

Flexible Pedagogy, Flexible Teachers: Insights from a workshop-based inquiry

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Abstract

Flexibility in Higher Education is increasingly framed as a necessary response to a complex and rapidly changing world, where students must adapt to shifting demands and conditions. Often associated with online and distance learning, flexibility is linked to increased accessibility, learner autonomy, and responsiveness to individual needs. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the push for flexible educational models, exposing both the potential and the limitations of existing structures and practices.

Despite its widespread use, flexibility remains a multifaceted and under-theorised concept, encompassing both pedagogical potential and structural challenges. It reflects a range of interpretations and priorities from institutional strategies shaped by market demands and technological innovation to pedagogical and personal approaches that focus on fostering student agency, critical thinking, and adaptability. This paper investigates how university teachers and researchers understand and construct the meaning of flexibility within the context of regular degree programs at a Danish university. Through two workshops involving approximately 35 participants, three artefacts - a flexibility barometer, a personal entry point, and a relationship matrix - were developed to facilitate reflection and dialogue. These artefacts supported conversations at multiple levels, ranging from grounded discussions grounded in participants' own teaching practices to more open-ended, exploratory dialogues about flexibility as a pedagogical and institutional phenomenon.

The analysis shows that flexibility is not merely a matter of logistics or technology, but rather a relational and context-dependent practice negotiated among teachers, students, and institutional structures. Participants highlighted both opportunities and dilemmas associated with flexible approaches, including the balance between structure and freedom, short-term responsiveness and long-term educational value, and tensions between individual autonomy and collective responsibility. Based on this, ten interrelated elements are identified through which flexibility is enacted, spanning timing, location, facilitation, student investment, and organisational infrastructure

Rather than reinforcing dominant narratives that present flexibility as inherently positive or easily implemented, this study challenges such assumptions by revealing the situated negotiations, pedagogical considerations, and institutional constraints involved in enacting flexibility. The workshop dialogues revealed how teachers engage with flexibility through critical reflection, drawing on their professional experience and values. The study emphasises the importance of involving teachers in shaping flexible practices. Their insights and pedagogical perspectives are essential to ensuring that flexibility supports meaningful learning and aligns with broader educational goals.

Keywords

Flexible Learning, Higher Education pedagogy, Problem-Based Learning, Workshop-based inquiry

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to develop ways to make flexible education more graspable and actionable for university teachers within regular degree programmes, without simplifying its consequences. Often, flexible education is framed as an effective solution to challenges in the 21st century, calling for 'human beings who are themselves flexible, able to respond purposively to new situations and ideas' as stated back in 2014 in the report by Barnett (2014) on the conditions of flexibility. Twelve years later, high tensions still surround flexible education, with the Covid-19 pandemic highlighting the need for educational change and more flexible models

and practices to address societal complexity and unpredictability (Rapanta et al., 2020). While distance and online learning have been the primary domains of flexible learning, this increasing demand has led institutions to reconsider the role of flexibility in course design within regular degree programmes (Barua & Lockee, 2024; Lockee & Clark-Stallkamp, 2022).

The starting point for this paper is the ambiguity surrounding the concept of flexibility in education and learning. It is a concept lacking universal definitions and has been characterised as a container concept, implying various and sometimes conflicting interpretations and agendas, ranging from system-level flexibility driven by marketisation, technological innovation, and efficiency goals to pedagogical and personal flexibility, emphasising the development of students as responsive, critical, and autonomous individuals (Barnett, 2014).

Flexibility in learning and education is often viewed positively and presented as a desirable trait within higher education (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019; Hrastinski et al., 2024). It is frequently associated with distance and online learning, efforts to overcome the limitations of traditional, location-bound education, and enable ‘any-time-anyplace’ learning. Through this, flexible education can support individuals whose circumstances make participation in traditional, location-dependent education difficult, including those tied to a specific location by work, family, or other commitments. Flexible education involves adapting education to the student’s needs, thereby addressing various needs and preferences (such as disabilities). As a result, flexible education is often linked to increasing accessibility and inclusion. Moreover, flexibility is associated with a high level of learner-centeredness and autonomy (Barua & Lockee, 2024) which often results in students having more choices, such as attendance options, delivery methods and modalities.

While flexibility is portrayed as a desirable and progressive feature of modern education, these narratives also invite critique, reveal limitations, and raise important questions.

Flexibility is relative and cannot be defined as a normative value in which every student participates and experiences it in the same way (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019). What is perceived as flexibility by one person may be experienced as rigidity by another (Willems, 2005).

As attention to flexible learning in higher education is growing, a deeper inquiry into its conceptual foundations and practical implications is called for. Veletsianos & Houlden (2019) argue that despite its long-standing presence in distance education, flexibility remains under-theorised and often treated as a *transparent solution to educational challenges*. They conclude with a series of critical questions that highlight the need for further research: “*What aspects of education can be made more flexible, and how can they be made more flexible? Which ones benefit learners the most? Who benefits from further flexibility and why? What are the limits of flexibility?*” (p. 462). In addition, Barua and Lockee’s (2024) selective review of strategies for incorporating flexibility into higher education course design underscores the importance of accounting for the challenges instructors face, such as workload.

Given this backdrop, the present study explores how flexibility is understood and enacted by university teachers, some of whom are also conducting research into higher education teaching, within regular degree programmes. Rather than relying on immediate solutions that might overlook situated beliefs and practices, the study investigates teachers’ meaning-making of flexibility through two workshops. The workshops invited participants to reflect on their own practices, negotiate interpretations, and consider how flexibility might align with pedagogical values and institutional contexts. By doing so, this paper seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ: How do university teachers and researchers construct the meaning of flexible learning in higher education? In this study, we do not consider flexibility as a predefined educational feature, but rather as a dynamic, negotiated practice embedded in pedagogical intentions, institutional frameworks, and relational contexts (Gourlay et al., 2021; Hodgson & McConnell, 2019). The study presented in this paper constitutes the initial and exploratory phase of a development and research initiative on flexible learning. Situated within a Danish university context, the project is anchored in a pedagogical model of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which emphasises collaboration, student autonomy, and engagement with real-world issues. By exploring how flexibility can be interpreted and enacted in accordance with these principles, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to imagine new futures for higher education and critically assess trending concepts and discourses.

Flexible learning as a point of departure

While the term 'flexibility' is widely used in educational discourse, it remains a multifaceted and contested concept. As outlined in the introduction, flexibility is often associated with student-centred approaches and learner autonomy. Collis and Moonen, for example, describe the core idea of flexibility as *learner choice in different aspects of the learning experience*. It is frequently described in terms of various types and dimensions – such as time, space, pace, content, and assessment. These dimensions depend on the choices available to students and thus become a matter of decision-making power among students, teachers, and institutions (Gordon, 2014). Yet the meanings vary across contexts and stakeholders. To provide a conceptual foundation for this study, this section outlines key interpretations of flexible learning.

The most widely recognised interpretation of flexibility involves offering learners *temporal-spatial flexibility* (Hrastinski et al., 2024; Lockee & Clark-Stallkamp, 2022). Time flexibility allows learners to start and access courses at their convenience, while pacing flexibility enables students to control when they submit assignments and complete courses. Spatial flexibility means that students can choose where to participate, such as from home or at school. One of the fundamental challenges of temporal-spatial flexibility is the considerable demands it places on both teachers and students. For students, flexibility necessitates a high level of self-direction, motivation, and digital proficiency (Samarawickrema, 2005). Thus, it is associated with a risk of decreased students' sense of belonging and increased dropout, delay, and social isolation (Lockee & Clark-Stallkamp, 2022; Naidu, 2017). For teachers, flexible delivery formats often require more time, technological skills, and the adoption of various pedagogical scaffolding than traditional teaching (Hrastinski et al., 2024). Furthermore, high pacing flexibility poses challenges to maintaining coherence, progression, and learning quality, and to the application of collaborative learning approaches (Chen, 2003; Hrastinski et al., 2024).

Moreover, Hrastinski et al. (2024) distinguish between temporal-spatial flexibility and pedagogical flexibility, with the latter relating to “education that is tailored to the pedagogical needs and preferences of students” (p. 3). Such considerations may include allowing students to have a say in selecting materials and formats they engage with, as well as their preferred ways of interaction. This form of flexibility highlights the importance of university teachers acting as facilitators, demonstrating sensitivity to individual student needs, and being prepared to continuously reassess and refine their teaching. Studying distance learning, Hrastinski et al. (2024) emphasise the challenges of attaining a high level of pedagogical flexibility within a learning environment characterised by significant time-spatial flexibility.

When integrated into course design decision-making, flexibility becomes a matter of considering where, when, how, and what to learn (Barua & Lockee, 2024). However, in addition to temporal-spatial and pedagogical flexibility, which reflect different learning orientations, flexibility can also encompass personal flexibility, referring to how individuals respond to complexity, make decisions, and manage their learning processes (Barnett, 2014). Together, these different types of flexibility illustrate the broadness and complexity of the concept, ranging from structural arrangements to pedagogical choices and individual capabilities.

Methodology

This article draws upon our observations, notes, and completed handouts from two workshops attended by approximately 35 participants in total. First, we present the context of our study. Subsequently, we share the workshop artefacts developed to facilitate discussion around flexibility.

Context

The workshops were conducted within Aalborg University (AAU), a Danish university context distinguished by its institution-wide pedagogical model of problem- and project-based learning. The pedagogical approach at the educational institution is translated into the following guiding principles:

1. The *problem* constitutes the starting point guiding the student's learning process
2. *Project organisation* establishes the framework for problem-based learning
3. *Courses* support the project work
4. *Collaboration* – with co-student, supervisor and external partners - serves as a key driver

5. *Exemplarity* of the project ensures that students will acquire knowledge and competences which are applicable in a wider context
6. Students are responsible for their own learning achievement (Askehave et al., 2015)

In practice, the pedagogical model is implemented differently across the university to suit various programmes and contexts. As a general guideline, 50% of students' time is allocated to project work, with the remaining 50% dedicated to coursework that supports their project efforts. In their project activities, students have considerable autonomy in organising their work and managing collaboration, including deciding the timing, location, and frequency of meetings. Although student collaboration practices vary widely, most students prefer meeting in person with their groups, either on campus or at home (Sørensen, 2022). The coursework is usually conducted synchronously and on-site. Therefore, online lectures and group activities are the exception rather than the norm.

Further, four additional principles have been developed to guide the use of digital teaching and learning at the university (Aalborg University, 2021). The principles reflect a hybrid, interconnected reality that encompasses both physical and digital spaces, educational settings and external work environments, and formal and informal learning contexts. The first principle, *Variation*, emphasises the importance of ensuring that students experience a wide range of learning activities across different stages of their education and the benefits of doing so. The principle of *Collaboration and Openness* highlights opportunities for students to engage in new forms of collaboration beyond coursework and project work, including stakeholder engagement, cross-collaboration, and networks. Third, *co-determination and empowerment* are reflected in students' experiences of involvement and engagement in their educational choices, primarily through participatory project management. The last principle, *inclusion*, reflects the values of a quality, appreciative, and respectful study culture by focusing on accessibility, diversity, and flexibility. Surprisingly, perhaps, the principles do not explicitly focus on the digital or technology itself; instead, they describe a value-based approach centred on how digital tools can expand opportunities and support organisational and pedagogical values.

Rooted in humanist and emancipatory perspectives on education, both PBL and Networked Learning (NL) share foundational values, including collaboration, learner autonomy, and engagement with real-world societal issues (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2016; Ryberg, 2019). These approaches emphasise the importance of relational learning, critical inquiry, and responsiveness to context. While PBL is typically embedded within formal educational structures and NL often extends beyond institutional boundaries, both frameworks offer complementary perspectives on how learning can be organised to support flexibility, meaningful participation, and distributed knowledge-building.

Workshop artefacts and dialogues

University teachers' and researchers' meaning-making of flexibility was explored through optional workshops of 1.5–2 hours. Two workshops were offered, supporting collective sharing and negotiation of experiences and meaning. Both workshops were framed as part of a development and research project titled "*Flexible education and facilitation in problem-based learning*" at (name of university) in Denmark. One workshop was conducted as part of a one-day formal event focused on higher education teaching and learning at the university, attended by university teachers and researchers. Approximately 20 participants attended the workshop. Another workshop was held as part of a strategic event lasting two days, targeting employees affiliated with the university's pedagogical hub. Approximately 15 participants attended, mainly researchers within problem-based learning. Below, we describe the artefacts developed for the workshops to cultivate reflection and dialogue on flexibility.

Flexible learning barometer

The flexible learning barometer was developed as a visual and reflective tool to help participants identify and discuss the degree of flexibility in their teaching practices. It comprises a set of dimensions, each represented as a continuum from fixed to flexible (Figure 1). The barometer reflects thinking about a phenomenon across different dimensions that may be present to varying degrees (Stenalt, 2021). In addition to serving as a visual tool to illustrate patterns, the dimensions of flexibility function as lenses for critical reflection. First, participants are asked to identify the current flexibility profile of a course or teaching activity. Next, participants are asked to adjust the barometer to reflect future intentions and explore nuances by adjusting the flexibility up or down.

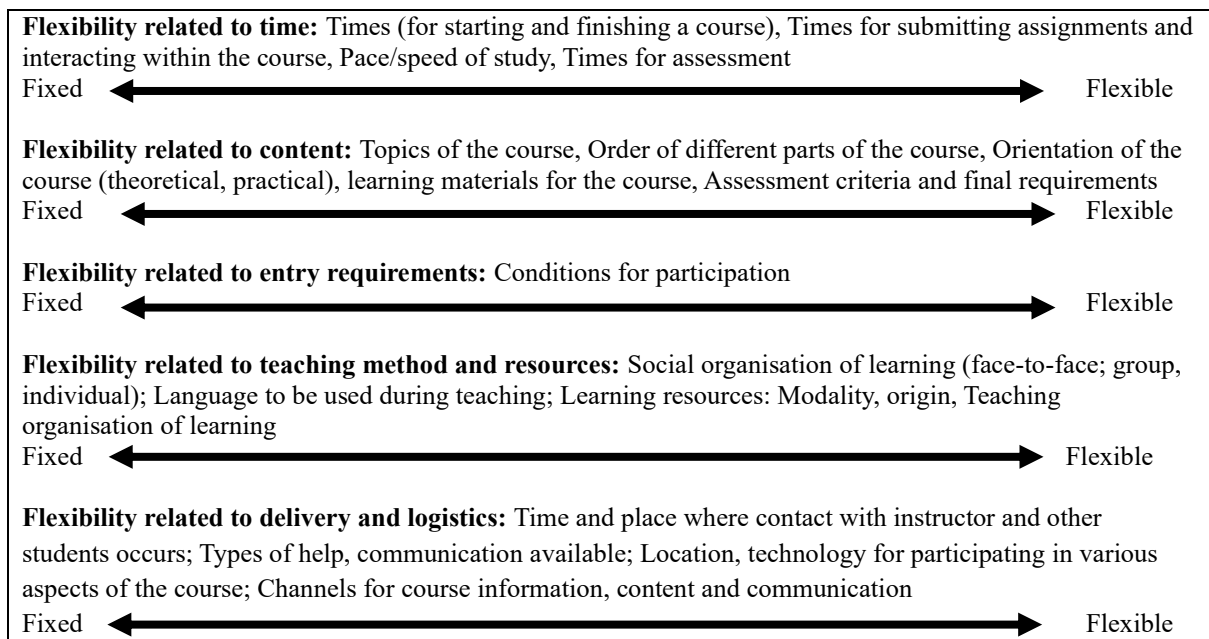


Figure 1: The flexible learning barometer. Flexibility dimensions are inspired by Collis and Moonen (2002)

Personal entry point

The *personal entry point* establishes an exploratory space for dialogue that extends beyond the limitations of time and spatial dimensions. The artefact structures the dialogue around two guiding questions:

1. When did you last demonstrate flexibility?
2. What does flexibility mean in the context of work and education?

Before discussing the questions, participants are invited to jot down their individual thoughts. The first question serves as an open personal entry point, aiming to illustrate the breadth of associations and experiences related to flexibility within and beyond educational contexts. The second question narrows the focus, shifting the emphasis towards participants’ understandings of flexibility in professional and pedagogical settings. This approach helped surface diverse interpretations of flexibility and positioned participants’ lived experiences as a starting point for pedagogical inquiry

The relationship matrix

The *relationship matrix* allows participants to explore how flexibility supports, enhances or challenges institutional frameworks and values. Figure 2 illustrates a matrix exploring the relationship between flexibility and (name of university) PBL.

Pedagogical principle/ Flexibility dimension	The problem as point of departure	Projects organised in groups	The project is supported by courses	Collaboration - groups, supervisor, external partners	Exemplarity	Student responsibility for learning	Variation	Collaboration and openness	Co-determination and Empowerment	Inclusion
Time										
Location										
Pace										
Pedagogical flexibility										
Personal flexibility										
Optional: Suggest a dimension										

Figure 2: Relationship matrix used to explore how different dimensions of flexibility intersect with pedagogical principles of PBL and institutional digital values

Findings

The key insights from the workshop sessions are derived from participants’ notes and our documentation of the dialogues. The section is structured around the artefacts and concludes with a model illustrating key elements in the construction of the meaning of flexibility by teachers and researchers.

Dialogue fostered by the flexibility barometer

Beyond the flexibility barometer, participants engaged in discussions about balancing common ground and individual needs. This included exploring the flip side of flexibility and, conversely, the flip side of common ground. The conversation highlighted how more flexible learning objectives were seen as a way to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration and thereby reduce risks. Additionally, increased flexibility in timing and access was considered beneficial for accommodating complex projects that do not fit neatly into traditional semester schedules. At the same time, participants expressed concern about preserving academic progression, noting that excessive flexibility in access or sequencing of topics could potentially compromise coherence and learning outcomes.

The barometer also facilitated peer exchange, with participants sharing examples of flexible practices such as flipped classrooms, video-based instruction, and multimodal learning materials. These conversations highlighted how flexibility is situationally interpreted and enacted through pedagogical design choices that offer students varied ways to engage with content. Conversely, participants identified rigid elements in their teaching environments, often tied to institutional structures such as timetables, room bookings, and formal learning goals. These constraints were not always pedagogically justified, prompting reflection on whether they stem from historical conventions or serve specific educational purposes.

The dialogue also encompassed inquiries concerning student preparedness. Participants expressed concerns regarding whether students possess the requisite competencies to effectively navigate flexible learning environments and make ‘the right decisions’ concerning their own learning. This prompted discussions on the necessity of scaffolding and progression in the types and degrees of choices provided to students, thereby ensuring that flexibility facilitates rather than hinders their learning.

Dialogue from a Personal Entry Point

The personal entry point artefact invited participants to reflect on flexibility through two guiding questions: “When did you last demonstrate flexibility?” and “What does flexibility mean in the context of work and education?” This

activity surfaced a wide range of interpretations, illustrating that flexibility is not a fixed or universally understood concept. Participants associated flexibility with physical movement (e.g., bending or stretching), with learner autonomy in deciding what, where, when, and how to engage in study, and with a loosening or absence of structure—sometimes described as a departure from the original plan. The conversations also addressed the interplay between flexibility and structure, highlighting how increased flexibility in one aspect of teaching often requires greater structure in another. Those reflections highlight how underlying structures enable flexibility and that their enactment depends on context and timing.

The dialogue among some participants centred on institutional-level flexibility. This included ideas for offering students more choice by enabling diverse educational trajectories. In this context, the student learning journey was likened to a choice-based video game, where players make decisions at key points to shape their path toward completion. Others focused on the teaching situation, highlighting how flexibility can be planned or improvised, such as adapting lesson plans, postponing deadlines, or responding to individual student needs. In these cases, flexibility was seen as a form of care and responsiveness, requiring preparation and pedagogical sensitivity.

Participants reflected on how short-term responsiveness to students' needs—such as adjusting deadlines or accommodating requests—can be perceived as supportive and caring. However, several voices cautioned that such practices may, over time, risk undermining students' learning by removing productive friction and challenge. Flexibility, in this sense, was discussed not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a temporal negotiation between immediate relief and long-term educational value.

The conversations also revisited experiences from emergency teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how short-term solutions, though necessary, had long-term implications for student engagement, coherence, and learning outcomes. These reflections underscored the importance of considering both immediate and extended temporal horizons when designing for flexibility, and of critically assessing whether flexibility serves educational goals or inadvertently compromises them.

The dialogue also touched on power dynamics. One participant described a change in flexibility as a reopening of the educational contract and as requiring a renegotiation of responsibilities and power dynamics among students and teachers.

Finally, flexibility was described as a form of variation and disruption, intended to expose students to diverse experiences and challenges. One participant metaphorically likened this to 'tempering glass', suggesting that flexibility, when thoughtfully enacted, can strengthen learners by confronting them with complexity and unpredictability.

Dialogues fostered by the relation matrix

The relationship matrix was designed to help participants explore how different dimensions of flexibility intersect with the pedagogical principles of PBL and the university's digital values.

Overall, participants linked flexibility to the principle of problem orientation, noting that students' ability to define and shape their own project problems inherently involves a high degree of flexibility. Similarly, the principle of co-determination and empowerment was seen as aligned with flexibility, particularly in how students manage and coordinate their group work.

In contrast, collaboration was often described as a less flexible element of PBL. Participants emphasised that project work typically involves close, face-to-face interaction and mutual dependency, which can be disrupted by increased temporal-spatial flexibility, such as asynchronous or online collaboration. This raised questions about how flexibility might alter the nature of collaboration and whether individual freedom can coexist with collective responsibility.

Asking, in general, how flexibility supports, improves, or challenges PBL via the relationship matrix proved too broad and abstract. However, relating it to a specific teaching practice sparked meaningful dialogues. This confirms that flexibility, in itself, is a broad, somewhat 'empty' concept; it gains significance when connected to a particular situation. Despite emerging from dialogues around the matrix, some PBL principles were interpreted as aligned with the idea of flexibility, while others were perceived as inflexible.

Summation of findings

The workshop-based dialogues revealed that university teachers and researchers conceptualise flexibility not as an objective, fixed feature, but as a situated, negotiated practice. Rather than being merely a logistical arrangement, flexibility emerged as a pedagogical and relational construct—shaped by institutional structures, teaching values, and educators' responsiveness to students' needs and the specific context.

Figure 3 synthesises these insights by illustrating ten interrelated aspects of teachers’ meaning-making of flexibility. Combined, these aspects underscore that flexibility is deeply context-dependent and requires careful calibration to support coherence, inclusion, and meaningful learning.

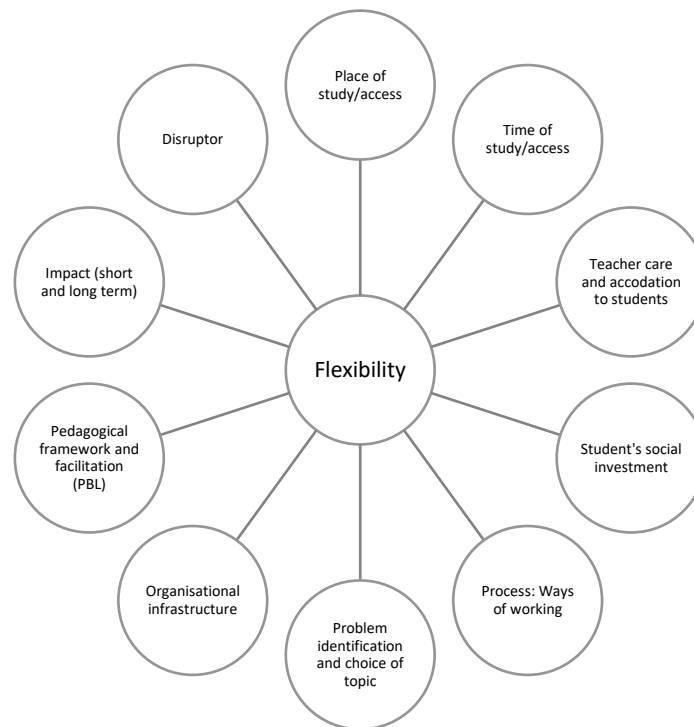


Figure 3: Flexible learning elements emerged in workshop dialogues among teachers and researchers in a PBL context

An aspirational view of flexibility

In an era of evolving technologies and demands for innovative pedagogies that advance flexibility, the question of *why* flexibility is needed often remains absent (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019). The two workshops demonstrated ways to open conversations about education. Rather than focusing on which technologies to use or how to convert onsite courses to online formats, the workshop dialogues centred on the role of flexibility and what educators aim to achieve through flexibility. This stands in contrast to other contexts, where discussions tend to prioritise digital tools over pedagogical values and purposes (Fawns, 2022)

The artefacts developed for the workshops encouraged university teachers and researchers to reflect critically on the *why* of flexibility. Figure 3 outlines the elements identified in the study that both constrain and inform adaptations of flexibility. It highlights the pivotal role of temporalities in negotiating the *how*, *when*, and *what* of flexibility. Each temporal factor appears equally relevant, yet the study identifies a clash between market demands, which favour short-term perspectives, and educational objectives, typically framed within long-term horizons. This tension invites further exploration of perspectives that may be missing, such as those related to sustainability, equity, and the evolving role of educators.

Moreover, the figure underscores the entangled nature of flexibility (Fawns, 2022). A meaningful account of flexible education and course design requires a complex analysis that goes beyond delivery formats and learning activities to include teachers’ working conditions and the broader institutional context. Since teachers and students are key agents in shaping flexibility, it is essential to engage them in exploring these entanglements in greater depth.

This study challenges simplistic discourses that treat flexibility as universally desirable or an easily implemented feature. Instead, it reveals flexibility as a multifaceted construct, temporally and relationally dependent, embedded in pedagogical frameworks, and enacted through situated practices and technologies. By extending the temporal lens from a within-course perspective to a long-term view, the study surfaces educators' concerns about how high degrees of flexibility in specific dimensions may inadvertently harm students over time. These reflections support

prior research calling for greater attention to the consequences of flexibility and its alignment with educational values and goals.

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