

EFFECTS OF INCREASED DISTANCE LEARNING ON EXPECTATIONS OF USING FLEXIBLE TEACHING METHODS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Erika Kallionpää¹, & Pasi Hellsten²

¹*Transport Research Centre Verne, Tampere University (Finland)*

²*Unit of Information and Knowledge management, Tampere University (Finland)*

Abstract

Distance learning has made it possible to increase the flexibility in teaching and learning. Flexibility is mentioned as one of the main benefits of distance learning, both from students and teachers. Distance learning has time flexibility, as if the lectures are recorded, they can be watched at any time. Distance learning is not place bound either, which means that students and lectures do not need any time to travel and move into the classroom. On the other hand, digital tools make it possible to organize hybrid teaching, combining both distance and contact teaching.

The aim of this study is to discuss the need of amount of flexibility in teaching methods at the master level courses at the university in future. What is the enough or good level of flexibility offered in education? How much flexibility do we need to offer to students? Distance learning, contact teaching or something between? These are the questions many university teachers and lectures need to consider these days when lecturing the courses and planning the future implementations. The purpose is to describe the students' and teachers' expectations and wishes related to flexibility in higher education. In addition, the benefits and challenges related to flexible teaching methods will be studied. This study is by its nature a case study in the form of survey for students at Tampere University, Finland. The study also analysis the discussions and interviews of students, teachers, and other stakeholders involved in higher education.

As a result, the different aspects of flexibility in teaching and learning will be introduced. Of course, it is in the best interests of the student, if you can choose, if you want to attend in lecture either through online or contact teaching in lecture room. But this can be the case also with other stakeholders. In many courses the representatives of industrial companies are involved as visiting lectures or as case companies in course assignments and it might be easier for them to attend the learning events as well through online. For example, Anyway, hybrid teaching compared just to contact teaching in lecture room requires more resources from teachers.

Keywords: *Higher education, flexibility, flexible learning, teaching methods, distance learning, contact teaching.*

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has led to significant changes in the way teachers teach and students engage in higher education (HE). Online and various kinds of blended learning modes were implemented rapidly and globally. With various modes of teaching and learning the social distancing and learners' diverse needs were taken care of, including being in different geographical locations. From the perspective of students, smooth and flexible study opportunities are one of the most important elements of quality in university operations (TAU, 2022). The duties of the teaching staff include supporting and furthering the students' engagement in studying, learning, and academic growth by employing varied teaching methods that consider the skills and abilities of various types of learners (TAU, 2019). The flexibility may be perceived as a value principle in education, like diversity and equality are (Naidu, 2017). The purpose of flexible study opportunities is to promote the smooth running of all students' studies. Moreover, students value the courses offering alternative study methods and teachers who also consider the different life situations and different learning styles.

Distance learning has made it possible to increase the flexibility in teaching and learning in HE. Flexibility has also been identified as one of the main benefits of distance learning, both from students and teachers. Distance learning has temporal flexibility, as if the lectures are recorded, they can be watched at any time. Distance learning is not place bound either, which means that students and lecturers

do not need any time to travel and move into the classroom. On the other hand, different kind of digital tools make it possible to organize hybrid teaching, combining both distance and contact teaching, giving students the opportunity to choose how they want to attend the lecture. In addition, due to increased distance learning, the value and meaning of the lectures has also changed, challenging teachers to develop lectures to be valuable and more than just interesting.

The aim of this study is to discuss the need of amount of flexibility in teaching methods at the master level courses at the university in future. What is the enough or good level of flexibility offered in education? How much flexibility do we need to offer to students? Do we promote distance learning, contact teaching or something between? These are the questions many university teachers and lecturers need to consider these days when lecturing the courses and planning for the future implementations. The purpose is to describe the students' and teachers' expectations and wishes related to flexibility in HE. In addition, the benefits and challenges related to flexible teaching methods will be discussed.

2. Flexibility in higher education (HE)

Flexibility has been a focus of attention and efforts in the field of education already for decades (Li & Wong, 2018). These days, the concept of flexibility together with openness are rapidly coming the norm in HE, which has led to the change of the nature of the educational transaction. (Naidu, 2017) Flexible learning has a key idea of being the learner's choice in different aspects of the learning experience (Collis & Moonen, 2002; Li & Wong, 2018). The flexible learning is often associated with the terms 'open learning', 'distance learning' and 'e-learning'. Especially, due to increasing application of information and communication technologies, flexible learning has been closely connected with the concept of e-learning. (Li & Wong, 2018) Al-Mawee et al. (2021) found in their research that students assess both positively and negatively their distance learning experiences. The positive things mentioned in their survey were for example time and location flexibility. The greatest concerns were about lack of social interaction and communication patterns. (Al-Mawee et al. 2021) The emerging technological tools are useful but need the know-how in addition to the mere know-what.

Learning is a complex process in which different learners and learning groups adopt various motivational and cognitive regulation strategies as part of their learning. (Naidu, 2017) Flexibility in learning has been one of the key elements to develop education quality and satisfying various student needs. (Li & Wong, 2018) Flexible learning allows students to combine different areas of their lives (studies, work, leisure) in a way that suit them best (AdvanceHE, 2023). The key is the way the flexible learning is implemented in practice. For example, Hack (2023) states that flexible learning can be a very good tool to promote success for the students, but it must be implemented in a way that it supports the learning environment.

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. (AdvanceHE, 2023; Naidu, 2017). For learners, flexible learning may include choices for example in relation to selection of learning activities, assessment tasks. (Naidu, 2017) For the teachers, the flexibility 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. Collis & Moonen (2002) highlight that flexible learning is much more than just distance learning. Flexibility in learning and teaching is relevant in any mode of study including campus-based face-to-face education (Naidu, 2017). Improving flexibility in studies can be seen through different components: in locations, in study programs, in types of interactions, in forms of communication, and in study materials. (Collis & Moonen, 2002) The goal of flexible learning is to leverage the benefits of pedagogy and technology to provide an engaging, personalized learning experience that supports students to reach their potential. The flexible learning opportunities can at its best promote successful student engagement and belonging in study community. (Hack, 2023) Thus, it may be proposed that should the means allow the value creation considering the individual needs and wants, the motivation will follow.

Flexible learning consists of four key areas: learner's choice, personal flexibility, institutional agility and balanced pragmatism. (AdvanceHE, 2023) Collis & Moonen (2002) express flexible learning through following four key components: technology, pedagogy, implementation and institution. Technology means the combination of information and communication technologies, pedagogy refers to the knowledge and skills, implementation is about how to apply methods and theories in practice, and institution highlights the institutional framework affecting flexible learning. Choosing to study in flexible ways is not always just about the physical separation, but also students being on campuses like to study in flexible way and prefer distance education. Distance education enables students being able to take on courses which might not have been offered at the time students needed to take them. This also gives opportunity to take on additional courses and this way will speed up the studies. (Naidu, 2017) The important question is that how flexible does flexible learning need to be? And who decides, and what

might be its implications, not only for learners, but also for teachers and institutional resources? Naidu (2017) claims that one size or approach to flexible learning does not, and will not, fit all kinds of learners, teachers, or disciplines. It is clear, that 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.

3. Data and methods

This study is by its nature a case study in the form of survey for university students. The study also analyses the discussions and interviews of students, teachers and other stakeholders involved in HE. The survey was executed in February 2023 at Tampere University, Finland. The survey was launched for in four different ongoing master level courses in the fields of logistics and information, and knowledge management. The authors of this paper are responsible teachers in two of these courses. The survey was constructed using the online survey tool, Google Forms. The survey was made both in Finnish and in English, as two of the four courses were lectured in English. The survey link was sent on 1st of February through Moodle learning environment to students. Students had one week time to answer, and one reminder was sent in between. Through the survey, the students were asked about their opinions related to the flexibility in learning, experiences on expectations of using flexible teaching methods in HE and how increased distance learning has affected on those expectations and their own learning and learning processes. Altogether 52 students answered to the survey (48 responds in Finnish and 4 in English). The database table was created to analyze and categorize the survey results.

4. Results

The first question in the survey was about the students' views of the flexible study possibilities: "What does flexible study possibilities mean to you?" The answers covered several approaches. Many answers included the distance learning possibilities, but also other aspects of flexibility in learning were mentioned as well. *"Flexible study opportunities take into account different learners."* Distance learning possibilities were seen vital. Several students mentioned that distance learning gives opportunities for time, place, and pace flexibility. *"I can study wherever and whenever I want, and I am not tied to a specific physical place and time."* Many students also said that due to distance learning, it is easier to combine studies, work, and leisure. One student also mentioned that distance learning offers possibility to follow the course in case of illness.

Some students mentioned that for them the flexibility means ability to plan your own schedule (e.g., having the information about the deadlines in good time). *"The deadlines for the assignments will be informed already at the beginning of the course and the assignments will be published in good time to allow sufficient time for them to be completed."* The students' views about the flexible study possibilities are presented in Table 1. Number of responses of each category are in brackets.

Table 1. Students' views about the flexible study possibilities.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance learning (17) • Alternative study requirements in the course (13) • Lecture recordings (11) • Hybrid model (10) • Time flexibility (6) • Place and pace flexibility (4) • Flexible course choices (4) • Information about the assignments in good time (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering substituting assignments (1) • Transferring assignment deadlines (1) • Consideration of different learning styles are (1) • Intermediate deadlines (1) • Possibility to study in different situation in life (1) • Offering voluntary tasks, bonus points motivate (1) • Presence flexibility, no obligation (1) • Opportunity to retake the exams (1) • Project based learning (1)
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Lecture recordings and hybrid model were also stated in answers. *"Providing multiple access points to students, allowing them to learn at their own pace and in their own ways, project-based learning. Also, hybrid model"* Despite of wishes to have different kind of distance learning possibilities, some students also want to remain contact teaching. *"You can participate in scheduled teaching on campus with other people, but you can also do the same things independently in your own time."* Time flexibility was seen very important among students, but again, not everything has to be flexible. *"Study scheduling is flexible; you don't have to be there at the same time each week. You can just choose when you want to watch lectures, for example. However, I do not think that there should be much flexibility in exams and assignment returns. There must be some deadlines, however."* The possibility to follow the teaching in shorter pieces also came up, as did the possibility to repeat the parts.

The next question was about the students' expectations and effects on learning: "How has COVID-19 pandemic and increased distance learning effect on your expectations about the flexible study possibilities (alternative study requirements, flexible teaching models)? What about the effects on your own study and ways of study?" Many students said that due to COVID-19 pandemic the expectations to have flexible study possibilities have increased and many wished the level of flexibility would remain. "I have started to support flexible study opportunities more. In the past, I might have been in full favor of contact teaching, but flexibility is perfect for my own study and lifestyle." Expectations to be able to study remotely have increased, as well the use of the hybrid model in lectures. There are also more expectations for the lectures to be recorded. Expectations also depend on the study year. "The expectations themselves have not changed because I have not studied at university except in 'exceptional circumstances. Now that the situation is 'normalized' I feel that distance learning and streaming is the basic assumption in teaching, like sneakers on a jogging. You can run without it, but it's not comfortable." On the other hand, some students highlighted that it is vital to have contact teaching as well, and especially now after pandemic, there is increased expectations to have more face-to-face activities on campus.

For the question about the effects on studies and ways of study, most of the students answered that effects have been mainly positive. There has been increased flexibility and more study possibilities, more temporal flexibility and due to that faster progress of own studies. "I noticed that the increase in distance learning was beneficial to me. Flexible study suits good for me, because I can watch the lectures accelerated, pause them and write the notes in the meantime." Some challenges were also raised. Flexible learning requires more self-discipline and time management. Studying can be less effective, workload of studying has increased, there is less networking and discussions with other students, it is more difficult to ask for help and less memorized learning due to lack of exams. Some students answered that there have been no effects on their studies or learning style. The effects on expectations and studies are presented in Table 2. Number of responses of each category are in brackets.

Table 2. Effects on expectations about the flexible study possibilities and effects on studies.

Increased expectations	Effects on studies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible study opportunities (11) • Distance learning (6) • Hybrid model, streaming (4) • Availability of lecture records (9) • Electric exams (1) • Contact teaching (5) • No change in expectations (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive effects (8) • Increased study possibilities (7) • Easier scheduling, time flexibility (6) • Faster progress of studies (2) • More difficult to separate study and leisure (2) • Less networking (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less memorized learning (1) • Less effective studying (1) • Increased study workload (1) • More self-discipline needed (1) • More difficult to ask for help (1) • No effects (1)

When asking, if students have asked any flexibility in their studies from the responsible teachers during the autumn 2022, 77,1% of students said that they have not. The rest 22,9% answered that they have asked some. Most of the students think that enabling remote participation to face-to-face learning events is supportable (83,3%), only 2,1% said it is not and rest 14,6% said it is not relevant to their studies. From different alternative study requirements, most of the students would like to have exams (54,2%). Group work was the second-best option (47,9%), learning diary third (43,8%) and individual assignment fourth (41,7%). Related to mode of the exam, the students would prefer to do the exam at home (41,2%). 35,3% would like to have an electric exam in classroom, 7,8% handwritten exam in a classroom and 15,7% would like to the do an exam in a classroom made with own laptop.

The several discussions with the students reflect similar results with the survey. Students prefer to have possibilities to distance learning, especially the lecture recordings are very much liked. Anyway, students would like to keep the possibility to attend the contact teaching as well. Time and place flexibility are usually mentioned as main positive things of remote teaching, but lack of meeting other students is perceived as a main negative effect of the remote teaching. Some students also feel that it is easier to focus and learn when you attend contact teaching. Based on the discussions with the teachers, it seems, that most of the teachers would prefer to have contact teaching, because they feel that in contact teaching you can teach better also other important working life skills, like interaction and performing skills. Teachers also feel that they get to know students better in contact teaching compared to remote teaching. Remote teaching can also have some flexible possibilities for the teachers and other stakeholders involved in teaching. For example, guest lecturers from industry and companies seem to favor remote lectures due to lesser time needed. However, some guest lecturers still think that it is vital to meet the students face to face.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper studied the effects of increased distance learning on expectations and wishes of using flexible teaching methods in HE. The study shows that students' expectations of using flexible teaching methods has clearly increased. The students are expecting possibilities for distance learning, but also for other flexible teaching and learning modes, like alternative study requirements and possibility to choose courses freely. Expectation and wishes for using hybrid models in lectures have also increased. Distance learning also seems to be something that students have got used to in course implementations and it is seen almost as a default in teaching and learning. Naidu (2017) had same kind of thoughts and underlined that the concept of flexibility is rapidly coming the norm in HE. It is also good to be aware, that now due to pandemic, we are also having many university students, who have only studied under conditions of pandemic. Based on this study, students appreciate especially time, place, and pace flexibility and at best, the distance learning can give you all these. The three elements are also identified to be the key benefits of flexible learning among researchers (see e.g., Collis & Moonen, 2002; Naidu 2017; Zaborava et al. 2017) Be as it may, the supporting voices for contact teaching are still there. Students would like to have the possibility to attend contact teaching as well. Especially, after pandemic, some students are eager to network and see other students.

As conclusion, it is clear, that we are all having different kind of learning styles and there is no one solution for all needs. Some students like distance learning, while others prefer contact teaching. Some like to write learning diaries, others traditional exams, etc. From the students' point of view the best would be that students can decide by themselves how, when and where they are studying. All in all, various flexible teaching and learning methods are something students are expecting these days and on the other hand, today's technology and digital tools also give opportunities for flexible teaching methods. But what is enough or good level of flexibility offered in HE? How much flexibility do we need to offer to students? These questions challenge the teachers and there are no clear answers. Of course, if you want to engage your students in their studies, you need to use several flexible learning and teaching methods. The use of flexible teaching methods highly depends on the resources available to and competences of the teachers, but also teachers can benefit from flexible learning.

This study delivers information about the meaning of flexible learning and teaching methods for students and students' expectations of using flexible teaching methods in HE. In terms of practical implications, the results of this study can be used as a guiding information and base when planning the future course implementations. In future, the more detailed follow-up study should be carried out. It would be interesting to conduct this kind of study in other universities as well, to get more information and compare the results. The comparison between different countries would be also informative. In addition, a study concentrating on the requirements and the thoughts of the teachers would increase the understanding of the situation even more shedding lighter on the big picture.

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