation concluded with the observation that online education can provide education without high tuition costs and with small class sizes. Flexible education makes a lifelong difference and improves equity; "If we educate one person you can educate a life but educate many you can change the world".

The main questions given to delegates were:

- How are learner expectations changing?
- What are the things we need to do in order to meet learner expectations?

Regional delegate conversations generated multiple points related to the sub-theme of flexibility in scope.

## **REGION 1: OCEANIA AND ASIA**

**Learner expectations must not be generalised:** Oceania participants agreed that proposed learner expectations of 21<sup>st</sup> century should not be over-generalised. Usage of internet devices, virtual learning, and authentic life experiences are context dependent by country; the political, economic, social, cultural, and technological factors in New Zealand are different to those of Malaysia, for example.



**Learner expectations are broad:** Learners have a broad range of expectations. For example, some students do not engage with discussion boards because they prefer mobile solutions such as WhatsApp. It is also difficult to engage some students with activity-based learning who have been out of university for ten years, because they frequently expect lectures and quizzes. Many students perceive active learning what academics should be doing on their behalf. Changing this expectation is a challenge, because students have been conditioned to the lecture-based education approach from past experience. Students also tend to expect a greater reward for the level of effort they put in; assigning 10% to extensive engagement within a discussion forum, for example, may not be viewed as sufficiently motivational for the time it will require.

**More needs to be known about what drives and motivates students:** In relation to strategies that are needed to meet learner expectations, participations from Oceania mentioned that it is important to first understand what drives students to study in the first place. This understanding will assist in motivating students throughout their study. Research is also needed into what learners understand by the term flexibility its range of meaning.

**Clear ground rules are a must:** A clear structure or framework of flexibility is needed, one that can inform students as to their responsibilities and the expectations upon them. Students need to understand that education is a commitment and what their obligations are by way of attendance and submission of work. Under flexible conditions each student needs to take increased levels of responsibility and ownership for their learning journey.

**Governments must improve infrastructure:** Of particular concern here are the IT connectivity needs of students living in rural areas. A variety of technologies rather than dependance on a single solution would likely help.

**Strategic goals related to OFDL must be integrated:** Strategic goals must be integrated into educational strategic plan, with a clear focus on access and equity.

With reference to the presentations, Oceania participants viewed the University of the People as an exception rather than the norm. UOP caters to specific cohort of learners (including refugees) and offers free courses. The operating model of UOP challenges that of more conventional models. It was also noted that the Malaysian government has allowed more flexibility by allowing working adults to graduate in a shorter time by counting work experience as part of the credits.

## **REGION 2: EUROPE, AFRICA AND MIDDLE EAST**

**Technology is embedded in learning:** Learners now expect technology to play a part in their learning. However, while learners have access to software, equipment and access to online information they do not necessarily know how to use these for education. As a result, there is a need to scaffold and guide them as to how to appropriately search for online resources and how to seek help. It was also pointed out that online synchronous activities have become popular, but teachers still need to actively encourage students to participate in discussion. Students also seem to prefer personalised, free-flowing learning.

**Micro credentials are on the rise:** Students are looking for micro credentials and opportunities to upskill through short courses. There is a need for smaller qualifications that are directly relevant to professions. Students no longer have the 'one job for life' mindset, as they prefer to mix and

match. Flexibility to pick their own path for learning based on their interests is now much more attractive than before.

**Demand for online presence:** The Europe, Africa and Middle East delegates also raised the issue of student expectations related to academic presence online. How available to academics need to be? Students expect quick response to their queries, so clear boundaries and expectations need to be in place. While it is important to have academic presence in place to guide the learning journey of the student and keep them on track, a balance is needed across what can be reasonably expected of academics and what learners want.

**Current and future needs of communities:** There is a need to work closely with community expectations for flexibility, and the types of flexibility anticipated.

**Rigid systems and structures:** University systems and structures must be streamlined before increased flexibility will be possible. Most universities have far too many processes and regulations, though these are often required because of their accountabilities as public funded service providers.

Delegates in the Europe, Africa and Middle East region observed that the UOP has disrupted the traditional university system in a positive way. However, on the other hand, there were questions raised about the quality of UOP courses. While UOP is fully accredited the perception of quality remains and consequently impacts the potential reputation of graduates. Traditional university structures have a higher perceived quality.

### **REGION 3: AMERICAS**

**Technology is embedded in learning, but learners are not using technology for learning:** Participants highlighted that even though new generation learners are confident with technology and might be described as 'digital natives', they are not necessarily confident or appropriate in using technology for learning purposes.

**Learner expectations must not be generalised:** A major challenge to flexibility is the generalisation of student expectations. It is also difficult to be flexible with the achievement of outcomes, especially in technical areas and in the sciences; students need a common foundation of knowledge, skills and attributes before they can start to self-direct and engage with others.

**Learner expectations are dependent on teacher expectations:** Any discussion about learner expectations, it is important to bring the role of teachers, and their own ideas about teaching, to bear. Students very frequently lower their expectations of flexibility because teachers continue to teach in traditional ways. Faculty in higher education likely do not know the fundamentals of how people learn, and what best practices are to ensure deep learning. Becoming more flexible can also be limited by teachers' own views of what their role entails.

Participants from the Americas mentioned that the Covid 19 pandemic has exposed teachers and students to new ways of teaching and learning. Educational institutions tend to be very conservative, and teachers typically teach the way they were themselves taught, so the seismic shift in practice required by the pandemic has been extremely disruptive. It is an open question

as to how the new approaches to teaching and learning as a result of the pandemic might be built upon and how socialisation and collaborative learning might be enabled.

### **SUMMARY: FLEXIBILITY IN SCOPE**

While it is clear that more flexibility is desirable, establishing what ought to be extended is difficult to generalise. It is also clear that students, academics/teachers, universities and governments all have a part to play in appropriately extending the reach and parameters of flexibility. A learner-focused or learner-centred approach will certainly involve more flexibility however care must be taken to define the limitations, responsibilities and expectations that come with more flexibility. Learners will also require guidance as to how to engage with more flexibility. While learner profiles and expectations are changing, and technology is now an integral part of learner's lives, the student ability to cope with more flexibility ought not be taken for granted. Learners are increasingly expecting more flexibility to their studies in multiple ways, including in study options; micro credentials are on the rise and institutions must balance what teachers can provide and what learners want.

## 2: FLEXIBILITY IN APPROACH –

### What limitations do our organisational structures place on flexibility?

The third Summit session addressed sub-theme two: flexibility in approach. The spotlight for this sub-theme was on how organisational structures limit or enable flexible practice. Three keynote presentations served as the basis for breakout conversations.

Presentations were as follows:

- [Professor Mpine Makoe](#)
- [Dr. Caroline Seelig & Alan Cadwaller](#)
- [Dr. Paul LeBlanc](#)

**The first presentation** (Professor Mpine Makoe) focused on the issues related to flexibility of open and distance universities in Africa. Six universities in the African region were discussed: Open University of Mauritius; Zimbabwe Open University; Open University of Tanzania; National Open University of Nigeria; Botswana Open University and UNISA (University of South Africa). The openness these universities characterise addresses social justice and serves the public good through inclusion. The universities were created to widen participation and so they provide access to marginalised people who have never previously participated in higher education. The presentation considered social justice from economic, cultural, political and digital perspectives.

- Economic justice: The universities operate in a cost effective way to widen participation. Openness includes access to education, access to open education resources, access to courses, and access to the MOOC movement. Through these forms of openness the universities are addressing economic justice, as people who have not been able to participate in higher education because of lack of funding are able to do so.
- Cultural justice: Many of the universities in Africa are based on the colonial higher education system of the 1960s. The universities inherited the colonial model and continued with their systems and cultures, and, for the most part, their curriculum. Unfortunately this has perpetuated inequality.
- Political justice: The post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa is still in the process of being equitable in terms of accessing education. Not all equality approaches are working well. 'Equality' means that we are all advancing at the same pace, whereas it is clear this is not yet achieved. Students come from different levels of educational achievement and many do not have the necessary resources to move forward. Hence universities need to build opportunities for those who have traditionally been excluded and marginalised, who might also live in parts of the country that do not provide infrastructure or opportunities enabling them to participate equitably in society.
- Digital justice: Many are excluded from participation in education because they do not have devices or connectivity. This problem was accentuated during Covid-19 restrictions requiring people to stay at home.

The presenter discussed points related to principles of open education, identifying flexibility in the context of lifelong learning, accessibility, equitability, development, cost effectiveness and student centeredness. Also highlighted was that most so-called 'open' universities neglected the social justice aspirations mentioned in their mission statements. Only half of the universities included flexibility as one of their principles. As such, mission and practice are not aligning.

Also highlighted in the presentation was the point that the concept of 'space' has always been an important element in flexible education. Considering space enters the debate between the merits of classroom and distance approaches to education. Systems and structures; policies and strategies; open education resources; MOOCs, and the ability to recognise formal, non-formal, informal and lifelong learning achievements; and accommodating the diverse needs of both students and employers are all among the things that need to align with more flexible approaches to education. In the presentation three key points were highlighted. To become more flexible, universities need to Rethink their vision and mission, Redefine their roles in relation to the education mandate and Repurpose how they operate with workable solutions. Future themes mentioned in the presentation include strengthening blended and online learning; increasing personalisation and customisation; accelerating the use of digital technologies; developing flexible structures and systems; addressing the social justice mandate, based on open education principles; pooling knowledge of technological resources through collaboration; and lifelong learning for development of new knowledge and skills. Strong leadership is crucial to drive innovation forward.

Equitable access is a matter of aligning the necessary systems, structures and strategies. A sole focus on equality will not address issues of equity; according to the presenter a commitment to transform, and the courage to learn to move forward without looking too much into the past are also needed. This requires a clear vision, leadership, and commitment.

**The second presentation** (Alan Cadwallader and Dr Caroline Seelig) looked at how the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand transformed itself into a more scalable and flexible organisation through transformational change. Open Polytechnic was founded 75 years ago and is currently New Zealand's largest dedicated online and distance education provider, specialising in OFDL. It offers over 100 vocational programmes from introductory certificate to graduate programmes, has over 30,000 annual enrollments and is now part of a collaborative, national network of vocation education institutes.

There are four characteristics underpinning its transformational change to become more learner-centric:

- Convenient: Offering a greater choice for learners in relation to when, what, how and what pace the learners can progress through their learning.
- Relevant: Providing personalised, self-directed learning that meets current and future needs through learning resources, developed in partnership with industry.
- Connected: Providing learner engagement with contemporary interactive courseware, strong connections to a learning community and a tiered system of support that utilises technology to track learner's progress and keep them engaged.
- Smart: Continuously improving experience for learners through data analytics, and seeking and responding to learners feedback.

The transformational change disaggregated the core elements of the teaching and learning process in order to optimise each individual function. These are then integrated into a single, highly coordinated delivery model. The transformation identified activities grouped in single academic roles that, in OFDL, might be logically allocated to specialists. Teaching, learning support, course administration, assessment authoring, content creation and stakeholder industry and professional engagement are all functions that might be separated from the traditional academic role. The result is a standardised practice suitable for employers seeking graduates with industry-relevant skills. The unbundled roles are combined to provide an optimal learning experience at scale, using digital resources that be used across multiple delivery contexts.

Through its transformational change, Open Polytechnic has successfully responded to its future state environment and has positioned itself as a developer and provider of educational products and services across a national network of provision. The institute is positioned to address inequality by providing options to under-served learners through its strategic planning and initiatives, leveraging its specialist role as a national, distance vocational educational provider.

**The third presentation** (Dr Paul J. LeBlanc) focused on the differences between education systems based on 'time' and those based on student learning. The presentation focused on a learner centric approach that redefined the role of a traditional university. Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) is the largest nonprofit provider of online higher education in the United States. It offers career focused programmes and affordable education to over 150,000 learners using by applying a blended learning experience. SNHU is the first university in the United States to gain US Department of Education approval for an academic programme not based on the constraints of time, instead based on the volume of actual student learning. SNHU offer competency-based programmes in which students proceed at their own pace.

The presentation highlighted the difficulties traditional universities face in attempting to break out from their legacy systems and the external framework of regulations in the US associated with financial aid. Accreditors have multilayered sets of standards they impose based on hours of learning, and State regulators' have their own additional rules. SNHU's education model is developed around the student and so focuses on micro credentials and certifications that can be staked along the pathway toward a degree. The process starts with a focus on student needs, which involves developing student profiles connected with their goals. The university then takes the role of curator, developing a personalised learning maps based on each student's interests. SNHU's learner centric approach then works to recognise student competencies (such as running a family business, being in the military) as an alternative to using credit hours as the basis of establishing learning. As such, the university becomes the translator of student learning into recognisable competencies. Additional rigorous assessments customised to the student's existing competencies then complete cerdentialing.

Overall, SNHU's competency-based model represents a new education ecosystem that moves away from the current, standardised industrial age practice of universities. The new approach is based on a compelling vision for flexible, fluid and responsive learning that is enabled by technology (machine learning and AI) making use of data captured across the student journey.

This session focuses on the following key questions:

- What limitations do our organisational structures place on flexibility?

- What are things we need to do in order to improve our organisations' flexibility?

Regional delegate conversations built on the insights provided in the presentations.

## **REGION 1: OCEANIA AND ASIA**

**Multiple institutional factors influence changing toward flexibility:** Oceania delegates identified several areas that need to be addressed from the organisational level before more flexibility could be provided to learners.

- Overall curriculum structure: The approach to accreditation and credit hours affect the ability to serve students more flexibly. Changing these takes considerable effort and coordination.
- Time investment: Shifting focus toward increasing flexibility will take substantial time and effort to implement.
- Financial considerations: The costs of change (financial and human) toward more flexibility will be significant.
- Leadership: Developing the vision and securing buy in, with the right people behind to support the new approach, look to be significant contributors to success. Selling the idea to staff and students, and dealing with the necessary restaffing (which will include dealing with unions and changes in practice) require strong and focused leadership.
- Acceptance of outputs: Gaining acceptance from staff is vital to an effective new system, as only their commitment will make more flexibility possible.
- Technology: The effort required to design and align the right technical systems to support the new approach should not be under-estimated.
- University-student relationship: Increasing flexibility has implications for how the institution interfaces with the student, and the design of all systems to support that interface.

The use of blockchain to develop a Comprehensive Learner Record (CLR) in support of academic and workplace recognition and achievement was suggested (<https://www.imsglobal.org/activity/comprehensive-learner-record>).

**Micro credentials and learner centricity are growing:** Oceania participants discussed the current trends toward micro credentials, lifelong learning, informal learning and certifications that give students more control, ownership and flexibility in their learning. Standards for these smaller qualifications are being developed by foundations such as IMS Global, the Illumina Foundation and the Gates foundation, which are all seeking to decentralise student records so that the student can own them. Although decentralisation of information was considered a positive change towards flexibility, issues of providing access where required were highlighted.

**Regulations and institution-centredness hinder change toward more flexibility:** There are many structural limitations to providing more flexibility to students. Government regulations and institution-centredness were specifically mentioned. Until governments (as primary funders) recognise the value of flexibility and start to measure it, core systems are likely to remain rigid. It was also pointed out that current organisational structures tend to be self-serving rather than designed around learners' needs. It is not possible to change systems to improve their flexibility

without changing the identity of the academic role, which is clearly very difficult. Additional challenges of meeting staff needs and training requirements to bring them in line with more flexible learning and teaching were also mentioned. Staff will be challenged to adapt to new processes and systems (typically facilitated through new technology) and manage their workloads in new ways.

## **REGION 2: EUROPE, AFRICA, AND MIDDLE EAST**

Participants in Europe, Africa and the Middle East identified similar themes to those of Oceania participants, and additionally identified the following key points related to what can organisations do in order to improve flexibility.

**Effective adaptation to change takes time:** In general, universities are slow to adapt compared to commercial organisations. Commercial bodies tend to have more confidence to adapt even in regulated industries such as health. One of the limitations of change in higher education centres on regulatory frameworks, which place expectations and requirements on how universities operate. Limitations at the European Commission and State levels create barriers to change. University regulations also hinder change. Frequently curriculum does not align with the university's own vision and mission statement, especially around goals related to social inclusion. The role of teachers and academics to deliver flexibly is also unclear or lacking. There can also be resistance from faculty to provide more flexible teaching due to lack of training, high expectations to develop online content, or simply a lack of vision. The pandemic has shown that the use of online technologies across education does not resemble a well-organised system. In some countries online learning has no regulation, and so there are problems with quality. There is no clear or single online pedagogy, and so teachers tend to mimic traditional or conventional forms of education using online education tools. It is important to instead consider online and distance education as a permanent, enduring solution and plan for it accordingly, rather than implementing it as a temporary solution in response to an emergency. Finally, altering perceptions of flexibility so that industry, students and parents do not view it as providing less quality than traditional approaches to education will require deliberate and likely lengthy attention.

**Flexibility must align with stakeholder expectations:** Stakeholders must understand the benefits of flexible education however it is not clear as to what stakeholders expect. Industry, for example, will need to be assured that the learning outcomes they advocate are not compromised through flexibility. Student desired for flexibility should be sought; some students may not know what they want. It is difficult to understand the right balance of flexibility and structure for an undergraduate student.

Participants in Europe, Africa and the Middle East were of the belief that there is a long way to go until the parameters of a well-structured flexible system can be achieved.

## **REGION 3: AMERICAS**

**Holding on to tradition is a problem:** Participants from the Americas pointed out the constraints of tradition when it comes to changing toward flexibility. Traditions and protocols related to faculty workload and credit hours structures present tremendous barriers to change. Participants



suggested that it is likely better to create separate entities with different rules and protocols than it is to change existing ones, particularly because mindsets based on these traditional ways of working can be so fixed. The examples of Penn State University, Franklin University, Athabasca's Executive MBA programme and Southern New Hampshire University were mentioned.

**Analytics have a role to play:** Student data analytics can help improve the student experience toward more flexibility without the need to change the entire system. For example, a student finding it difficult to pass a compulsory course might be offered options and pathways based on previous student experiences. Optimal study pathways for students might be offered based on their previous success.

**Credit transfer improvements increase flexibility:** Participants from the Americas highlighted ways in which students might become more mobile with their learning through improved credit transfer practices, flexible pacing of learning, and the removal of traditional admission requirements such as GMAT (the Graduate Management Admission Test). In the United States, high school students can take college classes and some states, such as Ohio, pay for this privilege. Students having access to college courses while in high school benefit from improved self-efficacy and a shorter journey to graduation as they can transfer the credits they earn while in high school.

**Flexibility is the means to an end:** Americas participants pointed out that flexibility should not be the aim of change; flexibility is rather the means to improving access, inclusivity, equitability and participation. Our objective is to maximise learning, not maximise flexibility. Importantly, flexibility must consider student motivation and autonomy. If students are not provided with a structure, they will tend to postpone activities to the last minute. Therefore, the objective should be to provide constructive flexibility and student success must be the dependent variable.

## **SUMMARY: FLEXIBILITY IN APPROACH**

Improving flexibility toward more equitable access is certainly possible through the alignment of systems, structures and strategies toward this objective. However there are significant barriers, both external to the institution (accreditation and funding regulations) and internal (structures, systems, technology, leadership, financial considerations, quality assurance and university-student relationships). Transformation is possible but difficult, and we must be open to moving forward without holding on to the past. The presentations gave a good oversight as to the nature and scale of change necessary to improve flexibility for students. Ways of improving flexibility also include using micro credentials and certifications that can be stacked toward degree achievement. Even here, though, structural limitations, government and university regulations, traditions, and technology act as constraints to change.

### 3: FLEXIBILITY IN PRACTICE – How flexible are our teaching and learning practices?

The third and final Summit session considered the sub-theme: Flexibility in practice. The three keynote presentations were followed by additional observations shared by the participants during the breakout sessions. Presentations were as follows:

- [Dr. Sanjaya Mishra](#)
- [Dr. Lynne Brice](#)
- [Professor Laura Czerniewicz](#)

**The first presentation** (Dr Sanjaya Mishra) considered the context of higher education, and suggested a framework to measure institutional readiness for flexibility in teaching and learning. In relation to context, the presenter began by addressing the tertiary education enrolment rate, which is a key indicator of development. The current world average of tertiary education enrolment is 38%, however, majority of the commonwealth countries have a below 20% enrolment rate. In Sub-Saharan Africa the rate is only 9%. As at 2018 there is also a significant disparity in access to ICT around the world; while mobile subscriptions are more than 100%, internet access is limited to 51% (it should be noted that the world average is not a good indicator of access in the Pacific countries and countries in Africa). Further to the overall context of higher education, students find it challenging to buy recommended textbooks due to their high cost. In Malaysia, data suggests that 76% of learners decide not to buy textbooks due to high costs. In the US about 65% learners stated that their grades were affected due to non-purchase of relevant textbooks. Over 5.2 million students worldwide use financial aid to purchase their textbooks. Skill shortages are another problem faced by many countries. A recent study indicated that 45% employers cannot find skilled individuals to recruit. Digitalisation is transforming the way many jobs are carried out, so increased access to higher education does not necessarily mean that learners can get employment in the new digital world. Recent statistics show that youth unemployment in the world is 13%, but some countries have much higher rates: Botswana (37%), Namibia (44%), St. Lucia (45%) and South Africa (53%) show more significant discrepancies.

Overall, the world is grappling with serious educational challenges in the areas related to access to higher education, improving quality of life, reducing gender inequality, reducing unemployment, and providing lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities to all. Covid 19 has demonstrated the lack of preparedness in terms of technology (connectivity and costs) in many institutions. The pandemic response has also highlighted shortfalls in teacher capabilities and growing inequality due to ICT access.

The contextual factors here provide an opportunity for the world to rethink education, however the current focus is on reopening rather than rethinking. ODL institutions have seen five stages of development: the first stage involves multi-media; the second, tele-learning; the third, correspondence; the fourth, flexible learning; and the fifth is intelligent flexible learning. Although in the presenter's view we are yet to successfully move into the fifth phase across ODL, flexibility is always under consideration across ODL providers. The concept of flexibility can be expressed in relation to openness to people, places methods and ideas (as in the Open University, UK). Based on this premise, the presenter proposes ten indicators to measure and quantify flexibility. These are:

- Entry requirements: Exclusive (1) entry to open entry (10).

- Learning space: Location specific (1) to anywhere learning (10).
- Time to study: Specific schedule (1) to anytime (10).
- Subjects of study: Fixed courses (1) to a la carte (10).
- Pedagogy: Sage on the stage (1) to highly collaborative (10).
- Learning resources: Copyrighted (1) to open source (10).
- Technology: Proprietary tools (1) to open tools (10).
- Assessment: Institution paced, fixed (1) to learner paced with multiple pathways (10).
- Credentials: Limited recognition; no staking (1) to recognised everywhere; accumulation allowed for higher degrees (10).
- Cost: High cost (10) to zero or low cost (10).

The framework has a one to ten rating system whereby low scores reflect low flexibility and higher scores reflect high flexibility. The presenter mentioned that flexibility is not only limited to open and distance institutions; every institution can consider their flexibility level in relation to the 10 dimensions. Analysis will help institutions to grow and become sustainable, while also reducing the cost of higher education.

**The second presentation** (Dr Lynne Brice) described the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand's Recognise, Reach and Retain model that provides scalable, intentional and positive interventions to learners studying flexibly. This model has two phases, an out-of-course phase and in-course phase. The presentation highlighted the interventions that take place in the in-course phase. In-course interventions begin with the onboarding of students, which is when welcome message, log in advice and orientation information are shared with the learner. The in-course phase ends when the student graduates. The interventions focus on three key touch point questions:

1. How do we Recognise the learners who deviate from the pathway?
2. How do we Reach/respond to these learners?
3. How do we Retain these learners?

The Recognition element identifies courses and learners that need additional attention. Of the 800 live courses at Open Polytechnic, priority courses are identified based on weighted metrics that consider historical data. Student mentors are assigned particularly to these courses. The actual metrics include the number of students; the percentage of priority learners; the percentage of successfully completed learners; the percentage of first assessment submissions; the percentage of first assessment passes; and, finally, the percentage of Māori and Pasifika learners (these are two priority groups). A student engagement dashboard drawing from multiple data sources provides real-time data to student mentors and academic staff members, so that they can provide intentional positive interventions at scale.

To identify learners needing longer term mentoring, a student engagement and achievement matrix has been developed. The predictive data point comes only from the individual student's past educational achievements; the model does not apply any demographic or student characteristic beyond this. It was recognised through initial data analysis that adults beginning online learning with a lower previous education level are less likely to be successful. Four weeks after courses start, this past student achievement is matched with the engagement level of the student (engagement is based on the number of course learning interactions by the learner). If the achievement and engagement levels are low, this student is flagged as a student that would

benefit from long term mentoring. Initial results have shown a significant improvement in successful student completions as a result of this model being applied.

Recognise, Reach and Retain is an exceptions-based model. It can be used by any institution seeking to improve flexibility to learners using a transparent, systematic and data driven approach. The model shows that flexibility need not mean losing sight of individual learners and supporting them at scale.

**The third presentation** (Professor Laura Czerniewicz) focused on flexibility applying the lens of equity. The presenter began with a quote from UN Secretary General António Guterres, who said "In today's world with digital divide is devastating and can be irreversible... digital inequality is one of our wickedest policy problems." The presenter noted that the pandemic has aggravated social inequality and so flexibility must be seen in this context. Hidden inequalities and inequities are built into the foundations of higher education; these have been exposed by the Covid 19 response. It is now impossible to unsee them. The presenter highlighted that during the pandemic vulnerable students have been hit hardest in South Africa and across the world.

When considering flexibility, it should be remembered that there is no such thing as a model learner. The ideal view considers an online learner as independent and self-paced, but the reality is that learners are embedded in multiple communities, and among varying webs of obligation and shared responsibility. This reality is acknowledged by the concept of radical flexibility, which tries to understand learners as whole people in their personal context (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020). According to Veletsianos & Houlden (2020), radically flexible education is responsive to the circumstances people live with on a day-to-day basis, the reasons why people are doing the work of learning and developing new skills, and who they are doing the work for and with. Understanding learners in this way shapes flexibility as a value or freedom, that shapes and influences educational infrastructure and practices. As such, education is guided by adaptability, suitability, responsibility, responsiveness, and creativity; all of this fall under the overall umbrella of "justice". The pandemic has shown the world what is possible in terms of flexible access. The sudden shift to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) catalysed action and showed that flexibility, agility, responsiveness, creativity and agency can be achieved. Countries have used multi-modal forms of access, for example we see high use of online materials in Europe and Asia, radio and television in Africa, and paper-based solutions in Oceania and Latin America. Governments also supported these changes via legislation change, for example in South Africa there is legislation requiring internet service providers to provide zero-rated access to local educational content websites. Universities also took action. For example, in South Africa, universities increased internet bandwidth, provided laptop rentals, provided free online devices and negotiated data free access to online learning. Students also showed extraordinary resilience and creativity themselves in gaining internet access. Students provided space for one another to gain access to Wi-Fi, they transformed their home environments into learning friendly spaces, used parking lots connected to Wi-Fi buses and applied various solutions where there is no electricity to get access to online content. The power of their commitment during this extraordinary difficult time is commendable.

The presenter also talked about the flexible design for equity demonstrated by academics and learning designers. As academics and learning designers addressed the circumstances of Covid 19 restrictions they were also designing for equity. The approaches used included using low tech tools such as text and slides; frequent and consistent communication; asynchronous learning activities, which give explicit instructions; running online 'office hours'; seeking student feedback; and breaking learning materials into short, identifiable topics. The growth and use of Universal Design

for Learning (UDL) was also mentioned, and its role in designing learning experiences that proactively meet the needs of all learners. UDL assumes that barriers to learning are in the design of the environment, rather than in the student. UDL emphasises a flexible curriculum and a variety of instructional practices, materials and learning activities. UDL has three focus areas: Engagement, Representation, and Action and Expression. In the Engagement phase, the 'why' of learning is questioned. The strategies relevant to Engagement apply cultural norms and experiences that are familiar to students, encourage peer support and feedback, and include variety of individual and group activities. In the Representation phase, the focus is on the 'what' of learning. Strategies that build cognitive connections between concepts are used, and multiple formats of the same file (audio and video) are included. Representation is sensitive to culturally assumed knowledge (such as culturally situated metaphors) and promotes study techniques and strategies that emphasise critical thinking over memorisation. The final phase, Action and Expression, focuses on the 'how' of learning by giving students opportunity to demonstrate knowledge in multiple ways; prompting students to stop and think about key concepts; using real-world problems and authentic situations; and providing choice as to how students can respond across various tasks and a range of assessment types.

In summary, the presenter reminded participants that not all students have equitable access to the technologies or access required to participate in flexible education. It is important to be adaptable, suitable, responsive and creative when developing open, distance and flexible materials and it is important to consider multi-modality. Finally, more flexibility does not automatically mean more equity; we must be wary of assuming things about our learners and ensure that we do design properly.

This final session focuses on the following key questions:

- How flexible are our teaching and learning practices?
- What are the things we need to do in order to improve our teaching and learning flexibility?

Regional delegate conversations addressed these questions, building on the insights provided in the presentations.

## **REGION 1: OCEANIA AND ASIA**

In a poll asking participants about which of Dr Mishra's (first presentation's) ten dimensions of flexibility were most important to their own flexible practice Oceania and Asia respondents identified 'reducing exclusive entry criteria' and 'improving openness'. They also indicated 'ability to learn from anywhere', 'using openly licensed resources', 'making assessment learner-paced with multiple pathways', and 'providing a zero or low-cost education experience' were priorities. Points made in the subsequent breakout session were as follows:

**Flexibility is in a transition phase:** The general view in response to the question 'how flexible are our teaching and learning practices?' is, not much. For example, a recent Carnegie Mellon University study (not cited) found that, over the last 600 years, neither the university nor the church have significantly changed. At its core, nothing much has changed in education toward more flexibility. Participants in Oceania and Asia perceived flexibility in teaching and learning as

being in a transitional phase, particularly as universities gradually move from face-to-face to blended and fully online tuition.

**Context is important:** Different voices must be factored into to the conversation as to what flexibility ought to be, at the level of society in general. There are many stakeholders viewing flexibility from different perspectives; for example, university leaders, parents, students, teachers, employers, government, regulators and funding providers all have their own expectations. The appropriate level of flexibility will always depend on the context of the student, and the discipline being studied. Complete flexibility is not necessarily optimal, since some students want their study experience to be prescribed in terms of when, what and how.

**Language is important:** Participants highlighted that the term 'flexibility' is not well defined, and its boundaries are not clear. It is important to have a good understanding of the meanings behind what is 'flexible', what is 'open', what is 'distance' and what is 'blended'; the use of language is important. Though the concept of 'flexibility' is broad, there is general agreement that we all want more students to be able to participate and all want institutions to be more responsive, and globally we are not sufficiently flexible. Some institutions are in contexts that enable them to be flexible, others are not. It is possible to adapt the definition of flexibility as "offering choices in the educational environment, as well as customising a given course to meet the needs of individual learners" (Huang et al., 2020, p. 2).

**The paradigm of the 'learning experience designer' should be considered:** Learning is a community activity, but also an individual pursuit. Learning is influenced by personal epistemologies, which need to be taken in to account when designing and developing learning experiences. Massified higher education put everyone through the same process; this is no longer adequate. An understanding of learning from theoretical and cognitive perspectives is important when designing instructional experiences, to the extent that it is more relevant and helpful to refer to instructional or educational designers as 'learning experience designers' – ultimately, it is experiences that result in learning. Providers might be differentiated by the learning experiences they provide to students (it was also pointed out that much depends on the discipline being studied, as certain disciplines will be more suited to flexible learning than others). Artificial Intelligence (AI) will play a key role in personalising the learning experience to the needs of the individual.

## **REGION 2: EUROPE, AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

In the poll results to Dr Mishra's ten dimensions, participants from Europe, Africa and the Middle East promoted 'making assessments learner-paced with multiple pathways' as the most important dimension of flexibility, whilst accepting that 'making use of openly licensed material and technology', 'enabling course achievement from multiple sources to be stacked into qualifications' and 'taking a highly collaborative approach in relation to online pedagogy' as further important dimensions.

**Teacher's mindsets need to change:** Participants from Europe, Africa and the Middle East highlighted the lack of flexibility, particularly among experienced academics, in adapting to new teaching environments. While some of this reluctance could be due to regulatory issues and university practice, the teacher's own mindset and assumptions that that 'they know best' when it comes to teaching is also a barrier. One suggested strategy is to work with newer teachers who

are starting their careers, because they are perhaps less influenced by old, established ways of doing things and might be more open to change. For many teachers, preventing student cheating is more important than exploring how their pedagogies might be adapted to promote flexibility. It was pointed out that the issue of cheating is more related to the nature of assessment practice. Assessments that invite more analysis, critical thinking and real-life activities were suggested.

**There are multiple options for promoting flexibility in teaching:** Participants identified multiple strategies for improving teaching and learning flexibility. Orientation courses and providing student questionnaires at early stages to better understand current level of knowledge, and what students' interests might be in relation to the course, were proposed. Promoting more investigation into student needs, inviting guest lecturers from other universities and guest speakers from industry were all among the suggestions, as was working closely with student unions and student associations when developing the structure of educational programmes. Improving the ratio of teachers to students is also an important means of adjusting material and the support. It is easier to be flexible with fewer students and more teachers. Applying Universal Design for Learning can also promote flexibility. Ultimately Europe, Africa and the Middle East participants felt that creative, asynchronous opportunities could be found to engage students and improve flexibility and that there is a need to educate the educators as to possibilities.

**'Elasticity' may be a better alternative to 'flexibility':** The concept of 'elasticity' was introduced, whereby elasticity expands current borders by removing limitations or inadvertently stretching beyond what institutions and learners are capable of. Participants suggested 'elasticity' promotes moving away from a fixed state to a more fluid state and promoted the term 'elasticity' as more flexible than the term 'flexible' itself.

### **REGION 3: AMERICAS**

Participants in the Americas ranked 'pedagogy (taking a highly collaborative approach)' as the most important element of Dr Mishra's ten dimensions of flexibility, followed by 'enabling course achievement from multiple sources to be stacked into qualifications and assessments' and 'anywhere and anytime learning'.

**The focus must be on the learner:** There is no absolute model for flexibility and so institutions must balance their interests when deciding on the level of flexibility they can achieve. Flexibility must be approached from the learner's point of view.

**Stakeholder engagement is a must:** Institutions are typically focused on teaching structures, instructional design and institutional concerns and problems, and so they often fail to notice that education only takes place because many people outside institutions are committed to it. Parents and student families must be considered stakeholders of education. Participants from the Americas acknowledged the helpfulness of keynote presentations and supported the 'data driven approach' to deal with engagement and student attrition.

**Apply instructional design practices and learning behaviours:** Participants from the Americas highlighted the importance of instructional design, improving the skills of instructional designers and implementing quality standards as ways of improving flexibility in teaching and learning. It was also suggested that learning behaviours and the technologies used by learners be considered. It is also valuable to see how flexibility contributes to student learning in different contexts and

the differences between synchronous and asynchronous learning activities, as synchronisation can be difficult for teachers and learners; asynchronous activities foster flexibility.

## **SUMMARY: FLEXIBILITY IN PRACTICE**

There are many dimensions to teaching and learning flexibility, and they might be applied by all institutions (not just those with a particular OFDL mandate). Applying analytics can improve flexibility and enable a great deal of scalability without losing sight of individual learners. However, not all students have equitable access to technologies. It is important to provide adaptable, suitable, responsive and creative options when developing flexible learning opportunities. Terminology is generally not helpful. Terms such as flexibility, open, distance and blended can be confusing; definitions are important. The concept of 'elasticity' might provide a useful alternative to describe how institutions might 'stretch' to better serve learner needs. Ultimately improving flexibility in teaching and learning involves a learner-centric view of education. The role of instructional or learning designer is a pivotal one in developing appropriate learning experiences. Enabling multiple pathways and stackable achievements, which in turn lead to formal qualification, are also important parts of being flexible. Wider stakeholder groups will also provide key information as to maximising flexibility in teaching and learning. No matter what approach is taken, learners must be effectively onboarded into the flexible environment with a clear strategic focus and tactics.



## OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

The participants in all the groups stated that the presentations and breakout sessions inspired them to think differently about flexibility and now they see additional possibilities for flexibility and what is needed to promote it.

Eight key themes can be discerned across the Leadership Summit related to flexibility.

1. **Flexibility is an issue of justice.** Becoming more flexible involves a transfer of power to the student. Issues of equity, access, inclusivity, agency and responsibility all apply. These are serious, foundational matters that require careful navigation and are applicable to all institutions worldwide. Our goal is *both access and success*.
2. **Flexibility is a means and not an end.** We do not want to be flexible for its own sake. We seek to become more flexible insofar as it improves student outcomes and enriches their participation, though we know that improving flexibility for education also improves its resilience.
3. **We need to base our flexibility on real student need.** We need to understand student contexts and be as flexible as we can while also ensuring their participation and success. We must avoid projecting our own assumptions on to student needs and preferences.
4. **Flexibility is multi-dimensional.** Entry, place, time, subject of study, pedagogy, technology, learning resources, assessment, credentials and cost are among the dimensions of flexibility that might be pursued.
5. **Creative means of improving flexibility are available.** Competency-based assessment; analytics-driven, personalised support and flexible learning design techniques are among the means presented. We must remain open to being surprised as to how we might improve flexibility, and continuously challenge ourselves over the rigidity of how we operate.
6. **Flexibility has an asynchronous bias.** Many institutions base themselves around the experience of a synchronous lecture. This limits the level of flexibility that may be possible and requires institutions to organise in particular ways. Asynchronous approaches can remove both time and place barriers to flexibility.
7. **Becoming more flexible is a difficult journey.** There are multiple factors that limit our ability to be as flexible as we want to be. Our challenge is to push against forces of rigidity to be more student centred. Taking a system, rather than an individual practice, approach is what makes a real difference. Unpicking systems is a difficult challenge; starting again in parallel is an option.
8. **Flexibility is strategic.** Several presenters stated that increasing flexibility is an inevitable feature of education. In that sense, we must either lead or follow. Leading requires leadership and the courage to promote change. It also requires having a sense of the institution's role (self-identity) and the courage to challenge those factors - both internal and external - that limit a student-centred approach.

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