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The Lived Experience of Flexible Education – Theory, Policy and Practice

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Keywords

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The range of rationales that underpin conceptions of flexible education, and the re-making over time of the official meaning of flexibility in national education policy, have led to the point where flexibility might be found, or be required, in nearly every aspect of Australian higher education. This paper seeks to identify those rationales and the development of public policy rhetoric that have framed the development of the meaning of flexible education over time in an Australian context. By considering the intersection of theoretical and policy perspectives on flexible education with the realities of teaching and learning practice in the discipline context of engineering, this paper proposes the essential importance of individual context and agency in the making of real meaning from, and creating practical boundaries around, the otherwise tenuous definitions of flexibility often offered by institutional policy.

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Introduction

In many countries, including Australia, the umbrella term "flexible education", incorporating flexible learning, flexible teaching and other related terms, has come into common usage in higher education. There is no universally agreed definition of flexible education (Casey & Wilson 2005; Kirkpatrick 1997; Ling et al. 2001; Morrison & Pitfield 2006; Nicoll 1998; Normand et al. 2008; Nunan 1996; Sappey 2005). The call for "flexibility" has emerged as a response to a range of needs from a range of stakeholders, at different times and in many contexts. The literature suggests a diverse array of drivers for flexibility. This paper seeks to identify those rationales and the public-policy rhetoric that have framed the developing meaning of flexible education over time in Australia. By considering the intersection of theoretical and policy perspectives on flexible education with the realities of teaching and learning in a specific discipline context, this paper proposes the importance of individual context and agency in making meaning from, and creating boundaries around, the otherwise tenuous definitions of flexibility often offered by institutional policy.

Flexible education – multiple meanings

The literature on flexible education can be categorised into two broad groups: meta-analyses, which identify aspects of flexibility (Casey & Wilson 2005; Collis & Moonen 2001; Ling et al. 2001; Mayes 2006; Normand & Littlejohn 2006), and/or individual case studies (Lindberg & Olofsson 2006; Morrison & Pitfield 2006; Sappey 2005; Willems 2005), which provide more detail of how aspects of flexibility are implemented. The approaches to operationalising aspects of flexible education are almost endless, incorporating, but not limited to:

- **time** – program start time, finish time, length/pace of program, timing of assessment points, number of annual study periods etc.;
- **content** – program topics, sequence of topics, learning materials, assessment etc.;
- **access/entry requirements** – program entry and exit points, recognition of prior learning/experience, bridging/access studies, articulation with the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector etc.;
- **instructional approach/design** – social organisation of learning (group, individual/independent, face-to-face), learning styles, language(s) of instruction, modality of learning resources (lecture notes, printed study guides, recorded lectures), origin of learning resources (teacher, students, library, Internet), methods of assessment etc.; and
- **delivery** – place(s) of study (on-campus, off-campus, online, blended, off-shore/twinning, work-based learning), opportunities for contact with instructors and/or students, methods of support, forms of help, venues for participating in aspects of the program, content delivery channels, program communication channels, access to program administrative information and processes etc.

The range of aspects for a program that might incorporate elements of flexibility is broad and, taken at face value, could lead to the conclusion that nearly any teaching and learning configuration could claim to be flexible in some regard. Just because a particular program offers

any of the aspects identified above in a non-traditional way (i.e., using video recorded lectures) if other program elements remain conventionally organised, the program as a whole is not necessarily particularly flexible (Nunan 1996). The lack of an agreed definition for flexible education may lead to a conflation of education typologies that can confuse more than illuminate (Casey & Wilson 2005; Chen 2003; Kirkpatrick 2001; Normand et al. 2008). Historically, this blurring of meaning may have equated distance with flexibility (Morrison & Pitfield 2006; Peters 2003); however, now it is likely that online will be automatically, perhaps uncritically, presumed to mean flexible (Holzl 1999; Normand et al. 2008). Even though government, institutional and other policy texts present flexible education as having an objective and understood meaning from which particular practices logically flow (Nicoll 1998), just exactly what is meant by flexible education depends on whom, when and where you ask!

Even within a single institution there may be significantly different perspectives on the theoretical meaning and practical implications of flexible education. A strong point of demarcation that is reported in the literature is level of management (Normand et al. 2008). Normand and Littlejohn (2006) identify three levels of management, with differing focus and concerns regarding flexible education:

- (1) institutional management (IM) – working at the big-picture/strategic level, often with limited concern for how objectives might be achieved;
- (2) operational management (OM) – Heads of Faculty/School and program leaders with the responsibility for achieving strategic objectives using budgetary control and resource management; and
- (3) teaching-learning management (TLM) – individual academic teaching staff who explicitly and implicitly accomplish objectives relating to flexible education through their interactions with learners.

The different management levels and their respective views on flexibility are often disconnected, mismatched and lacking a common vision, especially at the IM and TLM levels, with the OM level literally stuck in the middle and having to mediate between institutional objectives and the reality of everyday teaching and learning (Normand et al. 2008). At the IM level, policy and definitions relating to flexibility are necessarily generic (Taylor 2000), but may be of very limited value in providing guidance to those at the TLM level (Kirkpatrick 1997), where the "nitty gritty of flexible teaching and learning" must be enacted (Bigum & Rowan 2004).

Flexible education – multiple rationales

A range of espoused rationales underpins conceptions of flexible education. Notable among these is the commercialisation of higher education. As government funding declines (Kirkpatrick 2001; Morrison & Pitfield 2006) and numbers of conventional entry students plateau or decline (Casey & Wilson 2005), there is a need to compete for new student markets, particularly overseas fee-paying students (Bigum & Rowan 2004) to bolster institutional income. These new student groups may require new means of learning engagement. Non-conventional program delivery may be a response to overcrowded or limited on-campus facilities or to the availability of government incentives for flexible-delivery initiatives (Casey & Wilson 2005). It has been argued that to be effective in a world based on capitalist and competitive economic production systems, higher education needs to restructure its work practices and relationships to reflect this environment (Nunan 1996). In Australia, there is evidence of the displacement of traditional academic forms of

university administration with managerialism reminiscent of a private company (Marginson & Considine 2000; Nicoll 1997; Sappey 2005). Flexible education is seen to offer more efficient education delivery that would be attractive to institutional administrators (Bigum & Rowan 2004; Nicoll 1998), as well as providing marketing advantages to be used in local, national and international competition for students (Kirkpatrick 2001; Sappey 2005).

Flexibility may be touted as a method for catering for students in a crowded higher-education marketplace, distinguishing between students' demands and institutions' supply initiatives is often difficult. It is not clear whether students have fundamentally increased their demand for flexibility in time, place and mode of study (Casey & Wilson 2005), or whether institutions have taken the initiative in creating opportunities for students to study in different ways (Nicoll 1997). Widening access to higher education through flexible delivery modes (Morrison & Pitfield 2006; Nicoll 1997) is a way of accommodating a larger student body (Normand & Littlejohn 2006; Smith et al. 2006), but it simultaneously increases student diversity. In reality, the interconnectedness of these issues can no longer be separated: "Strategically, operating flexibly can be seen as both an offensive and defensive tactic" (Kirkpatrick 2001, p.169).

Other rationales for flexibility include those based on responding to perceived needs of industry and employers. These include targeted initiatives to reach non-conventional students to boost the supply of graduates in particular occupations or professions with shortages of practitioners (Morrison & Pitfield 2006). Flexibility may also be seen as a response to a general perception that traditional, "inflexible" models of university education do not cater for the just-in-time learning needed in a rapidly changing society (Nunan 1996).

Flexibility may be a response to government policy demands. This might include calls to achieve economic progress and competitiveness through up-skilling the workforce (Nicoll 1998; Sappey 2005), demands for increased accountability in the public funding of higher education (Kirkpatrick 2001) or a policies that declare flexibility in education "good" in its own right (Casey & Wilson 2005).

The literature contains a number of other general rationales for flexibility. It has been called a logical consequence of the change in higher education from "a pedagogical exchange to a service encounter" (Sappey, 2005, 495), where education is a market commodity (Nicoll, 1998). In its modern 'online' form, flexible education was first made possible by, and then rapidly driven by, the increasing availability of low-cost computer hardware and the Internet (Casey and Wilson, 2005, Kirkpatrick, 2001, Nunan, 1996, Sappey and Relf, 2010). For institutions, flexibility, in its various dimensions, provides a general capacity to respond to economic and political imperatives (Morrison and Pitfield, 2006).

Flexible education in Australia

While the flexible provision of education (through distance education) has a history within Australia that stretches back to the early twentieth century (National Board of Employment Education and Training 1992), the appearance of the adjective "flexible" in relation to education is relatively recent. Nicoll (1988) and Nicoll and Chappell (1998) have observed over the period 1988-1998 that the contemporary meaning of "flexible learning" in Australia has been framed, and subsequently re-framed, by the discourse surrounding a series of government policy papers and reports. The 1988 Dawkins higher-education policy white paper (Dawkins 1988) is seen as a key

development. In unifying the national system of higher education, it sought to not only to rationalise the number of institutions, but also to centralise the provision of university distance education to eight designated distance education centres (DECs). The policy sought thus to increase the quality of, and access to, distance education, with the aim of providing a more skilled workforce to drive national economic expansion (Nicoll & Chappell 1998).

A 1992 report investigating distance education in Australia (National Board of Employment Education and Training 1992) both reversed the decision to centralise university distance education, and cemented the term "flexibility" in the national higher-education discourse. While the DECs had been formed with a premise of collaboration, NEBEET argued that universities should compete to provide education opportunities that best satisfied student needs. It was observed that the emergence of information and communications technologies (ICTs) would render the DEC oligopoly model obsolete (Nunan 1996). It was also noted that the language and rationales employed in the report included competition, efficiency, access and equity and student choice, and hence "...resonated with values acceptable across a range of discourses..." (Nicoll & Chappell 1998, p.43) "...flexible learning has the virtue that it provides something for everybody!" (Nunan 1996, p.3)

The 1995 Hoare Report (Higher Education Management Review Committee 1995) reiterated the pressures facing Australian higher education. Factors identified included increased accountability for performance; competition with other universities, TAFE and private providers; reduced government funding; the impact of ICT; the increasing diversity of students; and the internationalisation of higher education (Le Grew & Calvert 1998). It foreshadowed that the future of university teaching would focus on flexibility in curriculum and delivery.

The 1998 West Report (Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs 1998) documented a significant shift in the policy intent of flexibility in higher education. While previous policy documents had focused on the organisation of higher education as a driver of national productivity and the economy, the West Report portrayed higher education itself as an economic system that needs to respond flexibly to environmental pressures and future uncertainty (Nicoll 1998). The West report cemented support for the desirability of individuals to choose '...what, how, when and where they study...' (Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs 1998, p.69), and lent weight to the valuing of higher education not for its own sake, but for how much it improved the earning capacity of individuals, corporations and the nation.

Since 1998, there have been further national reports on higher education; these have contributed to the developing meaning of flexibility in higher education. The 2003 Backing Australia's Future report (Nelson 2003) employed forms of the adjective flexible many times, but the context of flexibility had almost completely shifted to that of institutional structural flexibility, including "fostering flexible and responsive workplaces" (Nelson 2003, p.37). In advancing its industrial-relations reform agenda, the government of the time focused on higher education, including making additional university funding contingent upon universities complying with a range of industrial-relations requirements. As observed, "Flexible delivery is therefore a pedagogy and a marketing strategy as well as a form of work organisation" (Sappey 2005, p.497), and "The urge to make our universities more flexible has increased so considerably that one can speak of a campaign towards more flexibility at many universities" (Peters 2003, p.15).

The most recent report to influence Australian higher education policy discourse is the 2008 Bradley Review (Bradley et al. 2008). This wide-ranging report recapitulates all former policy conceptions of flexibility, as well as identifying new ones, including:

- flexible provision of higher education, particularly as a means for reaching otherwise uneconomic student markets;
- a flexible system that responds rapidly to stakeholder wants;
- flexibility derived from ICTs;
- flexibility in institutional staff working arrangements (this is noted as desirable, but also as having negative impacts on certain staff);
- development of graduates who think and operate flexibly;
- more flexible, less bureaucratic higher-education legislation;
- institutional strategic plans with in-built flexibility to respond to opportunities;
- flexible articulation of study pathways between the TAFE and university sectors; and
- more flexibility in the Australian qualifications framework (AQF) that defines generic qualification types and learning outcomes.

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) merit a separate examination as powerful drivers of new modes of flexibility in higher education. It has been noted that ICTs offer potential benefits to both students and teachers, but that such benefits are often presumed to accrue automatically, and that potential downsides, particularly impacts on the nature of teachers' work, are missing from any serious discussion (Sappey & Relf 2010). Email and online course discussion forums enable students to ask questions (and demand answers) of teaching staff at any time of the day (or night), on any day of the week and from any time zone. An educational technology (such as lecture recording) which might initially be a localised innovation offering value in a specific learning context may gradually become expected of all teaching staff, even where it might add marginal learning value, and might incur significant cost. Continuing changes in ICTs themselves are also continuing to change the ways in which they interact with education processes. Initially, the "static web" presented students with material they could read and copy, but the development of the "social web" (sometimes referred to as Web 2.0) means that students can now interactively communicate with many audiences, to create their own learning resources using tools including blogs, wikis, chat, social networking sites and others, and to take on roles that were formerly the principal domain of the teacher (Mathiasen & Schrum 2008).

Regardless of the rationale, and despite the lack of agreed meaning, flexibility is almost universally presented uncritically as an obvious solution to any problem. Flexible education is portrayed as inherently better than other forms of education (Bigum & Rowan 2004), as automatically leading to a more student-centred approach (Holzl 1999) and as an unproblematic fix to perceived problems (Nicoll 1997). In the Bradley Review, references to flexibility can be found frequently in conjunction with other adjectives that are intended to be desirable: for example, "flexible and collaborative", "flexible and adaptable" and "flexible and innovative". The identification of some of the rationales for flexible education and the charting of the development of the meaning of "flexibility" in Australian national policy have been presented here essentially descriptively; this is all that is really possible in the space available. This approach clearly calls for follow-on work to more fully analyse, discuss and critique the political, institutional and societal assumptions behind the various calls for flexibility in higher education, and the intended and implied meanings attributed to flexibility arising from them.

Engineering education at Deakin University – flexible education in practice

As an illustration, this section presents an account of the author's involvement in flexible engineering education over more than a decade, structured using the dimensions of flexibility espoused by Deakin's current teaching and learning plan.

In Australia, Deakin University is a major provider of distance and online education. It teaches on four campuses located in three cities in the State of Victoria. It was one of the former eight designated DEC's (Arger 1993). With a founding Vice-Chancellor demonstrating a strong commitment to distance education (Jevons 1984) Deakin saw itself as a dual-mode university, with some degree of separation between its teaching methods and materials used for on- and off-campus teaching. The use of distance-education methodologies and materials for both student cohorts gathered momentum in the early to mid-1990s under the strategic umbrella of flexible teaching and learning, and with a growing use of online systems for learning delivery and communication.

At that time, Deakin articulated its "vision of flexible teaching and learning" (Deakin University 1995, p.v):

The University's objectives for its educational programs are to:

- use contemporary communication technologies to provide learning opportunities for students, whether on- or off-campus, in the workplace or at home;
- provide flexible learning opportunities for students to overcome barriers of distance, location and circumstance;
- provide opportunities to students with diverse backgrounds and relatively wide ability ranges; and
- provide opportunities for those students who, because of social, cultural, economic and geographic factors, have particular needs and to whom Deakin has been traditionally responsive.

In moving to a more flexible open-campus learning approach, Deakin seeks to utilise the full range of learning strategies available through interactive technologies. Deakin's approach to flexible open-campus learning is one in which the interaction between teacher and learner, and the place, time, modes and pace of study are determined as flexible responses to particular mixtures of the circumstances of the teacher and the learner, the subject matter and the learning context.

By 2008 (Deakin University 2008a, p.5), this had become:

Deakin University's teaching and learning agenda dictates a new approach to the integration of traditional classroom teaching, distance education and online education in ways most appropriate to the needs of its diverse student cohorts and the changing student environment. Deakin's vision of an integrated approach to flexible education is an environment which includes, where appropriate, choice in:

- the time (including flexible entry and exit points) at which study occurs;
- the pace at which the learning proceeds;
- the place (both physical and virtual) in which study is conducted;
- the content that is studied;
- the learning style adopted by the learner;
- the forms of assessment employed;
- the option to collaborate with others or to learn independently;
- how teaching is staffed; and
- the mix of the above used in any given course or unit.

The development of Deakin's vision of flexible education mirrors the trend in the national policy discourse over the same period from one of concern with equity and access in higher education, to one that focuses on responding to student desires using a palette of options. While "equity and access for individuals and groups who might not otherwise enjoy the benefits that flow from participation in higher education" (Deakin University 2008b, p.3) is one of Deakin's current "core commitments", matters of equity and access are now notable by their absence from the current vision of flexible education. Although flexible education features in the current university teaching and learning plan, the university currently has no policies specifically relating to flexible education.

In Australia, the standard entry into professional engineering practice is via the completion of a four-year Bachelor of Engineering (BE) undergraduate program. Before 1983, Deakin offered a conventional on-campus BE program until funding was withdrawn by the government of the day. After a time, Deakin proposed to offer new engineering programs based on "flexible education", and after gaining both political and professional support, a new School of Engineering and Technology was constituted in 1991, with commencing student enrolments beginning in 1992 (Briggs 1995). The undergraduate programs were on-campus and full-time for conventional-entry students. Mature-age students could study the programs off-campus and/or part-time, using print-based study materials supplemented by an array of learning resources that varied by unit, including video presentations, home experimental kits, computer-aided learning packages and Internet-based laboratory experiments. More recently, equipment installed in some classrooms has permitted recording of the audio and/or video of on-campus lectures for later download by students. The program curriculum was developed to be modular, permitting part-time students to study at a pace less than full-time (Palmer 2001). Some aspects of flexibility of the Deakin engineering programs are considered in more detail below.

Flexibility in time (including flexible entry and exit points)

While off-campus students might exercise significant control over the time at which they study, all students must conform to a semester timetable that includes fixed dates for assignment submission, mandatory laboratory work and examinations. A modular curriculum allows students to exercise some control over the sequence of their studies, and provides for students to commence the program at the beginning of each semester. However, this flexibility is constrained by prerequisite requirements and unit availability – most engineering units are offered in only one semester each year. In 2008, Deakin implemented a trimester system, elevating a truncated summer semester to the same status as the other two semesters by shortening the teaching period to twelve weeks and removing the exam-preparation week. One of the purported benefits was flexibility for students to accelerate their programs using the third study period in the year. In

practice, in the first two years of the trimester system (2008-2009), the School of Engineering offered no undergraduate study units during the third trimester. For 2010, only four for-credit undergraduate study units were offered in the third trimester, and then only in off-campus mode.

Flexibility in pace

At the program level, students can accelerate their studies (or catch up on failed/missed units) using the summer trimester, but, as noted, for engineering this is for the most part only a theoretical possibility. Students with a good academic record may be permitted to enrol in more than a full-time load (four units per semester). Part-time enrolment can be used by students to fit study around work, family or other commitments, but this extends the time period to complete a degree. If a student is in receipt of government study support, they must maintain at least a 75 percent full-time study load, or they may lose their funding. The university sets a maximum candidature rule for students that places a limit on program completion time. For a BE, regardless of pace of study, the maximum candidature period is nine years. Students whose pace of study progress puts them at risk of not meeting the maximum candidature rule may be expelled from the program.

At the semester/unit level, there are only limited options for varying study pace. Due dates for assessment items are essentially fixed, with limited scope for negotiation through the granting of special consideration for students in difficult circumstances. The lecture timetable for a unit is essentially fixed. Students might elect to study at a different pace through the semester, but may find themselves ahead or behind key dates, or missing key learning activities, that are premised on the pre-determined class timetable.

Flexibility in place

While on-campus enrolled students are expected to attend classes as scheduled in a timetable, off-campus students have flexibility in where they undertake their study using print, online and other learning resources. In engineering education, the need to expose students to laboratory equipment remains an issue for off-campus study, generally requiring off-campus students to attend on-campus laboratory sessions. The use of Internet-based, remotely controlled laboratory equipment for experimental work is possible, but is expensive to develop and maintain. In Australia, in addition to required on-campus attendance for essential practical work, the engineering professional body that accredits undergraduate programs (Engineers Australia) requires that off-campus students attend mandatory on-campus sessions of two weeks for each full-time equivalent year of their program (Palmer et al. 2008).

Too much flexibility in place of study can be problematic. In the initial phase of the new School of Engineering and Technology, on-campus students (primarily direct from secondary school) were provided with the off-campus study materials and no lectures were offered, with tutorials being the only direct contact with teaching staff. Very soon, on-campus students demanded that lectures be run – they wanted more personal contact. The availability of flexible learning resources has also caused problems when off-campus students with no prospect of completing the mandatory attendance requirements nevertheless enrol in the program (for example, students currently incarcerated).

Flexibility in content

The BE program at Deakin contains 32 units of study, all prescribed except for four units which students may elect to study from any on offer, subject to program rules about minimum and maximum numbers of units from particular year levels. In response to feedback from the professional body that the program needed more technical depth, the engineering program now specifies two specialist engineering units as "highly recommended electives". The learning objectives, content, teaching methods and assessment for all units are specified in advance, though some assessment tasks that involve research elements may permit students some choice in the topics that they study. Students may enrol in a double-degree program that combines engineering with a limited range of other discipline areas, but the need to fit the core of both programs into a five-year period results in the loss of all elective unit choices.

Flexibility in learning style

With learning objectives, content, teaching methods and assessment for all units specified in advance, the options for variation in learning style are limited. The existence of print resources for all units, and their availability to on-campus students, provide options for students whose learning preference is reading. Where available, recorded lectures provide support for learners with a preference for listening. For students with disabilities, the central university Disability Resource Centre facilitates access to accessible course materials, alternative assessment arrangements, assistive technology, adaptive technology laboratories etc.

Flexibility in assessment

With assessment details for all units specified in advance of the semester, there is limited scope for flexibility. As noted previously, certain types of assessment permit students to select a topic to research and report on. There is an institutional equity requirement for "comparability of assessment" between all student groups enrolled in a unit. In practice, this is most easily achieved by making assessment identical for all modes of study; this eases the unit administrative and marking burden, but at the expense of not being able to optimise the assessment to best match the study mode.

Flexibility in collaboration

While off-campus students are free to study independently, it is not possible to complete the program in isolation. Working productively in a team environment is a graduate attribute that is specified by both Deakin University and Engineers Australia. The program must contain instances where students are required to work collaboratively. Where group work is part of an assessment task, the assessment-comparability policy generally means that the group-work requirement applies to all students. Advances in electronic communication technologies mean that it may be possible for students to collaborate at a distance.

Flexibility in staffing

While not directly related to students, staffing issues nevertheless influence the student experience. At an institutional level, the introduction of a trimester system is as much about increasing the productivity of staff and other resources as about increasing opportunities for students to study. As noted above, this is yet to translate into any additional unit offerings for BE students. All Australian universities use a percentage of casual (non-tenured) academic staff in teaching. These staff are normally paid only for their class contact hours, and not for preparation or extra student consultation time. Deakin reports that about 20 percent of its academic staff is casual, based on "full-time equivalent" (FTE) employment. It is known that FTE figures understate the actual number of casual academic staff, that in Australia 40 to 50 percent of teaching is performed by casual staff and that the poor funding and development of casual staff negatively affects the student learning environment (Percy et al. 2008).

Impacts of flexibility on teaching and learning practice

The author's own experience in the flexible delivery of engineering education demonstrates that a myriad of practical issues and constraints places many pragmatic limits on potential flexibility in teaching and learning. The need to comply with a range of internal policy requirements (often with no explicit connection to flexible education) and a range of requirements imposed by external stakeholders (such as program-accrediting professional bodies) enforces practical boundaries on flexibility. Realistic marketing of available "flexibility" to prospective students is required, lest they have false expectations, and ultimately, experience disappointment and dissatisfaction. Flexibility, as a general concept, might be desirable, but a certain level of structure, certainty and stability is required for efficiency in planning and delivering educational services, at both the institutional and individual staff levels, and for the honest management of student expectations. To move beyond abstract claims with little practical utility, institutions need to declare in detail what they actually mean by flexibility to all stakeholders, and then provide the resources (policy, financial, infrastructure and human) to realise it.

Conclusion – making meaning

The interpretations of flexible education are variable and contested. They have been spawned by a wide range of sometimes overlapping rationales and a national policy discourse that has evolved over more than two decades, to the point where every aspect of higher education in Australia must seemingly embody flexibility. Such an all-encompassing conception is often mirrored in institutional rhetoric and policy regarding flexibility, sometimes implying that an expansive palette of combinations of flexibility is available to students. Views of flexibility held by different management levels within the same institution are often disconnected – with executive rhetoric describing a conception of flexibility stretched so far that it becomes tenuous and insubstantial, leaving teaching staff without concrete direction to make flexibility meaningful in their discipline. Taking the lead from the central importance of context in giving meaning to flexibility (Casey & Wilson 2005; Kirkpatrick 1997; Ling et al. 2001; Morrison & Pitfield 2006; Sappey 2005), and

from the primacy of individual agency over institutional rhetoric, policy and technology in the "making real" of flexible education (Bigum & Rowan 2004; Errington 2004; Nicoll & Chappell 1998; Normand et al. 2008), this paper proposes that the meaning and value of flexible education are not solely defined by policy documents and standardised online course-management systems. Rather, their essential aspects emerge from the context-dependent lived experience of teachers and students engaged in the endeavour of flexible teaching and learning in their specific disciplines.

Flexibility is often presented as desirable in its own right, with a pick-and-choose array of options for learning and interaction on offer. However, there are often real trade-offs between aspects of flexibility that mean that the various dimensions of flexibility are not fully independent. The explicit choices made by academic staff in the design and operation of their learning environments also crystallise many of the possible options into real limits on the parameters of flexibility. Pressing a generic institutional-policy template for flexibility, or a model distilled from one specific context, onto a different teaching and learning situation may not be productive or possible. Where organisational policy seeks to control the implementation of flexible education, such policy should declare its underpinning rationale(s) for flexibility; provide practical boundaries on the parameters of flexibility countenanced; identify the internal structural and external environmental factors that may constrain flexibility; and acknowledge the central importance of academic agency, through the design and enactment of the learning environment, in making the lived experience of flexible education real for students and staff. This paper has taken a largely descriptive stance, drawing attention to the historical emergence of flexibility in Australian higher education and reviewing its impacts on one teaching and learning environment. It is hoped that this stimulates reflection and critique on the assumptions underlying the near-universal call for flexibility, the evolving and often tenuous meanings attributed to flexibility and its very real impacts, in all its guises, on pedagogical practice.

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