

Edited by Michaela Martin and Uliana Furiv



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Educational Planning

SDG-4: Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education – from Policy to Practice

Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education



Edited by Michaela Martin and Uliana Furiv

SDG-4: Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education – from Policy to Practice

An international comparative analysis

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Foreword

It is my pleasure to introduce IIEP-UNESCO's publication *SDG-4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education – From Policy to Practice*, which presents the findings from IIEP-UNESCO's comprehensive comparative research project on this topic of high policy relevance.

The traditional focus of higher education policy and planning has been on the provision of study places. Flexible learning pathways (FLPs) move the attention to a more student-centred approach, emphasizing student choice with regard to diverse entry, re-entry and exit points in order to earn post-secondary qualifications. This way it mirrors the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) and the Education 2030 Agenda, which call on all countries to develop education systems that emphasize the recognition of all forms of learning and to offer FLPs. The UNESCO *Futures of Education* report re-emphasizes this objective by stating that 'future policy agendas for higher education will need to better account for non-traditional educational trajectories and pathways'. And the topic is ever more relevant in the context of the COVID-19 global health crisis, which also brought to light the importance of flexible higher education systems and learning. Within this context, the publication hopes to offer useful lessons regarding how flexibility can make higher education (HE) systems more resilient and able to withstand future crises.

Taking into account the student perspective, IIEP-UNESCO's research has conceptualized FLPs as a continuum of entry into, progressing through, and moving out of higher education. FLPs refer to facilitated transitions between technical and vocational education and training and higher education, alternative entry modes, and flexible progression, so that students can choose the place, pace, and delivery mode of their studies, and transfer between programmes and institutions. And FLPs also encompass the combination of academic studies and work-based learning for enhanced employability. Given

Foreword

the focus in SDG-4 on equitable higher education systems, the publication pays particular attention to the effects of FLPs on disadvantaged groups.

This publication presents both a comparative analysis of effective policy options and country examples to illustrate good practices in their implementation in the area. It is meant to be a source of inspiration for national policy-makers and planners, institutional leaders, and the broader academic community at an international level. It is hoped, in particular, that it will support educational planners in moving FLPs from policy to practice.

Jordan Naidoo
IIEP Director a.i.

Abbreviations

APCL	Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (UK)
APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (Malaysia)
CAP	Career Advancement Programme (Jamaica)
CAT	credit accumulation and transfer
CBC	choice-based credit system
CEO	chief executive officer
CFT	centres for technical training in Chile (in Spanish, centros de formación técnica)
CFTLL	Centre for Technical Training in Los Lagos in Chile (in Spanish, Centro de Formación Técnica Los Lagos)
CHE	Council on Higher Education (South Africa)
CNA	National Commission for Accreditation in Chile (in Spanish, Comisión Nacional de Acreditación)
CNED	National Council for Education in Chile (in Spanish, Consejo Nacional de Educación)
COS	Centre of Occupational Studies (Jamaica)
CRUCH	Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities (in Spanish, Consejo de Rectores de las Universidades Chilenas)
CSEC	Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate
CST	Santo Tomás Corporation (Chile)
CVQ	Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (Jamaica)
DEB	Distance Education Bureau (India)
DEC	Distance Education Council (India)
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training (South Africa)
ECP	Extended Curriculum Programme (South Africa)
ECTS	European Credit and Transfer System
ENSAMC	National Higher School of Arts and Crafts of Casablanca in Morocco (in French, École nationale supérieure des Arts et Métiers de Casablanca)
FIER	Finnish Institute for Educational Research
FINEEC	Finnish Education Evaluation Centre

Abbreviations

FLPs	flexible learning pathways
GER	gross enrolment ratio
GFETQSF	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (South Africa)
HE	higher education
HEART	Human Employment and Resource Training (Jamaica)
HEIs	higher education institutions
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (South Africa)
HERA	Higher Education and Research Act (United Kingdom)
IGNOU	Indira Gandhi National Open University (India)
IIEP-UNESCO	UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning
IITs	Indian Institutes of Technology
IPs	professional institutes in Chile (in Spanish, institutos profesionales)
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
LANS	Liberal Arts and Natural Science programme at the University of Birmingham (UK)
LFS	London Film School (UK)
LLE	Lifelong Loan Entitlement (UK)
LLL	lifelong learning
LMD	Bachelor-Masters-Doctorate (Licence-Master-Doctorat) system
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MCTP	Qualifications Framework for Vocational Training in Chile (in Spanish, Marco de Cualificaciones Técnico Profesional)
MHRD	Ministry of Human Resource Development (India)
MoE	Ministry of Education (Chile)
MoEC	Ministry of Education and Culture (Finland)
MOEY&I	Ministry of Education, Youth and Information (Jamaica)
MOHE	Ministry of Higher Education (Malaysia)
MOOC	massive open online courses
MQA	Malaysian Qualifications Agency
MQF	Malaysian Qualifications Framework

Abbreviations

NAAC	National Assessment and Accreditation Council (India)
NCTVET	National Council on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (Jamaica)
ND	no data
NEP	National Education Policy (India)
NIEPA	National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (India)
NIRF	National Institutional Ranking Framework (India)
NLRD	National Learners' Records Database (South Africa)
NPTEL	National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (India)
NQF	national qualifications framework
NSTA	National Service Training Agency (Jamaica)
NVQ	national vocational qualification (Jamaica)
OAD	Occupational Associate Degree (Jamaica)
ODL	open and distance learning
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OQSF	Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (South Africa)
OU	Open University (UK)
OUM	Open University Malaysia
PACE	Programme for Effective Access and Support in Chile (in Spanish, Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso Efectivo)
PSET	post-school education and training system (South Africa)
PSPs	personal study plans
PUCV	Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso (Chile)
QA	quality assurance
QAA	quality assurance agency
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (South Africa)
R&D	research and development
RPL	recognition of prior learning
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority

Abbreviations

SDE	School of Distance Education (India)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIES	Higher Education Information Service (Chile)
SINACES	National System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Chile (in Spanish, Sistema Nacional de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior)
SWAYAM	Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds programme (India)
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
UASs	universities of applied sciences (Finland)
UCJ	University Council of Jamaica
UGC	University Grants Commission (India)
UiTM	Universiti Teknologi MARA
UK	United Kingdom
Umalusi	Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (South Africa)
UNIFI	Rectors' Councils (Finland)
UoT	public university of technology (South Africa)
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia (Malaysia)
UST	University Santo Tomás (Chile)
VET	vocational educational training
VIU	Venice International University
WOU	Wawasan Open University (Malaysia)

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Executive summary

Higher education (HE) systems across the world are currently faced with a massive influx of learners with diverse needs. The number of students worldwide has more than doubled in the last two decades, reaching 235 million students in 2020. The diversification of providers has added to the complexity of HE systems and entailed, in many contexts, their fragmentation.

Yet, the increase in and diversification of providers have not matched the provision of equal opportunities for disadvantaged learners. Access to HE remains unfairly distributed and often rigid, with the wealthier segments of the population much more likely to benefit from HE than the poorest. This calls for more equitable and permeable HE systems that allow all learners to access, progress through, and complete HE, including those from disadvantaged groups.

In addition, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown that flexible HE systems can better mitigate the adverse effects of the epidemic and ensure continuity of learning. Well-articulated and flexible HE systems with strong links between formal, non-formal, and informal learning, are better equipped to support learners, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background. This is also highlighted by the United Nations Education 2030 Agenda and the UNESCO *Futures of Education* report, which call on all countries to develop HE systems that emphasize the recognition of all forms of learning and to offer flexible learning pathways (FLPs).

In the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) research project, 'flexible learning pathways' are defined as diverse pathways for getting into HE (e.g. preparatory programmes, open entry, recognition of prior learning (RPL)), pathways for getting through HE (e.g. study transfer, credit accumulation and transfer, flexible study delivery modes, and broad-based curricula with options), and pathways for getting out of HE and preparing for the labour market (e.g. combining work and study, continuous learning).

Executive summary

To date, there is limited knowledge on policies and practices that work well to enhance articulation and flexibility in HE. With this in mind, in 2018 IIEP launched the research project *SDG 4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*. The project included a stocktaking exercise of good practices, an international survey of FLP policies, instruments, and practices among UNESCO Member States, and eight in-depth country studies on Chile, Finland, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Morocco, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (UK). While the research was conceived and data collected prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the project offers useful lessons regarding how flexibility can make HE systems more resilient and able to withstand future crises.

This project represents the first truly international research to examine policies and practices facilitating and creating FLPs in HE. The resulting publication aims to support national policy-makers and decision-makers in higher education institutions (HEIs) that intend to develop or strengthen FLPs. It highlights the main findings of the project and sheds new light on policy options and good practices, in order to assist countries in the creation of more flexible HE systems, and enhance choices for learners. Given the focus in SDG-4 on equitable HE systems, the study pays particular attention to the effects of FLPs on disadvantaged groups.

Creating a favourable policy environment for flexible learning pathways

IIEP's research shows that a supportive policy environment is an important condition for FLPs. This includes a comprehensive policy for an integrated post-secondary education sector, which clearly supports pathways between vocational education and academic HE. Three of the eight countries studied as part of the project (i.e. the UK, South Africa, and Jamaica) have developed such comprehensive post-secondary policy frameworks.

This research demonstrates that FLPs are typically embedded in policies on lifelong learning, RPL, and credit accumulation and transfer but that there is often no policy approach to address FLPs comprehensively. The study therefore concludes and recommends that a holistic approach to policy on FLPs is necessary: FLPs should

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be accessible across the HE system and encompass all stages of the student journey – entry, progression, and completion.

As disadvantaged learners face more constraints, flexible conditions for access and articulation are particularly important to them. IIEP's research shows how countries use a series of alternative entry pathways, such as contextual admission and compensatory entry criteria, to benefit these learners. In general, the research shows that FLPs that support the progression and success of disadvantaged learners are less prioritized than alternative entry routes. Hence, the study calls for a clearer linkage between equity policies and policies in support of FLPs for getting into, getting through, and getting out of HE.

Constructing flexible learning pathways at different stages of the learner's journey

Collaboration between upper secondary/ vocational institutions and HEIs plays an important part in creating articulation for equitable access. The chapter on Jamaica illustrates how such linkages can be created through the prolongation of compulsory schooling, with a strong focus on technical and vocational education and training (TVET). However, articulation between short-cycle vocational programmes and academic bachelor's programmes remains infrequent. The example of Morocco shows how articulation between TVET institutions and public universities can be implemented through a national system of regulated 'bridges'.

Preparatory programmes, open entry policies, and RPL are alternative paths that promote flexible access to HE. The Finnish example shows how open studies can promote access to HE in the context of a selective higher education system.

While many of these policies are effectively introduced in the case countries, more work is required for RPL to become a mainstream access route to HE, in particular with regard to the recognition of learning acquired in non-formal and informal settings.¹ The example of

¹ In its *Guidelines on the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-Formal and Informal Learning* (UIL, 2012: 8), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning defines formal, non-formal, and informal learning as follows:

Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions, is recognized by relevant national authorities, and leads to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications, and teaching-learning requirements.

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Malaysia shows that RPL with a focus on such learning can be effectively supported through a national policy and regulatory framework.

When learners are given choices allowing them to change and transfer credits from one programme or provider to another, HE systems are able to reduce dropout and repetition. The countries involved in the study tend to facilitate the progression of learners via transfer policies and credit transfer systems. The example of Jamaica shows how a seamless credit transfer between community colleges and universities can be operated under its so-called ‘2+2’ model. Credit transfer systems, however, often suffer from regulations that limit the number of transferable credits, or HEIs have no incentive to recognize credits obtained in another HEI as they are funded on a per-student basis. Therefore, the study highlights the need to further support HEIs with enabling policies on credit transfer and funding.

Open and distance learning (ODL) plays a key role in widening access and creating continuous learning opportunities. In particular, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and micro-credentials are offering flexible opportunities that make HE more accessible to a multitude of learners, including for upskilling and reskilling purposes. But the quality of MOOCs and micro-credentials are often still questioned by accreditation bodies, HEIs, students, and employers. The Indian example highlights the need for quality assurance systems that put ODL, including MOOCs and micro-credentials, on a par with face-to-face programmes to facilitate their full recognition within degree programmes.

Flexible pathways that enable students to prepare for the labour market were found to be the least developed in terms of policy and practice. The country cases showed that, by allowing students to combine work and study, HE systems enable truly integrated work-based learning in

Non-formal learning is learning that has been acquired in addition or as an alternative to formal learning. In some cases, it is also structured according to educational and training arrangements, but more flexible. It usually takes place in community-based settings, the workplace and through the activities of civil society organizations. Through the recognition, validation, and accreditation process, non-formal learning can also lead to qualifications and other recognitions.

Informal learning is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities, and through interests and activities of individuals. Through the recognition, validation, and accreditation process, competencies gained in informal learning can be made visible and can contribute to qualifications and other recognitions. In some cases, the term experiential learning is used to refer to informal learning that focuses on learning from experience.

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their curriculum. However, in order to promote this type of learning, it needs to be recognized to the same extent as formal learning.

Supporting flexible learning pathways with appropriate governance

Regulation plays a crucial role in the implementation of FLPs. For instance, regulation is useful to guide RPL, credit transfer, and ODL/MOOCs development. However, regulations which are too detailed and rigid should be avoided, so that HEIs can adapt their academic offer to their local circumstances. Finding a balance between regulation and institutional autonomy remains a challenge. The UK example demonstrates that institutional autonomy and market forces are the main drivers in the British system for the introduction of flexibility at the HEI level but that these factors prove to be less effective in enabling system-wide change.

Quality assurance (QA) can either support or impede development of FLPs. The Chilean example shows how a restrictive QA model derived from the prestigious university sector can prevent HEIs from innovating towards more flexibility. But QA also has the potential to create trust in the quality of programmes and courses across the HE sector and so support credit transfer, for instance. In addition, QA can guide HEIs in the implementation of ODL more broadly, and MOOCs and micro-credentials more specifically, as is demonstrated in Malaysia.

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) form the backbone for flexible access, progression, and completion. The South African chapter shows how an NQF policy framework for the post-school education and training (PSET) sector supports articulation, RPL, and credit transfer. A comprehensive NQF which spans an education system also facilitates the articulation between levels, institutions, and programmes. When NQFs and QA work together in defining learning outcomes in alignment with level descriptors of the NQF, articulation and transfers are further facilitated.

Funding policies also play a crucial role for FLPs. Governments can support the development of FLPs (e.g. RPL mechanisms at HEI level) through project funding. The Finnish chapter refers to the fact that funding formulae which allocate funding on the basis of obtained credits, rather than student numbers, facilitate credit transfers. While it is important to offer loans or grants to all learners, including HE

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returnees and adult learners, for disadvantaged students it is crucial. The examples of Chile and Jamaica show that financial support for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds is essential to ensure their access and retention in HE.

IIEP's research highlights that data systems to monitor and evaluate the implementation of FLPs are frequently underdeveloped, in particular when it comes to analysing progression and completion of learners via FLPs. In addition, there is a clear lack of data on the participation, progression, and completion of disadvantaged groups through FLP mechanisms, which makes it very challenging to study the effects of FLPs on these groups.

Finally, IIEP's research demonstrates the importance of developing information and guidance systems that support student choice. A growing number of countries have information portals to inform candidates of existing HE offer and admission requirements, as well as information and guidance services at the level of HEIs. Information on FLPs, such as RPL and transfer opportunities, is rarely made available, however. As FLPs can be only effective if learners know about them, this constitutes a clear challenge for transforming FLP policies into effective practices.

Introduction. Flexible learning pathways: A response to a changing higher education landscape

Michaela Martin and Uliana Furiv

Why flexible learning pathways?

International higher education landscape

Over the past decades, higher education (HE) systems around the world have undergone numerous changes, namely growth in enrolment, diversification of HE providers and learners, and more recently an increasing digitalization of teaching and learning. The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated these changes and has in particular highlighted the importance of flexible approaches to teaching and learning as well as to graduate employability.

Enrolment expansion has been one of the most important trends in HE worldwide. The number of students in HE has reached unprecedented levels over the past few decades. Worldwide, the average gross enrolment ratio (GER)² has doubled, from 19 per cent in 2000 (over 100 million students) to 40 per cent in 2020 (over 227 million students). It is expected that enrolment in HE will increase to 590 million students by 2040 (UNESCO, 2018; Calderon, 2018).

This expansion of HE has influenced the diversification of HE providers and modes of educational delivery. Providers of private, open and distance learning (ODL), cross-border, and other types of education compete with traditional state-funded institutions for students, staff, and funding. Digitalization has enabled a growing offer of online and hybrid learning and part-time programmes and courses.

² GER refers to the 'total enrolment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the official age group corresponding to this level of education'. GER can be above 100 per cent as it may include students whose age exceeds the official age group owing to their late entry or repetition of entry (UNESCO, 2014).

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The recent COVID-19 pandemic has forced many governments and higher education institutions (HEIs) to improve flexible delivery, using online learning platforms, videoconferencing tools, and interactive classrooms. Many HEIs were required to invest heavily in developing strategies for technology-enhanced learning, thus expanding the practice of online learning. Survey data collected by the International Association of Universities at the beginning of the pandemic in April/May 2020 on the impact on COVID-19 on higher education (IAU, 2020) revealed that only 29 per cent of responding African HEIs were able to quickly move teaching and learning online, compared to 85 per cent of HEIs in Europe. A follow-up survey conducted one year into the pandemic showed a striking increase in the use of remote teaching and learning: 89 per cent of responding HEIs offered remote teaching and learning, 82 per cent in African HEIs and 92 per cent in Europe (IAU, 2022).

Digital learning has played a crucial role in providing access to HE for millions of learners globally, particularly in the developing world (WENR, 2018). It is especially significant for non-traditional learners, who can benefit from digital learning in formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. However, emerging evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic also affected the ability of students from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups to access and succeed in HE. Data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) testify to a staggering urban–rural digital divide. While Internet use in developing countries increased by 13.3 per cent in the first year of the pandemic, reaching 57 per cent in 2020, the proportion of Internet users in urban areas was twice as high as in rural areas (ITU, 2021).

Together with this growing diversity in provision of learning opportunities, a more diverse student population is shaping the HE landscape. Traditional students now share classrooms with adult learners, HE returnees, people with disabilities, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, migrants, ethnic minorities, and other types of less privileged learners. Many more first-generation students have entered HE. Although the expansion of HE has benefitted new types of learners, in countries with high levels of social inequality HE still caters more commonly for the wealthier segments of the population.

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Benefits of flexible learning pathways

Flexible learning pathways (FLPs) can play a significant role in responding to the above challenges, as they support learners not only in accessing and moving through HE but also in preparing for the labour market. Their importance is also acknowledged more broadly by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and the Education Agenda 2030, which call for quality education and lifelong learning (LLL) for all. To achieve SDG-4, the Agenda urges HE systems to ensure ‘quality assurance, comparability and recognition of tertiary education qualifications and facilitate credit transfers between recognized tertiary education institutions’ (UNESCO, 2015: 41). Furthermore, it emphasizes that learning should be provided and recognized in different contexts (formal, non-formal, and informal learning) and through diverse modalities, so that all learners can attain skills, knowledge, and qualifications to have productive and dignified lives.

Implementing FLPs has many benefits for learners, HE systems, the economy, and the labour market, as well as society at large. For learners, articulated and flexible education systems offer greater choices as they seek to earn qualifications. For example, allowing entry to HE through recognition of prior learning (RPL) means that learners can reduce the time and cost of obtaining a degree. By providing coherent and well-articulated pathways that recognize learning that takes place outside the boundaries of formal education, systems can avoid duplication of previously gained knowledge and improve the job prospects of graduates. Moreover, FLPs can address the need for more equitable and inclusive HE systems and tackle social inequalities. The economy and the labour market benefit through a better-trained labour force, as a flexible higher education provision can improve job prospects and create a sense of fulfilment among those engaged in learning. And finally, FLPs can foster societal development and contribute to a culture of learning in society (IIEP-UNESCO, 2020).

Persisting obstacles for flexible learning pathways

However, ensuring that HE systems provide multiple entry and progression pathways adapted to more diverse learners remains a serious challenge. Many countries still have fragmented national governance structures, where separate ministries and buffer organizations are in

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charge of HE and vocational and professional education. Distributing authority among different actors without a clear coordination of activities, roles, and responsibilities can lead to paralysis and conflict in the development of HE reforms. While institutional autonomy is necessary for HEIs to function, it can also limit the state's ability to guide change in the HE sector. In market-driven systems, initiatives to develop FLPs may take place within and between institutions, giving them the power to choose which institutions to collaborate with and which ones to avoid. Competition between HEIs has a negative impact on HEIs' willingness to collaborate with one another and therefore to implement cross-sector change.

To respond to these challenges, HE systems need to be more collaborative, flexible, and inclusive. Providing students with access to learning opportunities in flexible ways requires adequate policies and management tools to create an enabling environment for FLPs. It also requires well-designed implementation strategies to ensure that these pathways are reflected in institutional practices. To make HE systems more permeable and to ensure support for FLPs, coordination across HE sub-sectors involving policy-makers, HE managers, staff, learners, and employers is crucial.

IIEP research project on flexible learning pathways

Existing research on FLPs rarely offers a comprehensive analysis of the policies, instruments, and practices that support the implementation of FLPs in HE. The UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) therefore launched an international comparative research project in 2018, *SDG-4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*. Specifically, the research distinguished three stages of FLPs:

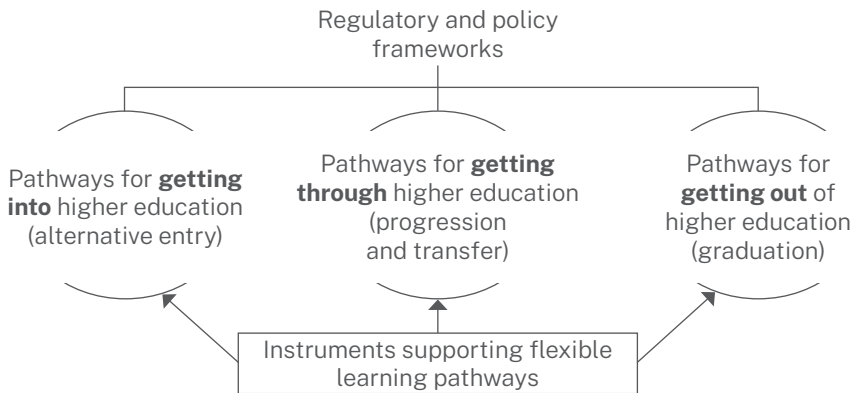
- pathways for getting into HE (alternative entry for first entry, but also re-entry);
- pathways for getting through HE (progression, transferability, and flexible study modes);
- pathways for getting out of HE (graduation and preparation for the labour market).

These three stages support the principle of LLL, inclusion and equity, according to which learning is conceptualized as taking place through

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the entire life of an individual. This implies a plurality of pathways that meet the needs of diverse learners, and in particular those of disadvantaged students. When investigating how students enter, progress through the system, and prepare for the labour market, this research focuses on the role of regulatory and policy frameworks and instruments that support FLPs (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Conceptualization of the ecosystem of FLPs



Source: Elaboration by the authors of this chapter.

Objectives of the project and research questions

The overarching objective of the research project was to generate knowledge and support UNESCO Member States and HEIs in developing or strengthening FLPs in their education systems. The following questions guided this research project:

1. What are the policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments, and practices that support FLPs in HE?
2. How effective are these policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments, and practices in establishing FLPs and building closer linkages between and within HE levels and institutions?
3. How does the establishment of FLPs influence the access, progression, transfer, completion, and preparation for the labour market of those identified as disadvantaged groups in the case countries?

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4. What lessons can be learned from the experience of case countries regarding key enablers and factors lacking in the implementation of FLPs in HE?

Research approach, methods, and stages

The research on FLPs followed a mixed-methods three-stage approach that helped to understand what FLPs are, their implementation in diverse HE contexts, and the instruments that support their implementation. The mixed-methods research approach involved the use of qualitative and quantitative data, involving analysis of policy documents, survey data, interviews, and focus group discussions.

The research was implemented in three stages and comprised a stocktaking exercise, an international survey, and eight country case studies. This synthesis publication draws from these three stages by comparing policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments, and practices for developing FLPs across countries.

Stage 1 – Stocktaking exercise

During the first stage of the research, a stocktaking exercise compiled good practices on FLPs internationally, mainly through a literature analysis. In 2018, IIEP researchers mapped and analysed existing research on the topic. The stocktaking helped to clarify FLP concepts and drew on country examples to demonstrate policy-relevant approaches to the development of FLPs in HE as a whole.

Stage 2 – International survey

During the second stage, and drawing on the stocktaking exercise, a global survey was developed in 2019 to gather comprehensive evidence on policy and regulatory frameworks, instruments, and practices supporting FLPs. It included questions on alternative admissions pathways, opportunities for transfer, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), quality assurance (QA), credit accumulation and transfer systems, and information and guidance services. Moreover, the survey asked countries to identify enablers and barriers to the implementation of FLPs, their effectiveness, monitoring, and evaluation of policies, and instruments used for FLPs. The survey was addressed to higher

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education authorities in all UNESCO member states. A total of 87 responses were received from 201 countries/territories to which the survey had been sent. Of the 87 responses received, 75 (86 per cent) could be exploited.

Stage 3 – Eight in-depth country case studies

During the third stage, eight in-depth case studies were carried out in countries that were developing FLPs or had strong policies in place. The purpose of the eight country case studies was to document different national policy options and good institutional practices, for the introduction of FLPs, and to analyse their effectiveness at the level of HEIs. The eight in-depth country case studies were conducted during 2019–2020 in Chile, Finland, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Morocco, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (UK). Countries were selected in order to ensure diversity in geographic region, socioeconomic context, and development stages of FLPs. The selected countries also have diverse governance systems, with varying degrees of government steering, institutional autonomy, and labour market influence.

The country case studies were implemented and prepared by national research teams involving one to three persons. The research teams were able to use evidence from national sources such as national evaluation reports and policy documents, mostly written in local languages.

For each country case study, the researchers selected two to three HEIs of varying types to study the implementation of FLPs at an institutional level. The sample of institutions usually included public and private institutions, as well as university and non-university institutions (e.g. vocational institutions).

The teams analysed national policy documents and conducted interviews and focus group discussions with national and institutional stakeholders. They interviewed representatives from national agencies (ministries of HE, national QA bodies or organizations responsible for the NQF). To present institutional perspectives, interviews were conducted with heads of institutions, heads of teaching and learning, heads of QA, information and guidance services, heads of statistical units, and leaders representing student associations.

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Focus group discussions were also held with students and alumni, to learn about their experiences using FLPs, particularly accessing HE through RPL, participating in transfer programmes, and using information and guidance services. Interviews were held with programme alumni to learn about the effectiveness of HE completion pathways and preparation for the labour market.

The purpose of the interviews was to determine how effective FLP policies, tools, and practices were, according to the different HE actors. Comparing the views of those who developed the policies and tools, those who implemented them, and those who benefitted from them allowed for a comprehensive analysis. It also helped to identify good practices and bottlenecks in the process of establishing FLPs, from the development of policies and tools to their implementation and use.

Scope and limitations of the research

The study focused mainly on FLPs in HE, which correspond mainly to Levels 5 and 6 (and to a lesser extent 7) of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011 nomenclature (UIS, 2012). It also examined the non-conventional pathways that provide entry from secondary (equivalent to ISCED Level 3) and post-secondary non-tertiary education (equivalent to ISCED Level 4) to HE (ISCED Level 5 and higher). The study included the university sector (e.g. universities, open universities, universities of applied sciences) and non-university sub-sectors (e.g. technical institutes, colleges, and polytechnics).

The analysis focused mainly on policies, legal and regulatory frameworks, instruments, and practices supporting FLPs at a national level. In addition, instruments and practices that exist to facilitate permeability between and within different types of education providers at an institutional level (e.g. transfer agreements between institutions) were covered.

It is useful to indicate some limitations in the research. The data for this research were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many governments and HEIs to introduce new policies and practices on FLPs. While the new realities that have emerged from the pandemic could not be reflected in this research, it is hoped that the

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research offers useful lessons on how FLPs can contribute to making HE systems more resilient and better prepared for crises.

Another major limitation was the limited availability of statistics both at the national and institutional levels on the participation, progression, and completion of students in FLPs. It was particularly difficult to find specific data on the participation of disadvantaged groups in FLPs and therefore to substantiate findings on their effects on them.

Furthermore, this study used stakeholder interviews to conclude on the use and effectiveness of policy frameworks, instruments, and practices to support FLPs in HE. The authors of this publication acknowledge that this research method, built on perceptions, may be subject to personal bias. With this risk in mind, other sources of evidence, such as available secondary literature, policy documents, and statistical data were used to triangulate and validate the findings.

This research attempts to take a comprehensive approach to a complex phenomenon, covering several sub-sectors, as well as policy, legislation, and instruments, and their implementation at the level of HEIs. Therefore, not all aspects could be studied in depth. With this argument in mind, the publication proposes areas for future research in the *Conclusions* chapter.

Evaluating the effectiveness of policies and practices requires a long time frame, as the move from policy development to full implementation can often take several years. In some case study countries, policies, instruments, and practices have been implemented only recently, therefore their availability and effectiveness could not be fully reflected in this publication.

Finally, it is important to be cautious when generalizing recommendations on policies, instruments, and practices for the establishment of FLPs across countries. Given the diversity of contexts in which HE systems and institutions operate, certain FLP tools may work well in a particular system, but less so in another. Nevertheless, the study presents examples of good practices and success factors in the implementation of FLPs as a source of inspiration.

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Target audience of the publication

The project was undertaken with an aim of documenting good FLP practices and supporting UNESCO Member States in developing or strengthening the implementation of FLPs. With this objective in mind, the findings from this research are particularly useful for the following target groups: (1) national-level policy-makers and planners (e.g. regulatory, QA, and funding bodies); (2) institutional-level policy-makers and planners (e.g. rectors, deans); (3) researchers working on HE policy, planning, and governance; and (4) higher education experts located in international organizations.

For national-level policy-makers and planners, the publication can support the development and implementation of FLP policies and instruments at the national level in diverse contexts. National HE policies on FLPs and their linkages to national governance and funding issues are also relevant for policy development.

Institutional policy-makers, such as rectors, vice rectors, and deans who are involved in policy development and decision-making in their HEIs, may find inspiration on how to implement innovative FLP practices in their institutions.

Researchers, especially those working on global HE policy and practice, will find a comprehensive overview of the state of the development of FLP policy and areas requiring further investigation.

Finally, this publication is valuable to higher education experts located in international organizations seeking strategies to strengthen the sustainability and adaptability of HE systems.

Overview of the publication

This publication is structured in four main parts.

Part 1. Concepts and cross-national perspectives represents the main results of an international survey and a comparative analysis of key aspects related to FLPs across the eight country case studies (Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4).

Part 2. Getting into higher education – flexible admission policies demonstrates examples of alternative entry policies found in Finland (Chapter 5) and Malaysia (Chapter 6).

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Part 3. Getting through and out of higher education – flexible study modes and articulation presents policies that enable flexible progression and flexible study modes for students in Jamaica (Chapter 7), Morocco (Chapter 8), and India (Chapter 9).

Part 4. Supporting flexible learning pathways through governance covers policies and regulatory instruments that support FLPs in the UK (Chapter 10), Chile (Chapter 11), and South Africa (Chapter 12).

Finally, *Conclusions. Moving flexible learning pathways from policy to practice* presents recommendations that are derived from the overall IIEP research project, to effectively promote FLPs through national policies and institutional practices.

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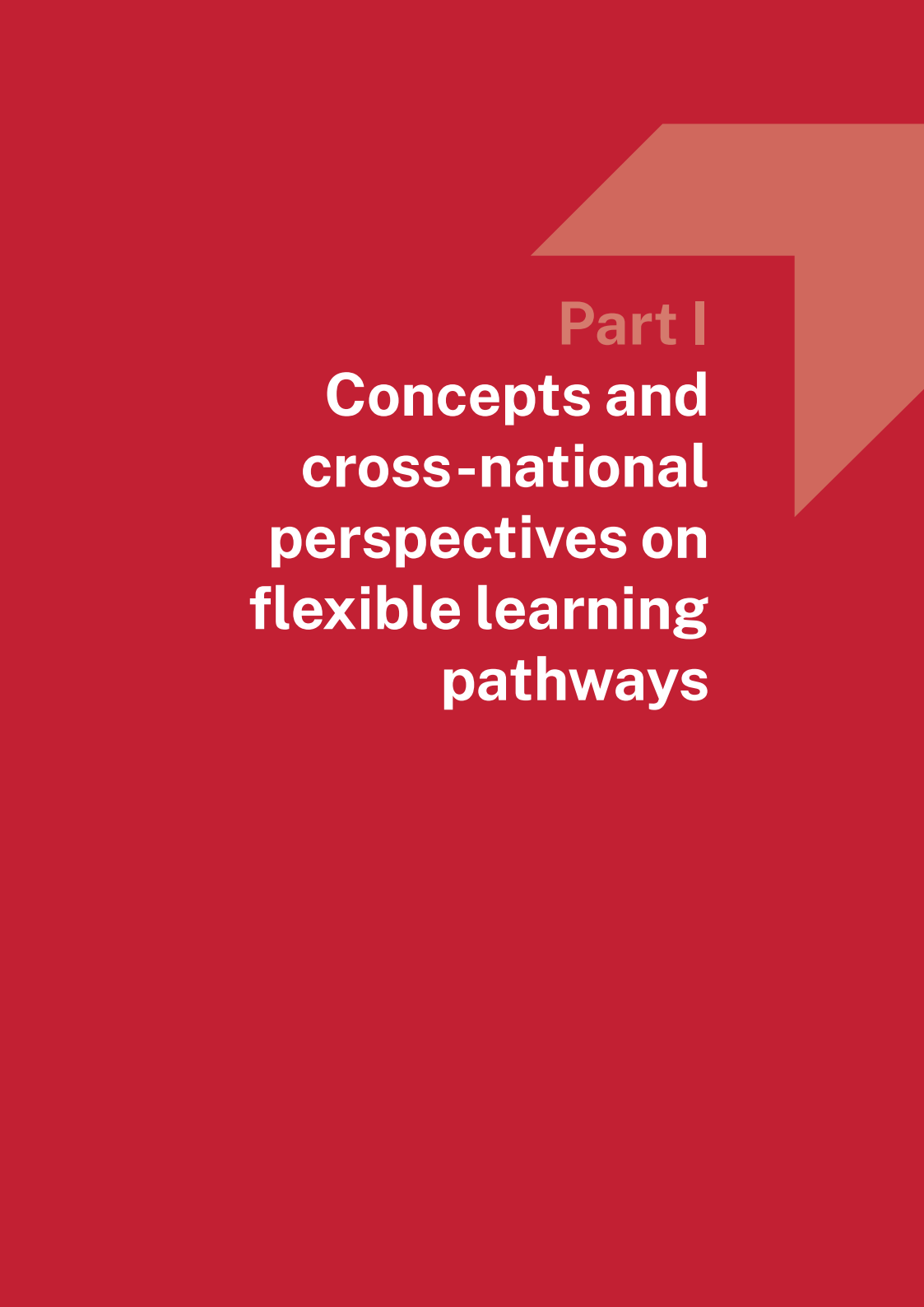
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Part I
**Concepts and
cross-national
perspectives on
flexible learning
pathways**

1. Clarifying concepts and dimensions of flexible learning pathways

Michaela Martin and Uliana Furiv

1.1 Introduction

The notion of flexible learning pathways (FLPs) is complex and multi-layered as it refers to policies, instruments, and practices shaped by national and institutional contexts. FLPs are also an umbrella concept that covers multiple and articulated pathways to serve the needs of diverse students to enter, progress, and complete (higher) education.

IIEP's research has been structured around the three dimensions for getting into, through, and out of higher education (HE). First, 'pathways for getting into HE' will generally imply first- and multiple-time entry pathways, which are implemented through alternative admission policies and practices. Second, 'pathways for getting through HE' will refer to transferability during studies, as well as flexible delivery modes and broad-based curricula. Third, 'pathways for getting out of HE' will relate to preparation for the labour market, combining work, study, and continuous learning.

It is important to understand that a cross-country analysis typically faces challenges regarding terminology and concepts, as the same concept may cover different realities, and a similar practice may be referred to using different terms in different contexts. Our analysis has clearly revealed the need to better define the terminology related to FLPs, if only to clarify the FLPs concept itself. It is hoped that the IIEP research project on FLPs contributes to this, by identifying dimensions, related policies, and good practices.

Chapter 1 aims to clarify the concept of FLPs by looking at definitions and interpretations found in the literature and policy documents. However, its main emphasis lies in a comparative analysis of how the three dimensions of FLPs are translated into policies and practices in the eight case countries. It will provide illustrations of good practices

1. Clarifying concepts and dimensions of flexible learning pathways

that exist across the three dimensions identified from the eight case countries, either in terms of national policy or institutional practices.

1.2 Flexible learning pathways: Concepts and definitions

FLPs are strongly advocated in the Education 2030 Agenda, where they are defined as ‘entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education’ (UNESCO, 2015: 33). The UNESCO Futures of Education report restates that ‘individuals have a basic right to have their learning recognized and validated, even in non-formal and informal educational settings’ (UNESCO, 2021: 43).

There is a clear convergence between the definition offered in the Education 2030 Agenda and other concepts found in the literature that are close to the notion of FLPs. Seamless pathways, for instance, is a concept used in the literature and which is in strong alignment with the Education 2030 Agenda as it recognizes that improved articulation in education systems serves an important equity objective. It denotes ‘systems and processes that accommodate all qualification articulations and credit transfers at a national level’ (Walls and Parry, 2010: 15).

There is also a strong overlap of FLPs with the concept of lifelong learning (LLL) that occurs at all ages and in a diverse set of contexts (formal, non-formal, or informal). But LLL implies continuous learning that does not necessarily lead to a qualification, whereas FLPs refer to flexible ways of gaining a qualification to move into the labour market. FLPs also refer to ways of gaining access to formal HE, whereas LLL does not always happen within a formal learning setting.

Other concepts that are similar in their meaning to FLPs are ‘articulation’ and ‘permeability’. Articulation is a process of transition between institutions, programmes, and levels of education that allows learners to move flexibly between them (Mohamedbhai, 2013; Álvarez, 2017). Articulation can be systemic, through a formal alignment of study programmes and pathways, or specific, in the form of inter-institutional agreements regarding, for instance, transferability between specific qualifications (SAQA, 2017). Permeability entails

1. Clarifying concepts and dimensions of flexible learning pathways

access and transition of learners between programmes, levels, and institutions. It is especially concerned with the recognition of learning outcomes gained through diverse contexts: informal, non-formal, and formal (CEDEFOP, 2014).

Articulation and permeability are very close in their meaning, together supporting the idea of creating stronger linkages between providers of formal, non-formal and informal learning, through better collaboration, more emphasis on flexibility and recognition of different types of learning.

However, articulation and permeability mainly capture specific aspects of flexibility rather than providing a holistic approach. For instance, the above concepts rarely emphasize flexible mechanisms for preparing for the labour market. Thus, the broader concept of FLPs as used in this research (see *Introduction*) responds to this gap by offering a comprehensive framework that implies mechanisms for flexible entry, progression, and completion of HE and preparation for the labour market.

Finally, the term FLPs is also related to the concept of ‘flexible learning’, which is a learning process free from the constraints of time, place, and pace, where a learner can choose entry and exit points, learning activities, assessment modes, and educational resources (Naidu, 2017). Flexible learning is also often associated with *student-centred learning*, where teaching and learning processes are designed for –and often with– the student, and they are intended to lead to ‘high quality, flexible and more individually tailored education paths’ (as cited in Unger and Zaussinger, 2018: 10).

1.3 Flexible learning pathways for getting into higher education

This section explores FLPs for getting into HE through alternative admission policies and practices, based on a comparative analysis of practices available in the eight FLP case studies.

1.3.1 Alternative admission pathways

Alternative admission ensures access to HE through pathways that do not adhere to traditional admission requirements (e.g. secondary school leaving certificate and/or university entrance examination). Non-traditional students who may not meet the traditional access

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criteria (e.g. people without secondary school leaving certification, adult learners, working professionals) can benefit from alternative admissions (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018). The IIEP research found that in the eight case countries, alternative admissions can occur through both national and institutional policies, such as preparatory programmes, open entry policies, and recognition of prior learning (RPL). Each of these policies is explored in more detail in the sub-sections below. *Table 1* shows the state of development of FLPs for getting into HE in the eight case countries.

Table 1. FLPs for getting into HE

Country	FLPs for getting into HE (Alternative admissions)		
	Preparatory programmes	Open entry	RPL
Chile	PACE, Propaedeutic, and, in some institutions, BETA university preparatory programmes	Often in vocational training centres	RPL to certify labour competencies in vocational training institutions
Finland	Preparatory programmes at the upper secondary level	Open entry courses (open studies) in most higher education institutions (HEIs)	RPL for access is guided by the government but defined at the level of HEIs
India	In some HEIs	In open universities	Under development
Jamaica	In some HEIs	No data (ND)	RPL is used by vocational institutions in the assessment of an applicant for the award of a national vocational qualification (NVQ)
Malaysia	Pre-university studies	In open universities	Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) for access or for credit
Morocco	ND	In public open entry universities for baccalaureate holders	Under development

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Country	FLPs for getting into HE (Alternative admissions)		
	Preparatory programmes	Open entry	RPL
South Africa	Pre-vocational learning programmes	ND	RPL for access to learning and advanced standing (joining studies midway) and for credit
United Kingdom	Foundation year (preparation for HE)	At the Open University	Access to Higher Education Diploma gained through the accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL) and the accreditation of experiential learning (APEL)

Source: Elaboration by the authors of this chapter.

Notes: This table is not exhaustive. Further details are given in each country case study.

■ Fully-fledged implementation of the policy at the system level

■ Partial/institutional implementation of the policy

■ No data/under development (ND)

Almost all countries in this study have fully-fledged implementation of alternative admission policies either at system or institutional levels. Preparatory programmes are more often facilitated through national policies, while open entry policies are implemented through institutional policies (e.g. at open entry universities). The implementation of an RPL policy varies from country to country. In Jamaica and Chile, for instance, RPL is practised by HEIs to certify vocational qualifications, while in Malaysia, South Africa, Finland, and the United Kingdom (UK), national HE authorities are deeply involved in setting the guidelines for RPL at HEIs.

Preparatory programmes

Generally, preparatory programmes can enable student access to higher levels of education. By organizing courses that focus on the academic skills and knowledge prioritized by universities, such programmes can allow candidates with vocational or professional backgrounds to better integrate into academically oriented courses. The duration of such programmes varies between six months and a year (Martin and Godonoga, 2020).

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Despite varying degrees of implementation of preparatory programmes in the case countries, they can be broadly defined as flexible entry pathways between general or vocational upper secondary level³ and HE. In countries such as Finland, Chile, South Africa, Jamaica, and the UK, preparatory programmes support learners with special needs to fulfil the general entry requirements allowing access to HE, as a compensation for existing disadvantages or prejudices.

In some of the countries studied, preparatory programmes were also understood as a means to support HE access for learners with technical vocational education and training (TVET) backgrounds. Because students from upper secondary vocational programmes receive mainly occupation-related knowledge and skills, they may often lack sufficient academic skills to cope with an HE curriculum. Hence, once admitted to undergraduate HE studies, these students earn lower grades compared to those with a general upper secondary qualification (OECD, 2014; UNESCO 2018; Martin and Godonoga, 2020). This emphasis on supporting vocational learners by imparting broader academic skills to improve transfer between vocational institutions and academic institutions can be found in some UK universities under the name of Foundation Degree programmes (see Box 1).

BOX 1

Foundation degree in the UK

In the UK, a Foundation Degree programme is organized between further education colleges and universities. This pathway supports candidates who could not meet the general entry requirements of universities. The programme has lower entry requirements than a university degree. To complete the degree, students must spend two years in a college, during which they gain broader academic and vocational skills and knowledge. After completing the degree, students can transfer to a partner university starting from the third year to gain a full bachelor's degree.

Source: Brennan, 2021.

³ Usually provided in upper secondary schools.

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Open entry policy

An open entry policy can be a feature of both single-mode (open universities offering open and distance learning (ODL) programmes only) and dual-mode institutions (offering both face-to-face and ODL programmes). Open universities usually have an ‘open-door’ policy, with minimal or no entry requirements. Such universities employ online and distance teaching and learning methods. Typically, open entry allows learners to take part in HE through participation in face-to-face courses or online courses in a selected university without having to meet traditional entry requirements. It is open to everyone on either a free or a fee-paying basis (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018). Open entry provides opportunity for continuous education, upskilling for working adults, and upgrading of personal competencies, but sometimes offers learning opportunities to students who could not gain a study place in HE and wish to do so in the future. While credits gained through open entry may be generally recognized, this pathway typically does not lead to a formal degree.

An open entry policy has been identified as a popular route in most of the case countries’ HEIs (i.e. Finland, Chile, Malaysia, India, the UK, and Morocco). However, several HEIs in Finland and India have begun offering digital credentials or opportunities to recognize a certain share of open entry credits when a student enrolls in a formal degree programme. Finland has created an interesting policy initiative to facilitate open entry, the so-called open studies (see *Box 2*).

In the case of countries that apply open entry, ODL programmes are the most common mode of delivery. However, some countries (e.g. Finland, Malaysia) have a number of selected universities that provide face-to-face courses in open entry, for example, as evening or weekend courses.

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BOX 2

Open studies in Finland

Open studies are offered in over 20 Finnish HEIs. Open studies enable access to those who could not get a study place after secondary schooling or who would like to self-study. They are open to anyone and do not require entrance examination. Such studies have the same content and requirements as traditional programmes in public HEIs, but they do not lead to a qualification. However, a certain share of credits (which is decided independently by each HEI) can be recognized towards a degree when a student enrolls in a degree programme at the same HEI where open studies have been pursued. Open studies are an alternative pathway to traditional admissions, because students can apply for a degree programme without taking the usual entry exams. Nevertheless, HEIs have the autonomy to decide on the entry quota, the criteria, and the courses that are offered as open studies. *Chapter 5* explores this Finnish initiative in more detail.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020.

Recognition of prior learning

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning defines RPL as a practice that acknowledges different kinds of knowledge and skills obtained in formal, non-formal, and informal contexts (UIL, 2012). An RPL policy is implemented in six of the eight case countries (while in India and Morocco it is under development for the TVET sector). In South Africa and Malaysia there is a strong national system for promoting RPL, while in other countries, initiatives for RPL tend to be either an institutional responsibility (e.g. Chile) or delegated to external accreditation and validation providers (e.g. the UK).

Malaysia has created an RPL scheme – Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) – mainly for access to open universities. Under this process, candidates need to pass an aptitude test and submit a portfolio to have their previous learning assessed and considered for admission to an open entry programme (see *Chapter 6* to learn more about RPL in Malaysia).

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In countries where national systems and procedures for RPL exist, they are typically supported by national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) (see *Box 3*). The research has found, however, that RPL is not a mainstream pathway in most of the case countries (except for South Africa). It is more often practised by vocational institutions for recognition of labour competencies, rather than by academic institutions.

BOX 3

RPL in South Africa

In South Africa, RPL has become a mainstream pathway for access to post-secondary education and training systems. Qualifications and professional designations can be awarded in whole or in part through RPL. Qualifications are evaluated against learning outcomes described in the NQF. Overall, the process includes extensive counselling, preparation for assessment, moderation, and feedback. It is worth noting that the implementation of this mechanism differs across institutions. Common principles applied for RPL in most institutions are ‘deep caring’ and ‘walk-in advice’. These mean that potential candidates can receive guidance in their home language and inquire about RPL gained through non-formal or informal learning. The process usually requires candidates to take a placement test or submit a portfolio of evidence.

Source: Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020.

1.4 Flexible learning pathways for getting through higher education

This section explores FLPs for getting through HE via articulation or transfer policies and flexible education delivery modes. *Table 2* presents the state of development of FLPs for getting through HE in the eight case study countries.

As can be noted, the implementation of FLPs for getting through HE greatly varies across HE systems in the eight countries. For example, articulation pathways are mostly implemented at an institutional level, with exceptions such as South Africa, Jamaica, and Finland, where articulations are nationally regulated. Flexible delivery modes are implemented in all case study countries where part-time study is a common practice, and ODL and flexibility in curricula are implemented to varying extents at the level of HEIs.

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Table 2. FLPs for getting through HE

Country	Articulation pathways		Flexible delivery modes			Flexibility in curriculum
	Transfer programmes	Credit accumulation and transfer	Open and distance learning	Flexibility in the pace of study		
Chile	At HEI level	Between the universities of the Council of University Rectors (CRUCH)	Online learning provided at HEI level	Part-time study and evening courses	At HEI level	
Finland	National system of transfer and institutional system	European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS) and Diploma Supplement	Online courses and massive open online courses (MOOCs) (delivered at HEIs and open universities)	Through open studies offered in the daytime, evenings, and on weekends	HEIs have elective courses and specializations, and cross-institutional programmes (cross-studies)	
India	On a case-by-case basis within HEIs	National Academic Credit Bank (in the making)	Strong emphasis on OD, including through SWAYAM platform for MOOCs	Part-time study	A choice-based credit (CBC) system, dual degrees, and branch transfers in some HEIs	
Jamaica	Through the '2+2' model	Through the '2+2' model	ND	Part-time study	ND	

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Country	Articulation pathways		Flexible delivery modes			Flexibility in curriculum
	Transfer programmes	Credit accumulation and transfer	Open and distance learning	Flexibility in the pace of study	Flexibility in the curriculum	
Malaysia	At HEI level, Malaysia Technical University Network programmes	80 per cent match is required for the credit transfer to operate	In open entry universities (credits can be earned through MOOCs)	Part-time and weekend study	HEI level, but little at the national level	
Morocco	ND	In the making with the new reform	In the making under the terms of the new reform	Part-time study	In the new bachelor's programme, to be created with the 2020 reform	
South Africa	Through credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems	Systemic and specific credit transfer	HEIs can offer online learning	At HEI level	Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs)	
United Kingdom	ND	ND	Mostly at HEI level, notably with the Open University	Part-time study and block courses	At HEI level, degrees with two specializations	

Source: Elaboration by the authors of this chapter.

Note: This table is not exhaustive. Further details are given in each country case study.

■ Fully-fledged policy implementation at system level

■ Partial/institutional policy implementation

■ No data (ND)/ Under development

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1.4.1 Articulation pathways

Articulation is understood as the process of transferring learners between programmes or disciplines within the same institution or across institutions of the HE sector (Álvarez, 2017). Articulation may be organized as part of a national policy, or it may be the responsibility of HEIs. Hence, both systemic and specific/institutional articulation could be identified in the case countries. Systemic articulation is typically achieved when there is a formal alignment of learning outcomes and qualifications in study programmes, supported by quality assurance and the NQF. It then applies to institutions across the sector. Specific articulation occurs when two or more institutions have an inter-institutional agreement specifying the conditions of articulation and of transfer opportunities between HEIs. The mechanisms enabling articulation pathways differ across the case countries, but they are commonly enabled through transfer programmes and credit transfer systems.

Transfer programmes

Transfer programmes support the seamless transfer of students between programmes, disciplines, and institutions to avoid repetition of learning and to increase completion. The IIEP research has shown, however, that transfer is not a mainstream practice in most case countries. Finland, however, does operate a national system allowing transfers. While transfers between disciplines and programmes within the same institution are more common than between different institutions, transfers between universities and TVET HEIs are less so.

It is clear that there is a great need in many countries to set up articulation between HEIs and academic and vocational sub-sectors, in particular to avoid dead ends for students. Morocco has attempted to address this issue by introducing pathways between institutions of the vocational type and universities (see *Box 4*).

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BOX 4

Transfer system in Morocco

Morocco has a binary system. University institutions are distinct from vocational training institutions, but transfers between the two types of entity, although limited in scope and scale, are possible. Indeed, students from public vocational training institutes with a baccalaureate degree can, after two years of study, benefit from regulated ‘bridges’ or transfer pathways to the university in order to access directly, through a competitive examination, the fifth term of a professional bachelor’s degree. They can also enter selective engineering schools, such as the ENSAMC (École nationale supérieure des Arts et Métiers de Casablanca), which is part of University Hassan II. The school reserves 20 per cent of its places for admissions through these bridges; to ensure the success of students coming from vocational institutions, ENSAMC provides them with refresher courses when they arrive at the school.

However, the system of bridges is typically a one-way relationship: university students cannot transfer to vocational training. As for private vocational training institutions, in practice they do not offer any possibility of transferring to universities, even if they are accredited by the state (see *Chapter 8*).

Source: Kouhlani and Benchekroun, 2021.

Credit accumulation and transfer

Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems support the recognition and transfer of learning obtained in formal, informal, or non-formal settings (Reilly, Mitchell, and Eaton, 2017). In the case countries, credit transfers are supported by articulation policies that enable the transfer of students from one programme to another or across institutions. Credit transfer in the study countries takes place at national or institutional levels. Jamaica uses a national credit transfer policy – the ‘2+2’ model – which supports transfer from one type of degree to another (see *Box 5*).

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BOX 5

Credit transfer system in Jamaica

The '2+2' model allows students to complete their first two years of undergraduate studies by accumulating 60 credits and earning an associate's degree from a community college. Students can choose to transfer these credits to continue their degree studies for two more years at a university level to obtain an undergraduate degree (bachelor's degree) or transfer to the labour market with an associate degree (see *Chapter 7*).

Source: Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021.

Also, in certain countries credit transfers can be applied only between similar types of institutions. In Chile, for instance, transfers take place between prestigious and mostly publicly funded universities (members of the Council of Rectors – CRUCH – in Chile) through a system of transferable credits. In addition, these institutional transfer systems are based on inter-institutional agreements. However, when there is a high level of competition between HEIs and lack of trust between them, as well as differences in curricular coverage, credit transfer across the HE system can be a challenge.

1.4.2 Flexible delivery modes

FLPs for getting through HE can be facilitated through flexibility in learning delivery modes. While there is much divergence between countries and HEIs regarding programme flexibility, it typically takes the form of:

- flexibility in mode of delivery, typically via open and distance learning (ODL) (e.g. facilitated through a national platform for online courses in India);
- flexibility in the pace of study (part-time, evening, and holiday-season programmes);
- flexibility in the curriculum (multidisciplinary programmes, specializations and cross-studies, flexible degree structures).

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Open and distance learning

ODL allows for flexibility in terms of learning mode of delivery, as well as time and place of learning (Muyinda, 2012). It aims to expand access to education and continuous learning opportunities for diverse types of students, for reskilling or further study. This type of delivery has been particularly important for disadvantaged groups, who benefit from learning that is open in access and usually free of charge. However, the use of ODL can also be problematic, as it relies on the availability of digital infrastructure and Internet connectivity, which some disadvantaged students may have limited access to. ODL programmes are delivered by both single-mode and dual-mode institutions (Varghese and Püttmann, 2011). An increasing number of HEIs operate in dual mode, delivering ODL programmes alongside regular face-to-face programmes (see Box 6).

BOX 6

ODL programmes in Malaysia and India

In Malaysia, ODL programmes were introduced in 2006 as part of an open entry policy and practised mainly by open universities. However, traditional universities have also begun offering such courses. At Universiti Teknologi MARA, one-week courses are offered remotely, under the title ‘delivery without walls’. Students learn in industry (short internships) or the community (community service), online or project-based. Wawasan Open University, in addition to offering online learning, offers blended learning, where classes are delivered partly online and partly face to face (usually once a month). The university caters mainly to working adults who are studying to progress in their profession.

To support ODL, India has created a national platform for online courses called the Study of Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds programme (SWAYAM). The platform aims to provide access to massive open online courses (MOOCs) and other e-learning content developed by various education providers. An important aspect of MOOCs hosted on the SWAYAM platform is their potential to receive credit recognition by HEIs. A student entering an HE study programme in a university can transfer up to 20 per cent of credits from relevant online courses completed on SWAYAM. This was increased to 40 per cent when HEIs were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 9).

Source: Sirat et al., 2020; Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022.

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Flexibility in the pace of study

Flexibility in the pace of study has been a feature of the HE landscape for more than two decades serving to diversify delivery of study programmes to reflect the needs of diverse learners. This type of flexibility may suit learners who need to combine work and study to cover their tuition fees or to take care of family members. It is mainly delivered through part-time, evening, weekend, holiday-season, or other types of provision as opposed to traditional full-time day study.

All eight case countries offer part-time studies. In the UK, part-time provision is well developed throughout the post-secondary sector, with 24 per cent of students studying part-time and completing a bachelor's degree in four to six years,⁴ although this proportion has been declining. In Chile, 23 per cent of students are enrolled in full-time evening studies, while about 70 per cent are enrolled in a traditional learning mode (daytime and full-time).

Flexibility in the curriculum

Flexibility in the curriculum is usually organized at the level of individual institutions via: elective courses (e.g. the choice-based credit system in India); flexible degree structures (e.g. joint degrees in Finland and India, accelerated degrees in the UK); and cross-institutional/departmental exchanges (e.g. cross-studies in Finland).

A good example of an *elective courses* policy is provided by India: a choice-based credit system, facilitating flexibility in the organization of the curriculum (see *Box 7*).

Flexibility in the organization of study programmes can be implemented through the modularization of curricula. This means dividing study programmes with corresponding workload and credits into units that can be gained independently of each other without a prescribed sequence. This way learners can receive course credits or even a degree if they have completed the required number of modules for a degree programme (see *Box 8*).

⁴ The number of part-time students in the UK has been declining since 2008/09 because of a change of funding policy for equivalent or lower-level qualifications, the economic downturn, and the 2012 higher education funding reforms, which led to an increase in tuition fees.

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BOX 7

Choice-based credit system in India

In India, a choice-based credit (CBC) system was introduced in 2015 to encourage more interdisciplinary approaches and provide greater flexibility in course selection. The University Grants Commission has published guidelines for the implementation of this system in central, state, and deemed universities (institutions officially accredited as universities). The system allows students to choose from a prescribed list of core, elective, and minor/soft skills development courses. The types and sequence of courses are flexible, making curricula more interdisciplinary.

Source: Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022.

BOX 8

The Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences degree at University of Birmingham, UK

In the UK, University of Birmingham has introduced considerable flexibility into the curriculum. In its four-year bachelor's programme – Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences – responsibility for curriculum content is transferred to students, who can tailor it to their needs and interests by choosing modules across the university, according to their major or joint major. Students can choose one or more of the following options: (1) a subject-specific credit; (2) personal interest; (3) specific personal needs; (4) academic performance. Based on these options, students can obtain a degree with a major and a minor, or a double major, in whatever subjects they prefer.

Source: Brennan, 2021.

Flexible degree structures

The duration of degree programmes can also be subject to flexible arrangements, such as accelerated or extended degree studies. Several case countries indicated that it is possible to obtain a degree in shorter or longer periods of time.

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Extended degrees can allow students to complete their degree over a longer period of time, allowing them, for example, to combine studies and work. For example, as part of the ongoing HE reform in Morocco, it is planned to introduce a four-year bachelor's degree. It is believed that the four-year degree structure, which can be taken on a work-study basis, better prepares graduates to enter the workforce than the current three-year bachelor's model. The new four-year bachelor's degree also emphasizes the provision of courses and programmes that respond to the digitalization of professions and the need for transversal skills useful for the professions of the future.

Accelerated degrees shorten the time to complete a degree. In the UK, they have been recently introduced to allow students to complete a bachelor's degree in two years if they devote more weeks per year to their studies than students on the standard three-year degrees. This pace of study can benefit mature students who wish to return to work quickly. Nonetheless, only 0.2 per cent of undergraduate students in England took accelerated degrees in 2018. Since students must pay their two years of tuition fees at a higher rate, this is not a popular route.

Cross-institutional studies

Cross-institutional studies exist within the HE sector of some case countries: between the secondary and HE sectors, and between sub-sectors. Such studies support cross-institutional collaboration and choice of studies for learners. In Finland, cross-studies have been promoted by two national projects dating from 2020: EduFutura and 3AMK. The first project was developed by a consortium of three universities, and students can take courses at any of the three institutions in the consortium. The second project is a collaboration between three universities of applied sciences in the Helsinki metropolitan area. It enables students to choose courses worth 15 credits from each of the three participating institutions.

1.5 Flexible learning pathways for getting out of higher education

This section explores FLPs for completing HE and preparing for the labour market. *Table 3* presents the state of development of policies and practices in the eight case study countries.

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Table 3. FLPs for getting out of HE

Country	Work-based learning	Continuous education programmes
Chile	Very little and at institution level	At institution level
Finland	'Studification of work', internships	At institution level
India	ND	ND
Jamaica	Through part-time degrees, '2+2' model	At institution level
Malaysia	ND	At institution level
Morocco	Apprenticeships	At institution level
South Africa	ND	ND
United Kingdom	Sandwich degrees	At institution level

Source: Elaboration by the authors of this chapter.

Notes: This table is not exhaustive. Further details are given in each country case study.

- Fully-fledged implementation of the practice at system level
- Partial/ institutional implementation of the practice
- No data (ND)

IIEP's research shows that pathways for getting out of HE are usually less developed than flexible entry and progression pathways in the eight case countries. They serve work-based learning and continuous learning programmes.

Work-based learning

Finland is a prime example of a country that has attempted to strengthen the linkage between HE and the labour market. To improve graduates' employability, Finnish HEIs allow learners to combine work and HE studies, gaining credits towards their degree in working life or through internships and student exchange periods embedded in the degree programmes. The 'studification of work' has been supported with multiple national projects by the Ministry of Education and Culture (e.g. Toteemi, Tyyli, and WORKPEDA), which have helped HEIs to develop internship practices and guidelines, and work-based pedagogy.

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1.5.1 Continuous education programmes

Continuous education programmes also provide flexible opportunities for preparing for the labour market. In Chile, HEIs offer specializations through continuous education programmes oriented for working adults who already possess a degree but who would like to acquire a specialization and develop new competencies required by the labour market. Continuous education programmes in Chile often have open entry and thus are open to people such as mature learners or working adults who do not have an HE qualification. Such programmes grant diplomas that state a specific competence, which may be required in the labour market.

In Finland, a collaboration of HEIs with the private sector allows for the provision of continuous studies. HEIs in Finland offer professional specialization studies oriented towards working professionals seeking to upgrade their skills. HEIs also provide commissioned professional development training, development programmes, and modules for enterprises, private companies, and the labour market in general. Hence, working professionals can take separate degree-education modules by paying a fee but without being enrolled in a degree programme.

1.6 Conclusions

This chapter has discussed different dimensions of FLPs based on the eight country case studies. IIEP's initial conception of FLPs was based on the interpretations found in the academic literature and international policy documents. As a result of the commendable policies and practices identified in the eight case study countries, understanding of the concept broadened during the analysis stage of the research. Hence, the research process helped to consolidate the concept of FLPs through encounters with country realities.

In the eight case countries, FLPs for getting into HE are typically implemented through alternative admissions policies ('alternative admissions' may refer to preparatory programmes, open entry, and/or RPL). Depending on the context, these measures take place through national policies or as institutional initiatives. In the case study countries, preparatory programmes are set up to support students by providing the necessary knowledge and skills to enter HEIs. RPL

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facilitates entry through learning gained in formal, non-formal, and informal settings. Finally, open entry policies are implemented for the purposes of broadening access, continuous learning, or professional development.

Our analysis has shown some convergence in the practice of FLPs for progression. In the case countries, articulation pathways have been commonly implemented through transfer programmes and CAT systems. While CAT systems were frequently implemented through national policies (e.g. in South Africa, Malaysia, Finland, and Jamaica), transfer programmes were often the responsibility of individual HEIs, operated through inter-institutional agreements. Flexibility during studies was offered in the mode of delivery (e.g. via ODL), in the organization of the curriculum (via the choice of courses, specializations, or cross-studies), and in the pace of study (e.g. via part-time or accelerated degrees).

To conclude, FLPs for getting out of HE are an essential dimension of FLPs. However, these pathways were less commonly implemented in the eight case study countries. They were also associated mainly with work-based learning and continuous education programmes to improve the employability of learners and their skills. In some countries work-based learning programmes took place through national initiatives (e.g. ‘studification of work’ in Finland), which ensured their successful integration into the curriculum.

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2. International overview of policies and practices for flexible learning pathways

Michaela Martin, Uliana Furiv, and Ana Godonoga

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents selected findings from the international survey conducted among UNESCO Member States as part of the IIEP research project *SDG-4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*. The survey was conducted to collect baseline information on existing flexible learning pathways (FLPs).

Questions were asked about policies, practices, and instruments related to alternative admission pathways and opportunities for transfer. The survey also interrogated the role of national qualifications framework (NQF), quality assurance (QA), and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems, as well as information and guidance services in supporting FLPs. Finally, questions were asked about the evaluation of FLP policies as well as key enablers and factors inhibiting effective implementation.

The survey was sent out in January 2019 to ministries of (higher) education in 201 UNESCO Member States. A total of 87 responses were received between January and March 2019, 75 (86 per cent) of which were exploitable.⁵ The survey was administered online in three languages (English, French, and Spanish), using a designated survey platform (SurveyMonkey).

Primary data from the survey were collected through a multiple-choice and open-ended survey questionnaire.⁶ The questions combined compulsory and optional items to maintain a balance between a desirable response rate and a common set of data.

⁵ 'Exploitable survey' implies that a country responded in full to 14 out of 25 questions. The questionnaire comprised 25 closed- and open-ended questions, 14 of which were compulsory and 11 optional. The number of respondents does not always total 75 due to the format of the survey.

⁶ If you would like to access the research instruments, please email us at: info@iiep.unesco.org.

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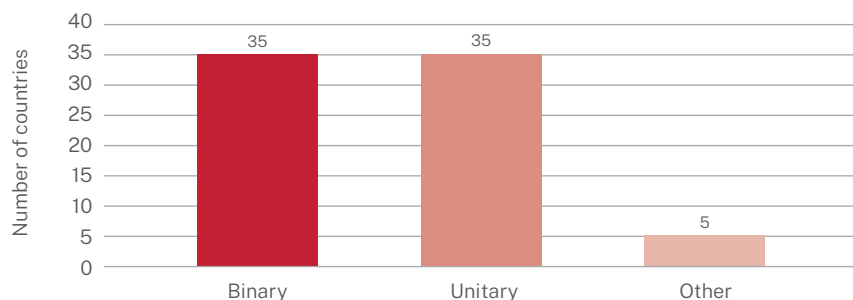
2.2 Overview of higher education provision in responding countries

2.2.1 Types of higher education systems

Evidence suggests that unitary systems can minimize horizontal differences and reduce inefficiencies and fragmentation (OECD, 2019). Therefore, it is important to contextualize the development of FLPs in relation to the structure of the higher education (HE) systems and the functions, missions, and roles of each of their sub-sectors.

Among the countries that responded to the survey, unitary and binary systems are equally represented (see *Figure 2*). Out of 75 countries providing exploitable responses to this question, 35 reported having unitary HE systems and another 35 described their systems as binary. However, in some of them this distinction is not clear as more than one type of institution belongs to the same sub-sector.

Figure 2. Types of HE systems



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

2.2.2 Modes of education delivery

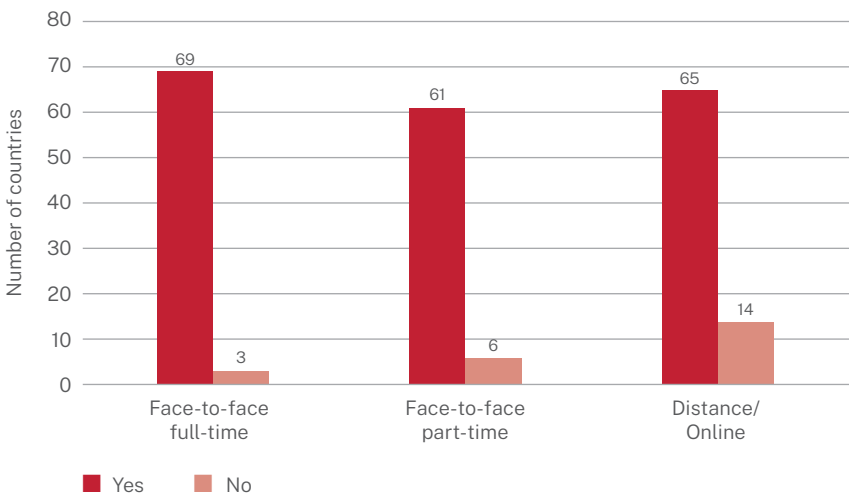
To enable higher education institutions (HEIs) to accommodate students with non-traditional qualifications – mature students, working professionals, students from remote areas, individuals with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups of students – there is an increasing need to organize study programmes in a more flexible manner, for example as part-time studies, evening classes, or online learning.

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By combining face-to-face provision with elements of open and distance learning (ODL), HEIs are better equipped to provide FLPs to a wider range of learners. ODL can also strengthen the role of HE in supporting lifelong learning (LLL) and enhance resilience of HEIs to continue learning even during crisis, as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the international survey suggest that a vast majority of responding countries have introduced more flexible modes of delivery in their HE systems. HE continues to be delivered mostly through face-to-face full-time provision (available in 69 systems⁷); however, distance and online provision (65) and face-to-face part-time delivery (61) have also become very widespread (see *Figure 3*). It should be noted however that the question did not ask about enrolments by mode of delivery, and the information above therefore represents merely a broad indication of available delivery modes.

Figure 3. Available modes of delivery of HE (number of countries)



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

⁷ Some countries did not provide answers to this question since it was not among the required questions.

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2.3 Policies for implementing flexible learning pathways in higher education

2.3.1 Policy outcomes supported by policies for flexible learning pathways

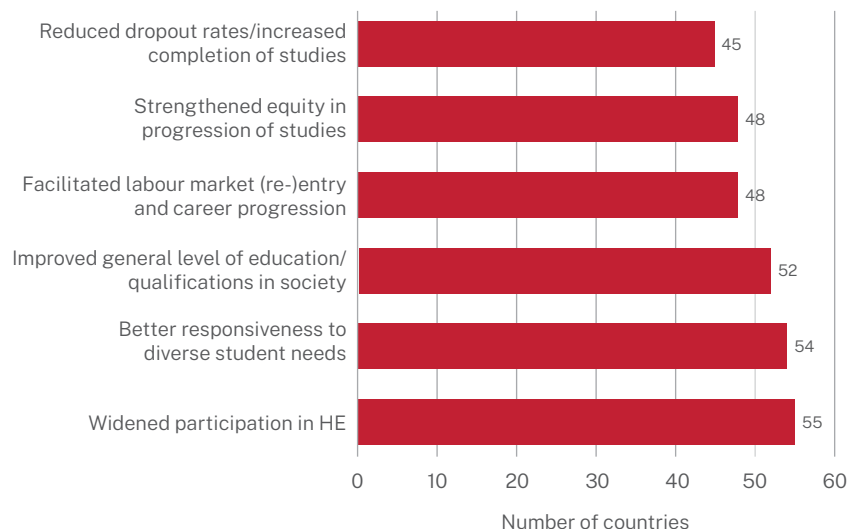
Regulatory, legislative, and policy frameworks for FLPs can ensure the provision of a well-integrated HE system with coherent entry and progression pathways. Defining policy outcomes associated with the development of FLPs helps governments steer their HE system towards broader desired sector outcomes. Such policy outcomes refer to improved access to and progression in HE, decreased non-completion and dropout rates, strengthened student-centred learning environments, or smoother preparation for the labour market or further studies.

Countries that responded to the international survey were asked to list the outcomes that their regulatory, legislative, and policy frameworks for FLPs supported. The survey question was multiple choice, thus giving respondents the opportunity to select multiple answers. Among the most frequently mentioned were widened participation in HE (noted by 55 out of 71 countries), better responsiveness to diverse student needs (54 out of 72), and improved general level of education and qualifications in society (52 out of 71). Other outcomes, such as facilitated labour market (re-)entry and career progression (48 out of 72), strengthened equity in the progression of studies (48 out of 71), and reduced dropout rates / increased completion of studies (45 out of 72) were also frequently mentioned (see *Figure 4*).

Overall, the results indicate that policy rationales for implementing FLPs in HE are multiple and diverse, but there is wide recognition of the role of FLPs in supporting participation in HE, building student-centred learning environments, and contributing to the development of a highly skilled society.

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Figure 4. Outcomes supported by regulatory, legislative, and policy frameworks for FLPs



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

2.3.2 Types of policies supporting flexible learning pathways

Governments may set one or several policies to support the development of FLPs in their HE systems. In fact, FLPs can be operationalized in different ways, and policies that support FLPs are diverse.

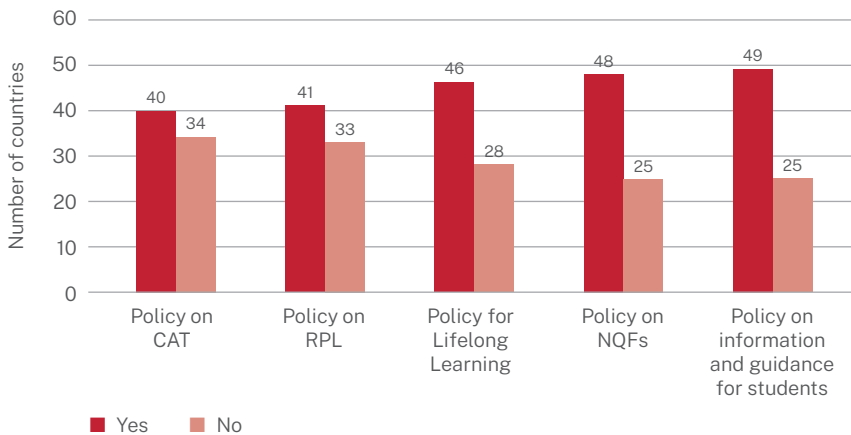
LLL policies, for example, can support HEIs in adapting their education provision to several different learning goals, including professional development, knowledge advancement, and personal interest. Policies for validation and recognition of prior learning (RPL) reinforces the idea that the acquisition of competencies, knowledge, and skills also takes place outside the boundaries of formal education, including in the work environment; prior learning also deserves to be recognized and accounted for in an individual's learning path to allow for career progression. Governments can also develop policies for CAT or to facilitate mobility and portability of credits across study fields, institutions, and levels of education. Or they can make use of policies to support the development of an integrated national qualifications framework (NQF), which can in turn strengthen linkages between

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study programmes, qualifications, and learning outcomes more widely across the education system. Finally, countries can develop policies or strategies to develop or strengthen student support and guidance systems, both at national and institutional level.

In more than two-thirds of the countries that responded to the international survey, FLPs are supported by policies that relate to information and guidance for students (49), NQFs (48), and LLL (46) (see *Figure 5*). Somewhat less prevalent yet still present in more than half of the systems are policies on RPL (41) and policies referring to CAT (40).

Figure 5. Policies that support FLPs in HE



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

2.4 Instruments supporting flexible learning pathways in higher education

FLPs require an enabling policy environment with an adequate mix of instruments and practices to facilitate policy implementation and ensure their effectiveness. Examples of well-known instruments that support flexible learning in HE are NQFs, QA and accreditation, CAT systems, and information and guidance services.

HEIs can also facilitate flexibility to make HE programmes more accessible to different categories of learners. This can be done, for example, through institutional arrangements that provide bridges

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between institutions and study programmes, through recognition, validation, and accreditation of formal, non-formal, and informal learning, or through inter-institutional transfer arrangements.

2.4.1 Pathways to access higher education

Access to HE is generally granted upon completion of a secondary education qualification. Most commonly, individuals who enter HE for the first time do so at the level of a short-cycle (International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Level 5) or bachelor's (ISCED Level 6) programme (OECD, 2019). Depending on the type of institution or study programme, candidates may also need to submit an application and submit transcripts from their secondary education or undergo an interview.

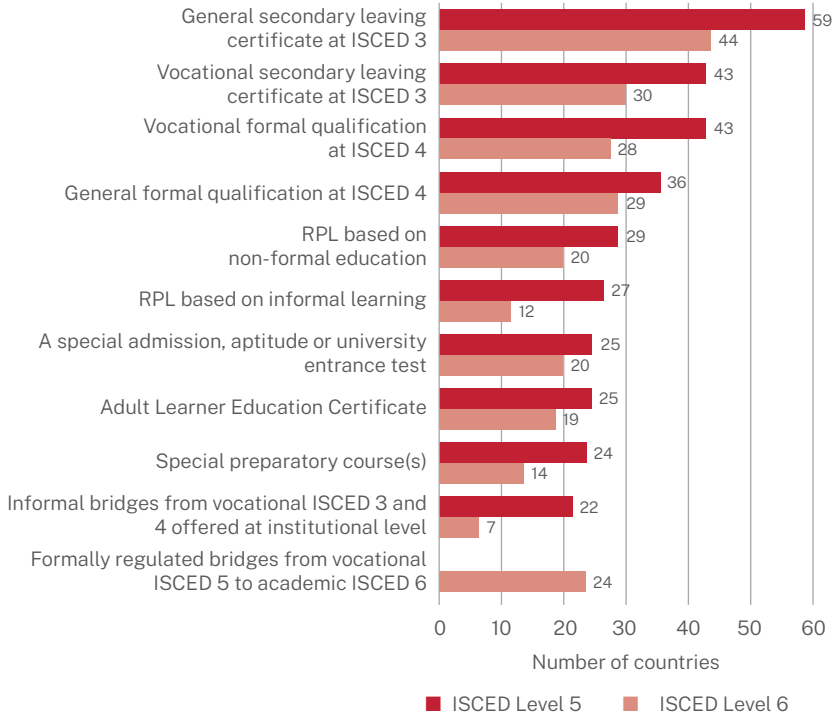
Meanwhile, HE is increasingly expected to be accessible to a wider range of learners who do not necessarily meet conventional entry requirements. This creates the need for alternative entry pathways into HE that consider candidates' backgrounds and their special circumstances.

Countries that responded to the survey were therefore asked to list the pathways that they have in place to allow access to HE and namely to ISCED Level 5 (e.g. short-cycle degree) and ISCED Level 6 (e.g. bachelor's degree) programmes (see *Figure 6*).

Overall, a more diverse range of pathways is available to facilitate entry to a short-cycle programme (ISCED Level 5) compared to a bachelor's or equivalent programme (ISCED Level 6). Of 75 responding countries, a short-cycle degree programme (or an equivalent ISCED Level 5 programme) can be accessed through a general secondary leaving certificate in 59 cases, a vocational secondary certificate in 43 cases, or a vocational formal qualification in 43 countries. Short-cycle qualifications generally provide entry to the labour market as well as occasional progression to more advanced learning. Therefore in many countries such programmes have a stronger potential to bring students into HE who have not followed a traditional pathway (Slantcheva-Durst, 2010).

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Figure 6. Entry pathways into HE



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

On the other hand, a bachelor's degree programme (or an equivalent ISCED Level 6 programme) is more difficult to access through non-conventional entry requirements. Entry at this level takes place most frequently through a general secondary leaving certificate (available in 44 countries), followed by a vocational secondary leaving certificate (30 countries) and a general formal qualification at ISCED Level 4 (29 countries).

Furthermore, survey findings reveal that RPL, particularly acquired in informal settings, is not a common practice across HE systems. In systems that do have RPL practices, they are more frequently used to facilitate entry to short-cycle than to bachelor's or equivalent programmes. This suggests that entry to HE at the level of short-cycle

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programmes is somewhat more flexible than access to bachelor's-level provision.

An issue of growing relevance to improving access to HE is the permeability between technical and vocational education and academically oriented provision at the HE level. Permeability between the two sub-sectors can be enhanced through formal tools reinforced by legislation or by means of more informal measures offered by HEIs themselves, such as inter- or intra-institutional agreements, memoranda of understanding, and so on.

Survey data show that 24 responding countries have formally regulated bridging programmes that enable progression from vocational short-cycle programmes (ISCED Level 5) to academically oriented bachelor's programmes (ISCED Level 6). This complements the existing research suggesting that short-cycle programmes serve not only the purpose of facilitating entry to the labour market but also progression to higher-level studies (CEDEFOP, 2014).

Finally, 22 systems provide access from vocational ISCED Levels 3 and 4 to ISCED Level 5 programmes through informal bridges that are not regulated by national policy but offered in practice at the institutional level, frequently based on institutional agreements.

2.4.2 Pathways for transfer within higher education

FLPs are important at the point of entry to HE but also throughout the study cycle to enable students to progress and successfully complete a degree or qualification in line with their personal and professional aspirations. Pathways throughout HE can facilitate transferability between levels, programmes, and institutions. They can also support student-centred learning, giving students more flexibility to switch to a different study programme or institution (OECD, 2019). Opportunities for transfer can therefore reduce learning dead ends and inefficiencies associated with dropout and non-completion.

Transfer pathways facilitate horizontal mobility by allowing students to switch to a different study programme within the same level of education or vertical mobility by enabling their progression to higher levels of education.

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Governments can adopt several measures to support transferability in HE systems. Transfers may be reinforced by national regulations supporting student transfers, policies for student transfer and mobility, or RPL.

CAT systems also provide a framework whereby learning acquired in different settings can be recognized and transferred in the form of credits. CAT systems are important in facilitating regional and international mobility of students across HEIs.

NQFs are known to facilitate transferability and progression in HE, enabling students to move between institutions, levels, and programmes based on the attainment of comparable learning outcomes. And QA supports comparability and transparency, as well as helping to establish trust and facilitate recognition. It can enable transferability by strengthening the coherence between academically oriented education and vocational education and training (VET) through, for instance, a common framework of assessment for VET and HE.

Finally, student transfers can also be supported by inter- or intra-institutional partnerships or agreements, particularly in highly decentralized systems where HEIs have a high level of autonomy and where decision-making (including aspects of transferability and recognition) is largely devolved to them.

2.4.3 Transfer within the same field of study

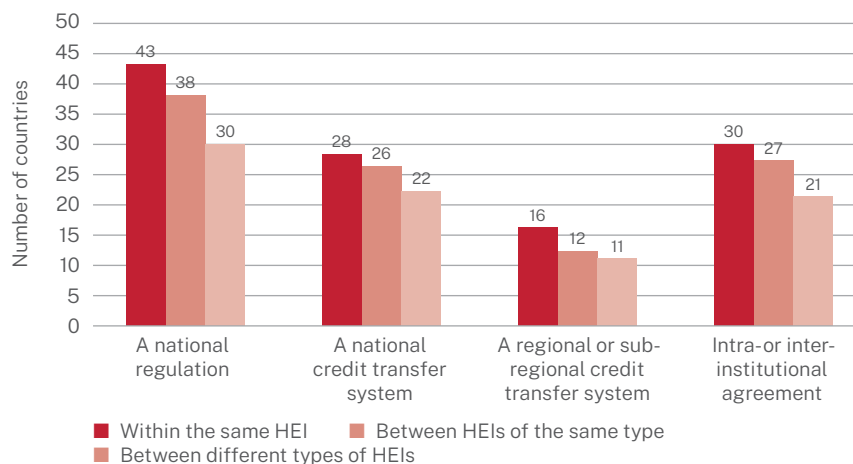
Findings from the international survey suggest (see *Figure 7*) that opportunities to transfer within the same field of study are more common within the same institution than across institutions. Of 75 countries, transfers that take place within the same institution are facilitated most frequently by a national regulation in 43 cases, followed by an intra- or inter-institutional agreement in 30 cases.

Transfers between HEIs of the same type (e.g. from one university to another) are, on average, more common than transfers between different types of HEIs (e.g. from a polytechnic to a university). As noted earlier, a binary divide between the university and non-university sub-sectors may act as an obstacle in some countries for transfers, as sub-sectors are often governed by different legislative frameworks and follow separate rules and regulations.

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Transfers between institutions of the same type are enabled most frequently by a national regulation (present in 38 countries) or an inter-institutional agreement (in 27 countries). The latter often occurs as a consequence of the absence of national regulatory frameworks and/or the high levels of institutional autonomy in countries where rules and processes related to student transfers are left to the discretion of HEIs. Transfers between different types of HEI are, however, most commonly supported by a national regulation (available in 30 countries) or a national CAT system (in 22 countries).

Figure 7. Opportunities for transfer within the same field of study



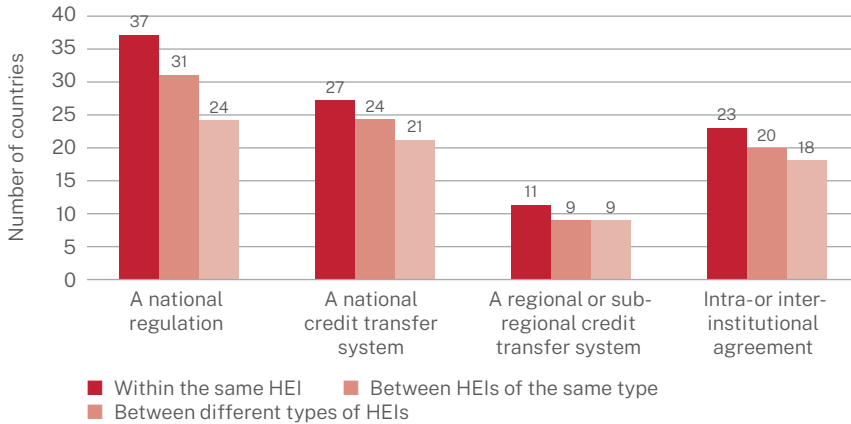
Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

2.4.4 Transfer across different fields of study

Opportunities for students to transfer across different fields of study are overall less common than within the same field among the surveyed countries. In systems that do apply cross-disciplinary transfers, they take place more frequently within the same institution than across institutions, and are supported by national regulations in 37 countries and national CAT systems in 27 out of 75 countries (see *Figure 8*).

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Figure 8. Opportunities for transfer across different fields of study



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

2.4.5 Role of national qualifications frameworks

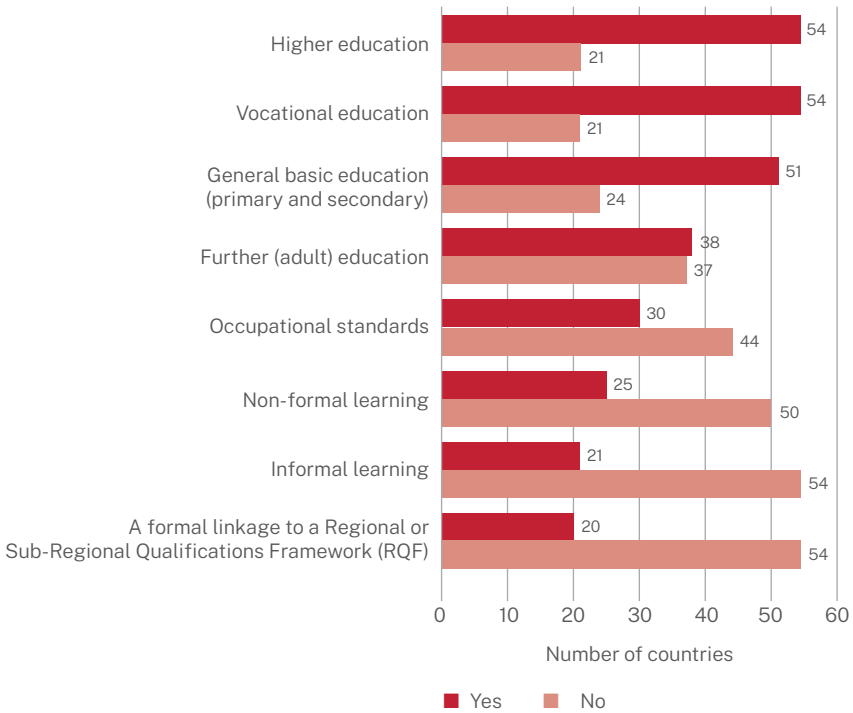
UNESCO defines a qualifications framework as ‘a comprehensive policy framework, defining all nationally recognized qualifications in HE in terms of workload, level, quality, learning outcomes and profiles’ (UNESCO, 2007: 67–68). NQFs are cornerstones of recent education reforms in countries across the world, and they are the backbone of FLPs. NQFs have often been influenced by the development of regional qualifications frameworks.

NQFs provide a framework for the classification and recognition of study programmes based on level and subject matter descriptors, and they serve as reference points for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2017). They support entry and progression to advanced studies, enabling learners to enter, exit, and switch between institutions, levels, or programmes, based on the recognition of comparable learning outcomes and competencies. Integrated NQFs covering several or all education levels under a single NQF can be particularly important for the development of FLPs as they generally cover all types of provision at all educational levels and show the linkages between different types of qualifications.

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Countries that responded to the international survey were asked to indicate the types of education that are recognized in their NQFs. A vast majority of countries have an NQF that includes HE (54) and vocational education (54); in 51 countries NQFs cover general basic education (see *Figure 9*).

Figure 9. Types of education included in the NQF



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

LLL has grown in importance in policy agendas across the world, but the integration of adult education into NQFs is not as widespread. Only about half (38) of responding countries indicated having NQFs that include further (adult) education.

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The limited prevalence of NQFs that recognize non-formal education and training and informal learning may be explained by the prominence of informal labour markets and related training opportunities in the African region, where informal learning is a dominant feature and where the need to recognize it is particularly pressing (Savadogo and Walther, 2013).

2.4.6 Role of quality assurance systems

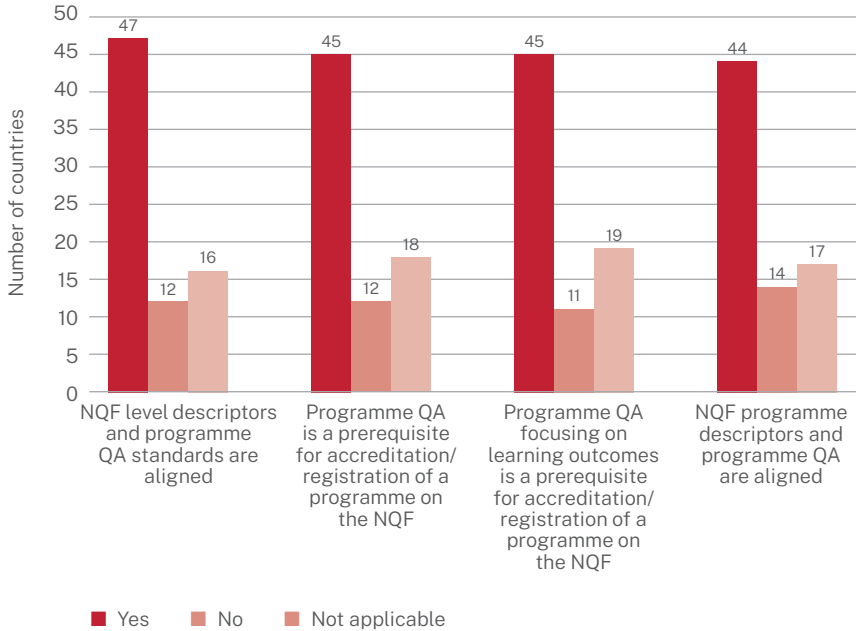
QA and accreditation systems can facilitate the development of FLPs in HE. A standards-based approach to QA enables the development of subject benchmarks in some systems, and this can reduce disparities in the content and quality of study programmes across institutions and programmes, facilitating the RPL and transfer of students. QA also facilitates FLPs through an alignment between programme standards and NQF programme and level descriptors, and therefore supports both horizontal and vertical student transfers. Finally, QA can help in recognizing the value of non-formal and informal learning and encouraging its use in access and progression in HE.

Ensuring coherence between study programmes and qualifications is important as it reinforces the level of trust, transparency, and credibility in the quality of education provision and resulting qualifications. Having a framework whereby QA standards and NQF descriptors are linked facilitates the portability of credits and recognition of learning, enabling students to move more flexibly through the HE system.

Some 47 countries indicated that the NQF level descriptors and programme QA standards are aligned in their context, and another 44 noted that NQF programme descriptors and programme QA standards are aligned. Lastly, in 45 countries, QA focusing on learning outcomes is a prerequisite for accreditation or registration of a programme on the NQF (see *Figure 10*).

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Figure 10. NQF linkages to programme QA



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

2.4.7 Role of information and guidance services

FLPs need to be supported by appropriate information and guidance services that advise learners on the learning paths that best meet their learning requirements and aspirations as well as help them prepare for the labour market. Student information and guidance systems are particularly beneficial for groups under-represented in HE, who may need additional guidance to help them progress and complete their studies. Therefore, such services can help reduce dropout and improve retention in HE, particularly for those that are at high risk of non-completion (European Commission/ EACEA/ Eurydice, 2015).

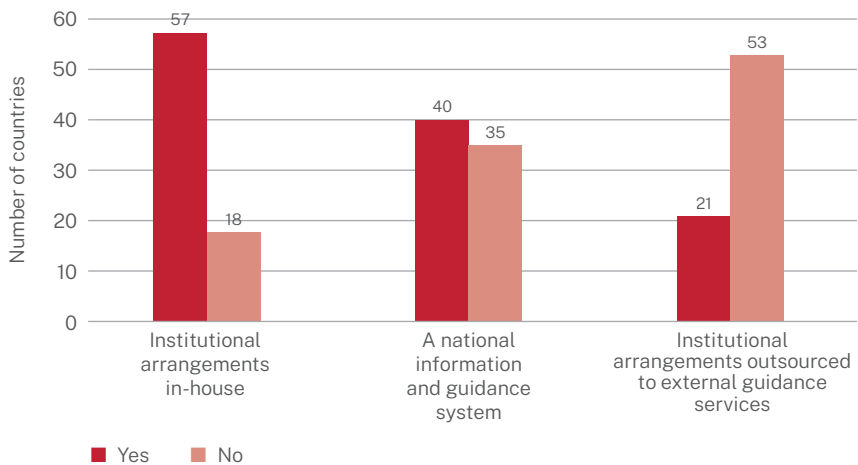
While the availability of information and guidance services is becoming increasingly important, particularly in the context of a diverse HE provision and multiple pathways, no comparable international data have been collected so far on the prevalence and effectiveness

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of these student support services in HE (OECD, 2019). To address this knowledge gap, the IIEP international survey asked national HE authorities to indicate whether they have services that provide information and guidance to students and, if they do, the level at which these services are provided.

Survey findings suggest that information and guidance services are delivered most commonly at the level of HEIs rather than systems (see *Figure 11*). Overall, 57 countries indicated that such services are provided in-house by HEIs, generally through guidance and counselling offices or similar entities. In some cases, central services that are involved in student recruitment are also the ones that offer information and guidance to students. Institutional arrangements outsourced to external guidance services are somewhat less common: 21 countries indicated having such systems in place. Furthermore, 40 countries use a system-wide approach, making student support and guidance available through national systems, such as online portals and platforms.

Figure 11. Availability of information and guidance services



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

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National information and guidance services generally have more complete information on available system-wide entry and progression pathways, while institutional structures are in a better position to provide more targeted support due to their proximity to the learner. To ensure a wider outreach while allowing for targeted and individual interventions, HE would ideally need to rely on both national and institutional measures for student support, as both have complementary functions.

2.5 Evaluation of policy implementation

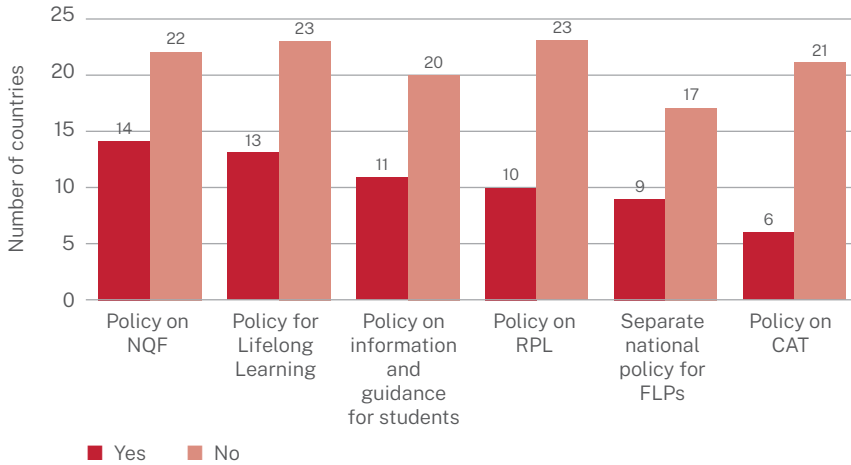
The evaluation phase is critical for the assessment of policy effectiveness, but policy evaluation is known to be less frequently conducted than is desirable. Policy evaluation is particularly important in understanding whether the instruments used in the implementation phase are effective in achieving policy objectives and targets: it therefore requires appropriate evaluation tools and procedures for monitoring and reporting. Such procedures and tools can provide summative and formative perspectives and unveil factors that promote or inhibit success in policy implementation.

Findings from the international survey suggest that evaluation of policy implementation is not a common practice among the countries responding to this question (see *Figure 12*), confirming the general lack of policy evaluation. In all policy areas, a majority of countries responding to this question (58 per cent) indicated that they do not perform evaluations of policy implementation. Countries that do perform evaluations most commonly do so to monitor the implementation of policies concerning NQFs (14 countries), LLL (13 countries), and information and guidance for students (11 countries).

It is worth noting that even though 21 countries reported collecting data to monitor the implementation of policies for RPL, less than half of them actually evaluate such policies. This indicates that while data are available, they are not systematically used for evaluation a posteriori. The need to evaluate the implementation of education policy more frequently is widely recognized, particularly since policies are not always implemented as planned or do not necessarily lead to envisaged outcomes (Viennet and Pont, 2017).

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Figure 12. Evaluation of policy implementation



Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2022.

2.6 Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of the international survey show that for the most part, countries recognize the importance of FLPs in their HE systems. The role that FLPs play in supporting participation and choice in HE, creating a student-centred learning environment and contributing to the development of a highly qualified society, is clearly understood.

The vast majority of countries responding to the IIEP international survey have introduced more flexible modes of learning delivery in their HE systems, many of them providing the opportunity to study part-time as well as at a distance or online, along with more traditional face-to-face learning modalities. At the same time, evidence suggests that opportunities offered by ODL could be further exploited, using regulation to ensure that the quality, validation, and recognition of such programmes are on a par with more traditional forms of learning.

As far as access to HE is concerned, evidence suggests that countries use a diverse range of pathways to facilitate entry to a short-cycle qualification compared to a bachelor's or equivalent qualification. Therefore, one can expect short-cycle programmes to attract a more

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diverse student population, many of whom would otherwise not be able to access HE. Apart from serving an equity objective, there is clear indication that short-cycle programmes facilitate permeability between vocational and academic-oriented provision. This is fundamental in ensuring upward mobility and reducing dead ends. Meanwhile, results also indicate that HE systems and institutions could do more to flexibilize entry to ISCED Level 6 (bachelor's level) which traditionally has favoured rigid and conventional entry requirements.

Evidence from the survey further suggests that HE systems provide opportunities for student transfer but mostly within the same field of study and between institutions of the same type. These forms of transfer are facilitated most commonly through national regulations or internal or inter-institutional agreements, depending on the level of decentralization and institutional autonomy in the system. Transfers across different disciplines and between different types of institutions are less common, which may be a consequence of the hierarchical and fragmented nature of HE in some contexts.

Furthermore, findings suggest that policy outcomes supporting FLPs at the point of entry to HE are more common than those supporting students' progression to higher learning levels. While it is indeed important to widen access to HE, further efforts are needed to ensure that students progress to higher levels of learning and prepare for entry to the labour market. Hence, the data reiterate the need for an overarching policy for FLPs comprising diverse HE pathways for entry, progression, and completion.

Findings show that a vast majority of countries do not have in place a single policy for FLPs. Nonetheless, different aspects of flexibility are supported through a *mix of policies*, particularly those that target the development of information and guidance systems, NQFs, and LLL. This suggests that at the policy level there is wide recognition of the importance of providing individuals with continuous learning opportunities and supporting them in making the best use of these opportunities.

In addition, findings suggest that policies that support FLPs and the instruments used for their implementation are not in full alignment with one another. For example, although a majority of countries have

2. International overview of policies and practices for flexible learning pathways

NQFs that include HE and vocational education, further efforts are needed to integrate adult education and recognition of non-formal and informal learning into the respective frameworks.

The majority of responding countries make use of information and guidance systems to support students in their study paths; however, these tools are more frequently available at the HEI level than at the system level. Indeed, institutional structures may be in a better position to provide more targeted support due to their proximity to the learners, but a national information and support system, such as information portals on HE study offer and access requirements, may also be beneficial in ensuring a more systemic and comprehensive approach to guidance and wider outreach.

These findings reiterate the complex nature of the policymaking process and the difficulty of translating policy objectives into effective practices leading to desired outcomes. This process requires management capacity at the system level, adequate resources for policy implementation and evaluation, and committed stakeholders at the HEI level who are able to translate policy objectives into well-functioning institutional practices.

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3. Role of flexible learning pathways in the promotion of equity

Michaela Martin, Uliana Furiv, and Sophie Guillet

3.1 Introduction

Despite the worldwide expansion of enrolment in higher education, strong disparities remain in the participation of equity groups. The Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report states that in 76 countries, 20 per cent of the wealthiest people aged 25–29 have completed at least four years of higher education (HE), compared to less than 1 per cent of the poorest (IIEP-UNESCO and GEM Report, 2017). Beyond a concern with fairness and equal opportunities, the pursuit of equity is also useful for developing a better-skilled population and contributing to a country's economic growth and social cohesion.⁸

IIEP's research aimed to investigate how flexible learning pathways (FLPs) influence HE access, progression, and completion for equity groups in the eight case countries. The research provides evidence that FLPs support disadvantaged students, mainly through recognition of prior learning (RPL), part-time programmes, open and distance learning (ODL), bridging programmes, and information and guidance services. However, it is important to note that statistics in the case countries are frequently scarce, making it difficult to establish a strong causal link between FLPs and the enhancement of equity.

The chapter draws conclusions from a comparative analysis of the eight country studies carried out in the context of IIEP's research, as well as educational statistics provided by the eight countries. The chapter focuses on two aspects: (1) equity policies, such as affirmative action

⁸ In this publication, equity is understood as a way of recognizing people's individual circumstances and providing them with necessary resources and opportunities to achieve equal outcomes. Equality means that everyone is given the same resources and opportunities.

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and targeted funding (specifically targeting disadvantaged learners), which enable greater flexibility when accessing and progressing through HE; and (2) available evidence on the effects of FLP policies on HE access, progression, and completion for disadvantaged learners.

3.2 Definition of equity in the eight case countries

In our research, ‘equity groups’ are defined as groups of learners who, because of their socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, disability, or other characteristics, are disadvantaged when entering into, progressing through and completing HE. Equity groups are defined by the history and sociopolitical context of individual countries as well as existing equity policies. The terms ‘equity groups’ and ‘disadvantaged groups’ are used interchangeably in this chapter.

Table 4 shows a comparative analysis of equity groups as recognized in the eight case countries. All eight case countries define learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those with disabilities, and those disadvantaged because of their gender as equity groups; all countries except South Africa identify students from remote areas as an equity group; all countries except India and Morocco consider mature students as an equity group; and all countries except Jamaica and Morocco consider students disadvantaged because of their race and ethnicity as an equity group. There is more divergence between countries regarding the definition of students belonging to linguistic minorities, youth out of school (unattached youth in Jamaica), and inmates.

Defining equity groups is an important step towards the implementation of adequate policies for disadvantaged learners. The issue of equity is embedded to a varying extent in the national legislation of all the case countries; hence, the degree of intervention and the impact of policies on the equity groups also vary.

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Table 4. Recognized equity groups by country

Country Equity focus	Chile	Finland	India	Jamaica	Malaysia	Morocco	South Africa	United Kingdom
Socio-economic status	Yes, the bottom 40 per cent	Yes	Yes, notably low castes	Yes	Yes, the bottom 60 per cent	Yes, households earning less than 3,000 dirhams a month (USD 350)	Yes	Yes
Gender	Yes, focus on men and women	Yes, focus on equal opportunities, regardless of gender	Yes, focus on women	Yes, focus on men and women	Yes, notably single mothers, housewives	Yes, focus on women	Yes, focus on men and women	Yes, focus on women
Disability	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, at the level of some higher education institutions *HEIs)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Students from remote areas	Yes	Yes, students from rural areas	Yes	Yes, at the level of HEIs	Yes, at the level of HEIs	Yes	ND	Yes, poor/under-represented post-code areas
Mature students	ND	Yes	ND	Yes	Yes	ND	Yes	Yes

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Country	Chile	Finland	India	Jamaica	Malaysia	Morocco	South Africa	United Kingdom
Race and ethnicity	Yes, indigenous people	Yes, migrants	Yes, scheduled tribes	ND	Yes, notably indigenous people	ND	Yes, Africans, Indians, Asians, and Coloured	Yes, Black, Asians, ethnic minorities, refugees, Roma people
Linguistic minority communities	ND	Yes, migrants	Yes, students whose home language is not English	ND	ND	Yes, students who have not mastered both Arabic and French	Yes, students whose home language is not English	ND
Unattached (out of school) youth	ND	ND	ND	Yes	ND	ND	ND	Yes
Inmates	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	Yes, at the level of HEIs	ND	Yes, at the level of HEIs

Source: Elaboration by the authors of this chapter.

Note: This table is built upon information from the eight case studies, not on statistical data sources.

■ National comprehensive equity focus

■ Equity focus restricted to specific groups or only adopted by some HEIs

■ No data (ND): the case study did not mention it – the study did not look specifically at equity policies, but rather at FLPs and their links with equity

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3.3 Effects of equity policies on disadvantaged learners

Equity policies are typically geared towards the implementation of flexibility in admission and progression for equity groups in HE. Equity policies in the eight case countries include preparatory programmes, quota systems, compensatory mechanisms (bonuses on entry requirements), and targeted funding for disadvantaged students.

3.3.1 Preparatory programmes

Several case countries have implemented equity policies through preparatory programmes to offer flexibility for disadvantaged students entering HE. Such programmes aim to help equity groups meet the minimum entry requirements by filling knowledge gaps and/or preparing them for entrance exams. While preparatory programmes exist in Finland, South Africa, and Jamaica for both non-traditional and disadvantaged students, in Chile these programmes are specifically designed as an equity policy that supports learners with particular needs to fulfil general entry requirements to access HE, as a compensation for existing disadvantages or prejudices (see Box 9).

BOX 9

Preparatory programme in Chile

In Chile, the Programme for Effective Access and Support (PACE) is organized in upper secondary school, jointly with universities, to ensure the transition of students into HE. High-performing students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds receive workshops and classes that emphasize academic skills needed to prepare them for access to HE. They are organized in the evenings or on weekends in the last two years of upper secondary school. Students also receive mentoring and guidance during their first year of university to prevent dropout and improve learning outcomes. In 2019, almost 100,000 students from disadvantaged groups benefitted from PACE, but only 4,000 have been enrolled in HE as a result.

Source: Lemaître et al., 2021.

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Another programme, called *Propaedeutic*, is implemented via a network of universities in Chile. The programme is designed to support the 10 per cent top-performing pupils from disadvantaged schools with academic competencies needed to succeed in HEIs. Some HEIs have quotas on how many students can be admitted via such preparatory programmes.

In Finland, where access to free HE studies is quite selective, preparatory programmes are offered to immigrant students to prepare them for entry into HE. Immigrant students are offered preparatory courses in the Finnish language and in the study skills they will need to engage in academic studies. Some 60 national and local projects supported the development of these programmes, which, in addition to improving knowledge of the Finnish language, resulted in improved transition from secondary to HE level and integration into HE. While the number of immigrant students in Finnish HEIs has increased fourfold from 2012 to 2017 and accounts for 0.5 per cent (1,400) of all students enrolled in HE, the dropout rate of immigrants remains high. In 2019, five years after starting university studies, 41 per cent of immigrant students had dropped out.

3.3.2 Quota system

Entering HE is more challenging for disadvantaged groups as they frequently have to deal with socioeconomic difficulties while having insufficient academic preparation to succeed in HE. Therefore, governments in some countries set up quotas to support flexible access to HE for individuals who have historically been deprived of HE participation. The quota policy implemented in India since independence reserves a set proportion of HE places to under-represented groups (see *Box 10*).

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BOX 10

Reservation quotas in India

In India, all universities and colleges are constitutionally required to provide reservation quotas in undergraduate programmes for socially disadvantaged groups. The national constitution foresees that a certain number of seats be reserved for access into HE for disadvantaged learners. Amendment 124 of the Constitution Bill, through the reservation policy, reserves 15 per cent of HEI places for Scheduled Castes, 7.5 per cent for Scheduled Tribes and 27 per cent for Other Backward Communities. These groups have faced socioeconomic discrimination in the past and were, or still are, under-represented in public life. In addition, 10 per cent of HEI places are reserved for economically weaker sections and 5 per cent for people with disability. Overall, the reservation policy has increased the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE, although it has not been fully implemented by all HE institutions.

Source: Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022.

Other countries have similar policies to reserve study places for groups that have been historically marginalized and deprived of HE opportunities. In Chile, some HEIs apply reserved study places for students from indigenous groups and for other target groups, such as civil servants' children, women in traditionally masculine programmes, men in predominantly feminine programmes, children of teachers, and graduates of technical studies who want to continue academic programmes. In Malaysia, the widening access policies have been implemented through ethnic quotas and reserved places for persons with disabilities, single mothers, and students from low-income households. The Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IIT Delhi), a case institution chosen for the Indian FLPs study, also decided to enforce a supernumerary quota for women. Supernumerary seats are created only if the percentage of female students falls below 14 per cent of current total number of places.

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However, it is worth pointing out that quota policies typically prioritize traditional access routes to HE and thus cannot be considered as non-traditional access pathways. In the absence of policies that provide alternative pathways to HE, disadvantaged groups may continue to experience challenges. This is the case in both Malaysia and India, where ethnic quotas have not resolved the issue of retention and dropout among marginalized groups.

3.3.3 Compensatory scores and contextualized entrance criteria

Equity policies can also provide entry flexibility through compensatory scores or contextualized entrance criteria. This is the practice in the UK to make up for the difficulties faced by students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Compensatory scores are understood as additional scores or bonus criteria that are added during the traditional admissions process to support candidates from neighbourhoods where HE participation is low. These policies are mostly facilitated by HEIs, therefore they are not uniformly implemented across the HE sector. For example, in Chile, only the universities belonging to the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities (CRUCH) applies a bonus score to students who have lower scores in the national entrance examination but who have been consistently scoring top of the class in the last three years of secondary education.

Both South Africa and the United Kingdom (UK) apply compensatory scores to ensure that economically and socially disadvantaged learners have equal chances to access HE (see *Box 11*).

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BOX 11

Contextualized criteria for equity groups – examples of the UK and South Africa

To enter HE in the UK, students are expected to focus on three or four subjects in A-Level exams for the General Certificate in Education. Their grades will determine what university they can enter. To take equity into account, universities have recently lowered requirements for A-Level grades for disadvantaged students. One example of a university that has implemented contextualized requirements in admissions is the prestigious London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The university considers the following criteria for contextualized admission of an applicant:

- lives in low-participation neighbourhood;
- attends a low-performing school;
- spent time in local authority long-term care;
- other factors (e.g. experienced disrupted education).

Since the introduction of these criteria at LSE in 2017, there has been a 150 per cent increase in the number of students recruited from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

In South Africa, all HEIs support equity in admissions by applying a ‘disadvantage factor’ during admission. It is calculated as a percentage of score points required for admission to undergraduate studies. Students can receive up to 10 per cent for all programmes (in some programmes up to 20 per cent) when their background is evaluated against a set of questions, such as their parents’ education level, if their parents receive child support grants or other social benefits, and so on.

Source: Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020; Brennan, 2021.

3.3.4 Funding policies to support equity and flexibility

The IIEP study has found that funding policies play a strong role in supporting disadvantaged groups to access and remain in HE. South Africa has a funding scheme primarily oriented to African students, who experience economic marginalization due to past discrimination. In 2018, some 604,114 students met the criteria for government funding (National Student Financial Aid Scheme). The number of African

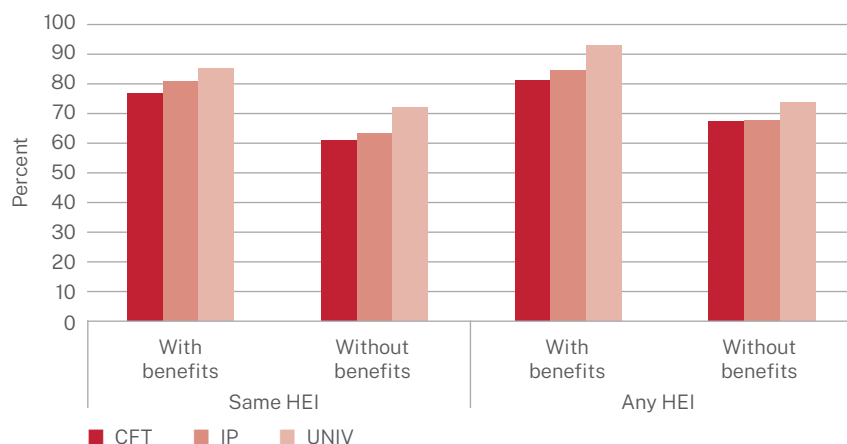
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students enrolled in public HEIs has increased from 689,000 (70 per cent of all student enrolment) in 2013 to 820,000 (75 per cent) in 2018.

In Chile, the national funding policy is designed as an equity policy to promote access to HE of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In 2018, the government established the Free Tuition Programme for the poorest 60 per cent of the population, who now benefit from a tuition fee waiver. The programme has indeed benefitted access and retention in HE of lower-income students. In 2019, about 47 per cent of those enrolled in HE received student aid of some type; in 2020, when free-tuition policy was widely implemented, the proportion increased to 70 per cent.

In the three HEIs selected for the Chilean FLPs research, the retention rate⁹ of students benefitting from financial aid is higher than for those without (see *Figure 13*). However, the dropout rate of students from low socioeconomic background remains high. In 2018, 39 per cent of all students in Chile dropping out of HE came from a low socioeconomic background. This shows the need for special support for students of low socioeconomic status during the progression of HE.

Figure 13. Retention rate of students with and without benefits at three Chilean HEIs



Source: SIES, 2018a, quoted in Lemaitre et al., 2021.

Note: CFT = centres for technical training; IP = professional institutes; UNIV = universities.

⁹ The retention rate is the percentage of students who remain in HE over a given period of time, usually a year. It is calculated as the number who re-enrol in the second year, either in the same institution or in another HEI, divided by the number of students enrolled in the first year.

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Other case countries, such as Jamaica, provide scholarships for low-income students. The Programme for Advancement through Health and Education in this country establishes a social protection floor (a social security guarantee protecting people from poverty and social exclusion) with scholarships up to the bachelor's level. The Jamaican FLPs research found, however, that too few potential beneficiaries are informed of this. Morocco and Finland provide tuition-free HE for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. But tuition-free higher education is often not enough to ensure that students from low-income households enrol and progress through HE. Hence, governments in all case countries assist students from low-income households with either grants or scholarships (see *Box 12*).

BOX 12

Financial support to low-income students in Morocco

In Morocco, the government provides scholarships for students whose parents' income is lower than 3,000 dirhams per month (equivalent to USD 350). The number of recipients has increased almost fourfold between 2006–2007 and 2018–2019. Students belonging to this equity group are also given priority in the allocation of places in university housing, which is cheaper than other forms of accommodation. Access to this facility supports disadvantaged students from rural areas who could not otherwise afford to study at university. The Moroccan government also offers financial aid for specific programmes, such as the diploma of specialized technician, for which the ministry covers one-third of the annual costs of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Source: Kouhlani and Benchekroun, 2021.

The case countries also dispense different types of loans to support equity. One of them is an income-contingent loan, available in the UK and Chile. Under such a framework, students receive a government loan to be repaid over a long period after graduation but only once a minimum level of salary has been achieved.

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3.4 Policies on flexible learning pathways and their effects on disadvantaged learners

One of the four research questions in IIEP's FLPs research focused on their effects on equity groups, as measured through participation, progression, and success (see *Introduction*). Unfortunately, with the exception of South Africa, statistical data on the access and progression of equity groups were frequently incomplete or unavailable. When they were available, they focused on participation, never on progression and completion. This simple fact seems to indicate the lack of awareness on the potential of FLPs for the enhancement of equity or the lack of concern with policy evaluation identified in *Chapter 2*. But some evidence was able to be collected to suggest that FLPs support disadvantaged students, mainly through RPL, part-time programmes, ODL, bridging programmes, and information and guidance services.

3.4.1 Recognition of prior learning

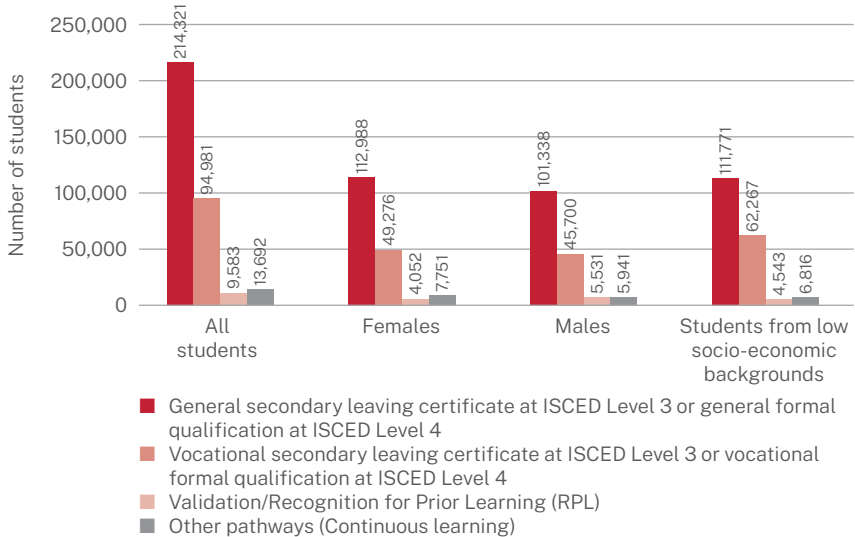
RPL is rarely identified as an instrument aimed at supporting the access of equity groups to HE. Nevertheless, it enables people who left school and started to work early, often coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, to convert their skills into academic credits. While a general secondary leaving certificate remains a common pathway to HE in most case countries, more and more students are entering HE through non-conventional pathways. For instance, in 2019 in Chile 4.4 per cent used the RPL pathway to enter HE, of which 47.4 per cent were students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (see *Figure 14*).

This is a similar trend to Finland, where the percentage of students entering HE through RPL has been increasing. For example, in 2016 the share of students entering through RPL was 1.5 per cent (864 out of 59,136 students) but by 2019 this proportion had more than doubled to 3.2 per cent (1,986 out of 61,662).

In addition to being a common pathway for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, RPL can also ensure that mature students can upskill or reskill while getting their previous formal, non-formal, and informal learning officially recognized, as is the case in South Africa (see *Box 13*).

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Figure 14. Students entering HE through non-conventional pathways in Chile



Source: Lemaître et al., 2021.

BOX 13

Recognition of prior learning for equity groups in South Africa

RPL was one of the first alternative pathways introduced post apartheid in South Africa in 1994, and it has now become mainstream. It was explicitly taken up as one of the objectives of the NQF, which aims to 'accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment' (RSA, 2008: Clause 5(1)[d], cited in Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020). RPL is an opportunity for adults from disadvantaged backgrounds to enhance their qualifications: 'a lot of people had to leave school because of crime [in the area], and this [RPL] programme was an opportunity to get a professional qualification' (South Africa, student interview). However, online RPL applications can contribute to widening the digital divide. Some students have limited access to the Internet or do not have adequate IT infrastructure at home, which can prevent them from applying.

Source: Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020.

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3.4.2 Part-time study

Adapting the study pace for students with caring responsibilities or students who need to work to fund their studies can take the form of part-time study. In Chile, part-time study favours women's access to HE, as it helps them balance domestic work and study. Some 63 per cent of students enrolled in part-time programmes are women, while they represent 53 per cent of enrolment in the whole HE system.

3.4.3 Open and distance learning

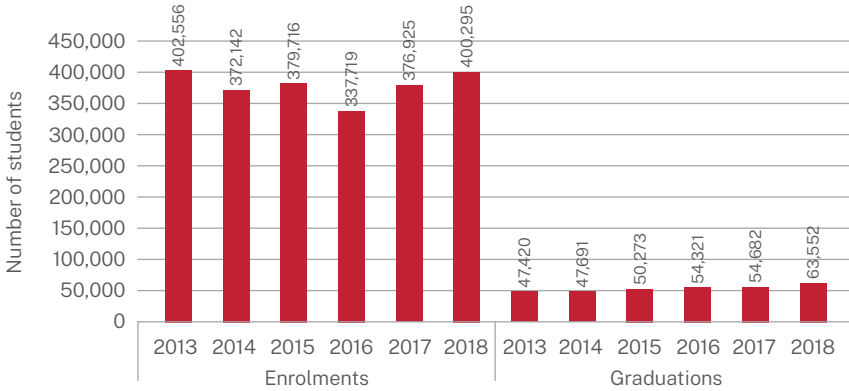
ODL enables working adults and students with disabilities or caring responsibilities who cannot physically go to class to pursue a degree. In South Africa and India, ODL is particularly attractive to female students, who can find it challenging to combine face-to-face studies with social demands for domestic work, caring responsibilities, or simply cultural expectations to remain in their families. In South Africa in 2018, many more females than males enrolled in ODL programmes (66 per cent of enrolment), whereas in traditional programmes their numbers were almost equal (54 per cent women). The data from the India case study show that while the enrolment of females in ODL is increasing (in 2018 it reached more than 1 million), more males are enrolled in ODL at the undergraduate level. This changes at the postgraduate level, where female enrolment (close to 600,000 in 2018) is higher than male enrolment.

However, graduation in distance education programmes at South African HEIs remains low compared to its enrolment. For example, with just over 400,000 students enrolled in distance education programmes in 2018, fewer than 64,000 graduated the same year (see *Figure 15*).

In the UK, the HE enrolment of disadvantaged students is also enabled through distance education and ODL. Fifty-nine per cent of all Open University students are above 30 years old, and 22 per cent have some form of disability (27,000 in 2020) (see *Figure 16*).

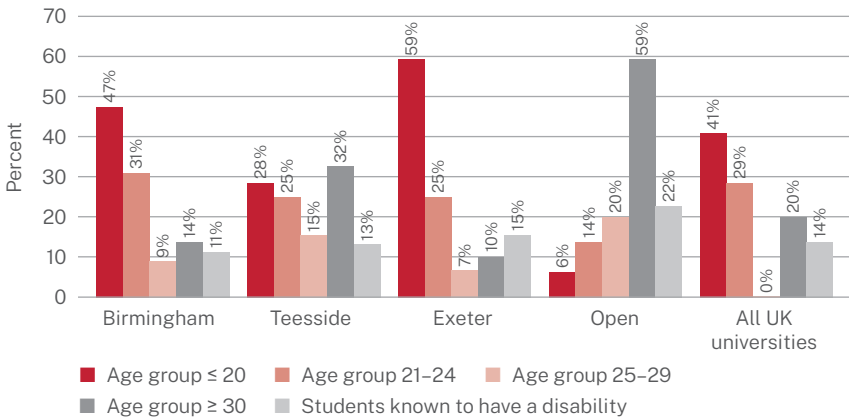
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Figure 15. Overall enrolments and graduations in public HEIs by distance mode in South Africa



Source: Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020.

Figure 16. HE enrolments by age group and disability (academic year 2018/19) in the case institutions of the UK case study



Source: Brennan, 2021.

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Besides this, the course content – and more specifically the language used – can be crucial in supporting equity groups during their ODL studies, especially in multilingual countries where an international language (e.g. English) may not be mastered by all. Some institutions in India have found effective and equitable ways to teach disadvantaged students in the more accessible vernacular language (see *Box 14*).

BOX 14

Teaching in vernacular languages in some institutions in India

The multilingual nature of India poses specific challenges in HE when English, which is often the most common medium of instruction, is not well understood nor spoken by numerous students, typically those from disadvantaged segments of society. Most of the massive open online courses (MOOCs) offered at the national level by digital platforms such as SWAYAM are in English, meaning that ODL can also perpetuate inequality between students in access to knowledge. To deal with this issue, the Ministry of Education has funded the Spoken Tutorials initiative. These are audio-visual tutorials which promote digital literacy. They are dubbed into 22 vernacular languages and can be used offline, which makes them available for students who cannot access the Internet or have low bandwidth. About 36,000 college labs now use Spoken Tutorials in their official curriculum, and 10 universities use them as MOOCs for their lab courses. A total of 4.5 million students have been trained with this course. Thus, this initiative is a way to support equity by ‘reaching the unreached’ and contributing to the reduction of the digital divide in India (Moudgalya, 2017, cited in Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022).

Source: Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022.

3.4.4 Bridging programmes

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is often labelled as a ‘second chance’ programme for students who dropped out of secondary education or did not have the required qualifications to directly enter HE. The IIEP study has found that creating a seamless articulation between TVET and HE via bridging programmes can foster the participation of disadvantaged students in HE. In Jamaica,

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a bridging programme in Grades 12 and 13 was initiated to introduce articulation between TVET and HE. While the programme does not specifically mention equity, it has been designed to prevent a large number of students from dropping out of high school (see *Box 15*).

BOX 15

Articulation between TVET and HE in Jamaica

In Jamaica, the current policy for FLPs is driven by the K-13 strategy, which starts at the early childhood education level and goes up to the Associate Degree level (NQF-J Level 4). The K-13 strategy added two more years (Grades 12 and 13) to secondary education. It brought flexibility through implementation of the Career Advancement Programme (CAP) – a technical and vocational programme that secondary students aged 16 to 18 can pursue to acquire job skills and qualifications. Students from CAP can then further articulate into associate degree programmes and from there move on to the third year of a full bachelor's degree. CAP therefore creates seamless articulations between TVET and HE. It also has free tuition, hence reflecting the objective of an equity-based and open-to-all system.

Source: Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021.

3.5 Conclusions

The chapter has highlighted that equity policies and FLP policies are effective in supporting disadvantaged learners in participating in HE. The enrolment of equity groups in higher education has increased over the years in case countries, either through specific policies such as free tuition in Chile for low-income students, through the provision of RPL systems in Finland and South Africa, or through the promotion of alternative study modes such as ODL in India and South Africa.

However, there is also evidence which suggests that progression and completion among these groups remains a concern, as dropout rates can be high among disadvantaged groups having entered HE through FLPs. As a consequence, policies that support disadvantaged groups' access to HE strongly need to support successful progression and completion.

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Overall, both affirmative action and financial aid have enabled a larger share of disadvantaged students to participate in HE. While preparatory programmes support only a small number of students, they do compensate for the lack of preparedness of many disadvantaged students in accessing HE. Quota and bonus systems acknowledge that disadvantaged students require special treatment to be able to access HE. The role of targeted funding policies for equity groups is paramount.

FLP policies that offer alternative admissions pathways via RPL provide clear support for equity groups. Greater flexibility in pace and place also benefit them. Part-time study supports the study-life balance that many disadvantaged students struggle to find when they try to continue their studies at university. ODL has become an excellent tool to access HE for students with disabilities or those who cannot afford daytime face-to-face HE. And finally, bridging programmes supporting a smoother transition from TVET to HE have also been useful in reducing the risk of disadvantaged students dropping out.

However, a lack of comprehensive data sets on access, progression, and completion among equity groups in FLPs makes it truly challenging to fully understand the effects of FLPs on these groups' learning journeys. Absence of systematic monitoring and evaluation practices is an additional concern. While some case countries already collect data on access of equity groups into HE by specific flexible pathway, data on their progression and completion of HE are clearly absent. This points to the lack of awareness of the important role that FLPs can play in fostering equity.

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4. Developing governance in support of flexible learning pathways

Michaela Martin and Uliana Furiv

4.1 Introduction

Flexible learning pathways (FLPs) depend on a complex set of national and institutional arrangements to create an enabling environment for their development. Regulation, legislation, and policy frameworks play an important role in providing direction for articulated and flexible higher education systems. Instruments such as national qualifications frameworks, quality assurance, and information and guidance services for students clearly support the implementation of FLPs.

Countries vary widely with regard to their higher education (HE) governance structures. Some use a strong regulatory approach, while others offer considerable autonomy to higher education institutions (HEIs). Some are more geared towards government regulation, while others favour stronger market involvement. And countries differ, of course, with regard to available financial and human resources for higher education as well as their capacities to monitor and evaluate policy. As FLPs require system-wide coordination, yet also considerable buy-in at the level of HEIs, all these factors can have a strong influence on FLP development.

In this chapter, a comparative analysis is offered on how governance influences the development of FLPs in the eight case countries of the IIEP FLPs research. In particular, it examines how the interaction between regulation, institutional autonomy, and the market impacts the effectiveness of FLPs. It also looks at the role of quality assurance (QA), national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), monitoring and evaluation (M&E), financial resources, and information and guidance systems in FLP development and implementation. It shows how governance can support, but also sometimes impede, the development of FLPs at the country level.

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4.2 Regulation, legislation, and policy frameworks

The IIEP research found that a holistic, continuous, and deliberate emphasis on FLPs was conducive to their effective implementation. Focus on flexibility in getting into, getting through, and getting out of HEIs is necessary for FLPs to be implemented equally across the entire HE system. Although FLPs are often not explicitly stated as a policy objective in the HE legislative frameworks of the eight countries studied, their policies address certain aspects of flexibility with regard to access, progression, and graduation/employment. The IIEP international survey has shown that FLPs are commonly conceptualized within the framework of lifelong learning (LLL) policies, NQFs, specific policies on recognition of prior learning (RPL), and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT). The survey also demonstrated that of the 72 participating countries, the most frequently cited reasons for supporting FLPs were to increase participation in HE (55 countries), to better respond to different needs (54), and to improve the general level of education and skills in society (52).

In the eight case countries FLP policies were linked to varying national objectives. In all of them FLPs were associated with the goal of human resource development on the one hand, and equity and equality of opportunity on the other. For example, FLPs in South Africa were introduced as part of policies to reduce poverty and income inequality and to improve economic and social growth. In Malaysia, the Education Blueprint 2015–2025 focuses on LLL to meet labour market skills needs as well as increase access to HE for the socioeconomically lowest 40 per cent of the population and other equity groups. The Finnish Government has been explicitly and continuously emphasizing the principles of flexibility, equality, continuing education, and employment in its national policy for more than a decade (see *Box 16*).

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BOX 16

A continuous policy focus on FLPs in Finland

The 2019 government programme, which builds on previous programmes, focuses on improving access for ‘under-represented groups’ with clear and measurable targets to facilitate access and completion; strengthen RPL principles with emphasis on recognition of work experience; provide flexible learning platforms to ensure flexible learning for students regardless of their location; and respond to demand for skills development and reskilling through continuing learning opportunities. National priorities in the field of FLPs are well coordinated across government structures and programmes. Such coordination improves the implementation of FLPs at the institutional level.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020.

The effective implementation of FLPs in the eight countries was found to require a high level of legislative and policy coherence as well as good coordination between the authorities responsible for the different HE sub-sectors and other relevant actors. In some countries, administrative fragmentation and the divide between the authorities responsible for academic and professional HE was an obstacle to the implementation of FLPs. Coordination and coherence between HE sub-sectors could also be ensured through comprehensive legislation covering both the university and non-university sub-sectors. In some countries (e.g. South Africa), the creation of a legal framework has made it possible to coordinate the implementation of FLPs between sub-sectors (see *Box 17*).

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BOX 17

A legal framework supports FLPs in South Africa

In South Africa, the NQF Act (2008) and the NQF Amendment Act (2019) designated the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to coordinate the development and implementation of the NQF. The NQF comprises three sub-frameworks administered by three quality councils – the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework, the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework. The NQF Act was an important step in the integration of the sub-frameworks into the post-secondary education and training system in South Africa. The NQF structure developed under the NQF Act allows the use of FLPs both within and across sub-sectors. Quality councils are required to align their policies with the NQF Act and the relevant policies on RPL, CAT, and articulation. SAQA has been instrumental in supporting the implementation of FLPs through numerous NQF policies, services, and research on FLPs.

Source: Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020.

However, a well-developed legislative and policy framework oriented towards FLPs is not sufficient to ensure their effective implementation. Robust managerial capacity, the involvement of all stakeholders, and good coordination between HE sub-sectors were identified as important enabling factors for an effective implementation of FLPs. The involvement of policy-makers, buffer organizations, HEIs, and labour organizations was also considered crucial for a comprehensive and effective implementation.

Participatory policymaking has also allowed governments to receive valuable feedback and advice, and to ensure awareness and acceptance of the FLP policies being implemented. In Finland, participatory approaches have been widely used in decision-making and policy-development processes related to FLPs (see *Box 18*).

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BOX 18

Participatory approaches to FLPs in the Finnish policy framework

The involvement of HEIs, students and the labour market in HE policy is of great importance for the development of the HE sector in Finland. While the government identifies national priorities and proposes projects, these are then submitted for public discussion through national working groups. Rectors' Councils (UNIFI) are involved in promoting RPL development, 'open learning', inter-university cooperation, and collaboration. The Student Union plays an important role in advocating more transfer places, RPL, and credit transfer during working groups. Other ministries such as the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health are also involved in discussions on continuing education, further education, professional development, and so on. Finally, national employers' organizations participate in working groups of the National Skills Anticipation Forum, which emphasizes the effectiveness of learning pathways.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020.

4.3 Balancing regulation and institutional autonomy

HE governance involves the sharing of power between the government and HEIs, as well as a clarification of respective responsibilities. Institutional autonomy has been identified in all participating countries as an important factor for the effective functioning of FLPs. This autonomy allows HEIs to adopt institutional strategies appropriate to local realities, facilitates flexibility in admissions and curricula, and ensures cooperation with other institutions and the labour market in the provision of FLPs.

The differences in the levels of regulation and autonomy in the HE systems of the eight countries has impacted the implementation of FLPs at HEIs. FLPs were implemented in a more homogeneous manner in HE systems where regulatory mechanisms specifically supported them, for example with RPL legislation providing for a designated FLPs governance body and funding (e.g. South Africa, Finland, India, and Malaysia). In systems where market competition prevailed (e.g.

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Chile and the UK), HEIs of the same type or with a similar level of prestige tended to cluster together, creating an articulation among perceived equals. In Chile, for example, there is a system of credit transfer between accredited universities belonging to the Council of Rectors (CRUCH), the top-ranking universities' group. This problem is also highlighted by the authors in the case study:

designing and implementing long-term policies within an extremely diverse system, with high levels of institutional autonomy and lack of confidence, is very difficult and it is even harder to promote flexible pathways that facilitate the transition between levels and within them. (Lemaître, Ramírez, Baeza, and Blanco, 2021: 26)

When countries in the study lacked system-wide policies to support FLPs, HEIs often applied bottom-up approaches, for instance implementing FLPs through inter-institutional agreements or memoranda of understanding between HEIs. However, in such systems, funding and QA played an important regulatory role for the whole HE sector, including FLPs (see *Box 19*).

BOX 19

Importance of QA and funding for regulating FLPs in Chile

In Chile, HEIs traditionally have a high degree of autonomy and in some cases can resist state intervention. Regulation is mainly through funding and accreditation.

A comprehensive reform of the HE system was undertaken in 2018. One of the objectives was to strengthen the role of the state through changes in system governance and regulation. The government plans to establish a single body, the National System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SINACES), which will bring together the newly established Superintendency for Higher Education and the Undersecretary for Higher Education, as well as the National Council for Higher Education and the National Commission for Accreditation. SINACES would be responsible for QA, HE policy development, and HE policy coordination, and possibly improving the sector cooperation and coherence necessary for the effectiveness of FLPs.

Source: Lemaître, Ramírez, Baeza, and Blanco, 2021.

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In more regulated HE systems (e.g. Finland, India, Morocco, and Malaysia), the government could play a larger role in guiding a sector-wide implementation of FLPs. In such contexts, HEIs relied on government support either through legislation, funding, or the provision of guidelines for implementing FLPs. As stated by the university respondent in the Indian case study:

Practical support from national agencies and appropriate management structures are the most important. We adopt the guidelines given by national agencies, making it critical for implementing FLPs. (Bharathiar University, Former IQAC Coordinator, interview, Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022)

However, some HEIs in heavily regulated countries have also found themselves constrained by excessive regulation. While in theory HEIs could choose how to implement FLPs, governance mechanisms were set up in such a way that, through the allocation of funding and the setting of incentives, they steered HEIs towards implementing FLPs in a rather prescriptive manner. It was also found that the requirement to strictly follow regulations limited the ability of HEIs to be innovative and proactive and take responsibility for implementing FLPs. In Morocco, for example, under Law 01.00, HEIs were given academic autonomy to develop continuous learning programmes, but because the programmes are not validated as national diplomas, they remained relatively unattractive to mature learners.

As mentioned above, institutional autonomy was found to be very important for the development of FLPs in all case countries. Autonomy was found to allow HEIs to develop stronger institutional leadership, administrative, and managerial capacities, which in turn are necessary to respond more effectively to local challenges for FLPs. The university interviewee in the Malaysian case study emphasized this point:

WOU [Wawasan Open University] needs leadership with strategic direction if the institution is to continue to excel in ODL [open and distance learning], and other FLP based on RPL. Leadership, resources, and technical skills were... some of the critical components for a successful FLP. (WOU, Dean interview, Sirat et al., 2020)

Balancing regulation and autonomy means developing regulation that can provide HEIs with guidance for the implementation of FLPs, but which is not too restrictive when it comes to adapting to local realities. Public funding mechanisms can act as a significant enabler for FLPs.

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In Finland, the government directs policy through incentive funding schemes, thereby respecting the autonomy of HEIs (see *Box 20*).

BOX 20

Steering autonomy with funding in Finland

In Finland, a new funding model for 2021–2024 rewards universities and universities of applied sciences (UASs) for cross-study pathways and students who take courses at other institutions. The model allocates a share of 5 per cent of funding to the universities and 9 per cent to the UASs for continuous learning activities. This includes the provision of specialized courses, open studies pathway, continuing education, and preparatory courses for immigrants. In addition, the funding promotes cooperation and follow-up pathways between universities and UASs. A share of 1 per cent is allocated to universities and UASs for credits based on cooperation and students taking courses at other institutions in the framework of cross-studies.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020.

4.4 Involvement of the market

Many governments expect their HEIs to interact more strongly with the market, either through raising fees from students or through service delivery. While competition between HEIs can stimulate innovation, it can also lead to fragmentation and less cross-sector collaboration. These tensions were highlighted by the national interviewee in the UK case study:

Market competition rather than a national qualification framework is the preference of the present government. And HE institutions are responding to this in a variety of ways. Competition generally rules over collaboration between institutions. The short-term tends to override the long-term. (National Policy Body, interview, Brennan, 2021)

Market-driven competition can have negative consequences for the interaction between HEIs in different HE sub-sectors. In Chile, the QA system allocates different durations of accreditation to different types of institutions and thus reinforces the existing hierarchies. This forces HEIs that are perceived as less prestigious (e.g. technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, with generally

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shorter accreditation periods) to emulate those that are perceived as more prestigious (e.g. traditional research-oriented universities with longer accreditation periods). It leads to the perception that vocational programmes are not of the same quality as academic programmes, resulting in limited opportunities for articulation between sub-sectors.

In addition, among the countries studied with lower levels of government funding and higher levels of privatization, student tuition fees tend to make up a larger share of institutional budgets. In the UK in 2017, for instance, tuition fees accounted for 63 per cent of total revenue (HESA, 2018). Even in more publicly funded HE systems, the role of the market has been increasing over time, and the decline in public funding has led public and private HEIs to diversify their sources of funding by raising tuition fees in almost all of the countries studied. In Malaysia, the Education Blueprint 2015 promotes the public universities' involvement with the market, aiming to enable HEIs to participate in income-generating opportunities. In Morocco, the government funds public HEIs to a large extent and tuition fees remain very low. However, there are plans to introduce tuition fees for public HEIs under Law 51.17 to enable HEIs to increase and diversify their resources. This is, without doubt, a worrying trend, with potentially negative consequences for the access and progression through HE of disadvantaged learners, who are now seeking access to higher education in greater numbers.

While the move to the market often takes place with the objective of resource diversification, it can also mean a stronger involvement in decision-making of societal stakeholders such as labour market representatives. In the HE systems of the eight case countries, stakeholder involvement was found to contribute to the development of FLPs. For example, the General Confederation of Enterprises has participated in the policy development and implementation of FLPs in Morocco (see *Box 21*).

In some countries, students are seen as consumers who drive demand, including for flexibility. In recent years, national policy in the UK has also emphasized that HEIs need to meet the changing needs and demands of students for more flexibility and choice in HE.

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BOX 21

Involvement of the market in policy development in Morocco

In Morocco, the General Confederation of Enterprises is involved in the development of TVET programmes and sits on various administrative committees. In addition, the curricula of the new Campuses of Trades and Skills (Cités des métiers et des compétences) are being developed in partnership with employers and regional actors to link training with the regional labour market. This should facilitate flexible interaction between TVET providers and the labour market.

Source: Kouhlani and Benchekroun, 2021.

The IIEP research has also found that university–enterprise partnerships played an essential role in providing pathways to graduation and labour market entry. For example, the Malaysian Employers Federation was often invited to participate or co-chair inter-ministerial committees, such as the National (Technical) Skills Development Council, to provide information and feedback on skills needed in the labour market.

The involvement of market actors can also diversify the FLPs offer to meet the needs of a diverse student population. In the UK, the University of Birmingham, selected for the UK case study, collaborated with John Wiley & Sons to deliver a master’s degree online. The involvement of employers is particularly common when HEIs offer continuing professional development programmes. In Finland, universities and UASs have developed arrangements with enterprises to deliver commission-based trainings and continuing professional development programmes. Lastly, the Universiti Teknologi MARA, the selected institution in the Malaysian case study, has partaken in the Malaysian MOOCs (massive open online courses) project, a partnership between Malaysian public universities and OpenLearning, an Australian education technology company.

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4.5 Quality assurance

In the eight countries studied, QA was identified as a strong tool to support the implementation of FLPs. QA builds trust in the HE system, not only among students but also among HE providers, and so facilitates collaboration between HEIs, for instance for student transfers or credit recognition.

The IIEP research has shown that QA can enable FLP policies by developing guidelines for various initiatives such as RPL, open and distance learning (ODL), and CAT. In Malaysia and South Africa, the national qualifications bodies provided HEIs with several prescriptive guidelines on the implementation of FLP initiatives. In Malaysia, guidelines exist on ODL, RPL, MOOCs, and micro-credentials. The implementation of these tools is also assessed by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). At the same time, one of the obstacles identified in the Malaysian case study was the low level of understanding of ODL policy across HEIs, because MQA guidelines were not widely disseminated. In South Africa, the Council for Higher Education provides HEIs with guidelines that support the alignment of learning pathways, the provision of short courses, and work-integrated learning.

The QA systems in the eight countries differ in the objectives and mechanisms used to support FLPs. Some QA systems included FLPs in the accreditation process of institutions and programmes (e.g. South Africa, India, and Jamaica), while others conducted assessments, reviews, or audits with a focus on FLPs (e.g. Finland). The accreditation process in some of these countries covered the implementation of RPL, CAT, MOOCs, ODL, and articulation mechanisms (see examples in *Box 22*).

Thematic evaluations conducted through institutional quality audits are also seen as effective mechanisms to enhance FLP implementation. Such audits are a supportive and improvement-oriented mechanism that has no regulatory or prescriptive power to enforce FLPs but which can help to identify and spread good practices across the HE sector (see *Box 23*).

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BOX 22

Accreditation in South Africa and India supports FLPs

In South Africa, registration of qualifications on the NQF and their accreditation to offer study programmes at HEIs requires an articulation statement (a statement that indicates articulation pathways between qualifications) stipulated by SAQA and the three quality councils. For example, as part of the accreditation process, one of the quality councils, the Council of Higher Education, assesses the implementation of CAT and RPL in the HE sector by setting qualification standards and conducting national programme reviews.

In India, accreditation is mandatory for all universities and colleges. It is conducted for the academic and professional sectors by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council and the All India Council of Technical Education, respectively. The accreditation process includes verification of the implementation of certain FLPs, such as the choice-based credit (CBC) system and MOOCs.

Source: Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020; Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022.

BOX 23

Quality audits and thematic evaluations to improve FLPs in Finland

In Finland, the third audit model of the Finnish National Education and Evaluation Centre looks at the institutional practices of RPL, the definition of learning outcomes based on the Finnish NQF, and the working periods integrated into the curricula. The evaluation also examines international best practices in the integration of immigrants into HEIs as well as the availability of counselling services, preparatory training for immigrants to access HE, and the availability of data on the issue.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020.

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The IIEP research found that the existence of one national QA body for all tertiary-level institutions can facilitate the process of articulation more generally. In Jamaica, the University Council of Jamaica will be responsible for QA in both the HE and TVET sub-sectors. Such a decision is expected to lead to support for articulation among TVET institutions and universities.

Although QA has served as a mechanism for raising quality standards of HE programmes, it can also limit institutional flexibility when it translates into a conservative concept of academic quality. For example, in 2017, to preserve quality, the University Grants Commission (UGC) in India set restrictive rules on certain programmes (e.g. medicine) meaning that they could not be offered as ODL programmes.

Equally, accreditation in some countries also favours traditional pathways by applying rigid standards for disciplinary and professional programmes and discouraging transfer between programmes and institutions, RPL, and flexible modes of delivery. For example, in Chile, QA discourages flexibility as HEIs do not want to take the risk of innovation, hence deviation from the existing mainstream model. This leads to HEIs fearing being accredited for a shorter period, hence losing prestige and recognition. Thus, this study has identified the need to adopt an approach to QA which enables HEIs to introduce FLPs in line with the needs of students and society at large. The case study interviewee from Chile also highlighted this tension:

It [QA] may have an influence, but I don't think this is desirable. To define a norm might generate a dangerous herd effect. What should be done instead is to make sure that the norms do not interfere with their [FLPs] existence or operation. (Commissioner, interview, Lemaître, Ramírez, Baeza, and Blanco, 2021)

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4.6 National qualifications frameworks

NQFs facilitate comparability between programmes and institutions and therefore improve the linkage between different sub-sectors, (such as the academic and TVET) and levels of study. NQFs usually contain level descriptors supporting definitions of student learning outcomes, entry requirements, credit hours, and credit transfers. The availability and use of this information greatly facilitates alignment between institutions and programmes.

However, despite the fact that all eight case countries recognize the importance of NQFs, qualifications frameworks have not been implemented uniformly in the HE sub-sectors of all countries. Finland, Jamaica, Malaysia, and South Africa have implemented system-wide NQFs, while in India and Chile NQFs exist only for the TVET sub-sector. In the UK, there is a single system for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland and a separate one for Scotland. Finally, there are countries such as India and Morocco where an NQF for the entire HE landscape is under development (see *Table 5*).

Among the countries studied, the inclusion of FLPs in the NQF was supported by guidelines. In South Africa, there are three quality councils responsible for general education, TVET, and HE, respectively. They have developed numerous guidelines and documents which ensure that NQFs promote RPL, CAT, and articulation processes in their respective sectors.

NQFs have been found to enable the implementation of FLPs by identifying and incorporating tools that promote flexibility in enrolment (e.g. through RPL) and transfer (e.g. through CAT) (see *Box 24*).

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Table 5. Implementation of NQFs in the studied countries

Country	NQF for the entire sector	NQFs for separate sub-sectors
Chile	ND	Vocational National Qualifications Framework in a pilot stage
Finland	Finnish National Qualifications Framework	ND
India	Plan to develop a National Higher Education Qualifications Framework	National Skills Qualifications Framework
Jamaica	National Qualifications Framework -Jamaica	Tertiary Qualifications Framework; National Vocational Qualifications Framework
Malaysia	Malaysian Qualifications Framework	ND
Morocco	A National Qualifications Framework is under development	ND
South Africa	National Qualifications Framework that integrates three sub-frameworks	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework; Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework; Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework
United Kingdom	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies; Framework for Qualifications of HEIs in Scotland	ND

Source: Elaboration by the authors of this chapter.

Notes: This table is not exhaustive. Further details are given in each country case study.

- Fully-fledged implementation of the practice at the system level
- Under development
- No data/ rare implementation

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BOX 24

Incorporation of FLPs in the NQFs of Malaysia and Jamaica

In Malaysia, following the implementation of its LLL policy, RPL has been identified as a route to the various levels of qualifications set out under the NQF. Thus, public universities must follow the rules and regulations of MQA if they wish their programmes and qualifications to be accredited and listed in the MQA's Malaysian Register of Qualifications.

In Jamaica, the NQF is an integration of the Tertiary Education Qualifications Framework and the National Vocational Qualifications Framework. It promotes flexibility by incorporating the following alternative routes: access to HEIs based on RPL; transfer based on RPL from one level to another; transfer between TVET and academic streams; transfer from associate degree to bachelor's, master's and PhD programmes; transfer from occupational associate degree to academic-type programmes.

Source: Sirat et al., 2020; Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021.

Having separate frameworks for the academic and vocational sub-sectors does not facilitate articulation and permeability between them (e.g. Jamaica). Consequently, a sector-wide NQF is needed, as noted by an interviewee of the Jamaica case study:

It [the NQF] needs policy for standardization to be used across institutions. Rules are needed on how it should be used so that it is understood by each institution. For example, how a student moves even within the same institution. (J-TEC representative, interview, Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021)

4.7 Monitoring and evaluation

The availability of information on the implementation of FLPs is central to understanding their effectiveness. FLP policies on RPL, CAT, ODL, and continuous learning programmes (e.g. Finland, South Africa, and Malaysia) were occasionally monitored and evaluated in the case countries (see *Box 25*).

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BOX 25

Monitoring and evaluation of FLPs in Finland, India, and Malaysia

In Finland, a national database maintained by the Ministry of Education and Culture monitors and evaluates 'open studies' and 'cross-studies' pathways and preparation for the labour market. The Ministry and the Finnish National Agency for Education collect and maintain the *Vipunen* database containing information on open studies, continuing education, progression, placement of graduates, and so on. Universities also collect data on alternative pathways, credits gained through RPL, integration of work and study periods, and credits gained through cross-studies.

In India, the UGC is actively involved in monitoring and evaluating ODL programmes. Feedback from students attending ODL courses is sent directly to UGC, and questions based on such feedback are sent back by UGC to the university for their response.

In Malaysia, several universities have been accredited by MQA as national guidance and counselling centres for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). These centres conduct research on APEL awareness and evaluate the results of APEL initiatives.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020; Sirat et al., 2020; Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022.

National authorities responsible for statistics in countries where FLPs were more centrally regulated have taken a stronger approach to monitoring and evaluating FLPs in HEIs (see *Box 26*).

In more decentralized HE systems where the development of FLPs has been led mainly by individual HEIs, such as in Chile and the United Kingdom (UK), there has been no formal and systematic M&E of FLPs. Since in the UK HE is seen more as a private good, ratings and student satisfaction surveys are widely used as a means of monitoring the sector in general and FLPs in particular. In Chile, the ministry assesses the effectiveness of preparatory programmes, such as the Programme for Effective Access and Support for vulnerable high school students to gain access to HE, but this does not cover all programmes that offer flexibility.

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BOX 26

Research on FLPs in South Africa

In South Africa, the provision of data is mandated by the Higher Education Act (1997) and HEIs must therefore comply with it. Data are stored in various databases on equity, RPL, CAT, and the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP). The National Learners' Records Database, managed by SAQA, contains information on qualifications and accredited HEIs, recognized professional bodies, and registered professional designations, and data on learners' achievements. SAQA uses these data for research analysing FLP trends. Between 2011 and 2019, SAQA conducted significant research on national associations, RPL policies, and flexible learning and teaching. The results of these research projects have been published in SAQA's newsletter on articulation initiatives and have resulted in national initiatives to strengthen learning pathways for community development, early childhood education, and engineering programmes.

Source: Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020.

Because M&E of the FLP policy has not been systematic and comprehensive across the eight case countries it was difficult to compare how effectively FLP policies had been implemented in their HE systems. In particular, the data on how equity groups enter and progress through HE using FLPs were often absent, meaning that the effectiveness of FLPs for disadvantaged students in the case countries often remained uncertain. Thus, M&E with a system-wide focus on equity and flexibility at different stages of HE is seen as central, but often missing, in the case study countries' implementation of FLPs.

4.8 Financial resources

Financial resources were found to be an important facilitating factor in the implementation of FLPs in all eight case countries. This finding is supported by the results of the IIEP international survey from 2019: available financial resources were identified as a key factor in implementing FLP policies by 28 participating countries and as a factor absent by 23 countries. This suggests that financial resources are considered fundamental to effective policy implementation but

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are often lacking. As one of the national interviewees in the South African case study noted:

I don't think the problem in South Africa is political leadership, political will ... the problem is the technical and the administrative and the budgetary will because RPL is an unfunded mandate. So, the problem is, on the one hand, you have the political will, [but] on the other hand, if you don't make money available for RPL, it is not going to happen. (Senior national official, NQF, interview, Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020)

In several of the case countries, targeted funding was available to support the implementation of FLPs in HEIs. In India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (now Ministry of Education) funds the online learning platforms SWAYAM and the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL).

Public funding allocated directly to HEIs strongly encouraged flexibility and promoted cooperation between HEIs in some case countries. This was so in Finland, where cooperation between HEIs for the development of FLPs was stimulated by government project funding. For example, in 2019 the government supported the implementation of the open entry pathway through the TRY project funding. The project launched a pilot with 11 universities to test 34 subjects as open studies (more on the open pathway in *Chapter 6*).

The study also revealed contradictions between financial autonomy and the availability of funding for FLPs. The lack of financial autonomy made it difficult for HEIs to generate additional income and subsequently allocate funds for the implementation of FLPs (e.g. in Morocco). Since FLPs in some countries were seen as an additional (non-core) activity, they were often underfunded. In such cases, HEIs tended to give priority to their core activities. For instance, in South Africa, the lack of funding for staff in RPL offices at HEIs was seen as an obstacle to expanding the RPL policy to the whole post-school education and training sector.

Finally, the study found that in some countries there was a tendency to reduce public funding, increase tuition fees, reduce study grants, and favour loans. At the same time, more market-based solutions were introduced to support the development of FLPs (see *Box 27*). It is significant that countries envisage student loans not only for studying to obtain a first degree, but also to participate in HE with an LLL approach.

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BOX 27

Corporate loan schemes to support flexibility in entry in the UK and Malaysia

In the UK, from 2025 as part of a new policy, the government will introduce a four-year Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) for post-18 education that will allow students and adults to enter and re-enter HE at different life stages. This loan could provide greater flexibility for non-traditional students entering HE and respond to the need for retraining throughout their professional lives.

In Malaysia, through the Student Loan Fund Corporation, the government provides high-performing public and private university students with a low-interest student loan that can be repaid upon graduation. This loan has increased access to education (especially in the public HE sector) for the socioeconomically lowest 40 per cent of families. In the case institution, Wawasan Open University, the loan is offered to the university's part-time and full-time students from the bottom 40 per cent category, to cover their studies (bachelor's degree or diploma) fully or partially.

Source: Sirat et al., 2020; Brennan, 2021.

However, it needs to be highlighted that funding support in some countries imposes rigid conditions on students seeking to benefit from available FLPs. For instance, in Chile, while the free-tuition programme supports students from most disadvantaged backgrounds, it also discourages flexibility as it requires students to be enrolled only in full-time education and have only one change of programme at the same education level. Thus, it leaves out part-time or distance learning students. There seems to be an implicit assumption that part-time students in some countries are mostly working adults who can afford HE studies and thus do not require financial support. Such an assumption may shift an undue burden on those who have not been able to benefit from full-time degree-granting education immediately after secondary education or those students who may follow non-linear learning pathways.

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4.9 Information and guidance

Information and guidance services in this study are defined as channels through which learners have access to accurate information about study options and career opportunities and how to navigate through these options. The provision of guidance is important during admissions, progression through HE, and for labour market entry, particularly for non-traditional learners, adult learners, and individuals with caring responsibilities, all of whom may need special support and guidance on how to access and progress through HE and prepare for the labour market.

Table 6 demonstrates the availability and type of information and guidance services in all eight countries.

Table 6. Information and guidance in the eight case study countries

Country	Information and guidance services
Chile	A national platform for orientation
Finland	Orientation courses for upper secondary students, national platform, and personal study plans
India	Responsibilities of HEIs
Jamaica	Overarching policy but sometimes implemented at the level of HEIs
Malaysia	Some HEIs have been designated as APEL centres for guidance on RPL
Morocco	National platform implemented with the new reform
South Africa	National Career Advice Portal and Career Development Service
United Kingdom	At the level of HEIs

Source: Elaboration by the authors of this chapter.

Notes: This table is not exhaustive. Further details are given in each country case study.

- Fully-fledged implementation of the practice at the system level
- Partial/ institutional implementation of the practice
- No data/ rare implementation/ under development

The table shows that information and guidance services are part of national policy in Chile, Finland, Jamaica, South Africa, and Malaysia but delivered mainly via institutional policies and practices in the UK and India. It is important to note that even when countries have national platforms for information and guidance, HEIs still provide institutional in-house services to guide students. This was also demonstrated in

4. Developing governance in support of flexible learning pathways

our international survey: 57 out of 75 participating countries indicated that information and guidance services are provided in-house by HEIs, generally through guidance and counselling offices or similar entities.

4.9.1 National policies on information and guidance

National policies on information and guidance can vary across countries, depending on the nature of regulation of the HE system. In countries with highly decentralized functioning of HEIs, there are barriers to implementing such services in a uniform manner. Therefore, national information platforms can play a crucial role in sharing accurate information about available pathways in the system (see an example of such platforms in Chile in *Box 28*).

BOX 28

National guidance platforms in Chile

In Chile, there are two national platforms for information and guidance, *Mi Futuro*, administered by SIES (Higher Education Information Service), and *Elige Carrera*, which is the responsibility of the National Council for Education (CNED). The first platform contains information to support students' choice of programmes and institutions. Students can find information on tuition fees, student aid, and anticipated income by programmes and institutions. The second platform advises potential students about different study programmes and financial support and requirements to enrol in the studies.

Source: Lemaître, Ramírez, Baeza, and Blanco, 2021.

The study found that in some study countries, information and guidance regarding the pathways towards completion of HE and preparation for the world of work is not readily available. Students may find themselves at a loss about which career to choose upon graduation. To counter this, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security in Jamaica launched a Labour Market Information System that aims to link certified students with local or international employers. The platform includes a list of potential employment opportunities and a page on institutions and programmes that can assist potential candidates in pursuing certain careers.

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It was also found that in countries with more centralized HE regulation, information and guidance can be implemented in a more coherent manner. Finland has a holistic approach to student guidance through personal study plans that support students (see *Box 29*).

BOX 29

Personal study plans in Finland

As a consequence of the right of each student to receive guidance before and during their studies, all Finnish HEIs have introduced personal study planning as a mandatory institutional policy. Personal study plans (PSPs) guide students through their studies and help identify their career prospects. The PSP is an electronic document that outlines a student's academic progress, the time it takes to complete a degree, and the different ways in which it can be completed; it is flexible and can be revised. Students are assigned a study advisor who can guide them during their bachelor's or master's studies. At the Finnish case University of Applied Sciences, PSPs are linked with the RPL process, whereby a student's prior learning and experience can be included in their PSP. Students may also receive guidance on how their prior learning can be recognized. PSPs compiled with an advisor are also available to immigrants, providing them guidance throughout their studies and advice on employment prospects.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020.

4.9.2 Institution-led guidance

As stated above, information and guidance services are often a responsibility of individual HEIs. Institutions can provide general guidance on study progression and available pathways, but they can also assist students in finding pathways that lead to good careers after graduation (see *Box 30*).

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BOX 30

Institutional information and guidance services

In Jamaica, graduate students of the case university, UTech, have the use of the Career and Placement Unit. The unit performs a psychometric evaluation to determine what type of career is suitable for a student and supports students in writing résumés and job applications. In addition, it has a mentoring programme where students are assigned an academic advisor to train them on networking and other industry-related skills. The unit runs 'Employment Empowerment', a year-long workshop that supports students in getting an internship.

Source: Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021.

In the absence of institutional policies on information and guidance, academic staff have been found to take a guiding role on available FLPs (e.g. ODL programmes, cross-disciplinary study opportunities and more). In India, academic staff at the case institution, Bharathiar University, offer academic counselling to students on how to combine courses under the CBC system and they also assume the role of mentors on the online course platform SWAYAM.

It is worth mentioning that some countries have designed guidance systems specifically for disadvantaged learners. Since equity is embedded in the HE policy in South Africa, information and guidance are provided through walk-in career development services at HEIs to support the facilitation of the RPL process. The information on RPL via these services has reached over 3.5 million people.

In India, IIT Delhi offers orientation sessions to vulnerable students entering HE. Students are assigned a mentor who familiarizes them with the campus facilities and academic opportunities. UTech, a case institution in Jamaica, has a Career and Placement Unit that negotiates contracts on behalf of disabled students, especially students with speech impairments.

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4.10 Conclusions

IIEP's research has helped to analyse the role of governance in support of FLPs across the eight case countries. In those countries with a unified and integrated HE governance framework, FLPs have been implemented more comprehensively. Effective implementation of FLPs therefore requires policy to create coherence and understanding between the authorities responsible for the different sub-sectors, HEIs, and external stakeholders such as labour organizations.

While regulation is often necessary to guide HEIs in the implementation of FLPs, institutional autonomy was found to be central. The eight country studies showed the importance of an appropriate balance between regulatory mechanisms and institutional autonomy. The aim is to guide HEIs in the implementation of FLPs while allowing them to adapt implementation to their particular environments.

QA systems serve to ensure the trust needed for collaboration between HEIs. They also offer guidance and support for the implementation of FLPs through the development of guidelines and cross-institutional evaluation. However, QA can also create barriers when accreditation systems are rigid, based on conservative academic models, and prevent HEIs from innovating.

NQFs facilitate comparability between programmes and institutions and therefore improve the linkage between different sub-sectors and across institutions and programmes in the same sub-sector. Integrated NQFs that cover all sub-sectors are, however, relatively rare. They support articulation and therefore permeability of learners and act as a backbone for the development of FLPs.

Funding and human resources play a key role in the development of FLPs. Government funding specifically earmarked for their development facilitates implementation in HEIs. Government project funding can support the development of one or more aspects of FLPs, such as RPL procedures, MOOC platforms, or transfer systems. Thus, the allocation of financial resources has supported HEIs in making FLPs a core activity.

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Finally, information and guidance services enable students to access, move through, and exit HE more effectively. They need to provide information about alternative entry pathways, study programmes with flexible delivery, financial packages, and career opportunities. Given existing asymmetries of information and higher dropout risks, these services need to pay particular attention to the specific needs of disadvantaged students, both in terms of accessing information and providing guidance for their entire learning journey.

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Part 2
**Getting into
higher education –
flexible admission
policies**

5. Open entry admission in Finland

Sirpa Moitus and Leasa Weimer

5.1 Introduction

Flexible learning pathways (FLPs) have been on the agenda in the Finnish higher education (HE) context for more than a decade. Finnish HE is based on the core values of equality, free education, and no dead ends when proceeding from one educational level to another, with a strong emphasis on lifelong learning. The system has undergone consistent reforms to meet the changing demands and needs of society. Changes in the demographic profile, with an ageing population and a growing number of immigrants, have impacted the demand for HE as well as the needs and aspirations of students.

However, the growing demand for access to HE has not been met with a commensurate increase in study places. Finland has a competitive HE system, where only one-third of all applicants (50,000 out of 150,000 applicants)¹⁰ are offered a study place at a university or at a university of applied sciences (UAS). While the number of places for first-time applicants was increased by 5,000 in 2019, also allowing more opportunities for multiple-time applicants to compete for an HE study place, the uptake of students each year remains nonetheless quite selective.

In this context, national policy objectives have focused on improved accessibility and availability of HE for the wider population, including equity groups, specifically by developing alternative pathways for student admissions and transfers, to better serve their needs. Such pathways have been facilitated by a steady flow of policy initiatives and tools.

In this chapter, the focus is on one such initiative, open studies. Through open studies anyone, regardless of age and education, can participate in HE. Open studies serve two purposes: they offer (1) study units and

¹⁰ The figure of 150,000 includes first-, second-, and even third-time applicants.

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competence modules for continuous learning and professional know-how; and (2) the possibility of an alternative pathway to degree studies.

The chapter is based on the findings of the Finnish country case study *Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education: Finland's Country Case Study for the IIEP-UNESCO SDG-4 Project in 2018–2021* (Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020).¹¹ The open studies pathway was identified as an emerging and promising alternative route into Finnish HE. Focusing on open studies as an FLP into HE, this chapter highlights how this pathway has developed in Finland in recent years and the lessons learned for future development.

5.2 Policy context for the open entry pathway

5.2.1 Key features of the Finnish higher education system and admissions

Finland has 13 universities (ISCED¹² Levels 6–8) and 22 UASs (ISCED Levels 6–7) operating under the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC). The tasks of universities and UASs are based on a dual model, defined by the University Act and the UAS Act. While the universities are tasked with engaging in scientific research and providing the highest level of education, UASs have a strong regional and working-life orientation. In addition to educating professional experts, UASs are expected to carry out research, development, and innovation activities serving regional needs.

Universities offer bachelor's and master's degrees and academic, artistic, and third-cycle postgraduate degrees. UASs provide bachelor's and master's degrees. Both sectors also offer international degree programmes.¹³ It is noteworthy that there are no short-cycle higher professional programmes (ISCED Level 5) in the Finnish education system (see *Figure 17*).

The legislation regulates the general eligibility criteria for students to apply to universities and UASs for bachelor's and master's degree programmes (see *Box 31*).

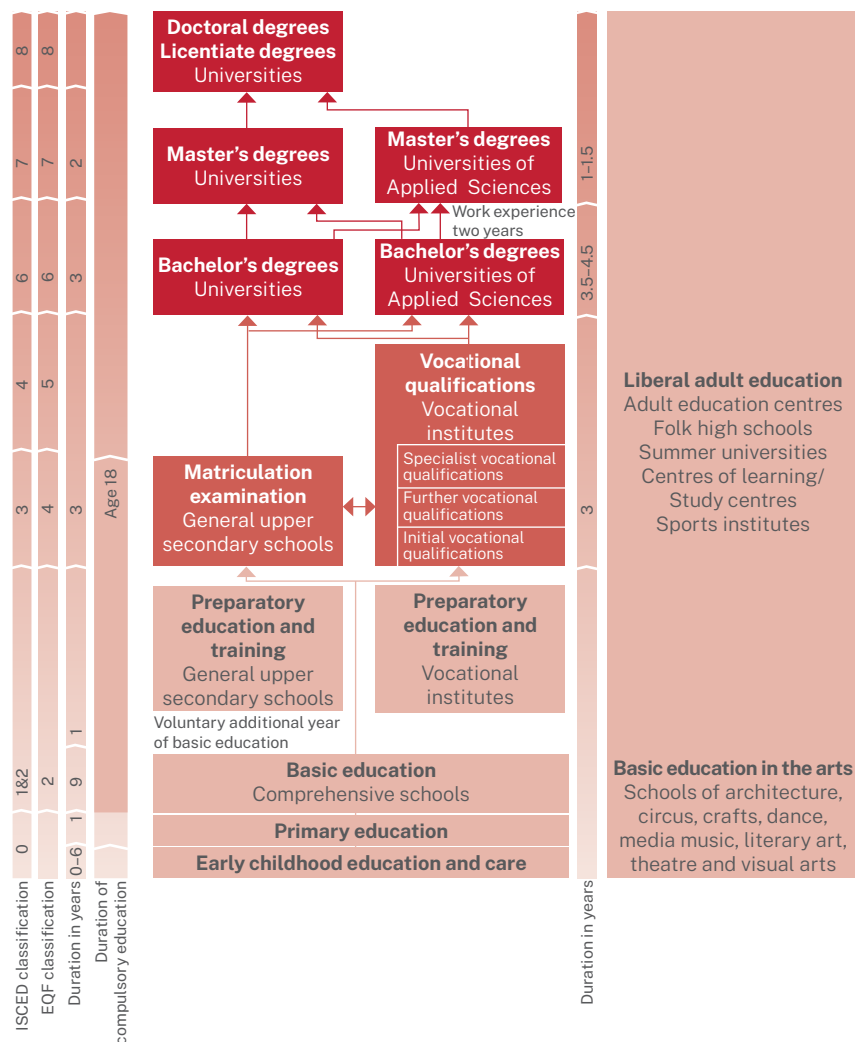
¹¹ The report was the result of a collaboration between IIEP-UNESCO, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), and the Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER) at the University of Jyväskylä.

¹² International Standard Classification of Education

¹³ International degree programmes are programmes with a foreign language of study, usually English, and where students may spend a period of study abroad.

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Figure 17. Structure of the Finnish education system



Source: Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 2020.

Based on admissions statistics from 2020, 90 per cent of students were admitted to universities through a matriculation exam, 2.5 per cent through a vocational degree, and 4 per cent through a double

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BOX 31

Eligibility criteria for applications to bachelor's and master's degree programmes at universities and UASs

By law, an applicant is eligible to apply for a bachelor's degree programme, provided they have completed the Finnish matriculation examination; hold an International Baccalaureate diploma; have three years or more vocational qualifications; hold a Finnish vocational upper secondary qualification or a further specialist vocational qualification as a competence-based qualification; have a comparable previous qualification as defined by the higher education institution (HEI); or have a foreign qualification that provides eligibility for HE studies in the awarding country.

A completed university bachelor's degree or a UAS bachelor's degree is required to be eligible for application to a master's degree programme in a university.

To be eligible to apply for a UAS master's level degree programme, applicants are required to hold an acceptable bachelor's level degree or other HE degree and to have had a minimum of two years' work experience after completion of the bachelor's degree.

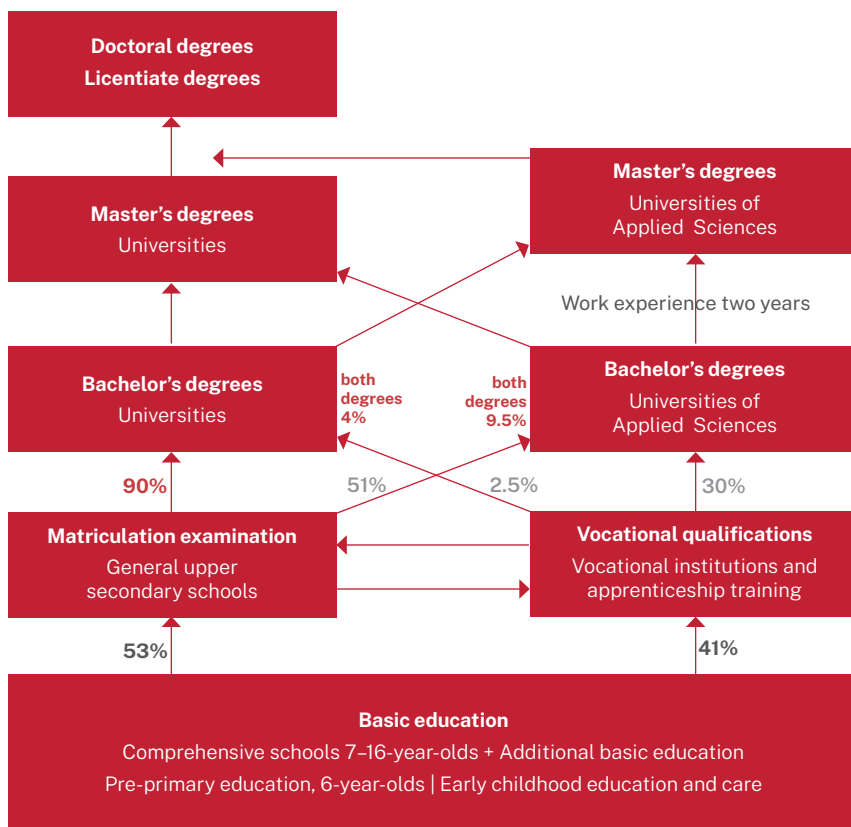
Source: Studyinfo, n.d.

degree from general upper secondary schools and vocational education. Correspondingly, 51 per cent of admitted UAS students had completed a matriculation exam, 30 per cent a vocational degree, and 9.5 per cent had both degrees.

As can be seen in *Figure 18*, the Finnish education system allows articulation from one educational level and sector to another, based on the 'no dead ends' philosophy. This means that an applicant with vocational qualifications gained at technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions can enter undergraduate programmes at universities, and a student with a matriculation examination gained at the general upper secondary level can enter directly into the undergraduate programmes at UASs.

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Figure 18. Admissions in the Finnish education system



Source: MoEC, 2020.

Note: This figure does not show the shares of students admitted via open pathway or based on secondary-level degrees taken in other countries.

It is also important to note that the Finnish HEIs have a high level of autonomy in defining the procedures for student selection and deciding on the number of new study places for admissions. Each HEI decides independently which eligible students (based on admissions criteria) to admit.

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However, as mentioned earlier, access to Finnish HE is highly selective. Annually about two-thirds of applicants are left without a place in HE. Some are first-time applicants, others have applied numerous times, and some already have a previous right to study at an HEI but have changed plans and reapply to a different degree programme. This phenomenon has been called the ‘matriculation backlog’, a problem that hinders seamless and quick transition from secondary to HE level.

In response to the matriculation backlog, the MoEC has initiated reforms in the student admissions frameworks. The reforms include:

- revising admissions criteria by adopting certificate-based selection, and ensuring entrance exams do not require lengthy preparation;
- updating the admissions procedure for transfer students;
- reforming continuous (lifelong) learning;
- improving recognition of prior learning;
- providing preparatory training for immigrants to access HE;
- drafting a national plan to increase access to HE;
- increasing the quota for enrolment of first-time applicants (the government has planned to widen access to HE degree education with 10,000 new student places from 2021 to 2022).

The development of open studies pathways takes place in the framework of the reform of student admissions.

5.2.2 National policy framework for the open entry pathway

Current policy aims to improve both the availability and accessibility of HE and to ensure that at least 50 per cent (in 2019 the level was 41 per cent) of 25–34-year-olds complete an HE degree by 2030 (Finland, 2019). In fact, the 2019 government programme reflects the emphasis on improving access to HE, particularly for working adults and immigrants. ‘Access’ in the Finnish context is understood not necessarily as access to a degree education, rather as access to open HE provision, courses, or modules that can serve the purpose of reskilling, upskilling of competencies for working adults, or providing academic preparation to immigrants.

While the current and previous governments’ programmes and their Vision for Higher Education and Research in 2030 (or: Vision 2030)

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do not explicitly state the policy objectives for the development of the open studies pathways, ‘the national policy is to enable several entry ways to HE for both young and adult applicants’ (MoEC, policy expert, in-person interview). Thus, the development of open studies pathways plays an important role in improving accessibility by developing ‘a third route’ to HE besides the two traditional admission routes: student selection based on certificates and entrance exams. Open studies support flexibility in access to HE. The intended target groups for open studies are young people without a study place after matriculation, people in working life, as well as applicants with an immigrant background.

5.2.3 Policy instruments supporting the development of open entry admission

One of the previous government’s policy instruments for developing HE was based on a project-driven approach with the aims of providing FLPs, facilitating young people’s transition to further education, and extending careers (Finland, 2017). Between 2016 and 2017, the MoEC organized two competitive calls for projects that would support the development of HE. As a result, the MoEC funded a total of 46 development projects in the years 2017–2020 for a sum expenditure of EUR 65 million. Practically all Finnish universities and UASs participate in one or more of the project consortia.

The initiative which provided a major impetus to open studies pathways into universities was the TRY project (in Finnish: Toinen reitti yliopistoon) (Alternative Path to University, 2020). It was one of the previous government’s key projects, conducted in 2018–2020 and coordinated by the University of Jyväskylä. A similar development project took place in the UAS sector. The aims of the TRY project – to develop, pilot, and establish open studies pathways into HE – were described as follows by a TRY project representative:

Firstly, we aim to revise the existing open university route, so that an increasing number of applicants would be admitted to university degree studies and that the admission criteria for study options could be predicted more accurately. Secondly, we will develop routes for secondary-level students and for the needs of working life. In addition, we will develop guidance and advice services related to these routes. (TRY project representative, interview, in Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020)

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While many other aspects related to FLPs have been supported by legislative changes, student admissions are considered to be subject to institutional autonomy. The Finnish HE legislation only regulates the overall admissions system and defines the general eligibility criteria which apply to bachelor's and master's degree programmes at universities and UASs. Therefore, there is no legislation on the open studies pathway or any national quota for this pathway, as these decisions are made by HEIs. Hence, while the applicants may acquire eligibility to apply to HE through open studies, the HEIs decide on the criteria and quotas for different groups of applicants.

However, in recent years, the Finnish MoEC has supported the development of open studies pathways by revising the national funding models for HEIs. In the revised funding model for 2021–2024, the share of funding earmarked for continuous learning modules taken by learners was increased to 9 per cent. This meant several millions of euros – applying to both universities' and UASs' funding models – became available for European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS) credits taken in open studies. This was one way to highlight the importance of FLPs and open studies (MoEC HE policy expert, interview, in Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020).

5.2.4 Organization of the open entry pathway

Practically all Finnish HEIs have an open university or open UAS unit, which is typically organized as an independent institute within a nHEI. These units facilitate open studies. Finnish HEIs also offer open studies in cooperation with other educational institutions, such as adult education centres, folk high schools, and summer universities, thus improving their regional availability.

Motives for enrolling in open studies can be manifold:

- to improve 'know-how' required at work;
- if a student plans to apply to an HEI;
- if a student wants to improve their general knowledge on specific topics of interest.

Open studies are available for anyone, irrespective of their age or background. By nature, open studies are flexible, as they are offered in daytime, evenings, weekends, and during summer. The modes of

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delivery include contact teaching, blended, or online learning. Contact teaching is typically organized on the HEI's campus, in classrooms or labs. Blended learning uses contact teaching and online teaching modalities. These modalities allow students to combine study and work. Online learning is carried out through the HEI's own online learning platforms to study individual courses online regardless of where they are located and when they are free to log in. The schedules detailing when these courses are offered are available on the HEI's website.

Teaching in open studies is organized in degree students' teaching groups, groups designed for Open University or UAS students. In other words, students in degree education may also take open studies, for instance during the evenings, weekends, and summer, which enables flexible planning of learning schedules.

There are no entrance exams for open studies. Usually, students can enrol in specific study units or bigger study modules via HEIs' websites, and they are usually accepted based on order of enrolment. Hence, when an open studies course is filled, students need to wait or enrol on a different course. Since open studies are not full-time, enrolled students cannot benefit from financial support; open universities/UASs charge a fee – typically EUR 15 for one ECTS credit.

The open studies are mainly oriented to students who live in Finland, as most courses are offered in the Finnish language. Their content and requirements are the same as for university or UAS degree studies. Since open studies have an open-door policy, those enrolled in these programmes are not considered degree students, and thus the studies do not lead to a qualification. However, by completing a certain number of open studies ECTS credits, a student may apply for the right to become a degree student at the same HEI, or another one, through the open studies pathway. Typically, open studies credits are transferred to the degree programme. This means that if students earn 60 ECTS credits (corresponds to one year of a three-year bachelor's degree) through open studies, they may be allowed to enter degree programmes in the second year. Upon completion of open studies, students can receive a certificate of attainment (see *Box 32*).

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BOX 32

Open studies pathways to HE

Open studies pathways to HE are available in universities and UASs. HEIs decide on the quotas and criteria for open pathways in a degree programme (ECTS requirements, previous study success, etc.). Not every degree programme offers an open pathway, especially those programmes that are highly competitive (e.g., class teacher training, medicine) and require an adaptability test. The minimum of open studies credits needed to apply for HE degrees varies between 15 and 60 ECTS (sometimes even 100), but most often 60 ECTS.

Source: Alternative Path to University, 2020.

Open studies students can benefit from student information and guidance during their studies, as well as from institutions' library services.

The open studies pathway, however, does not exist in all programmes or fields. In universities, there is an apparent connection between the attractiveness of fields and the kinds of open pathways that are available. In some universities, the open university provision has a strong focus on education and humanities (which are considered less in demand than law and medicine). In competitive and high-demand degree programmes, such as medicine and teacher education, no open pathways are available.

5.3 Findings: How policy measures impacted the open entry pathway

This section highlights the national and institutional perspectives on the implementation of open studies pathways at HEIs in Finland. The data for this chapter originate from the national case study on FLPs in the Finnish HE system. In 2019, the Finnish research team conducted national- and institutional-level interviews and focus group discussions with respondents from two case study higher education institutions (HEIs): a university and a UAS based in different regions in Finland. These data were complemented by additional interviews with institutional-level experts and researchers and updated with national statistical data.

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5.3.1 National perspective: Evaluation of the impact of the open entry pathway

The case study found that the revisions in the funding models and policy objectives on continuous learning led to an increased provision of open studies. It indicated that changes in the national funding models were strongly steering the provision of open studies as a form of continuous learning. Based on the national database (Vipunen.fi), there was an increase in ECTS credits taken in open studies; in 2019, ECTS credits taken by university and UAS students were 800,437, versus 528,830 in 2018.

The national TRY key project contributed to an increase and a widening of open pathways. As a result of the TRY project, the number of open pathways in the university sector increased. In an interview conducted in November 2019, one respondent highlighted the growth in open studies pathways:

The TRY project has been very successful. When we started, we had 11 universities and 34 subjects. About a month ago [in October 2019] we made an evaluation and we now have more than 200 pathways to bachelor's and master's studies [degree programmes]. The number of pathways has increased more than we projected. It's a big thing for universities and open universities. (TRY project representative, interview, Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020)

In a follow-up interview conducted in November 2020, the number of open pathways had further increased to 240.

In 2019, before the TRY project, the overall intake through the open studies pathway was about 2,000 students: 1,500 in UASs and 500 in universities. Thus, open studies pathway admissions were approximately 4 per cent of all HE admissions. Many universities taking part in the TRY project increased the share of admissions via open pathways to 10–15 per cent. In 2020, in some fields, 30 per cent of new degree students were admitted via open pathways.

As part of the TRY project, the FIER conducted two surveys related to open pathways: one survey of study advisors at the secondary-level institutions (N = 191) and another of study administration staff members in HEIs participating in the TRY project (N = 45) (Salminen and Aittola, 2020). Based on results, the benefits and challenges of the open pathway from the study advisors' perspective are summarized in *Table 7*.

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Table 7. Benefits and challenges of open studies pathways to HE according to secondary- and tertiary-level study advisors

The most important benefits of open pathways	The most important challenges of open pathways
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Offer the possibility to familiarize oneself with the field, studies, and required academic and study skills. – Increase the possibilities for an applicant to enter HE. – Provide an important addition to the HE entry pathways. – Include a way to test the applicant's study motivation. – Provide a possibility to consider study choices and use a gap year wisely. – Offer HE possibilities to adults and those who work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The criteria for open pathways vary from one HEI to another. – Open studies fees. – Open studies taken in one HEI are not always fully recognized in another. – The admission quota for open pathways is still low and the pathways still narrow. – The application schedules for open pathways vary between HEIs.

Source: Salminen and Aittola, 2020.

In addition, there was another survey conducted in the context of the TRY project, of students (N = 596) who had been admitted via open pathway (Lemmetty, Kuivalainen, and Haltia, 2020). Students' motives for applying via open pathways were clustered in four categories:

- personal reasons – an interest in studying in an HEI;
- strategic reasons – better chances to get admitted to an HEI;
- motivational reasons – interest in applying for degree studies born during open studies;
- work-based reasons (these included: increase in competencies, employment perspectives, the current employer's measures, and the need to acquire a qualification).

The study also found that despite quotas and availability of open studies pathways being the responsibility of individual HEIs, many universities aimed to increase the share of open pathway admissions generally. This is taking place in a context where there are no explicit national recommendations on the share of admissions via an open studies pathway.

As stated earlier, the open studies pathway is not available in all fields of education. The Finnish country case study brought up the question of whether the MoEC should regulate the provision of open studies so that it could apply to all fields of study.

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The interviews revealed that there are currently only limited national data available on the provision of open studies and its impact. While there are currently two national-level follow-up studies – VATT research on the impact of the reform on student admissions reducing gap years (Karhunen et al., 2021) and the GATE project on policies and means of promoting equal opportunities in HE (GATE project, 2020) – they evaluate policy development on the reform of student admissions on a wider scale, without covering the impact of open studies on reforming student admissions in particular. Therefore, several interviewees in the country case study stressed the need to conduct a national follow-up and long-term research on the lessons learned from the open studies pathway (Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020). The TRY project team proposed a follow-up study on the impact of open studies on student admissions and the setting up of a national coordination group made up of institutional representatives to ensure consistency and harmonization in the future development of open studies (Joutsen et al., 2020).

5.3.2 Impact of open entry on equity groups

As a part of the National Plan for Accessibility in Finnish Higher Education, which is high on the current government agenda, the MoEC has defined five criteria for equity groups: age, gender, socioeconomic background, people with disabilities, and people with immigrant backgrounds. Considering the role of open studies pathways to HE as a tool to improve the accessibility among the equity groups, the following conclusions could be drawn:

- *Age*: The research shows that alternative entry routes, including the open pathway, are common among older applicants, and their chances of being admitted are higher compared to via traditional entry routes (Nevala and Nori, 2017).
- *Socioeconomic factors*: The fees charged for open studies impact equitable access. Furthermore, since studying at an open HEI is not considered full-time, students studying in open universities or open UASs are not entitled to the same study grants as degree students. However, in 2020, as a response to the economic challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many Finnish universities took a decision to offer open studies free of charge to unemployed people and to laid-off employees.

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- *Immigrants*: open studies are offered mainly in the Finnish language, meaning that the open pathway does not serve non-Finnish-speaking immigrants' access to HE. The MoEC funding model, however, does reward HEIs for organizing immigrant preparatory training, considering that many immigrants need support in learning the Finnish language and developing their HE study skills.
- *Regional background*: Finnish universities offer open studies in cooperation with other educational institutions such as adult education centres, folk high schools, and summer universities which improves their regional availability.

5.3.3 Institutional perspective: Impact of the open entry pathway

In line with the findings of the national TRY project, the Finnish country case study confirmed that the criteria for open study admission pathways (ECTS requirements, previous study success, and quotas) varied a great deal between institutions and fields of study.

Implementation of open entry at the case university

The case university has an independent open university, which is open for anyone to pursue studies without an entrance exam. It does not offer degrees, but rather offers flexible coursework with the possibility for university admissions and continuous learning opportunities for people in working life or the unemployed to upgrade their qualifications and competencies (see *Box 33*).

Faculties made admission decisions and created quotas for the number of students who entered their programmes this way. Since this admissions pathway was being developed during the study in 2019–2020, the number of students entering university in this way was rather small:

There are not many students entering university via open university, the quotas are never met [the situation in autumn 2019]. They are still small numbers who come through these [alternative] routes. So, the majority of students come in the traditional admissions way. (Uni, faculty dean, interview, Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020)

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BOX 33

Open pathway at the case university Open University

The Open University works closely with university faculties to develop courses. Most courses are offered online, accessible in a web-based environment, with teacher support. The fee for Open University courses is EUR 15 for 1 ECTS credit, which some respondents commented was restrictive, especially for students who cannot afford this fee. The minimum level of Open University studies needed to apply for university degrees varies from 15 ECTS to a maximum of 60 ECTS and students must maintain high academic marks during their Open University studies. The degree programmes make a decision about the number of ECTS that can be taken by students in open studies. On average, it took about one year (on average 55–60 ECTS) to complete the Open University studies (basic studies) before applying to the university degree programme. Guidance and counselling were also included in Open University coursework.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020.

Although small, this pathway gives students an alternative to the traditional and competitive route to university:

I was taking open university courses because I wanted to go through that pathway into the university. I had tried the entrance exams four times and didn't pass them. In my case, I had really poor high school grades. I was desperately trying to get into university, and this was my last hope. This [open university studies] was an opportunity for me to show my motivation. It took me nine years trying to get into university and I think I was crying when I was admitted, because I was so happy. It [Open University] was a really good pathway. I had to do at least 50 credits, the study and courses were in the evening and weekends. It was a bit hard because part of the studies were organized in another campus and I had to travel there. (Uni, Open University alumna, focus group, interview, Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020)

One university respondent discussed how guidance is an important aspect of the open university, especially considering the variability of students' academic skills:

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It [Open University] is open to everyone and that's charming, but also a challenging issue, because the levels of readiness [for academic studies] vary quite a lot. That is why one of our specialities is good guidance. (Uni, Open University expert, interview, Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020).

On the other hand, some staff members at the case university were somewhat hesitant about the open pathways because they had an affinity with traditional academic admissions.

Implementation of open entry at the Open University of Applied Sciences

Like the case university, the case UAS has an independent unit, called Open University of Applied Sciences. The Open UAS range of studies consists of parts of degrees (bachelor's/ master's) based on the UAS curricula. The open pathway providing an alternative route to the degree is called *path studies*. The Open UAS paths do not automatically offer direct acceptance to the degree course, but there is a separate application procedure (see *Box 34*).

BOX 34

Open pathway at the case UAS

The Open UAS path usually equals first-year or first-semester studies in a degree programme. In bachelor's degrees the width of the paths is usually 30–60 credit points (ECTS) and in master's degrees 15–30 credit points (ECTS). In recent years, the case UAS's open pathway admissions procedure has been conducted as a separate admission process twice a year. As is typical, the open admission places are announced at the national online admissions service, Studyinfo.fi. After the applicants have applied for a study place, the degree programmes assess their open study performance and interview the applicants.

Source: Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020.

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According to some interviewees, this 60 ECTS threshold was considered a demanding requirement and there was institutional discussion about it. On the other hand, as these students had paid EUR 900 for the first year, some UAS staff members saw this as a strong signal of students' motivation. Considering the fact that the national funding model rewards HEIs for degrees completed in due time, admitting students already equipped with 60 ECTS completed is financially beneficial to HEIs.

The number of individual vacant places and the number of pathway students were defined by the heads of degree programmes. Some of the interviewees referred to the need to balance various admissions routes:

In practice, the open spots have to be balanced with the group sizes. If we want to increase the number of students coming in through alternative pathways, should we radically decrease the number of students coming in through the joint application process, since there's just not enough room in the classrooms? Then, of course, that's a physical limit. But also, student groups become heterogeneous, and it's not necessarily a good solution from a learning point of view to make the group sizes bigger. (UAS, Representative of the School of Business, interview, Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020)

The UAS students who had been admitted via open pathway and had been interviewed were generally very happy with the open studies path and the recognition of their prior learning obtained in the same institution:

It is easy to apply through Studyinfo.fi system and the RPL [recognition of prior learning] process was easy and painless. The timetable [of studies] has adapted to all my wishes. There are no empty slots [in my studies]. The studies are progressing faster than I expected. (UAS, student, focus group, interview, Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa, 2020)

A case UAS staff member also confirmed that recognition of prior open studies and integrating an open path student in a study group worked well:

If they have completed all first-year courses, for example, they start from the second year, or if they have completed more courses, we can find them the right place to start! (UAS, Representative of the School of Technology, interview, Moitus, Weimer and Välimaa, 2020).

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5.4 Conclusions

The Finnish research has shown that FLPs, and more specifically the open studies pathways, support the current policy objective to improve accessibility of HE. In light of statistical data, there was evidence that the TRY (Alternative Path to University) government project widened the scope of open studies pathways offerings. Since this pathway is undergoing significant development, it is too early to assess the full impact of policy measures on the pathway.

Evidence was also found that from an applicant or student perspective, the completion of a certain proportion of open studies offers an empowering and alternative pathway to HE. In particular, those Open University or Open UAS students who studied in groups with degree students, and were admitted to HE via open pathway, felt that their integration to degree education was seamless.

When it comes to developing the open studies pathway, the HEIs are key actors. Institutions have autonomy in setting their ECTS requirements as well as the quota of students admitted into degree programmes via open studies. The two case institutions highlighted the efforts being made to develop open studies pathways: in both institutions there had been an increased emphasis on this pathway in recent years. The same applies to all Finnish HEIs.

While there is ongoing commissioned research on the impact of student admissions reform, comprehensive national follow-up data are still lacking on the impact of open studies pathways on students' study progress and working life placement after graduation. A more systematic approach to the impact study might support both policy design and institutional developments.

Due to the deliberate changes in national funding schemes, Finnish HEIs have increased their open studies offer. Increased trust between HEIs, learning from each other, and national institutional-level projects with clear aims and mandates have all advanced the development of open pathways and field-specific cooperation.

The sustainability of the TRY and other key projects remains, however, a national challenge. The challenge is to ensure the continuation of

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the development work of open pathways after the TRY key project completion, when the project funding ends.

Due to institutional autonomy in student admissions, the criteria and quotas for open studies pathways and the way that these are communicated to applicants vary from one field and HEI to another. This makes the open pathway uneven and not transparent from an applicant's perspective. Another obstacle is the fact that open studies are not cost free for students.

And finally, there are limited data and a lack of national impact research on open pathways. At the time of the data collection for the country case study in 2020, there were limited national data available on open entry pathways. While the national database ([Vipunen.fi](https://vipunen.fi)) provides data on open pathway students and completed ECTS credits, the data on the offerings of open pathways are only available at the HEIs. In addition, there was no systematic research on lessons learned from the open studies pathway and the impact of the open pathway on study progress, graduation, and employment. The fact that open studies are fee-based and that they are not offered in all degree programmes may need attention, especially for reasons of equality, equity, and comprehensiveness.

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6. Recognition of prior learning in Malaysia

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6.1 Introduction

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) has facilitated the widening of access to higher education (HE) for more than 15 years. APEL aims to attract those without academic qualifications and non-traditional and disadvantaged learners to enter HE based on the recognition of prior learning (RPL). As reflected in recent national policies, APEL has served as a tool for both social equity and human resource development.

In Malaysia, disadvantaged and marginalized groups are identified by the Eleventh Malaysian Plan 2016–2020 as primary beneficiaries for socioeconomic development. In the Malaysian context, these are the indigenous population (*Orang Asli*), persons from the socioeconomically lowest 40 per cent of households, single mothers, older women, and people with disabilities. An important policy issue for Malaysia is to include these groups in higher education and the workforce.

The concern with human resource development stems from the fact that the proportion of skilled workers is still low in Malaysia.¹⁴ The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 aims at enabling Malaysians through lifelong learning (LLL), to meet the changing skill demands of a high-income economy. In addition, in 2018, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) communicated its strategic intentions, under the broad theme of Higher Education 4.0, to produce competent and skilled workers for the fourth industrial revolution.

The dual need to balance both equity and human resource development has been important in shaping the priorities for establishing flexible

¹⁴ Of the total working population of approximately 15.6 million in 2019, 27.8 per cent were skilled, 59.0 per cent were semi-skilled, and 13.2 per cent were low-skilled (DOSM, 2020).

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learning pathways (FLPs) in HE in Malaysia. In this context, APEL plays a necessary role for skills recognition and award of qualifications of skilled persons to participate in the labour market and as a tool for social equity.

Against this background, this chapter focuses on the implementation of APEL in Malaysian HE. The deliberations in this chapter draw on the IIEP country case study, *Flexible Learning Pathways in Malaysian Higher Education*, the main goal of which was to produce knowledge on strengthening FLPs in Malaysia as an area of reform (Sirat et al., 2020).¹⁵ First, the chapter explains in detail the history of APEL development and, then, how APEL works in practice. Finally, the chapter focuses on data from the IIEP country case study, by referring to evaluation results regarding the outcomes of APEL and challenges in its implementation.

6.2 Higher education policy context for recognition of prior learning

6.2.1 Higher education landscape

In 2021, Malaysia had approximately 150 public higher education institutions (HEIs) (universities, polytechnics, and community colleges) and 450 private HEIs that included universities, international branch campuses, university colleges, and colleges. Universities and university colleges offer academic degrees (bachelor's, master's, and doctorate) and diplomas. Polytechnics offer diplomas and advanced diplomas including work placement periods. Community colleges provide professional training leading to diplomas and certificates. Private colleges can also offer professional programmes, such as teaching programmes, leading to undergraduate degrees conferred by partner universities.

More than 1 million students were enrolled in public and private HEIs in 2018. Among these students, the total enrolment of non-traditional students represented 10 per cent in public and 14 per cent in private HEIs. However, the dropout rate of non-traditional students was three times higher in private than in public HEIs. International students accounted for a total enrolment of 7 per cent in public and 16 per cent in private HEIs; 70 per cent of all international students attend private HEIs.

¹⁵ The report was a result of the collaboration between IIEP-UNESCO, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility, Universiti Sains Malaysia, MOHE, and the Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA).

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The Malaysian education system allows several possibilities for articulation between upper secondary and HE, depending on students' performance in the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM). The last two years of upper secondary education comprise three types of schools: academic (arts and sciences stream), technical and vocational (TVET stream), and religious schools. There are three options for moving to HE: pre-university studies, diploma programmes, or certificate programmes (see *Figure 19*).

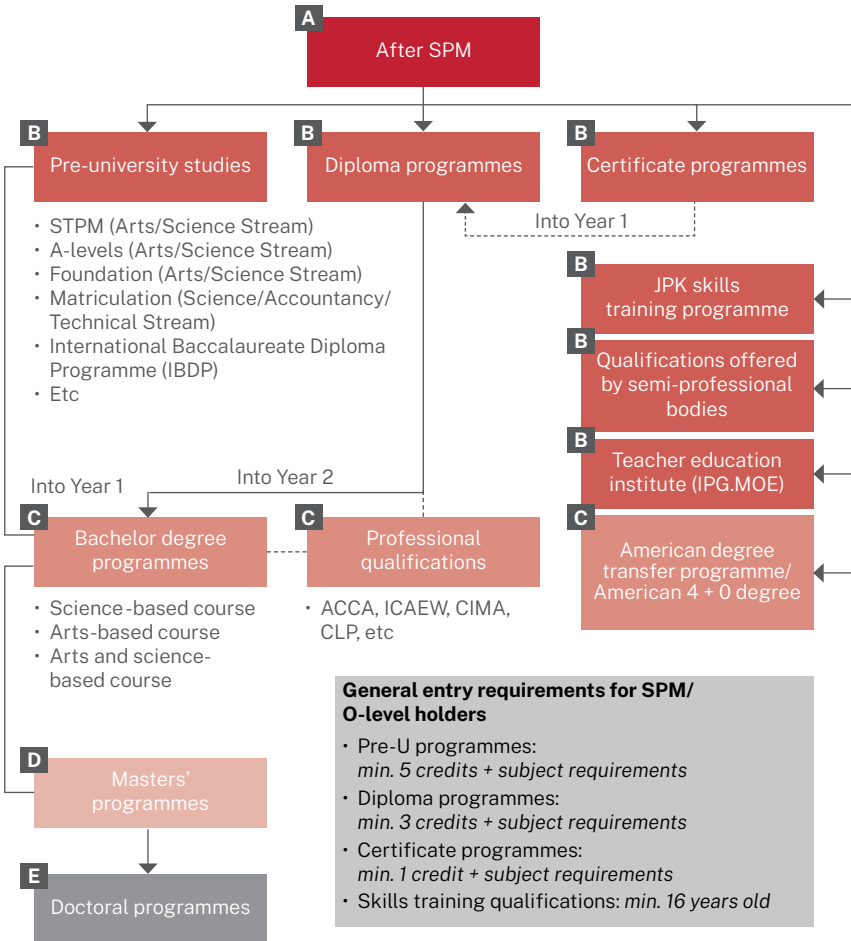
6.2.2 Development of the policy on recognition of prior learning

HE in Malaysia has a relatively recent history, characterized initially by nation-building aspiration based on nationalistic fervour. Since 2006, the national policy agenda has included alternative admission and study pathways into HE to cater for the needs of non-traditional and disadvantaged students. First, in 2006, the Malaysian Government acknowledged a growing interest among many working adults in furthering their education and obtaining formal recognition of their professional experiences, by introducing an open entry policy. The policy made the entry to HEIs possible without the required academic qualifications but instead based on an RPL tool known as APEL.¹⁶ APEL was used as a mechanism to access both public and private HEIs to gain various levels of qualifications set forth under MQF, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (see MQA, 2021).

APEL was enabled through the establishment of open and distance learning (ODL) institutions beginning in the early 2000s. The ministry had approved the establishment of three open universities – Open University Malaysia (OUM), Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, and Wawasan Open University (WOU) – to practise open entry and to promote open learning and flexible entry, which included the recognition of applicants' prior experiences, particularly to support entry of mature applicants. They have actively promoted APEL from the beginning and played a pivotal role in increasing flexibility in the Malaysian HE system.

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Figure 19. Study pathways of the Malaysian HE system



Source: StudyMalaysia.com, 2022.

Note: SPM = Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education).

STPM = Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Higher School Certificate).

ACCA = The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants.

ICAEW - The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales.

CIMA - The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants.

CLP - The Certificate in Legal Practice.

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In 2007, the MQA Act 679 established the MQF. The MQA Act emphasized a commitment to widen access and provide opportunities for individuals to pursue HE. Since then, the MOHE and MQA have fully implemented supportive administrative policies and instruments for the promotion of APEL as one of the instruments to widen access to HE.

The next important initiative was introduced in 2011, when the ministry launched *Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia*, as part of the Tenth National Higher Education Action Plan 2011–2015. The Blueprint stipulated that the recognition of LLL needed to be realized through the MQF. APEL for access purposes, APEL (A), started in 2011. To ensure that the strategies were successfully executed, the MQF, through the MQA Act 2007 (Act 679), has committed to assist stakeholders in recognizing prior learning.

The current Malaysian HE policy, the *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015–2025*, aims to widen participation in HE, ensure better responsiveness to diverse student needs, reduce dropout rates and ensure increased completion of studies, strengthen equity in progression of studies, facilitate labour market (re-)entry and career progression, and improve the general level of education/ qualification in Malaysian society. The Blueprint also responds to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), which stipulates that countries should ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning’.

In line with SDG-4, *Malaysia’s Shared Prosperity Vision 2030* has provided vital strategic policy direction to re-examine the situation of equity groups in terms of HE admission and attainment. While LLL agendas and instruments, such as APEL, are targeted at non-traditional learners, relevant regulations to guarantee flexible admission and progression in the Malaysian HE system for equity groups continue to be developed (Sirat et al., 2020). However, the non-availability of relevant data has made it difficult to assess the outcomes of these efforts. Even in the context of the adoption and implementation of SDG-4, enrolment data for non-formal education and on equity groups in HEIs are lacking, and analysis related to inclusivity remains a work in progress.

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6.2.3 Malaysian Qualifications Framework

The MQF is a national unified system of post-secondary qualifications offered in Malaysia by both public and private HEIs, overseen by MQA and MOHE. The framework comprises two sectors, TVET and academic, corresponding to the types of HEIs offering different qualifications: degrees, diplomas, and certificates (see *Figure 20*).

Each programme requires students to achieve minimum credits before an academic qualification can be awarded (diploma 90 credits, bachelor's degree 120 credits). Master's and doctoral degrees obtained by writing a research dissertation are not assigned a credit value. The framework presents the opportunities for non-traditional or alternative admission pathways in the Malaysian HE system, including for APEL, which is embedded in the MQF (see MQA, 2021).

APEL has been established as a pathway to access various levels of qualifications set under the MQF that provide an opportunity to non-conventional learners and disadvantaged groups to pursue their studies through recognition of their prior knowledge and skills.

6.3 Implementation of recognition of prior learning

APEL in this chapter is defined as a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, and assessment of prior experiential learning (i.e. knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to determine the extent to which an individual has achieved the desired learning outcomes for access to a programme of study – APEL (A) and/or award of *credits* – APEL (C) (MQA, 2016). This mechanism can reduce duplication of learning as well as potentially reduce the time and cost to the students of completing a study programme. APEL offers opportunities to experienced but not formally educated persons. However, it is challenging to ascertain the reliability of someone's experience. The implementation and utilization of APEL, respectively, involve active participation from assessors and advisors who initiate the provision of adequate information, the development of assessment instruments, provision of a support system, and ensuring QA in the system.

The key differences between APEL (A) and APEL (C) are summarized in *Table 8*. The following sub-sections will delve into each element (purpose, MQA approval, APEL application, assessment, requirements, etc.) in more detail.

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Figure 20. 2021 Malaysian Qualifications Framework

MQF Level	Graduating Credit	Sector		Lifelong Learning
		Academic	TVET*	
8	No credit rating	PhD by Research		Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)
	80	Doctoral Degree by Coursework & Mixed Mode		
7	No credit rating	Master's Degree by Research		
	40	Master's degree by Coursework & Mixed Mode		
	30	Postgraduate Diploma		
	20	Postgraduate Certificate		
6	120	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	
	64**	Graduate Diploma	Graduate Diploma	
	34**	Graduate Certificate	Graduate Certificate	
5	40	Advanced Diploma	Advanced Diploma	
4	90	Diploma	Diploma	
3	60	Certificate	Certificate	
2	30	Certificate	Certificate	
1	15	Certificate	Certificate	

* Technical and Vocational Education and Training

** Inclusive of four credits for U1 courses from general studies

Source: MQA, 2021.

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Table 8. Comparison of APEL (A) and APEL (C)

Types	APEL (A)	APEL (C)
Purpose	Entry into a programme	The course credit award in an academic programme
Approval by MQA	HEIs are not required to apply for MQA approval	HEIs must apply for MQA approval for five years to practise the credit award
APEL Application	Application for APEL (A) certification to MQA or APEL centre	Application for assessment to HEIs
Assessment Instrument	Standardized and administered nationwide	Varies between HEIs depending on the nature of the course and students'/ HEIs' preference
Basic Requirements	<p>Malaysian or expatriate</p> <p>Minimum age requirements:</p> <p>Certificate – 19 years old</p> <p>Diploma – 20 years old</p> <p>Bachelor's Degree – 21 years old</p> <p>Master's Degree – 30 years old</p> <p>Doctoral Degree – 35 years old</p> <p>For entry at undergraduate level: pass aptitude test, portfolio evaluation, and interview session.</p>	<p>Open to all</p> <p>Pass assessment</p> <p>No age requirements</p>
Documents Supporting the Implementation of APEL	<p>Guidelines to Good Practices: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning</p> <p>APEL Handbook for Learners</p>	<p>Guidelines to Good Practices:</p> <p>APEL for Credit Award</p>
Administrator of Assessment	Coordination and Quality Assurance Reference Division, MQA	Standards Division, MQA

Source: MQA, 2020.

6. Recognition of prior learning in Malaysia

6.3.1 Recognition of prior learning for access

As discussed earlier, the policy on APEL for access – APEL (A) – was implemented in 2011 by MQA. The purpose of assessment for APEL (A) is to provide access to a programme based on the assessment of a candidate's prior knowledge and skills. Eligible candidates are required to apply to MQA or an APEL centre to have their prior experience recognized. Under APEL (A), admission for entry into HEIs can be obtained by Malaysians or expatriates if they fulfil several requirements (see Box 35).

BOX 35

Eligibility criteria for APEL (A)

- Are 19 years and above for admission to the certificate level programme (APEL T-3) in the year the application is made; have the appropriate experience and pass the APEL assessment.
- Are 20 years and above for admission to the diploma level programme (APEL T-4) in the year the application is made; have the appropriate experience and pass the APEL assessment.
- Are 21 years and above for admission to the bachelor's level programme (APEL T-6) in the year the application is made; have the appropriate experience and pass the APEL assessment.
- Are 30 years and above for admission to the master's level programme (APEL T-7) in the year the application is made and have a Malaysian Higher School Certificate or diploma or other qualifications that are recognized as equivalent; have the appropriate experience and pass the APEL assessment.

Source: MQA, 2020.

There are three main modalities of assessment for APEL (A) practices in Malaysia; these are quite similar to those of most of the countries who are practising APEL. To be admitted into an HEI through APEL (A), prospective candidates must:

6. Recognition of prior learning in Malaysia

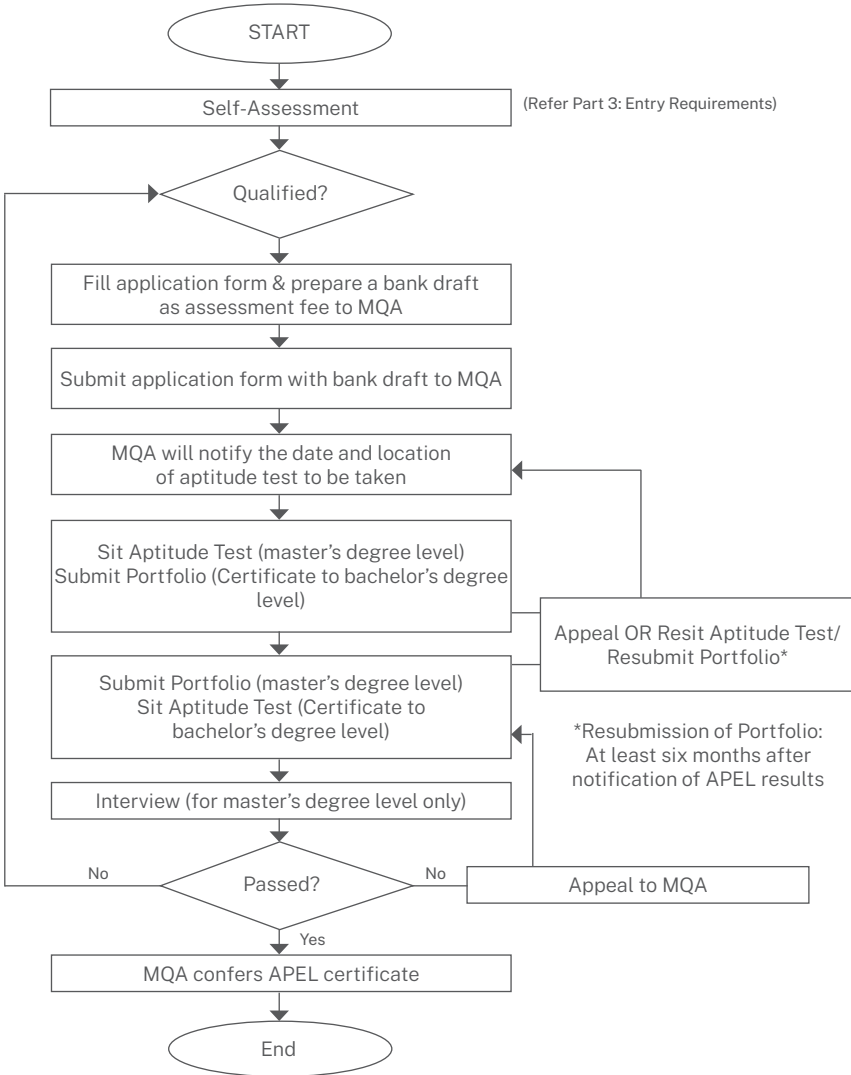
- *Conduct a self-assessment and pay a basic fee to MQA.* After this they can formally apply for an APEL certification and proceed to take an APEL aptitude test.
- *Take an aptitude test to assess the competencies and readiness of the candidates.* Aspects of assessment that will be tested include knowledge in Bahasa Malaysia, English, mathematics and general knowledge/ critical thinking.
- *Submit a portfolio.* Applicant's prior experiences, which include formal, informal, and non-formal learning, must be compiled in this portfolio. Different types of evidence can be presented to verify the validity and authenticity of the experiential learning to fit to the programme that a candidate is interested in, e.g. work reports, objects, emails, notes, journals, customer feedback, an employment letter, diaries, agreements, statements of results, and academic transcripts. The portfolio is then submitted for evaluation by two panels: instrument-expert and subject-matter-expert panels.
- *Interview of candidates to test their commitment, observe readiness/ plans to join an academic programme.* This is only applicable for the postgraduate level.

Upon candidates' assessment, MQA can confer an APEL certificate to be used by the prospective students to gain admission in their choice of institution. The name of the candidate, area of study, entry level, and mode of entry are clearly specified in this certificate, together with a serial number, stamp, and signature of the MQA's chief executive officer (CEO). *Figure 21* demonstrates the assessment procedure for APEL (A) – the APEL handbook for learners for admission to master's level.

If a candidate is unable to meet the eligibility requirement to enrol in a master's programme from a diploma qualification via APEL (A) admission criteria, there is a chance to appeal to MQA.

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Figure 21. Standard operating procedure for APEL (A)



Source: MQA, 2021.

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6.3.2 Recognition of prior learning for credit

The APEL (C) scheme was implemented in 2016 to award credits to an academic programme based on students' working and learning experience. The APEL (C) process encourages continuous learning and promotes the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience. Both formal learning and informal learning (work experience and other activities such as consultancy services or social work) as well as non-formal learning (trainings and workshops attended) can be considered for awarding APEL credits if they fit to the course learning outcomes (MQA, 2016).

APEL (C) is an inclusive process available for registered students of study programmes at all levels of the MQF. In practice, the maximum percentage of credit transfer through APEL (C) is 30 per cent of the total graduating credits of a specific programme of study (MQA, 2016). This means that if the student is able to prove experiential learning in a particular course, they will be exempted from that course through conventional methods. This percentage is in addition to the credit transfer provision based on the existing formal credit transfer policy. HEIs interested in conducting APEL (C) must comply with the following general policies:

- The APEL (C) provision is applicable to learners registered at any HEI regardless of the mode of entry: whether through the conventional or APEL (A) route.
- APEL (C) encompasses the assessment of prior experiential learning for the purpose of credit award. Learning acquired through massive open online courses, or any other methods of self-learning, should also be considered under this provision.
- All HEIs can implement APEL (C) at their respective institutions only after obtaining approval from MQA. HEIs which intend to implement APEL (C) must comply with the MQA APEL (C) policies.

During the APEL (C) implementation process, the issue of student readiness becomes an overriding consideration for academic assessors. A portfolio and/or challenge test are the two main assessment tools used in practice to assess experiential learning for granting the credit awards (MQA, 2016). Students can choose either of

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the options, depending on the nature of the course and upon advice by their appointed APEL (C) advisor.

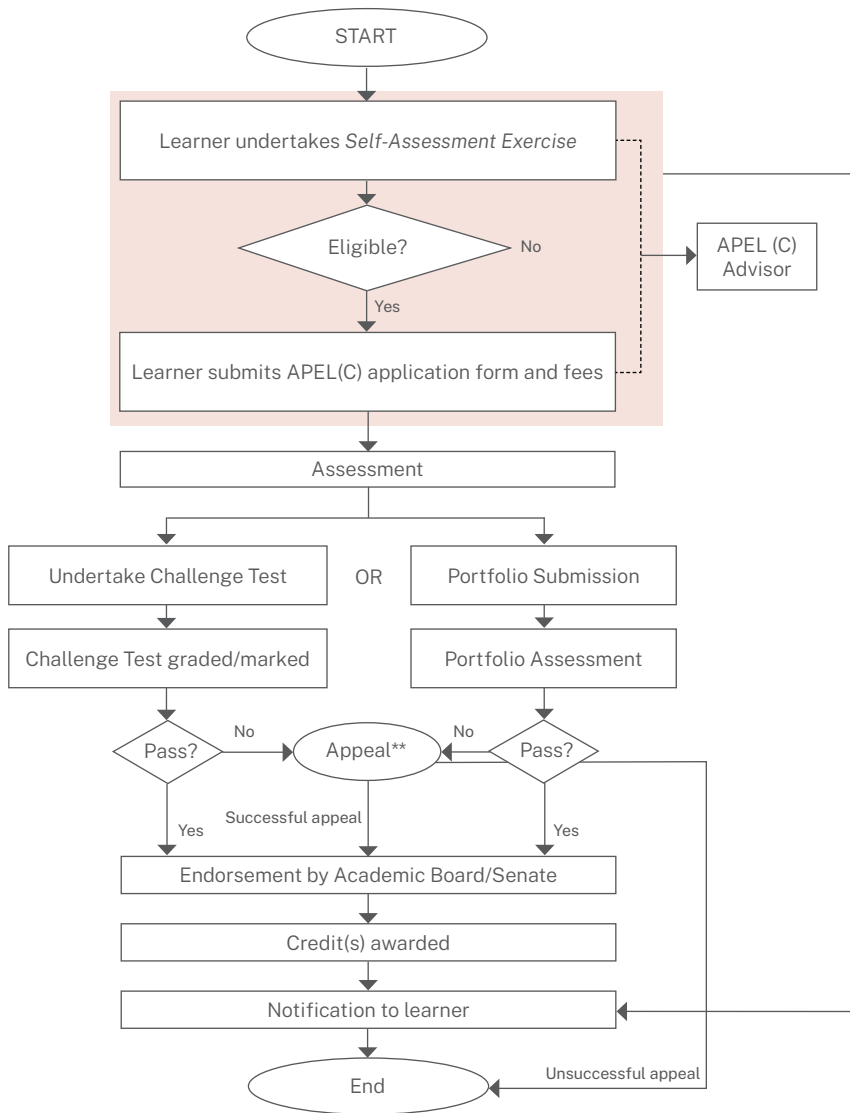
- A challenge test is an invigilated standard test to assess if the learner has achieved the course learning outcomes. It can be in the form of a written test, oral examination, and/or performance assessment, depending on the landscape and discipline of the course.
- A portfolio is a formal document that contains a compilation of evidence documenting the prior experiential learning of a learner and their articulation of learning acquired over a period of time (formal, informal, and non-formal). It is prepared by the learner with the objective of demonstrating that the learning acquired is relevant and specific to each of the course learning outcomes of a particular course. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most implementers of APEL (C) in Malaysia practised online portfolio submission to minimize human contact.

The credit system allows for harmonization of educational qualifications and the validation of units of learning. It assists students to complete studies by reducing cost and time, eventually opening paths to mobility. APEL (C) can be implemented for all areas and levels of qualifications in the MQF. For postgraduate level of study, the credit award is limited to the courses in programmes conducted via coursework and mixed modes. APEL (C) is confined to courses in programmes that have obtained at least provisional accreditation from MQA. Courses that form part of the programme structure under professional bodies may be considered for APEL (C), subject to acceptance by relevant professional bodies. HEIs are responsible for securing such approval.

Figure 22., Standard operating procedure for APEL (C), outlines the key processes and procedures involved in administering APEL (C) for learners, as originally published in the *Guidelines to Good Practices* by MQA (2016) and updated in MQA (2021).

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Figure 22. Standard operating procedure for APEL (C)



Source: MQA, 2021.

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6.3.3 Administration of recognition of prior learning through dedicated centres

The APEL centre is the main counselling structure and plays an important role in ensuring effective support during the admission process. Presently, there are six universities which are MQA APEL assessment centres and practise APEL (A): OUM, WOU, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. About 31 HEIs can conduct APEL (C) as approved by MQA.

All these centres have been licensed by MQA: there are certain criteria that must be fulfilled before a centre can start its operations:

- There should be a dedicated structure (e.g. department) within the university with sufficient staffing to manage APEL matters.
- The staff must have an opportunity to grow their skills and competencies in APEL matters.
- There must be an effective record management system to facilitate QA and support system activities.
- The application procedures must be aligned to the requirements of MQA.
- From an assessment system perspective, all the instruments prescribed by MQA must be operationalized and a proper support system must be offered to non-traditional learners.
- The APEL centres are required to implement QA checks comprehensively by periodic reviews.
- A pool of APEL assessors needs to be identified and trained so that the implementation can be smoothly performed. This information is to be delivered to MQA before an HEI is appointed as an established APEL centre.
- Sufficient resources, facilities, and infrastructure must be in place before the administration of APEL assessment.

There are two main reasons why institutions want to become APEL centres: primarily, an APEL Centre can uplift the reputation of the university as an adult learning institution supporting the ideology of LLL; secondly, institutions will be able to upskill more employees from industry: a good business opportunity for a university currently working to be sustainable in the education market in these difficult times.

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A typical procedure for HEIs to apply for MQA approval to administer APEL (C) may be as follows. First, the HEI submits an application form and pays a fee to MQA. Next, MQA selects a panel of assessors and works with them in reviewing the plans of the HEI as disclosed in the application documents. If it is feasible, the HEI will be invited for a pilot test of two applicants. Once MQA receives the notification that the pilot test is completed, the HEI will be invited to a representation session where they will present the pilot study outcomes to the panel of assessors and MQA. MQA issues a certificate and an APEL (C) approval letter to the HEI upon being successfully assessed.

Having sufficient infrastructure, support systems, and human resource capacity are important determinants for an HEI to establish its own APEL centre. It is vital for the APEL centres to ensure that there is:

- a proper student support and counselling system;
- an information management system;
- a QA mechanism in the implementation process.

Moreover, students with special needs and those facing personal or family issues can be provided with professional counselling services when they enrol as students. Currently, the trend is also moving towards creating resource centres in university libraries.

6.4 Findings: Evaluation of the implementation of recognition of prior learning

This section evaluates the implementation of APEL (A) and (C) from a national and institutional perspective. The data are based on the IIEP case study investigating FLPs, in particular the implementation of APEL in Malaysia. As part of the study, interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with national-level respondents and representatives from two case HEIs: UiTM a public university, and WOU, a private university. The interviews were complemented by a review of relevant national projects, legislative documents, and national statistical databases.

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6.4.1 Evaluation of the implementation of recognition of prior learning for access

The study found that there has been growth in APEL (A) admissions from 2018 to 2020; this is particularly prominent at the master's level (see *Table 9*).

Table 9. APEL (A) admission data

Year	2018	2020
Total number of respondents who passed APEL (A) assessment	531	1,196
Entry at certificate level	1 (0.19%)	19 (1.6%)
Entry at diploma level	142 (26.74%)	237 (19.8%)
Entry at bachelor's level	291 (58.4%)	440 (36.8%)
Entry at master's level	97 (18.27%)	500 (41.8%)

Source: MQA, 2018, 2020.

It is predominantly open and private universities, for example the OUM, WOU, and the Asia e-university, that offer APEL (A) for both citizens and non-citizens in Malaysia. The implementation of APEL (A) is based on the MQA's guidelines stipulating that HEIs should offer APEL (A) to access diploma and degree programmes.

Respondents in the study stated that the private HE sector is more receptive to APEL, due to possessing the appropriate policy, mechanisms, and instruments. The private HE sector must follow the MQA's guidelines seriously, as non-compliance may result in non-accreditation status. However, due to protracted deliberations on academic quality issues, the public HE sector has slowed down its implementation of APEL. At WOU, the case private university, there is an APEL (A) admissions pathway implemented to serve the needs of working Malaysians who wish to enter or re-enter HE.

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The case public university, UiTM, offers alternative pathways via APEL (A) to diploma and degree programmes. At UiTM's Business School, students with no experience require five credits to obtain a diploma, while applicants with work experience require three credits. Qualified elite athletes and students from disadvantaged groups have also benefitted from this alternative pathway. Both UiTM and WOU have plans to make APEL (A) assessment more inclusive by implementing testing instruments for persons with visual impairments.

The study also found that achievements of students who enter HEIs via APEL (A) have been a concern; this may have contributed to the reluctance of some HEIs to admit non-traditional and disadvantaged students via this pathway. However, the student interview data at UiTM showed that current students and alumni who accessed the university through APEL see it as a second chance to pursue qualifications. Therefore, they were willing to work extra hard to make good any of their academic shortcomings.

In fact, a national evaluation of APEL (A) conducted by MQA, *Survey Report on Acceptance and Achievement of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL A) Students at Higher Education Providers* (MQA, 2018, 2020) concluded that there was no significant difference in academic performance between a traditional student and an APEL student. The survey also concluded that more institutions need to get involved in managing APEL (A) to grow FLPs as well as providing career-enhancement chances to students using APEL. When comparing the two years' cumulative grade point averages, it can be seen that APEL students are improving in terms of academic performance (see *Table 10*). The improvement is due to the active role being played by various parties in providing support system to APEL learners, e.g. the APEL Centre, the faculties, and the support staff. Actions include helping APEL learners to access learning materials and providing coaching to those who need support.

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Table 10. Academic performance of APEL (A) students

Year	2018	
CGPA*	Total	%
3.70–4.00	31	5.8
2.50–3.69	250	47.1
2.00–2.49	72	13.6
Below 2.00	42	7.9
No CGPA (have not sat exam)	136	25.6
Total response obtained	531	100
Year	2020	
CGPA*	Total	%
3.50–4.00	262	37.8
3.00–3.49	213	30.7
2.50–2.99	88	12.7
2.00–2.49	8	1.2
Below 2.00	2	0.3
No CGPA (have not sat exam)	121	17.4
Total response obtained	694	100

Source: MQA, 2018, 2020.

* CGPA = Cumulative grade point average.

6.4.2 Evaluation of the implementation of recognition of prior learning for credit

There has been an increase in the implementation of APEL (C) by HEIs. A survey was conducted by MQA in 2019 of which the central focus was to provide information on the implementation of APEL (C). A total of 17 institutions provided data on how APEL credits were implemented between 2016 and 2019 (see *Table 11*). From the 1,753 students who requested credit awards, 28 per cent were diploma students, 66 per cent were doing their bachelor's, and only 6 per cent were pursuing a master's degree. Most were enrolled in academic programmes on early childhood, occupational safety and health,

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business management, Islamic studies, human resource management, information management, and psychology.

Table 11. Credit awards in Malaysia

Year	Number of applications	Total credits awarded	Total credits not awarded
2016	184	222 (71%)	92 (29%)
2017	279	213 (49%)	222 (51%)
2018	531	778 (79%)	202 (21%)
2019	759	1,414 (80%)	360 (20%)
Total	1,753	2,627 (75%)	876 (25%)

Source: MQA, 2018.

From this research report, three inferences can be drawn. First, the number of applicants for APEL (C) has grown fourfold from 2016 to 2019. This shows that the awareness of APEL (C) as a way to gain credit for prior learning has increased over time. Second, the total number of credits awarded through APEL (C) has grown about sixfold during the period from 2016 to 2019. Third, credits are given on selective grounds. Out of 3,503 credits (100 per cent) applied for, only 2,627 (75 per cent) were awarded.

However, since all HEIs in Malaysia must apply for MQA approval every five years, this process may sometimes impede how effectively HEIs can practice APEL (C). An interviewee from the case institution UiTM stated that once relevant documentation was submitted to MQA and MOHE, the application review process could take too much time (UiTM, head of unit, MY/Inst/ADVCQAU/ID01, in-person interview). In this case, the university applies credit exemptions, since opportunities for credit transfer were not applicable to all the subjects offered.

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6.4.3 Evaluation of the implementation of centres for recognition of prior learning

The case study found that MOHE and MQA have supported the establishment of APEL centres for information and guidance regarding APEL (A) and (C) to prospective and current students in the Malaysian HE system. However, not every HEI has an APEL centre as, at present, only some HEIs have been accredited by MQA to create them. Centres can administer testing for APEL (A), provide training for APEL assessors to build their capacity, enhance their own instruments, and conduct research on APEL. OUM, one of the case universities in the FLPs study, has an APEL centre that provides guidance, counselling, testing, and an appeal system for APEL (A) and APEL (C) applicants.

However, the study also found that there is a lack of awareness among target groups regarding APEL opportunities. Relevant information on the implementation of APEL may not be readily accessible to the target groups concerned, especially among equity groups, resulting in low awareness of the available opportunities to enter or re-enter HE through non-conventional admission pathways, especially in rural areas. This is being counteracted with the establishment of APEL centres in rural areas to improve accessibility and reachability of APEL for these learners.

6.4.4 Issues related to monitoring and evaluation of recognition of prior learning

There are issues around the monitoring of the implementation of APEL. It was found that due to lack of awareness and understanding of policy intent on APEL among mid-level administrators in MOHE, the implementation of APEL was not as effective as it should be. As stated by a respondent from MQA, relevant and updated information provided by the Ministry or the MQA's guidelines was not disseminated widely to facilitate better understanding and implementation of APEL (MQA, top management, in-person interview).

In addition, the evaluation of APEL's effectiveness has been made more difficult by the fact that the information on equity groups is not well defined and standardized at the policy level and between ministries. Hence, as stated by a respondent, varied interpretations and definitions have caused difficulty when trying to determine

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the effectiveness of APEL for non-traditional and disadvantaged learners (MOHE, top management, MY/Nat/DSCD/ID01, in-person interview).

6.5 Conclusions

The preceding discussion on the implementation of APEL (A) and APEL (C) and the related policy-formulation and implementation experiences have led to five main recommendations for improving the effectiveness of APEL implementation in Malaysia.

- It is important to support the development of APEL through a well-planned and continuous exchange of knowledge and sharing of best practices, both nationally and through international collaboration and cooperation. This will support the formulation of policy and its implementation, particularly in terms of the impact of APEL on marginalized and disadvantaged groups.
- Engagement with stakeholders at all levels, including experts, industries, and the public, and especially marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society, must be strengthened to create committed partnerships towards achieving FLP objectives in Malaysia. Such partnerships should help in future planning to bring together mechanisms such as APEL with a view to enhancing the skills of human capital in the long run, while at the same time accommodating the empowerment of non-conventional learners.
- Information about APEL should be actively disseminated and publicized to all working adults using social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), electronic media (TV and radio), and also traditional marketing strategies (newspapers). All the success stories and benefits that it has provided to current students should be highlighted. This will create more interest among working adults to re-enter HE and support the idea of LLL. HEIs must be urged to allocate sufficient resources for marketing efforts.
- It is also vital to create a standardized database so that systems such as APEL (A) and APEL (C) can be performed in a systematic manner. That will also facilitate the creation of a national credit bank system in the future. The database must be well designed and classified by equity groups. Once data are segregated, more actions can be taken to facilitate construction of a system to make the APEL system progress better.

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- Capacity building is important to ensure appropriate and effective managerial and administrative support of FLP policies and practices in HEIs. Communication is central in every assessment and recognition process. Therefore, APEL processes must be well organized and clearly communicated. For that to take place, managerial support at institutional level is critical, particularly support from managers and faculties or departments in HEIs. There is a need to develop capacity at the institutional level through continuous human resource development initiatives and effective distribution of guidelines on the implementation of APEL in HEIs.

As stated earlier in this chapter, the concern with human resource development stems from the fact that the proportion of skilled workers is still low in Malaysia. APEL plays a necessary role in skills recognition and award of qualifications for skilled persons to participate in the labour market. APEL needs to be promoted actively by the authorities, institutions, and the workforce to ensure inclusivity and promote LLL in the education system. APEL can transform people's lives.

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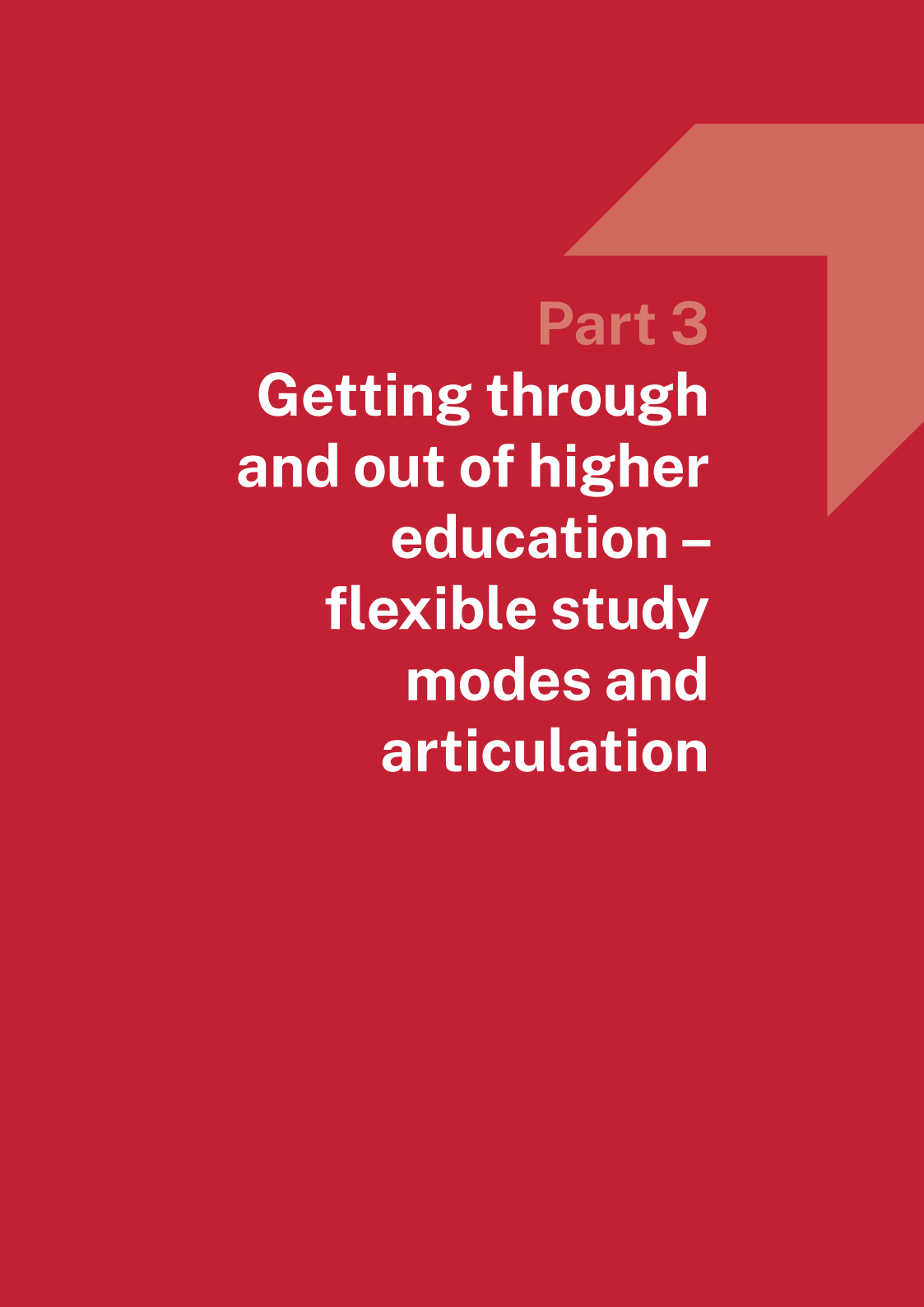
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Part 3
**Getting through
and out of higher
education –
flexible study
modes and
articulation**

7. Combining vocational and academic studies in Jamaica

Dawn Barrett-Adams and Carolyn Hayle

7.1 Introduction

The higher education (HE) landscape in Jamaica continues to be transformed as the country implements the goals outlined in its *Vision 2030 Jamaica – National Development Plan*. HE is recognized as a key economic driver for development and a tool for addressing poverty. It forms part of the government's strategy to ensure the availability of qualified and skilled human resources to drive economic development. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Information (MOEY&I) has identified and promulgated the development of alternative pathways in HE as one of the four policy pillars of the HE strategy.

Flexible learning pathways (FLPs), therefore, form an important component in the realization of the national vision. They are a vehicle through which the national goal of ensuring that each Jamaican actualizes their full potential can be achieved. FLPs also support Jamaica's goal to meet Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) to create inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning (LLL).

The K-13 Strategy, a policy of the MOEY&I aimed at prolonging the duration of school education from formerly 11 years to 13, is integral to the implementation of SDG-4 in Jamaica. It aims to create a seamless system from early childhood to Grade 13 where students can pursue seven years of secondary education instead of formerly five. It also provides students with more options for study: purely academic, purely technical and vocational education and training (TVET), or a combination of both. All hold equal standing on Jamaica's National Qualifications Framework (NQF-J).

This chapter draws on the findings of the Jamaican country case study *Integrated Higher Education in Support of Flexible Learning Pathways in*

7. Combining vocational and academic studies in Jamaica

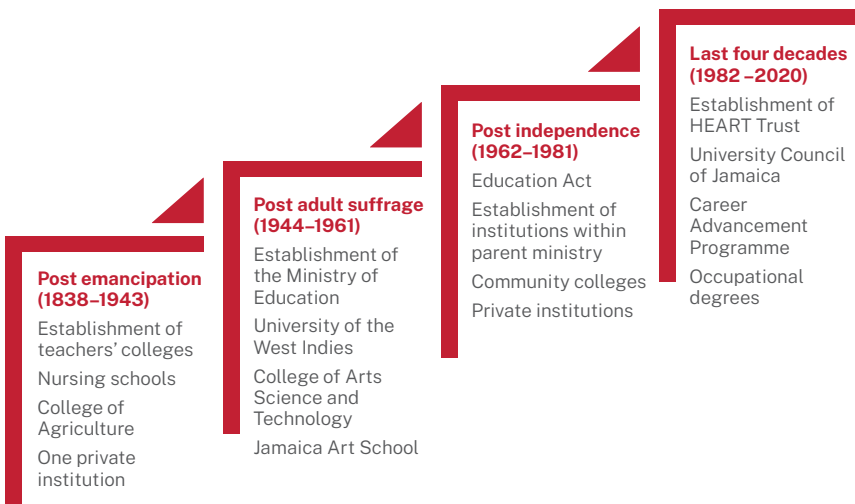
Jamaica (Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021).¹⁷ This chapter analyses the implementation of the K-13 Strategy through the Career Advancement Programme (CAP), which was recently transformed into the Sixth Form Pathways Programme, and the Occupational Associate Degree (OAD), and the extent to which these programmes have enabled permeability in Jamaican HE between vocational and academic higher education. The chapter includes an evaluation of the national policy and regulatory frameworks, instruments, and practices supporting access to TVET at the HE level. Focus is given to the flexibility in admission and progression through HE.

7.2 Governance instruments enabling the integration of vocational and academic studies

7.2.1 Context for higher education in Jamaica

HE in Jamaica dates back to the post-emancipation period in 1838 and reflects a progressive expansion captured in four distinct stages (*Figure 23*). A common goal to all four is the provision of training for the workplace in Jamaica.

Figure 23. Stages in the development and transition of HE in Jamaica



Source: Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021.

17 The report was a result of the collaboration between IIEP-UNESCO and the University Council of Jamaica

7. Combining vocational and academic studies in Jamaica

Over the years, HE in Jamaica has diversified in types of institutions, programmes, and participants, combining both private and public higher education institutions (HEIs). The sector is characterized by different types of institutions, including universities, university colleges, teachers' colleges, institutes, tertiary colleges, community colleges, brokers, and general providers.

Table 12 shows the distribution of HEIs based on both public and private types.

Table 12. Number and types of HEIs

Public higher education institutions	Private higher education institutions
3 universities	1 university
1 university college	2 university colleges
3 multidisciplinary institutions	8 colleges
1 physical education college	14 institutions
1 visual and performing arts college	
4 teachers' colleges	
5 community colleges	

Source: Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021.

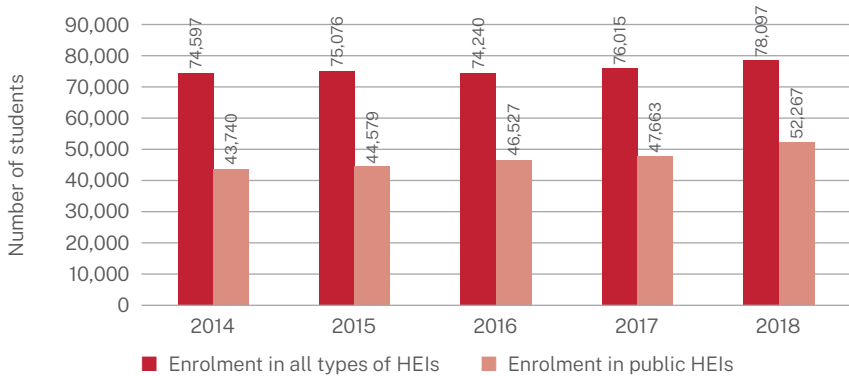
These institutions provide students with flexible options for study through different types of programmes and modalities for learning and allow for part-time and full-time study arrangements.

There has been a steady increase in enrolment in HE, where enrolments in public HEIs in 2018 formed almost 70 per cent of the total enrolment (see *Figure 24*).

Another interesting trend is that enrolments of female students greatly outnumber their male counterparts (see *Figure 25*). The enrolment rate shows that, on average, the student population comprises 65 per cent females and 35 per cent males.

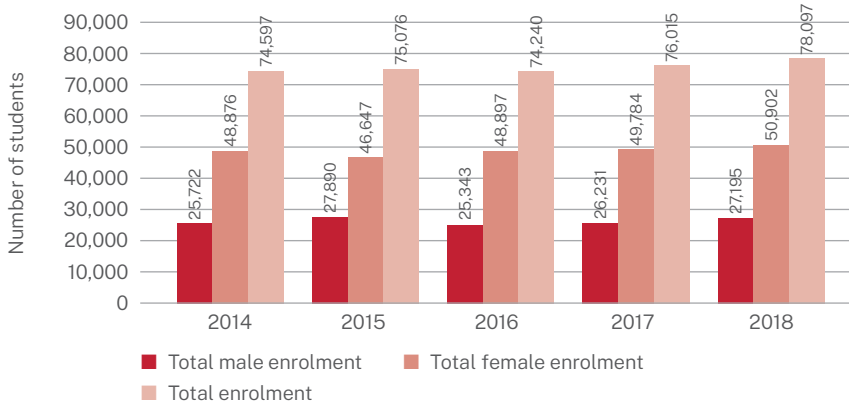
7. Combining vocational and academic studies in Jamaica

Figure 24. Enrolment in HEIs



Source: PIOJ, 2014–2018.

Figure 25. Enrolments in all HEIs by gender



Source: PIOJ, 2014–2018.

Males are therefore considered a disadvantaged group in the Jamaican HE system. A report by UNESCO that analyses these gender inequalities in Jamaica stated that males' poorer academic performance is deeply rooted in the education system and the societal context, and is perpetuated at their entrance to HE (UNESCO, 1999).

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7.2.2 Governance of the higher education sector

When discussing FLPs and the creation of a seamless HE sector, it is important to understand the governance framework and responsibilities of its organizations. TVET is governed by the Human Employment and Resource Training (HEART) Act (Jamaica, 1982), as amended in 2019. The Act established the HEART Trust to finance the training and certification of persons for the purpose of improving national productivity and competitiveness and reducing unemployment. HEART has been expanded to become the HEART/NSTA (National Service and Training Agency) Trust, which is funded by a 3 per cent tax on employers in Jamaica.

In 1994, the National Council on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (NCTVET) was created by the HEART Trust to develop competency standards, accredit, and develop assessments for TVET programmes, and award certificates and diplomas to individuals who have demonstrated competence in vocational areas. The competency standards used by NCTVET are industry-determined specifications for performance and state the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required by a worker in the execution of a particular role in the workplace. Competency level certifications, called the National Vocational Qualification of Jamaica (NVQ-J), were also developed by NCTVET. In 2017, the NVQs were listed on the NQF-J.

To ensure good governance in the university sector, the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) was established through an Act of Parliament (UCJ Act). The UCJ Act gives the agency authority to determine the conditions for academic awards and distinctions of students who have completed a course of study and to confer these awards. Over the years, UCJ has used quality assurance and accreditation as the conditions for the granting of academic awards. UCJ is mandated with the establishment of standards for quality and the promotion of the internal quality assurance system for both public and private HE entities. The QA functions of the UCJ focus on institutional effectiveness and students' success.

7.2.3 National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica

The NQF-J, which was launched in 2017, establishes levels of student learning outcomes. The framework captures TVET programmes,

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specifically the Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQ), NVQs, and the OADs, and shows the comparability of the levels of these certifications (Levels 1–8) to the qualifications gained for academic programmes (see *Table 13*).

Table 13. National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica

Jamaica HE Sectors					
Levels	General education	Technical and vocational	Occupational degrees	Tertiary education	Lifelong learning
8		CVQ/NVQ 8 (Specialist)	Applied doctorate	Doctoral degree	Prior learning assessment and recognition
7		CVQ/NVQ 7 (Specialist/ Multi disciplined professional)		Master's degree	
6		CVQ/NVQ 6 (Specialist)	Occupational master's	Postgraduate certificate/ diploma	
5		CVQ/NVQ 5 (Manager)	Occupational bachelor's	Bachelor's degree	
4		CVQ/NVQ 4 (Middle manager)	Occupational associates	Associate degree/ advanced diploma	
3	Certificate (upper secondary)	CVQ/NVQ 3 (Supervisor)		Diploma	
2	Certificate (upper secondary leaving)	CVQ/NVQ 2 (Supervised skilled worker)			
1	Certificate (lower secondary)	CVQ/NVQ 1 (Directly supervised worker)			
-	Access point 2				
	Access point 1				

Source: Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021.

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The NQF-J is an integration of the NVQ-J and the Tertiary Qualifications Framework and allows students and institutions to develop flexible pathways within and across occupations, education, and training. The NVQ levels are aligned to job responsibilities in the workplace. NVQs have been used to develop the CVQ, which is a regional certification for the Caribbean. While NVQs form the pool of qualifications together with CVQs, they are not equivalent to CVQs. CVQs are currently awarded by the regional examination body, the Caribbean Examinations Council. Attainment of any of the CVQ competencies also allows students to seamlessly transfer into the workplace or HE.

The NQF-J also embraces the assessment of prior learning to determine the level of learning that an individual has acquired through formal, informal, and non-formal learning, and the additional learning required to be awarded a qualification. Students therefore have the option of mapping a pathway that is flexible and best fit towards obtaining an HE qualification. Therefore, the NQF-J promotes access and progression through HE and serves as a valuable tool for FLPs towards obtaining a qualification.

7.2.4 Quality assurance and accreditation

As mentioned above, UCJ and NCTVET, respectively, are in charge of quality assuring HEIs and TVET institutions in Jamaica. QAA is fundamental to the recognition and acceptance of qualifications on the NQF-J and promotes the portability of qualifications. The TVET certifications (NVQs) are quality assured by NCTVET and the academic programmes by the UCJ. While the OADs have not yet been quality assured, they were developed using the UCJ's recently published generic standards for associate degrees.

More recently, efforts towards transferring the QAA function of NCTVET to the UCJ have begun. Based on this transfer, the UCJ will have responsibility for quality assuring all HE provisions that form part of the NQF in Jamaica, including the NVQs. The scope of the UCJ's QAA function is therefore being widened and will allow for a unified system for quality assuring and accrediting all qualifications appearing on

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the NQF-J. Implicit in this decision, is the increased recognition of TVET as another option for post-secondary and tertiary education and training. Students can now have confidence in the acceptability of TVET certification. It also allows for a seamless transfer from TVET to academic study and vice versa.

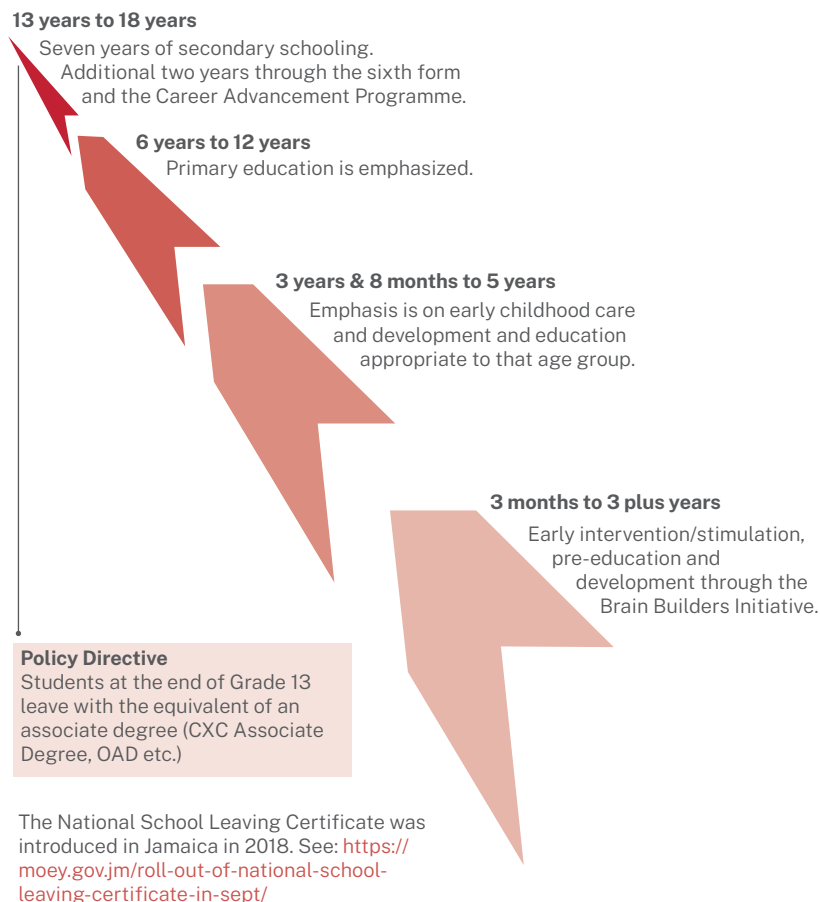
7.3 K-13 Strategy as a way to better integrate vocational and academic studies

The current policy for FLPs in HE is being driven by the K-13 Strategy (see *Figure 26*), which aims to create a seamless system where students can pursue seven years of secondary education and then transition into the labour market or pursue an HE degree (McLean, 2019). The secondary system for most schools consisted of five years of education (Grades 7–11). This has moved to offering seven years of education at the secondary level. The K-13 Strategy thus makes two additional years of post-secondary education (Grades 12–13) compulsory for all high schools in Jamaica and therefore has expanded the length of time a student spends at the secondary level to seven years. As part of the K-13 strategy, a post-secondary option was implemented into the secondary school system through the introduction of CAP, which covers Grades 12 and 13 with vocational content.

Another programme was developed at the HE level, including for graduates from CAP: the OADs. Both CAP and the OADs are tuition-free programmes and therefore facilitate the participation of economically disadvantaged students in HE. Funding for CAP is provided by HEART/ NSTA Trust, the national agency responsible for the certification and accreditation of TVET. The funds are disbursed to institutions by the MOEY&I. The OADs are funded directly by the MOEY&I. Both programmes provide opportunities for vulnerable persons in Jamaica to participate in HE.

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Figure 26. K-13 Strategy (0–18 years)



Source: McLean, 2019.

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7.3.1 Career Advancement Programme

CAP was established out of concern by the then Minister of Education in 2009 that many students (averaging 26,000 per year) completed the secondary school system but did not have any form of final professional certification. These students were likely to have come into the secondary system from the primary exit examination, the Grade 6 Achievement Test (GSAT), and were among the lower-performing students. GSAT has since then been replaced by the Primary Exit Programme. Before CAP, only the ‘traditional’ secondary schools (known as grammar schools) offered Grades 12 and 13 and provided for seven years of education (five years of secondary plus two years of post-secondary).

In CAP, students can pursue seven years of education at the secondary level (Ellington, 2019). They have the following options for study at Grades 12 and 13 (JIS, 2017):

- Obtain competency in literacy and numeracy and pursue NVQ-J certification;
- Pursue the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination units and have the option to pursue NVQ-J certification (dual certification);
- Resit the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) and pursue NVQ-J certification.

These options for post-secondary education ensure that all students leaving secondary schools are qualified to either enter the labour market or pursue HE. CAP also addresses individual students’ capabilities and personal goals by providing options for study for students rather than them leaving secondary school without any form of final certification.

7.3.2 Occupational Associate Degrees

The OADs were launched in 2016 to offer a wide variety of industry-specific training at the HE level for the workplace, with the aim of boosting the skilled workforce in Jamaica. Students with NVQ-J at Levels 2 or 3 are able to matriculate into the OADs (JIS, 2016). The OADs also allow the graduates of CAP with NVQ-J or CVQ certification to seamlessly enter HE.

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The OADs are available only at some HEIs. Twenty-one HEIs (14 public and 7 private) in Jamaica which offer the routine academic-type programmes also offer the OADs (JIS, 2016). Each institution is allowed to enrol students based on a quota. According to the MOEY&I, the enrolment in OADs in 2018 was 1,233 students.

The OADs cover a diverse range of occupations including logistics and supply chain management, business process outsourcing, fitness management, construction site management, restaurant operations, renewable energy, and allied health, to name a few. The strength of the OADs lies in the knowledge and skills being applied to real workplace situations, and therefore the programmes allow students to seamlessly transition into further studies or the labour market.

7.4 Findings: Evaluation of policies for integrating vocational and academic studies

This section evaluates the effectiveness of integration of TVET in HE in Jamaica. As part of the study, interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with national-level respondents and representatives from three contrasting case HEIs – the University of Technology (UTech), a public university; Northern Caribbean University (NCU), a private university; and Moneague College, a multidisciplinary college. The interviews were complemented by a literature review of relevant national projects, legislative documents, and national statistical databases.

The findings emanating from this study revealed a disconnect between policy and implementation of the above-mentioned FLPs in Jamaica. It also showed an area within the policy framework that needed to be tightened to ensure effectiveness. These issues are explored from the perspective of policy and regulations, national instruments, and the actual practices within the institutions.

7.4.1 Policy for integrating vocational and academic studies

The K-13 Strategy was developed to ensure that all students are able to pursue seven years at the secondary level of the education system (McLean, 2019). The aim is to ensure that all students leaving the secondary school system have the required qualifications to enter the world of work or pursue further studies towards obtaining an HE

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degree. This was explained in the interview with senior administrators at the MOEY&I:

Over the last couple of years – nine years or more – we [MOEY&I] have taken some deliberate steps to ensure that greater focus is placed on those who are leaving the secondary level system, and under our code of regulations speaks to five years of secondary; but incidentally it speaks to vocational training and tertiary education. While the code does not specifically highlight seven years of secondary education, it allows us to offer at least the additional two years at secondary based on how it is worded. (Senior administrator, MOEY&I, interview, Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021)

There are two programmes, the OAD and the CAP, that have been developed and speak to the K-13 Strategy. The OAD has been developed directly jointly with the tertiary institutions and along the lines of the NQF. (Senior administrator, MOEY&I, interview, Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021)

The K-13 Strategy is authorized by the Education Act. Though the Act does not speak to seven years of education at the secondary level, it is clear that secondary education is catering for students up to the age of 19. The K-13 Strategy incorporates TVET as an option for HE through the development and implementation of CAP and the OADs, which is supported by the provisions of the HEART/NSTA Act. It is therefore grounded on the principles of access, equity, and inclusiveness.

7.4.2 National Qualifications Framework supporting the integration of vocational and academic studies

NQFs are important to facilitate the integration of TVET into the HE system. The NQF-J classifies the education and training provided by HEIs based on their level, type, and student learning outcomes. It presents the certification in the academic domain, the OADs, and TVET spanning Levels 1–8. Descriptors of the knowledge, skills, and competencies, as well as attitudes at each level, are stated in the form of student learning outcomes. The UCJ has been using the stated student learning outcomes contained in the NQF-J to develop and review the standards used for its quality assurance processes and takes into account discipline-specific standards as well as generic level standards. In this regard, generic standards for the OADs and standards for two vocational areas have been developed by the UCJ.

Another strength of the NQF-J is its comprehensiveness, accounting for all certifications offered in Jamaica. This was stated in the interview with the MOEY&I:

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The NQF is essentially a comprehensive framework designed to incorporate placement of qualification in TVET and professional and academic and prior learning assessment. The intention is to have the framework facilitating particular streams and also across. (MOEY&I representative, interview, Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021)

However, despite having been launched in 2016, the instrument, from all indications, is not being used by HE stakeholders. The interviews with stakeholders at the national bodies and institutions revealed that although the senior administrators were aware of the NQF-J, they were not conversant with its purpose and utility.

Also, interviews with the various stakeholders at the three case institutions revealed that the NQF-J was also not being used within the HEIs. While senior administrators and lecturers were aware of its development and launch, they had not begun to integrate the framework into their institutional systems and processes. There is apparently much work needed to ensure that the framework can be accepted and utilized in enabling FLPs for entry, progression, and completion of HE and transition into the labour market. A stakeholder survey may be beneficial in determining the factors that have limited the full implementation of the NQF-J.

7.4.3 Quality assurance and accreditation supporting the integration of vocational and academic studies

QAA has been a feature of the HE system in Jamaica for over 30 years. The NCTVET continues to be responsible for QAA of TVET institutions and programmes, and the UCJ for HEIs and programmes. All three institutions studied under the Jamaican FLPs research have been quality assured either through programme or institutional accreditation. However, although the OADs have been developed using the generic standards developed by the UCJ, they had not been quality assured at the time of the interviews for the FLPs report.

And there is still work to be done in terms of the integration of TVET in HE from the QAA end. While the NQF-J does reflect qualifications that are equivalent in levels, recognition of TVET qualifications as being comparable to academic-type qualifications at each level has not been fully achieved. This will require stronger collaboration on the part of UCJ and NCTVET. Even if the transfer of the NCTVET

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accreditation functions to the UCJ is still in its infancy stage, having one agency responsible for QAA in HE will facilitate this much-needed recognition.

7.4.4 Integration of vocational and academic studies in practice

The actual practices being undertaken by HEIs to integrate TVET are explored in this section. As indicated earlier, both CAP and the OADs are directly aligned to workplace needs. Both CAP and the OADs are coordinated by the MOEY&I, CAP directly by the Chief Education Officer and the OADs by the Centre of Occupational Studies (COS). These programmes are also funded through the MOEY&I, and each institution is allocated an amount on a per student basis. Two out of the three case institutions were found to be offering both CAP and the OADs. The purpose of CAP was explained in the interview with senior administrators at the MOEY&I:

CAP provides access for the 100 per cent leaving the secondary level to qualify and move on to tertiary or into the world of work. CAP allows for number of opportunities for students to complete. You are targeting the entire Grade 11 cohort where 60 per cent will do one or more CSEC subjects (and move into 6th forms [Grades 12–13]) and the other 40 per cent will go into the workplace. We open the door and the persons apply for the programme; and we find places to put the students. (MOEY&I representative, interview, Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021)

It was made clear from interviewing the students that some of them had pursued CAP in Grades 12 and 13 at either their respective secondary schools or at an HEI. Other students seemed to have pursued the NVQ-J certification directly through HEART/NSTA Trust. These students were able to use their TVET certification to enter HE, albeit for the OADs. The formal qualifications of five CSEC passes including mathematics and English were being applied only to the HE ‘academic’ programmes. This was substantiated by the senior administrator at one of the case institutions:

We have persons pursuing CAP who gained the required CSEC passes that qualify them to matriculate into our [tertiary] programmes. We have had students who started out in CAP and they are [now] into the classical academic programmes. But it wasn’t based on their NVQ Level 2 [certification], it was based on their CSEC passes. (HEI, senior administrator, interview, Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021)

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CAP has been beneficial in providing students with the opportunity to attain certification in a skill area which is used for entry into HE. However, this certification is only systematically applied to the OAD programmes, pointing to a gap in the system. While the MOEY&I funds both programmes in totality, it has not tied the use of the NQF-J and QAA of especially the OADs to the funding. This allows institutions to bypass the policy and continue with business as usual, therefore diminishing the opportunity to achieve a seamless transition to HE.

But the students lauded the skills training aspect of the OAD programmes, demonstrating that the OADs support the integration of TVET into HE and could provide a seamless system for transfer from the OADs into a bachelor's degree:

On my journey through the COS programme, yes, I have a great experience in the hospitality field. The way the OAD programme is formulated is tremendous. It is mostly hands-on training. And I sense that teenagers and young people learn practically more than theory which is the traditional way back in my days in college. I think it is a programme that will capture all the youth, and sooner or later we will have a lot of 18- and 19-year-olds with a college degree. It is a plus for Jamaica, we are climbing up the ladder where education is concerned. (HEI, Student 1, interview, Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021)

Another notable feature of CAP and the OADs is their contribution to achieving greater equity. Both programmes addressed equity from the perspective of allowing students in the upgraded secondary schools an additional two years to gain qualifications in a skill area. Previously, the option of seven years of secondary level education was limited to those students who had performed well at the exit examinations for primary education and who could afford an additional two years of secondary school. Now CAP and the OADs provide students who could not normally afford HE with opportunities to pursue studies at this level:

The programme is free and it is offered to those who apply [sic]. The government takes care of tuition and examination fees; they [the students] only have to turn up. The socioeconomic situation may stop them from coming. The ministry focuses on access and is not able to provide a stipend. There is no assessment to determine who needs lunch and fare. (MOEY&I representative, interview, Barrett-Adams and Hayle, 2021)

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7.5 Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the integration between TVET and higher education in Jamaica, enabled through the current K-13 Strategy. CAP and the OADs have played a significant role towards achieving SDG-4 (Target 4.3): ensuring there is equal access for all women and men to affordable quality TVET and HE.

It is evident that the policies articulated and tested by the MOEY&I relating to inclusiveness and equity in HE have worked relatively well. Jamaicans now have access to quality technical, vocational, and higher education up to a college/ university degree. Both CAP and the OADs programmes provide for a diversification of learning opportunities for Jamaicans, including those students who are limited due to socioeconomic factors.

The findings clearly show that TVET Level 2 has become an access point for entry into HE. The expanded offer of CAP in the form of pre-college programmes has increased the opportunities for students to gain the qualifications necessary to matriculate in HE and at the same time provides students with study choices. The OADs placed at Level 4 of the NQF-J were developed as a pathway for students to progress through HE that closely mirrors characteristics of TVET-type programmes. The OADs are aligned to industry standards and are important in providing required competencies for the workplace.

Having both CAP and the OADs as tuition-free programmes has eliminated the socioeconomic barriers to participation in HE. These programmes have addressed equity by giving the opportunity to students who could not afford to go to college and pursue their dream of a college education.

The findings from the study therefore clearly substantiate that CAP has been impactful in serving two positive purposes, namely: facilitating the integration of TVET as an option for post-secondary and higher education; and addressing equity by enabling students who could not normally afford to access HE due to financial constraints to pursue an HE degree.

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However, there are factors that need to be addressed in realizing the full integration of TVET in the HE sector in Jamaica.

First, there is a lack of a documented policy or clear framework to support CAP and the OADs. Currently, these programmes are not fully incorporated into the normal administration and programme delivery system within the HEIs. Rather, they are treated as ‘add-on’ programmes. The students in these programmes are seen as getting a ‘second chance’ rather than being viewed as having chosen a flexible pathway towards obtaining an HE degree. Consequently, the qualifications gained by these students are perceived as of a ‘lesser’ quality. The non-integration of these programmes into the mainstream offering at institutions threatens their sustainability. The solution would be to use the NQF-J.

Second, the acceptability and recognition of the qualifications awarded by institutions also remain low because CAP and the OADs are not quality assured by UCJ. The qualifications gained and listed on the NQF must be trusted through a validation system that gives recognition to the programmes and provides confidence that these qualifications meet the required standards of quality. Currently, and based on the NQF-J, the NVQ Levels 1 and 2 are access points which are yet to be validated. While NVQ Levels 3 and above are accredited by NCTVET, they are not perceived as equivalent to an academic programme that is quality assured by the UCJ. The transfer of the accreditation functions of NCTVET will address this limitation.

Third, the NQF-J was not used at any of the three HEIs that formed part of the study, possibly due to the lack of information on the framework. Whereas students had matriculated into the OADs based on the NVQ-J Levels 1 and 2, the institutional administrators were not conversant with the NQF nor ISCED. This is a missed opportunity especially in facilitating access to HE through the implementation of a formal system for prior learning. Institutions wishing to receive government funds would not only have to comply with the policies, but would also have to use the appropriate instruments that support the policies.

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8. Establishing regulated bridges in Morocco

El Bachir Kouhlani and Mohammed Nabil Benchekroun

8.1 Introduction

Morocco has been through important economic, social, and technological transformations over the last 20 years. These changes have resulted in increased demand for higher education (HE) and a very rapid expansion of the number of learners. In this context of expansion, Moroccan HE has welcomed new groups of students, some of whom are unable to devote themselves exclusively to studying because of caring responsibilities, working constraints, disabilities, or other hindrances. These developments have brought out the need for flexible organization of HE, making articulation and flexible learning pathways (FLPs) the new basis for a further expansion of the HE system.

The system had been characterized by the fragmentation and compartmentalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) and learning pathways. In response, the country has adopted a policy to increase the articulation of HEIs and pathways to favour the mobility of learners. In the first instance, this reform aims to make up for the partial implementation of Law 01.00, passed in 2003–2004. This law introduced a new qualification structure, the Bachelor's-Masters-Doctorate (LMD), inspired by the Bologna process, but did not put in place the necessary tools for flexibility of the learning pathways.

The new policy, *Vision 2015–2030*, through Law 51.17 passed in 2019, puts increased emphasis on articulation and mechanisms to facilitate the development of regulated ‘bridges’¹⁸ between levels on the one hand, and institutions and the labour market on the other. Bridges – organized through alternative admissions between different disciplines and institutions – have proven to be one of the key tools of flexibility,

¹⁸ ‘Bridges’ has been used as a translation for the widely used French term ‘passerelles’.

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addressing the harmful effects of rigidity and compartmentalization in a massified HE system (Higher Council of Education, Training and Scientific Research, 2019a, 2019b).

The adoption of the new policy highlights the need for research to better understand existing practices of flexibility in institutions and the effects on the articulation and permeability of learning pathways. Such an understanding is needed to be able to draw conclusions for the implementation of the new policy currently implemented under *Vision 2015–2030*. This chapter draws on the Moroccan FLP case study titled *Flexibilization of Higher Education in Morocco: Analysis of the present situation and reflection on the future*, prepared for the IIEP-UNESCO research on FLPs in HE (Kouhlani and Benchekroun, 2021).¹⁹ The project studied existing bridges in the HEIs selected for the case studies: University Hassan II, (Casablanca), Mundiapolis University (a private HEI in Casablanca), the Higher School of Management Sciences, and the Office of Professional Education. The authors conducted interviews with both national and institutional policy-makers to explore the current status of articulation and existing bridges.

8.2 Main features of the Moroccan higher education context

Since Morocco's independence in 1956, HE has attracted significant state investments, seeking to respond to a continuous increase in social demand. Between 2007–2008 and 2018–2019, the number of HE students rose from 403,561 to 1,135,971, a more than 2.5-fold increase. From the 1980s onwards, however, the adoption of fiscal austerity policies meant that public resources were insufficient to support increased social demand in terms of physical infrastructure and pedagogical support. The student/teacher ratio for the 2018–2019 university year reached an average of 100 students per teacher in non-selective HEIs.²⁰ More specifically, this ratio was 187 students per teacher in faculties of Economics, Law and Social Sciences, 79 in faculties of Art and Humanities, 105 in multidisciplinary faculties,

¹⁹ The original French title of the report is: *La flexibilisation de l'enseignement supérieur au Maroc: Analyse du présent et réflexions pour l'avenir*.

²⁰ These are faculties in HEIs, where all baccalaureate holders are admitted without supplementary entry requirements (such as average grades obtained in the baccalaureate examinations or scores obtained in entry examinations) as practised by HEIs with regulated access.

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and 30 in science faculties. The number of students per 100 physical places available (as per planned capacity) over the same period rose to an average of 148. More specifically it reached 273 students per 100 physical places in faculties of Economics, Law and Social Sciences, 93 in faculties of science and technical sciences, and 179 for multidisciplinary faculties (HCETSR, 2018). This development resulted in a deterioration in teaching conditions, with a negative impact on the quality of learning, especially in open entry institutions.

Moroccan HE is also characterized by high dropout rates during the first years of undergraduate studies in public universities. According to the minister's presentation to the parliamentary education commission (Exposé, 2018), for undergraduate courses in public universities the overall dropout rate was 47 per cent, with 16 per cent in the first year, and 12, 8, and 10 per cent in, respectively, the second, third, and fourth years.

Several reforms have been implemented to create better teaching conditions and address the issue of low internal efficiency. The most significant was the 2000 reform mentioned above, implemented in 2003–2004, which introduced the LMD system, albeit with only a partial implementation of the tools for articulation and flexibility. It replaced yearly study programmes with teaching organized in semesters and modules. However, conditions for access to HE and progression pathways remained the same, thereby limiting articulation, bridges, and cross-sector student mobility. Most students access HE following the Baccalauréat or 'Bac'.

8.3 Policy of regulated bridges in Moroccan higher education

This chapter focuses on regulated bridges as a way of promoting flexibility in HE. Regulated bridges are an important tool in decompartmentalizing learning pathways and institutions. They work by enabling learners to move towards the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and aptitudes that correspond to their needs and aptitudes. Bridges, therefore, help to increase the efficiency and improve the performance of institutions.

Bridges are defined as opportunities for a change in pathway, for which admission is based on the recognition of knowledge validated by learners during their studies. They are a comprehensive tool that supports FLPs for progression through HE and preparation for the labour market.

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However, as demonstrated by the Moroccan case study, the implementation of these bridges remains limited at present. There are both too few bridges and too few students benefitting from them (less than 5 per cent of student requests were met). A new policy for regulated bridges is essential.

In this context, several articles of new Law 51.57, particularly articles 15, 17, and 18, aim to improve the process of articulation and the mechanisms facilitating the development of bridges between various components, between levels, and between institutions and the professional world. Contrary to the earlier Law 01.00, which mentions bridges and the core curriculum without going into detail, the new law proposes different tools to promote the multiplication of bridges and recommends a restructuring of the system on the following basis:

- putting learners at centre stage so that they become agents of their own learning and supporting them in succeeding in their chosen learning pathways;
- developing flexibilization through the articulation of learning components and levels by creating networks of institutions, complementarity and the development of common learning projects, and the creation of relations with the economic fabric;
- creating mechanisms to organize mobility for learners on academic and professional pathways.

The new policy, which is part of *Vision 2015–2030*, aims to break down the barriers that were gradually set up in the HE system. Originally, these barriers existed between subjects, courses, and institutions and were supported by sub-sector-specific governance bodies, leading to a fragmentation of the system. This configuration was developed by the public sector, which drew a distinction between highly rated institutions with regulated access, admitting candidates based on a selection process, and institutions which accept all baccalaureate holders. Applicants to HE not selected by the first category of institutions usually try to join the second, more open, category. Private institutions and those providing professional training for specialized technicians²¹ also practise selection at entry, modelled on regulated access, which earned them their prestige. The disadvantage of selection is that it

²¹ Specialized technicians are trained in technical colleges in short-cycle two-year programmes with regulated access.

8. Establishing regulated bridges in Morocco

inhibits learners' aspirations in terms of their choice of pathway. Some students end up doing courses they did not have as their first choice, and there are few possibilities of reorientation.

Law 51.17 favours a broadening of transfers via so-called alternative admissions between programmes that lead to national diplomas and university diplomas²² and those that may result from non-traditional learning (distance or part-time learning, etc.) and traditional face-to face programmes. This way alternative admissions create bridges that value non-traditional forms of learning (Chamber of Representatives, 2018).

Designed to create a system in which the components of HE are well articulated, the new policy aims to multiply bridges with a view to preventing dead ends in the HE system. The aim is to enable students to pursue their studies with conviction by offering bridges to programmes that better correspond to their profiles and aspirations. More choice is crucial during the first years of university due to the above-mentioned sharp transition between secondary and HE, which offers an imperfect match between student aspirations and allocation of study places.

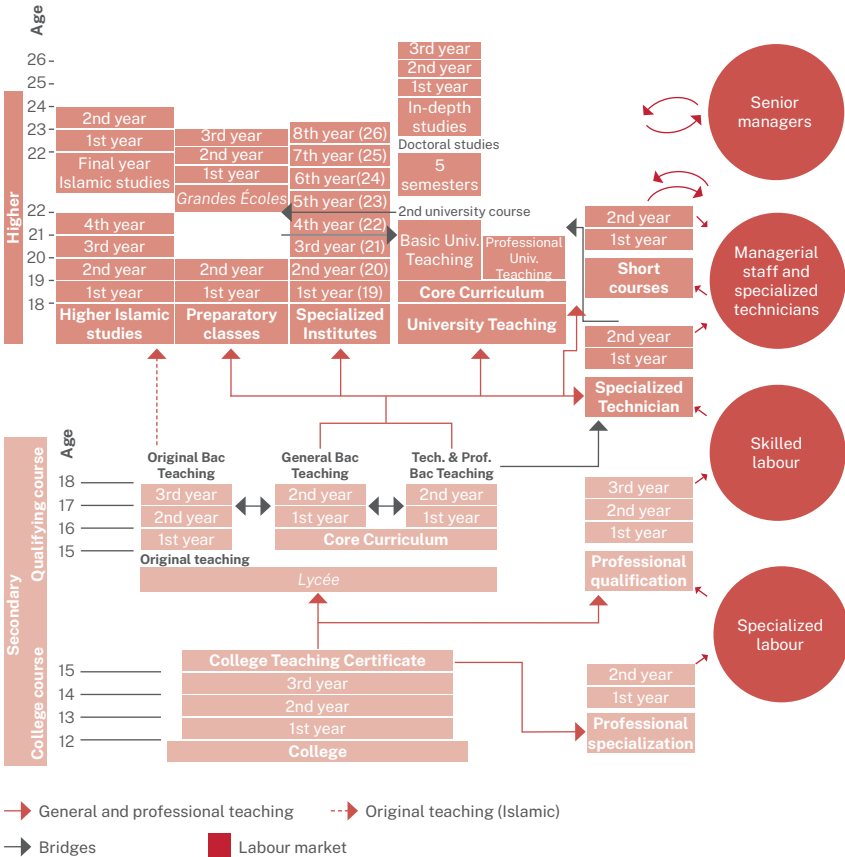
Figure 27 shows existing regulated bridges, which may be increased tenfold in the framework of the new reform.

Note that the regulated bridges currently in use are limited to courses accredited at the national level and leading to national diplomas. For example, after two years of undergraduate studies, students from non-selective HEIs can join institutions with regulated access, such as engineering institutions, at the fifth semester. Specialized technicians (who have graduated from courses with two years of HE) can integrate professional university degrees in the third and final year to obtain a licence (bachelor's). However, these bridges are subject to certain conditions (performance during these semesters, grades obtained for modules considered fundamental, etc.) which limit their use (less than 5 per cent of requests to use these bridges were met).

²² In Morocco most HE qualifications are submitted to a national validation process and then obtain the status of national diploma. HEIs are also allowed to create university diplomas, which are, however, not national diplomas but only university diplomas.

8. Establishing regulated bridges in Morocco

Figure 27. Structure of Moroccan HE and existing regulated bridges



Source: MENFPESRS, 2004.

Note: This figure has been translated from French. The label 'college' refers to ISCED Level 2.

In principle, institutions also allow transfers and changes in pathways during the first year, but only in very limited numbers. Opportunities for transfers are stipulated in the National Education Standards (*Cahiers des normes pédagogiques nationales*), which define the number of modules, the number of hours per semester, the diplomas required to access courses, etc. These standards must be respected in the applications for accreditation made to the National Higher Education

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Coordination Commission,²³ which is in charge of the accreditation of programmes and new institutions, and the recognition of private institutions. It merely checks the consistency of teaching modules and conditions for their support but does not take into account the articulation of learning pathways.

Accessing regulated bridges is subject to certain conditions. *Figure 27* shows transfers from one institution and programme to another during the first two semesters to be a clear exception. National Educational Standards provide for mobility only after the fourth semester of the core curriculum. Furthermore, most applications are not accepted due to insufficient support capacity as well as weak flexibility of the system. In addition to these constraints, bridges are rarely used in the private sector, and are a one-way system operating from learning courses at the Office of Professional Training to professional degrees offered by universities.

8.4 Main instruments of the new reform aimed at facilitating the use of bridges

To make bridges a more common reality, the new Vision 2015–2030 relies on a series of tools to facilitate the mobility of learners from one pathway or institution to another. The main tools are:

- *Strengthening information and guidance services* to support undergraduates in choosing the pathway that suits them, ensuring a smoother transition between secondary and HE.
- The possibility of *reorientation*, to change learning pathways to find one that better suits a student's needs and aspirations. This prevents learners from finding themselves in a dead end which could lead them to repeat a year or drop out.
- *Recognition and validation of learning acquired through alternatives* to traditional teaching. This is the case for the following forms of teaching:
 - Distance learning, which can be developed by relying on the new policy, which considers distance learning as a way of developing inclusive HE, reducing inequality of opportunity, and promoting fairness. Indeed, this form of learning diversifies access and responds to various HE needs. It can act as a support for the

23 Commission nationale de coordination de l'enseignement supérieur (CNACES).

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disabled and students with learning difficulties, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, hence acting to ensure justice and fairness in access to and success in HE studies. This form of teaching is on the increase, given its great potential for expanding access for all and its flexibility in responding to the various needs of an increasingly diverse student population (including students who are exclusively devoted to their studies and others who combine them with professional or family activities or who live far from campus). The new reform supports the construction of a complete system of distance learning opportunities at the HE level as well as the implementation of procedures and regulations for the validation of teaching content and knowledge in this form of learning.

- Initial training on a time-sharing basis, with fewer hours per week, allowing for a longer period to obtain a diploma. This form of learning, as an alternative to traditional teaching, offers students the possibility of combining studies with other commitments such as professional or family activities.
 - Learning through continuous lifelong learning, which aims to facilitate access to HE for all, and mobility of learners between professional activities and higher learning.
- *A rigorous system of quality assurance (QA)*, which puts university and professional knowledge on the same level, in order to improve learners' mobility and increase the system's flexibility. QA is an essential support for building confidence between institutions in levels of achievement, independent from learning modalities and qualifications.
 - *The certification of learning pathways through a mechanism of monitoring learning outcomes*. This tool, developed in partnership with professional bodies, enables employers to become involved and committed and ensures that the results of learning are converted into competencies according to certification levels. By structuring the levels of knowledge, this tool should improve the transparency of learning outcomes and their comparability, thereby facilitating learners' mobility. It should enable the alignment of skills acquired through learning in institutions and in the labour market, and open up bridges between these two places of learning.

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All of these tools of the new policy should be put to use through the creation of a new diploma, the so-called bachelor's²⁴ degree, which signals the implementation of the new educational model in academic institutions. Compared to a traditional degree course, the new bachelor's degree is more focused on professionalization and is more flexible: its duration can vary – it can be obtained in three years instead of four. Its structure helps to better guide and support learners towards successful completion and the acquisition of knowledge and skills, better preparing them to integrate into professional life. In addition, the bachelor's degree is expected to better inform learners about the possibilities that bridges offer to facilitate mobility. Learners who are not satisfied with their choice of pathway can use regulated bridges to change direction towards a different form of learning that suits them better. Reorientation in the new bachelor's will be possible until the choice of specialization is made in the fifth semester. A change of pathway or institution can occur after the fifth semester by using any validated credits.

In addition, the fact that all academic, professional, and accredited public and private institutions deliver the same teaching during several semesters (e.g. soft skills and languages) provides a base for developing bridges while capitalizing on these skills. The same applies to knowledge acquired through elective courses on other subjects. Specialized teaching also opens up bridges for different pathways within the same subject matter. The diversity of bridges offered within the bachelor's system is enriched through work-based learning enabling learners to acquire professional skills.

The bachelor's degree therefore broadens the range of bridges that HEIs can offer, by developing recognition and validation of knowledge from different learning pathways. However, it is important to note that recognition of learning from non-traditional modes is hindered by the absence of a regulatory framework or dedicated institutional systems for their recognition. Hence, it is difficult to support articulation arrangements between different learning spaces effectively or to recognize knowledge gained from different types of learning.

²⁴ The name of the new degree in French is bachelor's rather than licence, to mark the difference in nature and orientation.

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8.5 Findings: Evaluation of enablers and obstacles to creating regulated bridges

The following section was developed from findings gathered from interviews conducted with national and institutional policy-makers for the implementation of the Moroccan FLP case study. Interviewees at national and institutional levels were aware of the need to create conditions that favour the extension of regulated bridges. They mentioned a series of levers, which they intended to rely on, and obstacles to the making of changes that would increase the number of bridges between learning institutions and so enable flexible pathways.

8.5.1 Levers and obstacles to creating bridges at the national level

Levers at the national level

At the national level, several factors favour the creation of bridges. First is the political will voiced by national officials and actors, who have confirmed their willingness to work across sub-sectors. The merging under a single ministry of the departments of HE, professional learning, and schools of education also facilitates political action and the implementation of bridges between sub-sectors.

Second, political will is supported by a favourable legal context through the establishment of an action plan and a new legal framework set out in Law 51.17, stemming from Vision 2015–2030, to support reform, specifically the system of bridges. This new national framework for the implementation of the policy will, according to the Secretary General, ‘allow, among other things, a better articulation between different components of higher education and their integration in a coherent system through the diversification of pathways and an increase in their flexibility’ (MENFPESRS Secretary General, interview, Kouhlani and Benchekroun, 2021).

Existing national measures for steering the system are a third lever for the implementation of bridges. These are in the process of being strengthened through the creation of a directorate of information (including all information about learning pathways), orientation services for the new bachelor’s degree, a review of practices in the area of monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and the transition from accreditation of study programmes to institutional evaluation. The last

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can strengthen the capacity to steer and monitor the implementation of bridges created by institutions.

Finally, the involvement of employers in developing the national qualifications framework (NQF) will allow a new form of collaboration to be developed between HE and the labour market and also the building of bridges between these two institutional spaces. This can support FLPs in preparing students for entering the labour market.

Obstacles at the national level

First, it is crucial to attach greater importance to the publication of regulations to guide implementation of FLPs. In other words, the gap between policy and practice should be minimized to avoid blocking the implementation of regulated bridges. Past experience with Law 01.00 has shown that implementation can be inhibited due to the non-publication of regulations to guide implementation. The challenge is also to find a solution to the problem of the time lapse between the publication of a law and the related regulation of implementation.

Second, the implementation of bridges may also suffer from a lack of rigour and good practice in terms of QA through institutional evaluation. Institutional self-evaluation should integrate criteria for the analysis of flexible pathways, their appropriateness, and the quality of learning outcomes required by positioning them within the NQF.

Third, there is a deficit in infrastructure, software applications, and staff training to turn the national higher education information system into an integrated tool to supply different national bodies with reliable and relevant information. Indeed, a functional information system is vital to build essential indicators for monitoring the implementation of FLPs and bridges. The Vice Dean of the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences of Hassan II University noted: 'The insufficient development of the current system of statistical information does not allow the creation of applications to produce information on the flexibility of pathways' (Hassan II University, Vice Dean of the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences, interview, Kouhlani and Benchekroun, 2021).

Finally, the current financing model is not conducive to the development of bridges. The allocation of government subsidy

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should be reviewed so that it can become a means of encouraging flexibility and enhancing the quality of FLP results. A new allocation formula could be based on a fixed allowance of part of the subsidy for institutions and the allocation of the remaining part using indicators of flexibility, quality, and performance as criteria for allocation.

A greater reliance on a national strategy should be matched by greater institutional autonomy. A clear allocation of responsibilities is essential as well. It tasks the ministry with setting objectives and ensuring M&E for each institution with responsibility for implementing FLPs and providing information on the results obtained by HEIs.

8.5.2 Levers and obstacles to creating bridges at the institutional level

Levers at the institutional level

Despite the current relatively low level of institutional autonomy, several aspects support the implementation of bridges.

First, it is important to remember that practices for exercising flexibility already exist, although their deployment is limited to stages after the core curriculum. These experiences are an important asset.

Second, actors in HE support the idea of bridges. The IIEP research found that presidents of universities and heads of institutions are aware of the importance of flexibility. They are convinced of the dynamics that could be triggered by opening up their institutions and learning pathways to motivate learners and ensure their success. Furthermore, students support the creation of bridges which systematize opportunities for reorientation, recognition, and validation of knowledge from different forms of learning.

Third, the world of work has expressed its willingness to strengthen collaboration with HEIs in the development of continuous professional development. Within this perspective, the admission of workers as learners 'will enable the institution to benefit from their skills and strengthen linkages with the labour market' (Hassan II University, Dean of the Science Faculty, interview, Kouhlani and Benchekroun, 2021).

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Obstacles at the institutional level

However, four major challenges need to be overcome before these levers can fully support the implementation of bridges at the institutional level.

First, it is important to find a method for transforming the culture of compartmentalization in institutions by supporting collegial work and institutional cooperation. The development of bridges requires an adaptation of the institutional framework, the training offer, and teaching practices. This in turn demands greater collaboration between teachers in different institutions. It is important to make institutions aware of the advantages of bridges and encourage their development through greater collaboration.

Second, it is necessary to broaden the margins of autonomy to allow universities to take initiatives designed to support the implementation of bridges. This autonomy implies an awareness of institutions' responsibility to demonstrate and communicate results obtained in the wider HE field.

Third, practices to evaluate institutions should also be developed by strengthening the institutional information system to monitor the operationalization of bridges and report on them by developing indicators that demonstrate the state of progress. As at the national level, it is fundamental to consolidate the infrastructure, diversify and integrate computer software that may be lacking, and train staff in computer skills to support the implementation of bridges.

Finally, the last challenge is developing new relationships with companies, to encourage them to become involved in the development of learning pathways and to offer internships to increase the employability of graduates and build bridges between HE and the labour market.

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8.6 Conclusions

This chapter has highlighted the justifications for the development of bridges in Moroccan HE Law 51.17, derived from Vision 2015–2030. From an analysis of levers and obstacles at both national and institutional levels, recommendations can be made to support the efficient implementation of bridges.

The ministry should encourage, support, and raise awareness in institutions of the benefits of increasing the number of bridges for learners and implement common learning projects that will favour collaboration between different HE providers.

It is also important to communicate about good practices in terms of articulating learning pathways so that actors own them. Raising support from the labour market for building bridges will favour their creation and reassure the world of work that their expectations can be fulfilled, thus building trust in the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes of learners.

The implementation of bridges should include staff training to build skills for the implementation of digitalization policies. This is essential to manage bridges between institutions and between institutions and the labour market.

The implementation of bridges should be supported by the creation of an oversight structure at the national level to monitor their development and provide corrections when necessary. Delay in the publication of regulations to guide implementation of the law relating to bridges needs to be avoided.

Institutional autonomy to allow HEIs to take initiatives should be broadened, and institutions should be made aware of their responsibility in the implementation of bridges. It is necessary, for example, to enable HEIs to organize bridges across disciplines by providing modules that allow for the upgraded knowledge needed for reorientation. Institutions should be held accountable for how well their bridges work.

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9. Distance education and open learning platforms in India

Garima Malik and Narayanan Annalakshmi

9.1 Introduction

While India has moved from an elite stage to massified higher education (HE),²⁵ disparities in access and quality of HE continue to be of concern. The recent National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 plans to increase the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in HE and vocational education to 50 per cent by 2035. To achieve this goal, higher education institutions (HEIs) with accreditation will have an option to run open and distance learning (ODL) and online platforms. Moreover, the policy aims to make ODL programmes equivalent to the highest quality available in face-to-face programmes.

ODL is a flexible and learner-centred system with the potential to create a suitable environment for learners by utilizing information and communication technologies. ODL has been on the policy agenda since the 1960s, mainly as a means to improve access. But ODL can also serve as a tool to achieve equity, as it provides an opportunity to those learners who have difficulty in gaining access to education due to poor economic conditions and unavailability of HE infrastructure in rural or hard-to-reach places. It also offers learning opportunities for adults who need to update their knowledge and skills (Chawinga and Paxton, 2016; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2016; Henderson et al., 2017).

This chapter sets out to examine the issues of improving access and progression in Indian HE through expanding access to ODL and online platforms. In doing so it will provide critical insights into the problems encountered by policy-makers, HEIs, course developers, and learners who have to grapple with ODL design and provision. In addition to setting out the challenges of ODL, it also provides good practices and recommendations.

25 Martin Trow (2020) proposes a conceptualization of the development of HE systems into three stages – elite (up to 15 per cent of GER), mass (up to 50 per cent), and universal systems (more than 50 per cent).

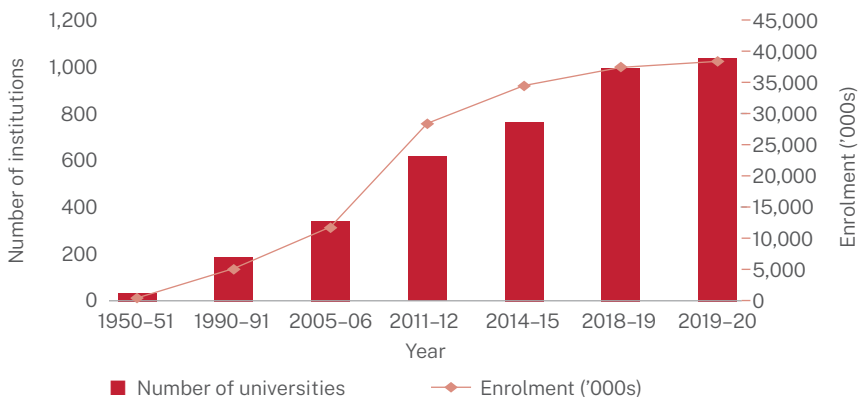
9. Distance education and open learning platforms in India

This chapter is based on the report *Turning Challenges into Opportunities: Flexible Learning Pathways in Indian Higher Education* (Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022).²⁶ The objective of the report was to analyse the effects of policies on flexible learning pathways (FLPs) in Indian HE at national and institutional levels. This chapter focuses on the implementation of ODL and online learning platforms in India.

9.2 Higher education context

Growth in the number of HEIs and student enrolment has been phenomenal since 2000, largely due to the increase in private universities and colleges. There has been a steep rise in the GER, from 8.1 per cent in 2001–2002 to 27.1 per cent in 2019–2020, leading to a massified HE in India (Varghese, 2015; MHRD, 2020). India is in the initial phase of massification, with around 38.5 million students, 1.5 million teachers, 1,043 universities, and 42,343 colleges (see *Figure 28*). As public resources did not follow expansion, more HEIs started to engage with the market (Varghese and Malik, 2016; Varghese and Malik, 2020).

Figure 28. Growth of universities and enrolment in HE



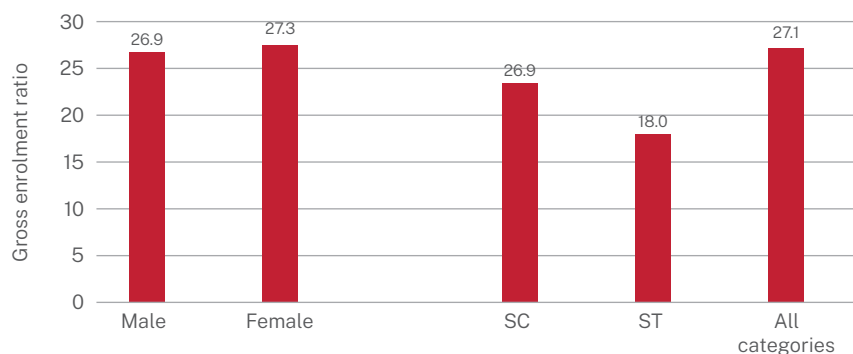
Source: Agarwal, 2009; India, 2020.

²⁶ The report was a result of collaboration between IIEP-UNESCO and the Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education (CPRHE) at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) in India.

9. Distance education and open learning platforms in India

The expansion of HE has democratized access, but inequities in participation continue to persist. While gender disparities have narrowed considerably over the years, regional inequalities and disparities across income and social groups (Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes) and rural–urban disparities continue to be a major challenge (see *Figure 29*). Even the GER of different states varies considerably: for example, in the state of Assam the GER stands at 17.3 per cent, while in Delhi it is 48 per cent. However, there is high student inter state mobility, in particular for professional HE. Therefore, the analysis of GER figures across states does not always point to the correct picture on a macro level.

Figure 29. Disparities in enrolment by GER (male/female and SC/ST)



Source: India, 2020.

Note: ST = Scheduled Tribe, SC = Scheduled Caste.

The HE structure in India consists of universities, colleges, and other institutions. All universities, including deemed universities²⁷ and institutions of national importance, are degree-awarding institutions; colleges can award degrees by being affiliated with universities. While colleges typically provide undergraduate education, universities focus on postgraduate education and carry out research. As new institution types have emerged (e.g. open universities), educational offerings within institutions have multiplied and diversified, including the

²⁷ Deemed university, or deemed-to-be-university, is an accreditation title awarded to HEIs in India by the Department of Higher Education, based on the recommendation of the University Grants Commission (UGC).

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offering of ODL programmes delivered at conventional HEIs and at a number of open universities.

9.3 Open and distance learning policies and practices in India

This section presents an overview on the development of ODL policies and practices. It aims to demonstrate how ODL originated in India and what the current state of the art is regarding its implementation.

9.3.1 Evolution of open and distance learning

India's HE has undergone an impressive growth in enrolment since independence in 1947. It became clear by the 1960s that traditional formal education would not be able to meet social demand for HE and that distance education could support the needed expansion. The foundations for distance education were laid under the third five-year plan for 1961–1967 of the Planning Commission to the Government of India. A committee was set up by the Central Advisory Board of Education to look into establishing correspondence education. In the 1960s, a number of universities (e.g. the University of Delhi, Punjab University, Meerut University) began offering correspondence education. This is the method of providing education for non-resident students, primarily adults, who receive lessons and exercises through the mail or some other device and, upon completion, return them for analysis and grading. The 1980–1990s was a period of growth in state open universities (Sharma, 2005). The first open university, Andhra Pradesh Open University, was set up in 1982 at Hyderabad.²⁸ The success of this university, both in terms of student enrolment and graduation, encouraged the Government of India to establish a nationwide open university under the national jurisdiction through an Act of Parliament (No. 50 of 1985), named the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) (Varghese, 2018).

In 1991, the Distance Education Council (DEC) was established to promote, coordinate, and ensure the quality of ODL. In 2012 the Distance Education Bureau (DEB) attached to the UGC, the national regulatory body for university education, replaced DEC.

²⁸ Later renamed Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar Open University.

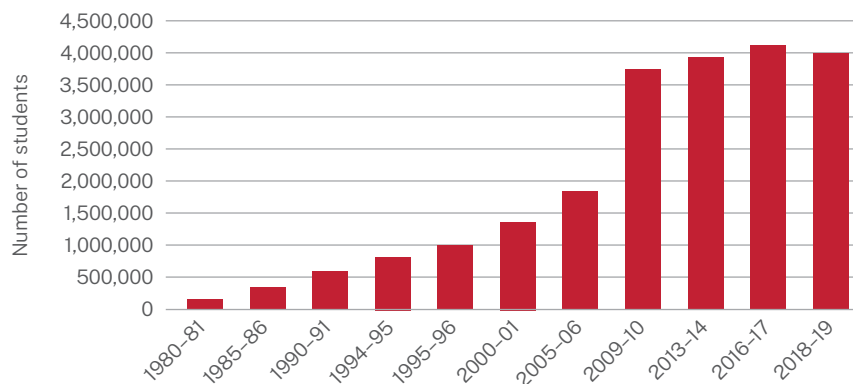
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9.3.2 Open and distance learning in numbers

The aim of ODL programmes in India is to increase access to education for areas with lesser HE reach. It is one of the central instruments to facilitate equity and flexibility in HE in India, as there has been an increase in enrolment, in particular among disadvantaged groups. Currently, there are more than 15 open universities, as well as other HEIs, central and state universities, that can offer distance education programmes overseen by DEB.

Enrolment in distance education has grown rapidly since the 1980s, from some 166,428 students in 1980–1981 to 3.9 million in 2018–2019 (see *Figure 30*). Enrolment in ODL programmes accounts for 11 per cent of total HE enrolment, concentrated in undergraduate programmes. In 2019, 2 million students were enrolled in ODL undergraduate programmes and 1 million in postgraduate programmes.

Figure 30. Total enrolment in distance education



Source: UGC (2020) and MHRD (2019).

9.3.3 Open learning platform – SWAYAM

More recently, with a view to further expanding access to high-quality education, India has invested in the development of open learning platforms. The Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) Central is a locally developed IT platform, launched in 2017 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD)²⁹

²⁹ Renamed in 2020 as the Ministry of Education.

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under the national campaign *Digital India*, aimed at ensuring that all citizens of India have improved access to online infrastructure, better Internet connectivity, and improved digital competence. The SWAYAM platform offers free access to online courses from Grade 9 in secondary school to postgraduate level. As of 2021, there were 203 partnering institutions and 4,024 completed courses, with 18 million students enrolled on the SWAYAM platform.

The development and design of SWAYAM for hosting massive open online courses (MOOCs), blending academics with technology, has been a major step in integrating distance learning into HE provision. SWAYAM has nine national coordinators (NCs): institutions designated by the ministry and assigned a specific sector for preparation of online courses for SWAYAM (Pushpanadham, 2019). These nine NCs ensure quality in the content and delivery of courses on SWAYAM:

- All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) for self-paced and international courses;
- Consortium for Educational Communication (CEC) for undergraduate education;
- IGNOU for out-of-school students;
- Indian Institute of Management –Bangalore (IIMB) for management studies;
- National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) for school education;
- National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) for school education;
- National Institute of Technical Teachers' Training and Research (NITTTR) for teacher training programmes;
- National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) for engineering;
- UGC for non-technical post-graduation education.

On the receipt of a MOOCs certificate of completion from the host institution (institution that offers the MOOCs), the parent institution (institution where the student is enrolled in a programme and may further opt for a particular MOOC hosted on SWAYAM) will give equivalent credit weight for the credits earned through SWAYAM. Thus, institutions can allow up to 20 per cent of the total courses in a semester to be taken through online learning courses provided on the

9. Distance education and open learning platforms in India

SWAYAM platform. However, in response to the exceptional need to offer online education that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion was increased to 40 per cent.

Some HEIs, such as Bharathiar University, have started to implement MOOCs as add-on courses. The university has made it mandatory for students to complete a minimum of two credits from MOOCs in addition to the 90 credits required for a master's degree. Due to infrastructure challenges, the non-availability of an adequate number of relevant courses, the non-availability of course options in Tamil, and the reluctance of students to opt for online courses, the university has not yet brought MOOC credits into the 90 credits, thus making MOOC credits eligible for credit transfer, but the authorities are considering this development for the future (Malick and Narayanan, 2022).

9.3.4 Open learning platform – NPTEL

NPTEL is one of the nine national coordinators of SWAYAM. It is a joint initiative of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and Indian Institute of Science funded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). NPTEL has been offering self-study courses in more than 20 disciplines in the engineering, humanities, and science streams through online and video-based courses for more than a decade now. Its aim is to improve the quality of engineering education in the country by providing high-quality, free online courseware. From March 2014, NPTEL has been offering online certification for its courses, the key feature being the certification exam through which the student can earn a certificate from IIT. The e-learning courses on NPTEL are useful for a wide audience, ranging from schools, universities, and technical institutes to people working in industry, having rich utility and long-term reach. There are two high-level motivations for giving the courses: to get many people excited about technology and to bridge the wide gap between the knowledge that universities typically supply and the technology skills that industry normally demands.

Enrolment and learning from SWAYAM and NPTEL involves no cost. There is no entry requirement, but an in-person invigilated certification exam (optional) for NPTEL is conducted, for a charge, and a certificate is provided through the participating institutions, when applicable.

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Exam fees can be reimbursed for students who pass SWAYAM MOOCs with more than 40 per cent.

In the Indian context, however, only IIT Madras allows NPTEL courses to be taken for credit. As each IIT has its own independent academic council, what is followed in one IIT is not necessarily followed in another. It therefore seems that the role of NPTEL is more geared towards taking engineering education to far-flung rural areas and students from outside the IIT system.

9.4 National policy and regulation on open and distance learning

The Government of India (led by different central bodies) has implemented a policy for ODL and SWAYAM, including NPTEL, to increase access to HE in the country.

9.4.1 National Education Policy 2020

NEP 2020 envisages that, among other initiatives, ODL will be further developed and the GER will be raised to 50 per cent by 2035. The policy proposes transforming the regulatory system by setting up a single regulator as the Higher Education Commission of India with four verticals: for regulation (National Higher Education Resource Centre), accreditation (National Assessment and Accreditation Council), funding (Higher Education Grants Commission), and setting academic standards (General Education Council). The policy specifically proposes the creation of an empowered autonomous structure of Board of Governors at the institutional level.

NEP 2020 states that ODL and traditional programmes should have the same course content and therefore should be treated as of equal quality. It stipulates that the quality of ODL programmes should be measured by their effectiveness in delivering learning outcomes relative to the quality of face-to-face programmes of a similar nature across HEIs. Norms, standards, and guidelines for regulation and accreditation of ODL, should be prepared by the National Higher Education Regulatory Authority, and a framework for quality of ODL, which should be recommendatory for all HEIs, should be developed by the General Education Council.

NEP 2020 also pushes for adequate funding to be provided for research to continually improve the quality of ODL-specific pedagogy

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and assessments, student support services, models of ODL, and integration of technology.

9.4.2 University Grants Commission regulations for open and distance learning

The regulatory functions regarding distance education programmes in HE are now vested with the UGC. DEC, the former regulator of distance education programmes, was dissolved, and all regulatory functions are now undertaken by DEB under UGC. The intention is to have a national regulatory body dedicated to distance education that can coordinate and ensure the provision of quality ODL programmes across the HE system.

Under the UGC, DEB frames and provides guidelines for running distance education. In 2017, new regulations were enacted for ODL. They specify the eligibility criteria for an institution to be recognized for offering online courses, the process of seeking approval from UGC by an institution offering online courses or programmes, and their operation. Further, the course or programme monitoring and renewal process and quality assurance, as well as faculty and staff requirements for running online programmes, are also specified in the guidelines.

The first four amendments in the UGC ODL Regulations 2017 indicate the minimum standards of instruction for the grant of degree at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels through ODL. It was specified that HEI programmes in engineering, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, architecture, physiotherapy, agriculture, hotel management and culinary management cannot be conducted in the ODL mode.

The guidelines of DEB 2018 further specify the criteria for an institution to be eligible to offer programmes in the ODL mode. Only HEIs that have been operating for at least five years and have a NAAC accreditation score of 3.26 on a four-point scale³⁰ before the end of the academic year 2019–2020 can offer ODL programmes (see Box 36). And only universities that follow the relevant UGC regulations and are found adequate after due inspection of the ODL centres or study centres are recognized by the UGC to run ODL courses. Additionally,

³⁰ NAAC gives a score out of four as Cumulative Grade Point Average in order to get accreditation; any score above 3.01 is A-grade, while a score above 3.51 is A++.

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universities that have ranked in the top 50 of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)³¹ can also offer ODL programmes.

BOX 36

NAAC's accreditation of ODL programmes

NAAC's accreditation grades are based on quantitative and qualitative indicators. Qualitative indicators comprise such aspects as the relevance of programmes and curricular and student assessment. NAAC's quality assurance framework considers the implementation of ODL programmes during its evaluation process. More specifically, it designates points for implementation of ODL programmes. HEIs that can offer ODL receive accreditation for five years. In 2019, NAAC also published a specific manual for the accreditation of open universities, available at: www.naac.gov.in/images/docs/Manuals/ODL-Manual-22_04_2019.pdf

Source: Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022.

Moreover, the latest UGC Regulation of 2020 in the pandemic period (UGC, 2020: *Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes*) states that any institutions with a NAAC rating between 3.01 and 3.26 will have to apply to UGC for approval in conducting or starting ODL programmes. It was also decided to allow all institutions with a NAAC rating of 3.26 and above to offer ODL programmes without any prior permission from UGC. Thus, the new legal framework will bring more institutes into the fold of offering ODL programmes of higher quality.

9.5 Findings: Evaluation of enablers and challenges for open and distance learning

ODL has improved access for millions of students, but disparities in access and quality of HE remain. This section therefore explores enablers and challenges that the research has found in the implementation of ODL. The data are drawn from the IIEP-UNESCO case study of FLPs in India. As part of the study, a review of national HE

31 NIRF was launched in 2015 as a national policy. It outlines a methodology to rank institutions across the country. The parameters broadly cover teaching, learning and resources, research and professional practices, graduation outcomes, outreach and inclusivity, and perception.

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policy documents on FLPs, interviews, and focus group discussions were conducted with national-level respondents and representatives from two contrasting case HEIs, namely IIT Delhi and Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.

9.5.1 Enablers of open and distance learning

Policy framework and regulation

National policies in the past, and specifically NEP 2020, have been important for promoting the development of ODL programmes and online courses. NEP 2020 aims at a synergistic functioning of India's education system, to deliver equity and excellence through all delivery modes. This is reflected in an interview with a national representative:

Future is only online education and there is a limit for physical institutions we can establish. Whether we can mobilize faculty with the capacity to transact the curriculum, whether you allow them to go online for greater reach, we have brought in online education, and under that, many institutions are permitted. IIT Madras has started with a very good online programme on artificial intelligence. All these are going to gather speed because there is a need to double our GER in the next 10 years. (Government of India, Former Secretary of Higher Education, interview, Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022)

In addition to a favourable policy environment for ODL, the regulation on ODL has also influenced its implementation, which is regulated at the central level by UGC. It was found in the Indian FLPs research that the guidelines issued by UGC on ODL and online courses have enhanced their implementation at the institutional level. Accreditation, which is mandatory for universities, has also been important in supporting the implementation of ODL at HEIs.

The implementation of ODL programmes is monitored and evaluated at the central level. UGC oversees monitoring and evaluating the quality of ODL programmes. UGC collects feedback directly from students on ODL programmes and centres. It also sends requests to universities to improve ODL provision.

Funding provision for open and distance learning

Education through ODL can help students to reduce education expenditure by sparing students who live in rural or hard-to-reach areas the cost of transportation.

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The Ministry of Education (MoE, formerly MHRD) funds the online learning platform SWAYAM, including NPTEL. Financial support by HEIs is provided to students who cannot afford studies, through reduced fees and funding schemes. However, such financing options greatly vary between HEIs.

The School of Distance Education (SDE) of Bharathiar University receives funds from DEB of about USD 63,000 for infrastructure and USD 25,000 for coursework development. This is the fund provided by DEB to the university for running the distance programme. There is no funding received by the SDE from the state government. The university also generates funds through online admissions and providing certain deliverables, e.g. study material uploaded on websites, online admissions, payment of tuition fees and examination fees online, payment of fees for the certificate online, and purchase of certificates (transfer certificates and course completion certificates).

However, the university provides no scholarships to students of SDE. This may put a financial burden on some disadvantaged students who wish to pursue education through distance mode. At the same time, the fees for a distance education programme are nominal compared to the fees for the programmes offered via traditional-delivery, face-to-face mode. And fee concessions available for special groups, such as women, military personnel, and people with physical disabilities, are applicable to students applying to programmes offered at SDE. Furthermore, most SDE students are working adults who finance themselves or have scholarships from their employers.

Graded autonomy

Graded institutional autonomy enables selected HEIs to introduce flexibility in study provision and mode of delivery. The UGC's Grant of Graded Autonomy Regulation of 2018 has introduced a system that provides more autonomy for best-performing HEIs according to the scores obtained in NAAC accreditation. It implies more autonomy in creating new courses and programmes and introducing ODL programmes. For example, to offer ODL programmes, an HEI needs to be accredited by NAAC (or other well-reputed agency) with a score of at least 3.51 (out of four) and it needs to be ranked in the top 500 of reputed world HE rankings.

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Leadership and management

The most important factor cited by the interviewees of the Indian FLPs research in enabling ODL was institutional leadership and management, together with institutional autonomy. At Bharathiar University, the vision of the leadership and the trust given to the leadership have a direct impact on any innovation in the institution.

As mentioned above, SWAYAM has been made mandatory in line with the leadership's vision. Faculty development programmes that promote readiness and skills to engage in online teaching and to develop MOOCs are being conducted at the university. At IIT Delhi, both the Board of Governors responsible for the overall administration and the Senate decide the academic policy of the institute, approve curriculum, courses, and examination results, and appoint committees for academic issues. New leadership has been crucial for generating new funding streams for the institute, including for ODL.

Reachability of open and distance learning

SWAYAM and NPTEL MOOCs improve opportunities for flexible learning, benefitting both traditional and non-traditional students. More specifically, they benefit students from rural areas and other disadvantaged groups, who represent the majority of enrolment in open universities (Varghese, 2018).

NPTEL courses at the case institution, IIT Delhi, aim at reaching students beyond the realm of IIT Delhi and beyond all IITs. In the focus group discussion, one student remarked about NPTEL:

NPTEL came up with the objective that whatever is taught at IITs should reach the masses. With the term masses, I mean the students who belong to tier II cities, colleges, and universities. It has been a very successful initiative of the Government of India and IITs. (IIT Delhi, Alumni #1, online focus group, Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022)

The Registrar, IIT Delhi, further remarked when quizzed about the implementation of NPTEL:

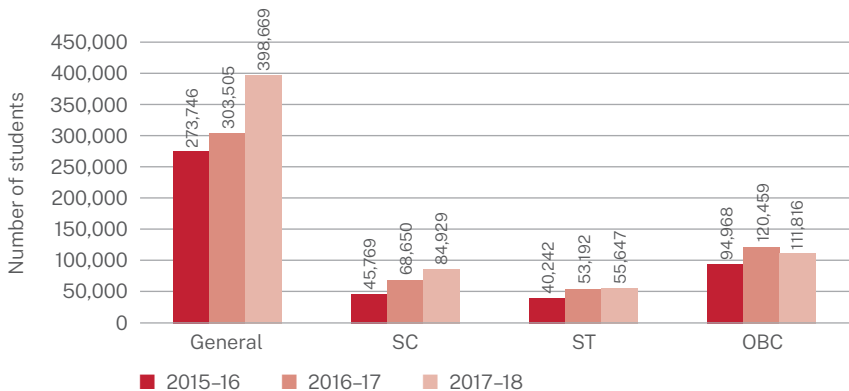
It is possible for anyone outside the IIT system to be able to do an online certification course from NPTEL and get a certificate from the IITs. IITs are reaching out and taking education to the homes of people through this initiative. (IIT Delhi, Registrar, interview, Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022)

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ODL programmes have been important in providing HE for disadvantaged groups and improving HE coverage (especially in remote areas). Some universities have started to integrate MOOCs as a mandatory part of the curriculum (e.g. Bharathiar University). However, when making MOOCs a compulsory part of the curriculum, Bharathiar University faced issues with the language of instruction. For instance, students pursuing a master's programme in Tamil were having difficulty passing MOOCs that are in English only. This pointed to the possibility of MOOCs also widening existing inequalities due to language barriers (Malick and Narayanan, 2022).

If we examine the trends in enrolment over the years for IGNOU, the national open university, we can see that disadvantaged groups have increased in enrolment numbers, particularly Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes (less so for Scheduled Tribes) (see *Figure 31*).³² The same is true for enrolment in rural areas (see *Figure 32*). However, tribal areas still need more access to distance learning opportunities compared to other groups (Bordoloi, 2018).

Figure 31. Comparative enrolment trend of IGNOU in terms of social category



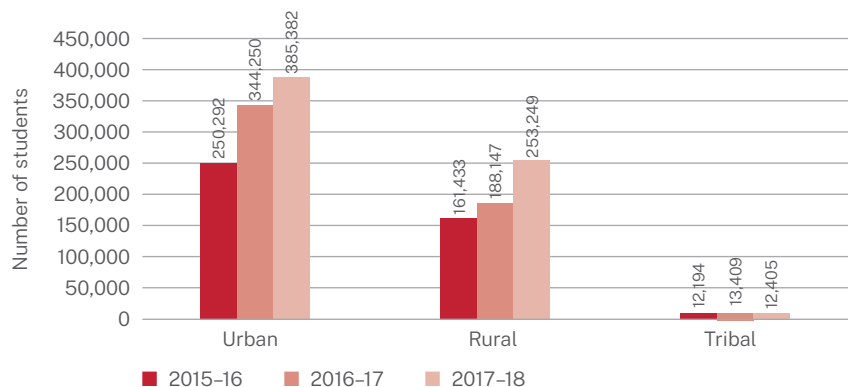
Source: IGNOU, 2015–2018.

Note: SC = Scheduled Castes; ST = Scheduled Tribes; OBC = Other Backward Classes.

³² The Constitution of India enshrines the right to a certain number of places in HE for students from three groups, categorized as: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes.

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Figure 32. Comparative enrolment trend of IGNOU in terms of area of living



Source: IGNOU, 2015–2018.

Flexibility in admission – the student perspective

The flexibility in admission into ODL programmes has been important for widening access into HE. The admission process in the SDE at Bharathiar University is online, for example. The students have to scan their certificates that are evaluated by SDE, and those who fulfil the eligibility criteria get their ID cards online. Thus, students make an online submission of their certificates (the certificates that are relevant to the eligibility criteria for admission into a programme). The office verifies these certificates, and if a student is found to meet the eligibility criteria (i.e. they have submitted the required certificates), the office will prepare a student ID card that the student can download from the SDE's website.

Flexible learning

The students interviewed in the study recognize that taking MOOCs is like entering a new era in education. The students believe that MOOCs give them the opportunity to pace their learning progression and learn flexibly. This provides the students with satisfaction and increases their productivity. One interviewee commented:

Whatever we teach in the colleges becomes outdated in next four-five years and in some of the areas of high-level science and technology, such as computer science or in physics, from such courses things get outdated

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in some other subjects and in the process if you got the degree you may not know so many things by the time you graduate. Therefore, flexible pathways for relearning those new things are also important, and SWAYAM is one of the platforms to do so as well even if you graduate and go out if something new has happened that will come on to the SWAYAM platform and you can learn yourself. It covers the important process of learning, relearning, and self-learning. (AICTE, Chairman, interview, Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022)

9.5.2 Challenges for open and distance learning

While there are many enablers to make ODL work for increased access and quality, there are also numerous remaining challenges.

Administrative fragmentation

While the NEP 2020 policy is very forward-looking, with many instruments supporting ODL, the administrative fragmentation with too many regulatory agencies involved, organized by sub-sectors (i.e. academic and professional HE), make it challenging to coordinate ODL implementation across the sub-sectors.

Moreover, there is also fragmentation within institutions and sometimes lack of acceptance of ODL programmes by academic staff, due to apprehension that ODL programmes are not on a par with regular programmes. However, to build a flexible curriculum and learning programmes, it is crucial for universities to work with their teaching and non-teaching staff to enhance the capabilities required to manage a flexible learning environment. Unless technology is leveraged effectively and the administrative hurdles removed, the implementation of ODL policy will remain a challenge.

Overregulation and lack of institutional autonomy

Despite increased autonomy for some HEIs, the HE system in India is still highly regulated. Several central governing bodies (MoE, UGC, DEB) oversee central and state universities³³ and colleges in India. They regulate admissions and academic matters, such as the quality of HEIs (via registration and accreditation) and ODL programmes. This constrains the freedom of HEIs to introduce more flexible and innovative study options.

³³ Central universities are overseen by MoE and funded by UGC grants. State universities are overseen by MoE and respective states.

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Restriction of distance learning centres beyond institutional jurisdiction

The UGC ODL Regulations 2017 reads, 'A University established or incorporated by or under a State Act shall operate only within the territory of the state of its location' (UGC, 2017: 6). This regulation obliged all state dual-mode universities that were offering programmes beyond their jurisdiction to close these programmes. NEP 2020 insists again that a state university can offer ODL only within the same state. UGC justifies this, stating that when the study centres are in distant places, away from the university, the quality of such offerings is compromised, and monitoring of the centres is not up to the mark. Interestingly, this restriction of the geographical location of study centres applies only to state universities and not to the central universities.

Lack of adequate infrastructure and proper training of faculty

Lack of proper training of faculty to meet HE challenges and implement ODL has been cited as a challenge by interviewees in the Indian FLPs research. The quality of MOOCs depends on the quality of staff that offer it. Students in the focus groups also pointed out some difficulties they were facing with SWAYAM MOOCs. Registration for the course, applying for the examination, and submitting assignments in some courses are difficult due to technical reasons, such as the portal not responding. One student highlighted that there are very few options for courses in certain disciplines.

Peer support is not available when students are required to do MOOCs, since not all students get a chance to register for the same course. In such cases, when students face any difficulty in the process of completing the course, they have to handle the problem all by themselves.

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Language of open and distance learning programmes

Most MOOCs are available only in English, thus students who do not master English cannot benefit from them. One interviewee stated the following regarding this issue:

FLPs through MOOCs could be one short-term goal. However, compatibility with language and technology is an issue for our learners (Bharathiar University, Former IQAC Coordinator, interview, Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022).

Perception of open and distance learning as of lower quality

Despite their high level of regulation, ODL programmes are perceived as lower in quality. There is still a perception by employers, students, and sometimes policy-makers that ODL programmes do not provide the same quality as regular programmes. At Bharathiar University, for instance, ODL programmes of the same type as offline programmes do not offer the same curriculum coverage and the same number of examinations. They are 'lighter' and therefore perceived as of lower quality. One participant from the focus group on students from SDE commented:

There is apprehension for faculty as well as students that distance education programmes are of lower quality and that students who complete their degree through distance mode of education cannot compete with those completing their degree through regular mode. However, this is true only in the case of employment in government concerns. The industry is more concerned with the skills. (Bharathiar University, Student (SDE) #2, focus group, Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022)

The difference in quality is attributable to the number of courses and the pattern of examination. Regular programmes have a greater number of courses per programme than distance programmes, and they follow a semester scheme while distance programmes are organized on an annual basis. The number of subjects taught in a programme that has a semester scheme is lower than the number of subjects taught in a programme with an annual pattern. This results in unequal credits between regular programmes and distance programmes. The students of distance education also said that there is a perception that the programme offered in distance mode is not valid, and hence students who complete the first year in distance mode are not permitted to continue the second year in regular mode.

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Further, the regular programmes are offered in a choice-based credit system, but the distance programmes do not follow any credit system.

Currently, there are efforts to make distance programmes more similar to regular programmes and to have a comparable number of courses that are offered in a semester pattern. UGC 2017 Regulation on ODL specifies that institutions can introduce distance programme using a semester pattern. It should be noted that UGC recommends the semester pattern for distance programmes only as an additional pathway, and institutions can continue to offer distance programmes following an annual mode.

9.6 Conclusions

ODL clearly enhances flexibility in the mode of learning delivery; it therefore supports FLPs for getting into and getting through HE. However, the analysis of ODL in developing nations by Gulati (2008) shows that although ODL aims for equitable and extended educational opportunities for disadvantaged and poor populations, the lack of educational and technological infrastructures and trained teachers, and inadequate policy and funding decisions, have been responsible for exacerbating gaps in educational outcomes instead of narrowing them. While learning technologies provide an alternative to the limitations and rigidities of conventional education in reaching more learners, the difficulty of accessing them and the digital divide between privileged and underprivileged groups continues to widen the educational gap (Sutaria, 1990). This has been a continuous concern during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While India has succeeded in widening access through ODL in recent decades, the challenges still remain in reaching that goal of 50 per cent GER stipulated in NEP 2020. Therefore, the following recommendations are offered to improve the ODL in India to move towards achieving this objective:

- *Enhance reachability of ODL.* ODL and online platforms have been important in providing HE for disadvantaged groups and improving HE coverage. More specifically, SWAYAM and NPTEL improve opportunities for flexible learning, benefitting both traditional and non-traditional students. However, there is an urgent need to bridge the digital divide to allow students in remote rural areas to

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keep up with the digital transformation. Therefore, the provision of ODL programmes needs to be allowed in state universities.

- *Enable more flexibility in admissions to ODL programmes.* Flexibility in admission to enter in desired academic programmes would make the ODL and online platforms more learner-friendly and enable lifelong learning.
- *Ensure equal accreditation standards for ODL programmes, on a par with regular face-to-face programmes.* NEP 2020 places great emphasis on ODL and online platforms. The policy aims to make the teaching–learning process student-centric. However, further mainstreaming of ODL and online platforms will require improved policy implementation and accreditation. Accreditation standards for ODL and online platforms need to be developed by regulatory agencies to ensure the same accreditation standards for ODL programmes as for regular face-to-face HE programmes.
- *Diversify the languages of ODL and online platforms.* Most MOOCs are available only in English, thus students who do not master English cannot benefit from them. NEP 2020 places great emphasis on regional languages in HE, to provide access to students across the country.
- *Train faculty and administrative staff to operate ODL.* Lack of proper training of faculty to meet HE challenges and implement ODL has been cited as a hindering factor in the effective implementation of ODL. The quality of MOOCs depends on the quality of staff that support them. Proper training of faculty is needed to implement ODL and online platforms and to allow for their further integration into regular programmes organized through the blended mode.

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Part 4
**Supporting
flexible learning
pathways through
governance**

10. Balancing autonomy and market forces with regulation in England

John Brennan

10.1 Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) has a large and diverse higher education (HE) sector which provides a wide range of different learning pathways for different learners at different life stages. There are some important distinctions between the four nations of the UK, namely England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but their HE systems do share some common features, a key one being the high level of autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs). However, in recent years, student choice and consumerism have become increasingly emphasized by government. And to a considerable extent, universities have turned into businesses, with students as their main customers.

This chapter will focus on the HE system in England, where the funding provision has mainly shifted from the state to the students, though set in a policy context where meeting the changing needs of the economy for highly skilled labour has been emphasized as the key function of HE (Department for Education, 2019 and 2021). And those needs include greater flexibility in what, when, where, and how learners study. Greater flexibility for students poses challenges for institutions, in terms of how much flexibility they can provide and allow while achieving their needs as successful businesses and maintaining, in many cases enhancing, their reputations as successful universities.

In addition, policy implementation and effects can often differ from policy intentions. And a key question which this chapter will consider is whether largely autonomous institutions, offering flexible learning pathways (FLPs) while operating in a competitive marketplace, are likely to achieve the intentions behind government policies as well as meet the larger needs of society.

10. Balancing autonomy and market forces with regulation in England

The chapter will draw on the IIEP case study *Flexible Pathways in British Higher Education: A Decentralised and Market-Based System* in answering the above question. Information was obtained from HE policy documents and from interviews with representatives of key national policy bodies (Brennan, 2021). Data were also collected from four English universities, selected primarily not because they were necessarily typical of the system as a whole, but because they were identified as providing interesting examples of different ways in which universities could meet the changing needs of students and of society for greater flexibility in the student learning experience.

10.2 Changing governance context: Enabler or barrier to flexible learning pathways?

England remains part of a United Kingdom, but there has been considerable devolution of powers to the constituent nations of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland in recent years, and HE is one of the areas affected by this. This chapter will focus on the current English HE system, although some of the features will also be shared by the other national systems.

However, alongside these system differences, there are institutional differences which reflect the traditions of institutional autonomy across the UK HE system as a whole. Differences between HEIs reflect differences in history and geography as much as they reflect differences in current policies. Differences are both ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’, in Clark’s terms (Clark, 1981). The ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge are always at the top of the vertical prestige rankings, with strong reputations for both their research and teaching, and for recruiting high-achieving students, mainly from advantaged social backgrounds. Then there are the civic universities created in the nineteenth century, based in major cities and which have built up good reputations and attract users for both their teaching and their research from around the UK and, increasingly, internationally.

There are many other universities across the UK nations, but the differences here tend to be more horizontal, with different institutions doing different things. The horizontal differences do not, however, replace the vertical; they combine with them. For example, an institution might identify itself as a ‘world-class research university

10. Balancing autonomy and market forces with regulation in England

which specializes in the applied sciences'. In some cases, differences reflect greater institutional engagement with their local communities and the distinctive needs that can be found there. In other cases, they may reflect institutional histories. Most UK universities have had long lives as other institutions before getting their university status, having previously been technical colleges, vocational polytechnics, or specialist educational providers. The growth of the university system has been massive in the last 30 years. In 1992, all polytechnics acquired university status. But even since 2000, another 49 universities have been created, all with pre-university lives as different institutions.

Thus, the UK nations, and England in particular, have large and diverse HE systems, with a diversity driven by a mixture of history and geography together with policies, market pressures and, importantly, the values and priorities developed over time within individual institutions. This diversity has implications for FLPs. In principle, there are many FLPs provided by HEIs, but choosing the right one or changing pathways can be challenging for the learners travelling along them, because they might feel quite 'lost' if they cross boundaries and change pathways during their learning journey. Therefore, the research delves not only into the availability of FLPs but also the mechanisms that support their effective use, guidance, funding, and other aspects.

Overall, the UK has reached the 'universal' stage of HE expansion. This stage was defined by Martin Trow as occurring when over 50 per cent of a nation's population are entering HE at some time in their lives (Trow, 2010). This stage is bringing with it 'much postponement of entry, softening of boundaries between formal education and other aspects of life, term-time working' (Trow, 2010: 558), to which today would be added open and distance learning (ODL). And in the UK it has also brought national policy changes concerning the funding and regulation of HE. The most significant policy change in England, though not in the other national systems, has been the shift in much of the funding of HE from the state to the users of HE. Student fees were introduced, accompanied by a student loan system. The government provides financial loans to students to pay for their HE, with the loan being repaid at later life stages but also dependent on the individual's income from employment at those stages.

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Students are seen by government as the main beneficiaries of HE and therefore as the principal funders of HE. In so doing, students become consumers and customers, and their requirements and preferences become important drivers of policies and practices within individual HEIs. HE becomes a marketplace, with institutions competing to secure the necessary income to survive and develop (Brennan and Patel, 2011). Thus, the choices and preferences made by students about their learning pathways have major consequences for the providers of those pathways. Loss of students means loss of income, so movement between institutions is generally not encouraged by HE providers. The consequences of the HE marketplace were summed up by a staff member from a national policy body interviewed for the FLPs project:

There is a culture of competitiveness between institutions, which itself can be driven by government rewards and recognition to institutions. The culture of competitiveness needs to be challenged and a greater recognition of the need for a division of labour between different institutions. (Staff member from the Office for Students, interview, Brennan, 2021)

National policies in recent years have emphasized the importance of HEIs recognizing and meeting the changing needs of students. However, different students can have different needs. A Higher Education and Research Bill was enacted by the government in 2018 through the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA), with its five main aims being:

- placing students at the heart of HE regulation;
- raising teaching quality and standards so students and employers get the skills they need;
- putting more information in the hands of students through a ‘transparency revolution’;
- boosting social mobility, life chances, and opportunity for all;
- enhancing the reputation of a world-class HE system.

The conversion of the main funding and regulatory body from being the Higher Education Funding Council for England into the Office for Students was one of several major changes that were made following HERA. It also implied a shift towards a more student-centred approach in funding matters.

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HEIs in the UK remain quite autonomous, although the shift of power from government bodies to students as customers has altered the priorities of governing bodies of institutions and resulted in a more market-driven system. But increasingly it is a diverse market, with diverse learners with diverse needs, who require more guidance than ever in choosing their pathways. And the strong vertical differentiation of UK HE remains, or is even strengthened, as the perceived benefits from attending one of the ‘best’ institutions are generally seen to outweigh benefits from meeting the different needs and preferences of individual students. But basically, since so much funding now reaches HEIs via the fees paid by the students, a competitive marketplace has come to dominate priorities of most institutions. The UK government has also emphasized that it wants to encourage new institutional entrants into the HE marketplace and is not averse to the departure of some existing institutions.

10.3 National policies and practices on flexible learning pathways

As part of the IIEP FLPs project in the UK (mainly England), representatives from most of the national HE policy bodies were interviewed in order to assess the national system-level approaches to FLPs. However, some of the interviewees indicated at the start of the interview that they were not sure that there was an HE ‘system’ in the UK. On the one hand, there were four systems, representing the four nations of the UK, and on the other hand, there was no system at all because individual institutions had considerable freedom to pursue their own distinctive missions in ways that they themselves wished to adopt.

However, there were still some national policies for HE. HERA was referred to in the previous section and HERA’s aims were described in the Higher Education and Research Bill with the following statement:

The Bill will deliver greater competition and choice that will promote social mobility, boost productivity in the economy and ensure students and taxpayers receive value for money from their investment in HE, while safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom. It will help ensure that everyone with the potential to benefit from higher study can access relevant information to help them make the right choices from a wide range of high-quality universities and benefit from excellent teaching that supports future productivity. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016)

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As already indicated, the considerable diversity of UK HE does, in principle, provide intending students with great choice in the learning pathways they can follow. However, there are constraints. One is the absence of a national credit transfer system. There is some movement across institutional boundaries and there are groupings of institutions which have transfer arrangements in place. However, as a staff member from the national universities representative body, Universities UK, explained during an interview for the FLPs project:

We have a flexible system, but it has problems. Flexibility is prevented by the priorities of individual institutions. This all links to institutional autonomy and the challenges that come from attempting transfers between different curricula. (Universities UK staff member, interview, Brennan, 2021)

Competition between institutions and the dangers of financial loss resulting from loss of students through transfers discourage an emphasis on transfers between institutions. Also, the differences which exist in the curriculum offerings between different institutions can produce educational blockages to transfer. If a student from one institution who transfers to the second year of a course at a different institution is lacking some of the knowledge acquired by existing students in year one at the new institution, they may find it difficult to achieve the expected standards at the new institution. However, as we will see in the next section, there can also be considerable flexibility of learning pathways available to students within a single institution.

However, it is not clear how well the diversity in the education on offer matches the diversity of backgrounds and aspirations of intending students. As already noted, the stratified nature of the UK systems tends to lead to an emphasis on getting a place at a 'top' university, irrespective of the learning pathways available. This is very understandable because there are social pathways to success and privilege in British society where 'who you know' has more influence than 'what you know', and this can enable the 'top universities' to provide pathways that may not be available at other institutions (Savage, 2015). Institutional reputation can transmit reputation to its students, quite independently of the knowledge and skill that may be transmitted.

That said, there is currently considerable national emphasis on social equity issues. A national qualification, the Access to Higher Education Diploma, supports students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to enter HE through a flexible route (see *Box 37*).

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BOX 37

Flexible routes into HE

The Higher Education Diploma is a national qualification that has been providing a flexible route into HE for adults from diverse social backgrounds for nearly 40 years. It prepares potential students without A-Levels³⁴ for study at university. Students can acquire credits for learning on the diploma courses, which can be combined with recognition of other prior learning (RPL) to acquire the qualifications needed to gain entry to HE. Up to 50 per cent of the credits can be obtained through RPL.

Source: Brennan, 2021.

System-level policies in the UK tend to define what HEIs are ‘allowed’ to do rather than what they are ‘required’ to do. There are, however, national quality assurance (QA) policies and practices which are intended to monitor and evaluate what institutions are doing and how they are doing it. The new Office for Students maintains a register of approved providers of HE, and it is not impossible for an institution to be removed from the register if performance falls below expectations. The Office for Students also welcomes new providers of HE to its register to increase the choices available to students. The Office also operates a new Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework that uses data from the National Student Survey (and others) to rank HEIs.

As indicated previously, post-school education in the UK has consisted of two systems, one delivered in *higher* education institutions and another one offered through *further* education colleges, although 10 per cent of HE currently takes place in the latter. Further education colleges offer vocational training for the 16 to 19 group and adults, along with some parts of HE diplomas and degrees. It may not be HE, but may be useful and beneficial to learners in a variety of ways, especially in respect of enhancing employability.

Recently there has been a review of post-18 education and funding (Post-18 Review) (Department for Education, 2019) undertaken for the

³⁴ Qualifications for students aged above 16 required for entry to HEIs in the UK.

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UK government by a panel of experienced experts in the field of HE. The focus of the review went beyond the boundaries of HE to include other forms of adult education, particularly the further education colleges, which provide post-school education that is not HE, although is still tuition-based and can lead to a qualification, if the learner desires one. The branding of ‘post-18’ reflected the changing government aims for post-school education, which placed considerable emphasis on the effects and needs of changing employment patterns.

One of the aims of the Post-18 Review of education was to encourage flexibility across the post-18 system as a whole, with learners able to move between different institutions and educational qualifications as required by changing employment needs. As the Post-18 Review report emphasized,

Employment patterns are changing fast with shorter job cycles and longer working lives requiring many people to reskill and upskill. We recommend the introduction of a lifelong learning allowance to be used at higher technical level at any stage of an adult’s career for full and part-time students. (Department for Education, 2019)

Subsequently the UK Government announced the introduction of a Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) scheme to enable people to flexibly enter and re-enter education at different life stages, reflecting evolving training needs, particularly related to employment changes. The Government’s policy paper (Department for Education, 2021) states that the LLE will be available for students to undertake ‘modules at high technical and degree levels (4 to 6) regardless of whether they are provided in colleges or universities, as well as for full years of study’ (DfE, 2021: 40).

As well as FLPs crossing institutional and educational sector boundaries, there is also national policy encouragement for pathways that extend beyond the boundaries of the educational sectors. A recent report by the national universities body, Universities UK, called for new partnerships between HE, further education, employers, and other parts of society in order to address changing skills needs: ‘by providing integrated pathways to higher level skills for learners on vocational and technical, as well as traditional academic routes’ (Universities UK, 2018). The outcomes of the report are important for enhancing flexibility in progression through HE.

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Some UK universities are developing partnerships with different organizations to provide innovative learning opportunities which meet the changing needs of wider publics and organizations. A statement made in 2020 by then UK prime minister, Boris Johnson,³⁵ referring to the new LLE, emphasized the need for flexibility in order to enable people to continuously improve their knowledge and skills as required by changing employment requirements, HE loans will be made more flexible, allowing adults and young people to space out their study across their lifetime, and to support people to retrain for jobs of the future.

From the national policy perspective at the present time, there is considerable emphasis on the importance of flexible lifelong learning (LLL) to meet changing employment and economic needs. There are messages and incentives to institutional providers of education to innovate and move towards greater flexibility, though the autonomy of institutions gives them considerable independence about whether and how they respond to the messages.

The UK policy bodies allow flexibility to the institutions of HE as well as to the learners within them. Thus, the traditional three-year bachelor's degree can be spread over several years of part-time study or speeded up in the two-year accelerated degrees which have recently been introduced. Prior learning can be given recognition by institutions towards the acquisition of their degree qualifications, and the learning can be both educational and/or experiential. Increasingly, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching can be delivered by online and blended methods as well as by traditional face-to-face methods. Curricula can be offered to students in disciplinary, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary forms. They can include work-based learning and employment experiences in a variety of forms.

Thus, individual institutions have a lot of choices on what to provide, how to provide it, who to provide it for, and when to provide it. However, their activities are monitored and there are a variety of quality measures and dimensions in place. In the next section, we consider whether the flexibilities allowed to institutions by the UK policy bodies are facilitating the provision of FLPs for learners.

35 See: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-uk-jobs-redundancies-rishi-sunak-lifelong-learning-guarantee-b676420.html>

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10.4 Flexible learning pathways at institutions: Learners, their routes, and destinations

The UK IIEP project on FLPs collected information from four universities plus a networked educational organization that provides diverse learning opportunities online for learners around the world. The four universities were Teesside, Birmingham, Exeter, and the Open University (OU), together with the OU's FutureLearn organization. Teesside and Birmingham universities were selected as case studies, reflecting both the considerable diversity of the UK HE system and the innovations that were taking place to achieve more flexible learning for students. Information was also collected from the three other institutions, which were also recognized as distinctive providers of flexible learning, though the forms of the flexibility being provided could differ significantly between the different institutions.

10.4.1 Teesside University: A modern university in the north-east of England

Teesside University, situated in industrial town of Middlesbrough, had a previous life as a college and then as a polytechnic and gained university status in 1992 when all of the polytechnics were upgraded to university status. It is the only HEI in Middlesbrough and the surrounding Tees Valley area. The town of Middlesbrough is only rarely the destination of pathways from other parts of England. A high proportion of the students at Teesside University come from relatively local areas: some 70 per cent of its students are recruited from the north-east of England.

Like many of the former polytechnics, Teesside University has a good track record for delivering professional programmes in areas such as business, engineering, nursing, social work, and the police. The university's School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law was the main focus of the IIEP FLPs study at Teesside.

A lot of the university's students are mature adults studying part-time and are travelling on learning pathways that cross the further and HE boundaries in post-18 education. The university is part of the Teesside University College Partnership, which includes four local colleges. Students can move across institutional boundaries and benefit from an access route into the university for applicants who do not have the

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normal entry qualifications for access to a three-year bachelor's degree. Learners can take an initial foundation year at a further education college before transferring to the university for a bachelor's degree. Many of these degree programmes are delivered in partnership with employers, allowing students to combine work and study. The university also allows students to interrupt their studies for six months, if this is necessary to meet work or domestic needs. They can switch between subjects and also move between full-time and part-time study options.

The flexibilities available to students are particularly valuable to adult learners who are combining their studies with many other commitments. All students are provided with a personal tutor to advise them about the options and pathways available to them. And younger students in particular are encouraged to gain work experience relevant to their courses and their career intentions. For local students who intend to remain in the Tees Valley and seek employment there, this can be an extremely valuable experience. Degree apprenticeships are also on offer, including a Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship in collaboration with the local police force.

Online learning, work-based learning, and full- and part-time courses are all on offer, and students can follow FLPs to meet their own distinctive needs. These pathways enable flexibility in delivery of learning and progression of studies. The university is well integrated into the local community, with strong links with local employers, sometimes delivering teaching to workers at their place of employment rather than at the university.

A head of department described some of the flexibility available to Teesside students as follows:

There are new routes available to students leading to different destinations. Also, many firms are now doing their own teaching and it is becoming increasingly important for educators to respond to employers' needs. (Teesside University, head of department, interview, Brennan, 2021)

There is modularity in the curriculum, which provides all students with opportunities for greater selectivity and flexibility in what they study, although staff interviewed for the project did emphasize that the flexibility had to be controlled to ensure an integrated and good-quality learning experience.

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FLPs for students at all ages and with diverse needs and domestic circumstances are being provided by the university. But alongside this work, there are also many young students taking traditional full-time courses in particular academic disciplines. There are also quite large numbers of international students at the university, many of whom are studying business and law, and, according to the university, they are bringing in £240 million into the Teesside local economy each year. The university has established international campuses in Delhi and Kuala Lumpur. The combining of local and global activities has brought benefits and challenges to the university and is important in enhancing the reputation of the university and of Middlesbrough itself, as well as bringing in revenue from international student fees.

The flexibility of the learning pathways offered by Teesside University is largely a response to the circumstances and aspirations of their students, whether local, regional, national, or international, though meeting the needs of the large numbers of local students is clearly a priority. There is also an important social equity aspect, both in terms of the flexibility of entry routes and study methods, and the recruitment of substantial numbers of adults who had no previous experience of HE. Thus, at Teesside, FLPs are a response to the needs of a distinctive market which reflects local history, geography, and the economy as much as current national policies. The latter allow FLPs, but do not require or construct them.

10.4.2 The University of Birmingham: A well-established university in central England

The University of Birmingham is located in the centre of England, in its second largest city. It was created during the nineteenth century and has a strong reputation, both for its research and its educational provision. It is a much larger university than Teesside and it recruits students nationally and internationally. Most of the students study full-time, with a significant proportion enrolled in postgraduate courses. There were some students taking part-time postgraduate courses, but all undergraduates were studying full-time. Compared with Teesside, it had very few mature students.

Most Birmingham undergraduates, therefore, are commencing their HE learning journeys very soon after leaving secondary school. A wide

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range of degree courses in traditional academic subjects is available for students, along with some quite innovative course provisions, and the students are allowed considerable flexibility in selecting their learning pathways. Students can transfer between degree programmes, change modules, have a leave of absence, extend their dissertation deadlines, and extend their period of study. ODL options for postgraduate students in a wide range of subjects and short courses are also available, including a 24-week University of Birmingham Coding Boot Camp, which provides training in digital technologies geared to job opportunities, both for existing Birmingham full-time students and for workers already in employment.

The flexibility of the undergraduate programmes includes a Widening Horizons opportunity for first-year students to take a module from outside their main discipline: for example an engineering student taking a module in Japanese. There is also a recently established Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences mini-college which provides a large number of FLPs for undergraduate students together with a year studying abroad as part of their four-year undergraduate degree course. As well as providing students with opportunities to study different subjects, the mini-college offers modules on topics such as ‘Truth and Post-Truth in the age of Big Data’ and ‘Real World Problems’. There is also a Learning Entrepreneurial Skills option available and a cultural programme of visits and events involving poets, writers, academics, and scientific specialists.

Students who enter Birmingham’s Liberal Arts and Natural Science (LANS) degree programme are faced with choices of many different learning pathways, which may involve journeys through different academic disciplines with different destinations and with challenges in reaching them. This may involve crossing many boundaries: of academic disciplines, academic/vocational divides, and, potentially, boundaries between institutions and countries. The university attaches a lot of importance to supporting students in their learning journeys, ensuring that they receive the information and advice needed to select the right pathways to reach their desired destinations. Each student is assigned an adviser to assist them in making the important choices from the numerous and diverse study opportunities available to them. And the students seem to be broadly positive about the

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arrangements and the support they received. As one undergraduate student remarked,

I have very few compulsory modules, which means I am able to work out what works best for me in the content, teaching and assessment style... I'm unsure I could complete a degree if it was not somewhat flexible. (Undergraduate student on the Birmingham LANS degree, interview, Brennan, 2021)

Thus, there is considerable flexibility and innovation in the learning pathways available at the University of Birmingham. And there is also some flexibility in entry routes to the pathways. Applicants may receive 'contextualized offers' of places at the university, and lower than normal grades are required of them if they are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. There are also routes into the university via further education colleges which do not require students to possess the standard entry requirements. And a major flexible entry route is the Pathways to Birmingham University programme, where local school students can learn about the university and the career opportunities that a university degree can provide. The programme can be a route into Birmingham University for these students.

Students interviewed at Birmingham were generally positive about their experiences there. However, several students did refer to the challenges posed by the diversity of choices available to them, including the challenges of interdisciplinarity. The mixing of courses across disciplinary boundaries brings questions: for students about whether they have the right knowledge base for a particular course module and for lecturers about the knowledge base that they could assume that their students possessed. The university does provide good support, but many of the students would have appreciated some warning and preparation for the FLPs awaiting them.

The advent of FLPs at Birmingham brought challenges for both students and academic staff and for the university itself: staff had to review the content and delivery methods of their courses to take into account different learning journeys being taken by their students; organizationally, there were developments to standardize study programmes, including timetables, to make it possible for students to combine different courses; and there were challenges to maintain quality and academic reputation which needed to be considered in managing the pathways.

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While there are many FLPs within the boundaries of the university, there are also attempts to cross boundaries by collaborating with other universities and colleges and with businesses and other organizations. There were already degree apprenticeships being offered in fields as varied as civil engineering and nursing.

The changes and innovations required to expand the diversity and flexibility of the learning pathways at Birmingham were considerable. They were summarized by one head of department as follows:

Changes are being driven to bring the university into line with our competitors, to reduce the exam burden in May and June, to enhance a more centralized timetable approach, and hopefully see greater student mobility options. Both incoming and outgoing. (Birmingham University head of department, interview, Brennan, 2021)

Thus, the university is operating in a competitive market but also enabling its students to move across the wider HE marketplace. However, as well as supporting new study programmes, a lot of importance is attached to protecting well-established programmes. Full-time courses in all the major academic disciplines studied by young students with good qualifications, mainly living away from home, remain a core activity of the university. As one senior member of the university observed, 'Innovation can be risky so we do need to help to check that no damaging mistakes are made'.

10.4.3 The University of Exeter: An innovative university in the south-west of England

The University of Exeter is a well-established university in the south-west of England. It has a good reputation and recruits students from a wide range of places, nationally and internationally. Like Birmingham, it has mainly full-time students, with some part-time students on its postgraduate courses. Like the two previous case study universities, Exeter is an innovative institution. It links with business, industry, and professional expertise beyond the boundaries of the university to help deliver a high-quality and flexible learning experience for its students. There are academic partnerships between the university and organizations in fields such as medicine and films; degree apprenticeships in subjects such as civil engineering, digital technologies, and financial services; some part-time studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels; and some online distance

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learning programmes which provide a flexibility of learning pathways and experiences that learners can fit alongside work and family commitments. It has some strong international connections, being part of the Venice International University Consortium.³⁶

An example of flexible partnerships with other organizations beyond HE boundaries was described by a staff member: an academic partnership between the university and the London Film School (LFS):

Under our partnership with the LFS, postgraduate students have access to both the professional expertise, experience, and facilities of the LFS as well as the academic excellence of researchers and resources of the University of Exeter. The alliance has enabled the institutions to launch a number of initiatives, including the MA in International Film Business. During the first term at the university, students explore the markets in the international film business. During the second term at LFS, students explore innovative models being applied to the international film business. (Exeter University staff member, interview, Brennan, 2021)

Partnerships like these, which cross the boundaries between HE and other sectors of society, emphasize that within the modern ‘knowledge society’, knowledge is not only to be acquired within HEIs. But when acquired from other sources, its acquisition needs to be recorded and recognized both within and beyond the boundaries of HE.

FLPs at Exeter seem to be drawn mainly from the distinctive internal academic culture of the university and the particular aims and objectives of its basic units of departments and faculties. There has been an increasing diversity and flexibility in the learning pathways being provided for students, and this has required a mix of diverse staff expertise and commitments, bringing academic, administrative, and other professional skills and orientations together to deliver innovation and quality to the student experience.

The university’s mission was summed up by a senior staff member as follows:

Through its people, partnerships and innovative flexible learning pathways, the University of Exeter is working hard to challenge traditional thinking and defy conventional boundaries to achieve its vision of a diverse learning community within an education–research ecosystem. (University of Exeter, senior staff member, interview Brennan, 2021)

³⁶ Venice International University (VIU) is a global consortium of 20 universities and the Metropolitan City of Venice. The member universities represent China, Korea, Japan, Israel, Russia, Switzerland, the UK, Germany, Belgium, France, Slovenia, Italy, South Africa, USA, and Canada.

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10.4.4 The Open University: Learning available to everyone everywhere

The OU was established at the end of the 1960s and has been ‘open to all’ ever since. The university has no entry requirements for most of its undergraduate courses, which can lead to the award of a degree by the Open University on the acquisition of sufficient credits and which can be studied by anybody using online distance education methods. Its students mainly study part-time, typically combining their HE with paid employment and/or domestic responsibilities. Teaching is mainly online and the university provides a broad curriculum, offering students a wide choice of what and when to study. The university today has approaching 200,000 students, and about a quarter of them already possess HE qualifications when they enter the university. Some of the already-qualified students may be studying to gain a postgraduate qualification but many will just be updating their knowledge, responding to changing work requirements, or just changing interests. The OU is the only university that operates across all four of the UK nations of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland and must therefore meet the different regulatory requirements of each of the four nations.

The OU remains a major provider of flexible LLL for adults entering or returning to HE at different life stages for different reasons and with different aspirations. LLL is central to the OU’s mission, which states that it is ‘open to people, places, methods and ideas’, with a vision ‘to reach more students with life-changing learning that meets their needs and enriches society’ (OU, n.d.). However, in recent years student numbers have been in decline and the biggest drop has been in the enrolment of younger students under the age of 30. The decline may be a function of increasing fee levels and of the increase in the number of young students entering other universities immediately after leaving school, thus reducing the numbers of people needing a ‘second chance’ of a university experience. However, there has been a growth in degree apprenticeships and an increase in module completion rates in recent years.

The OU has recently integrated its different student databases to enable better-informed and more individualized support to be available

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to its students. Personalized student profiles are regularly updated and bring together not only formal educational experiences but also information about jobs and locations. Information is gathered about a ‘personalized digital student experience’ and the ‘user journey’ being followed by every student, including the credentials being acquired, changes in career directions, and geographical locations. The new database is intended to enable the university to provide individualized support to all students as they proceed along their FLPs. Something like this on a system-wide basis could be one way of helping to provide individualized support to people who are selecting and then travelling along their FLPs.

FutureLearn: Providing flexible learning pathways crossing many boundaries

Greater and wider FLPs are becoming available with the arrival of FutureLearn. Created by the OU in 2012, FutureLearn is a social learning platform which provides online learning internationally from over 170 UK and international partners comprising HEIs and a range of other providers of learning opportunities. Together, the FutureLearn partners offer online short courses and degrees as well as micro-credentials and study programmes, all of which enable students to follow FLPs and acquire degrees and certificates from different sources and at different times.

There are over 3,000 short courses available from FutureLearn, a high proportion of which are work related in a range of professional fields. But there are also online degrees provided by a wide range of universities, built from courses and credentials from which a degree can be assembled quickly or slowly, combining academic and vocational pathways and reflecting different and changing learner needs.

The benefits of micro-credentials are described in the FutureLearn document *Microcredentials and Programs* as follows:

Microcredentials and programs allow you to pursue further study in a specialised field. Created by leading universities, microcredentials are professional credentials designed for you to build in-demand career skills. Programmes allow you to deepen your understanding of a subject, with the opportunity to obtain a professional academic credential. (FutureLearn, n.d.)

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As well as providing opportunities to upskill in chosen careers, FutureLearn's micro-credentials could also support career changes at different life stages very effectively. The OU's vice chancellor is quoted in *Microcredentials and Programs*:

Our online credentials are designed to upskill you for work in rapidly growing industries, without the time and cost commitments of a full degree. You can earn academic credit to use towards a degree or they can be used as an independent certificate. (FutureLearn, n.d.)

FutureLearn thus provides students with learning pathways which can cross institutional boundaries, enabling them to collect micro-credentials which can lead to degrees or other certificated learning qualifications (though it is accepted that for some learners, certificated learning is not needed or relevant). There is flexibility about the destinations as well as the pathways that are available through FutureLearn.

In addition to creating FutureLearn, the OU has established OpenLearn, through which the university itself provides over 1,000 free short courses. Each of these typically involves 24 hours of study which can be spread over long or short periods, according to the needs of the learner. The courses are grouped within sets: e.g. Health, Sports and Psychology; Education and Development; History and the Arts; Languages; and Nature and Environment. In the words of the OU, OpenLearn provides 'skills for work', 'family and relationships', 'health and wellbeing', and 'money and finances', all of which are giving 'education for life' (OpenLearn, n.d.).

The OU, with its FutureLearn and OpenLearn provision, is therefore offering a huge range of FLPs for learners at all ages who are heading to many destinations.

10.5 Conclusions

The examples of FLPs provided by UK HEIs in the previous section demonstrate the considerable number and diversity of pathways that are available in the HE community. The four case universities have created FLPs in different ways, targeting different students in different places and heading to different destinations. Institutions were offered sufficient autonomy to establish these diverse pathways. There are also some institutional partnerships and collaborations enabling the

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crossing of boundaries between further and higher education, and, though to a lesser extent, between HEIs themselves. The universities reflect the diversity of HE in the four nations of the UK, but flexibilities available to individual students do tend to be limited by the boundaries of individual institutions.

That is not to say that the four case universities are necessarily typical of the rest of the system. The diversity in UK HE reflects history and geography quite as much as current national policy. The big question is whether the current diversity and flexibility meet today's (and tomorrow's) social and economic needs. Institutional autonomy combined with market forces tends to deliver competitive rather than collaborative relationships, although OU FutureLearn is a large and significant example of how collaboration can be achieved in generating more FLPs.

The different pathways will lead to different destinations (although some may be different pathways to the same destination). But typically, they also reflect different starting points for the learners, and these generally can reflect the social background of the learners as much as they reflect the desired destinations. The diversity of the expanded UK HE system reflects social equity factors to a considerable extent. This is recognized politically and educationally and there are pressures on institutions at the elite end of the system to diversify their student intakes and move away from recruiting excessively from elite social backgrounds.

This will of course expand the range of choices available to learners, and this can bring both benefits and challenges. The more pathways that are available, the more difficult it is for the potential learner to find the right one! And the increasingly marketized system does not necessarily help if information provided is presented mainly to benefit the 'selling power' of the institution rather than meeting the learning needs of the potential student. Less competitiveness and more collaboration across the HE system might help learners find the right pathways for themselves or to change pathways if they discover they are travelling along the wrong one.

The OU's FutureLearn with its large and diverse institutional membership of universities and other organizations across the world may be a

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model for providing a large and diverse set of learning pathways for a large and diverse set of learners. The current limitation is that the educational provision is exclusively for online learning. The possibility of extending provision to allow blended learning that includes face-to-face learning alongside online learning would provide more flexibility and meet a wider range of learner needs.

As indicated in the section 'National policies and practices on flexible learning pathways', there are current moves from the UK government to extend lifelong learning (LLL) and to meet the learning needs of different learners at different life stages. The LLE would be a useful step in this direction. But the move presents a large addition to HE's agenda bringing, as it does, new challenges in terms of equitable access.

As mentioned above, there is considerable flexibility in the learning pathways provided by many HEIs in the UK. However, potential travellers along these learning pathways can find it difficult to select the right ones. This suggests that rather than focusing on the national system, its institutions, or the courses and modules available within them, the individual student journey may be the most important level to focus on in providing FLPs to meet changing individual and social needs. Ways of doing so are currently being explored by many universities in the UK.

In summary, the diversity and institutional autonomy characteristics of the UK, and especially the English, HE system bring many potential benefits to learners and to wider society. But achieving these benefits also brings many challenges, most particularly the challenge of balancing and matching the diversities of the system with the diversities of the learners: their needs, aspirations, conditions, and abilities. It requires more blended learning, a greater number of micro-credentials, more collaboration between institutions, a broadening of the student experience, balancing external and internal QA, more contextualized admissions, stronger institutional managements with a diversity of professional supports, and, above all, the provision of better information and support to learners in selecting and travelling on their FLPs. This is a long agenda, involving multiple actors and actions, but invaluable in serving today's students and their needs!

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11. Funding and quality assurance for flexible learning pathways in Chile

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11.1 Introduction

The Chilean higher education (HE) system has grown significantly in the last three decades, in terms of the student population, higher education institutions (HEIs), and programmes offered. This is the result of a growing demand for HE by a new and developing middle class, and systematic national policies to increase access, especially for disadvantaged groups. In response to the diversification of the system (mostly through the establishment of new, private institutions), a national quality assurance (QA) system was established as early as 1990. Despite being in operation for over 30 years, QA has not been able to overcome the erosion of trust in the quality of HE that emerged as a result of diversification and privatization. This may partially explain why articulation and flexibility have not been considered, so far, a priority in national policies.

However, with a gross entry rate of 87 per cent and some 67 per cent for students below 25 years old (OECD, 2017), there is a significant need for increased flexibility and articulation in Chilean higher education. Many of the new entrants belong to the lower-income quintiles and are the first generation in their families to enter HE. There are also mature learners needing recognition of labour competencies or needing to upgrade their skills or gain new HE credentials. These groups of new entrants run a higher risk of non-completion in HE, hence systematic support is necessary in the Chilean HE context, with policies that create flexible opportunities to access and progress.

As flexibility and articulation have proven paramount to strengthen HE systems in many countries, many HE stakeholders are convinced that flexible pathways can allow HE to better respond to social

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expectations and demands. Nevertheless, there is in Chile no formal translation of this discourse into specific instruments, beyond the instruments promoting access. In the absence of specific public policies in this respect, it becomes important to learn how HEIs have managed to respond to the needs for flexible HE provision.

This chapter draws on selected findings from the national IIEP case study *Flexible Learning Pathways in Chilean Higher Education: Can a Bottom-Up Approach Work?* (Lemaître et al., 2021), which aimed to identify the effects national and institutional mechanisms had on the design and implementation of flexible learning pathways (FLPs) in Chile's HEIs. Specifically, the chapter analyses how selected national policies have contributed to increased flexibility in the absence of explicit policy goals and how HEIs have developed different strategies to address the need for flexibility. It also identifies enablers and obstacles related to institutional autonomy, funding policies, and QA that enhance, and sometimes impede, the development of FLPs in the system.

This chapter presents the perceptions of policy-makers of the main public agencies and members of three different HEIs, including academic leaders, staff, and students who have benefitted from FLPs. It covers existing policies, such as QA and access to HE; instruments (a qualifications framework, transferable credits); and specific institutional practices enabled by institutional autonomy, such as diversified access mechanisms, opportunities for transfer between programmes or institutions, or recognition of prior learning (RPL). It also addresses unanticipated flexible pathways, mainly based on the experience of the institutions included in the study as well as on comments made by interviewees.

11.2 National higher education context

Chilean HE has undergone important changes, which can be summarized in three trends: expansion, diversification, and privatization, all of which led to the establishment of a QA scheme in response to the questioning of quality of the diversified HE system. These factors have entailed a massive growth in the student population, from only 249,482 students in 1990 to 1,268,510 in 2019.

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This expansion was fuelled in the main by students from the lower-income quintiles, thus reducing the gap in participation between the more affluent groups and the poorer ones (SIES, 2019). These new students brought to HE a much wider range of expectations, interests, and needs. As a result, the provision of HE also diversified, with new programmes, new teaching and learning modes, and the development of different HEIs, especially non-selective, private HEIs.

It is also important to note that there are significant differences among institutions in the same category, in terms of size, complexity, quality, and prestige. Private HE grew as it offered a much wider range of provision than public universities. By 2019, private HEIs enrolled 70 per cent of all students in universities, professional institutes (*institutos profesionales*, IPs), and vocational technical training centres (*centros de formación técnica*, CFTs), although some public HEIs also started offering short-cycle technical degrees. The complete institutional constellation in terms of type and number of HEIs in Chile can be seen in *Table 14*.

Table 14. Number of HEIs in Chile, by ownership and enrolment (in parentheses)

Types of institution	Public HEI		Private without public funding
	State-owned	Private with public funding*	
Universities (grant professional and academic degrees; can also offer vocational programmes)	18 (201,116)	9 (165,314)	33 (384,094)
IPs (grant professional and vocational degrees)			42 (375,462)
CFTs (grant only vocational degrees)	5** (209)		42 (136,575)

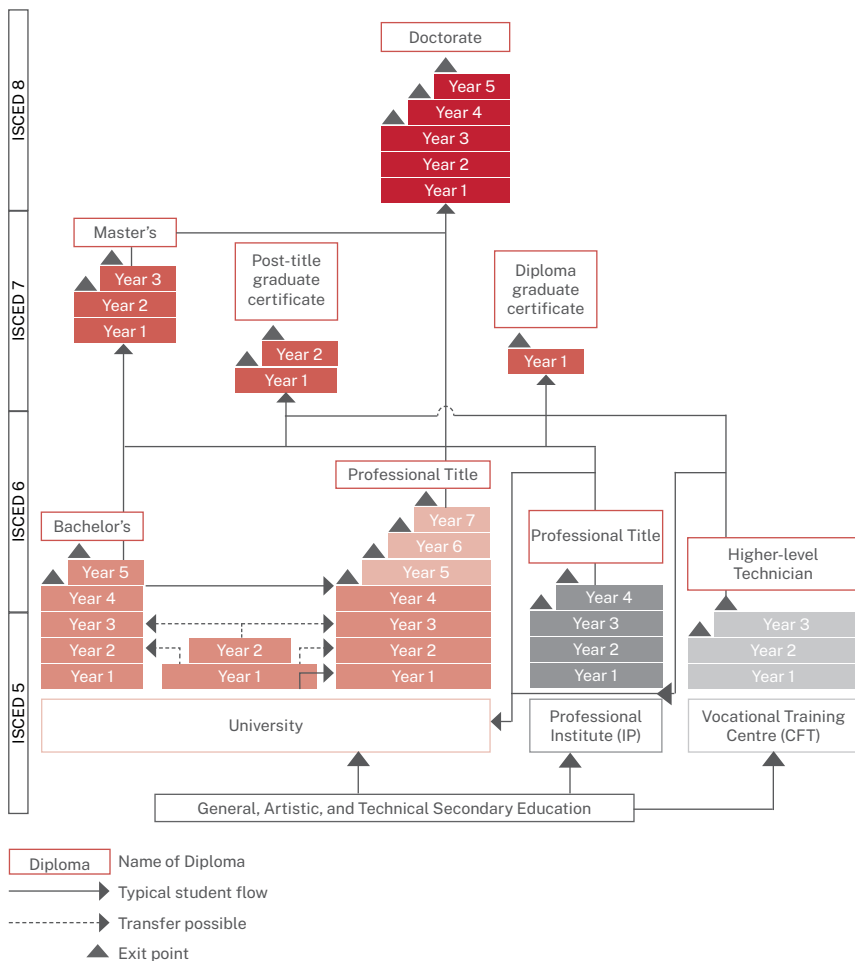
Source: SIES, 2019.

Notes: * These are institutions created before 1981, funded in a similar way to state HEIs. ** A 2016 law created 15 state-owned CFTs, which will be established gradually.

The structure of HE is quite rigid. *Figure 33* shows the different formative levels and regulated pathways, as well as the difficulties in moving from one pathway to another.

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Figure 33. Structure of the HE system in Chile



Source: OECD, 2020.

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Students with a vocational degree from the CFTs have very limited opportunities to move into HE. If they want to proceed to professional degrees, they must go through the admission process and will probably have very few, if any, of their studies recognized. Graduates from IPs face a similar situation, but can gain a bachelor's degree in the same field after completing just one or two years at a university. Some universities will recognize an IP degree as equivalent to their own, thus making it possible for students to go on to a master's degree, most likely in a professional field. Transfer between programmes or between institutions of the same type depends on the policies of the receiving institutions, which will usually be associated with the relative prestige of both HEIs.

11.3 National governance mechanisms for enabling flexible learning pathways

In most Latin American countries, governments play a secondary role in decisions related to HE. This leaves them with two main policy instruments to guide the system – regulation (mostly through legislation and QA) and funding (through different channels) – and no institutionalized mechanism for long-term decisions.

The governance of the system is composed of an Undersecretariat of Higher Education, which defines policies, distributes resources, and will be responsible for a unified admission process for all HEIs; a Superintendency of Higher Education, whose role is to supervise compliance with legal and regulatory mechanisms; a QA body, the National Commission for Accreditation (*Comisión Nacional de Acreditación*, CNA), in charge of all compulsory accreditation processes; and a licensing agency, the National Council for Education (*Consejo Nacional de Educación*, CNED), which will also supervise HEIs unable to meet accreditation requirements. The last two agencies operate autonomously, but all four organizations meet weekly in a coordination committee, the National System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (*Sistema Nacional de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior*, SINACES), whose decisions are not binding, but which allows for alignment of decisions across the HE sector. The governance bodies and their roles and responsibilities can be seen in *Box 38*.

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BOX 38

Responsibility of SINACES members

Undersecretariat – performs a governing role, oversees student aid and HEI funding.

CNA – defines criteria and procedures for accreditation, mandated to develop and publish new standards and criteria for WA.

CNED – conducts licensing for new HEIs, appeals to accreditation decisions, oversees new state-owned CFTs.

Superintendency – controls the legal and financial management of HEIs and their relationship with related business corporations.

Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2021 (Chile country note).

11.3.1 Regulatory policies that support flexible learning pathways

As mentioned above, regulation is one of the mechanisms that governments use to guide HE. In Chile, this is mostly done through legislation, but also through other mechanisms, such as QA, an information system, and a recently established national qualifications framework (NQF) for vocational training.

Quality assurance

Although Chile, as many other Latin American countries, has a long-standing tradition of strong institutional autonomy, the growth in private HEIs since the system's liberalization in 1981 sparked a debate on QA. HE became a more complex and much less transparent system during the 1980s and early 1990s. Information on quality was not easily accessible, and the reliability of HEIs – especially private ones – became uncertain.

The influence of expansion, diversification, and privatization, as well as sociopolitical changes such as a growing request for more state regulation, pushed the setting up of the first external QA agency in 1990, pilot accreditation initiatives in the early 2000s, a national QA system in 2006, and its revision in 2018. Initially QA was introduced in the form of a compulsory licensing mechanism for the new private

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HEIs and later as voluntary accreditation for both public and private, already-licensed HEIs and programmes (mandatory for teacher training and medicine). But in 2018, institutional accreditation became compulsory for all HEIs, and dentistry and doctoral programmes were added to teacher training and medicine in the list of programmes for which accreditation was mandatory, as they were deemed key programmes for public interest.

QA helped to weed out some low-quality HEIs and programmes, made quality expectations explicit, and promoted the use of management information systems. It contributed to the increased professionalism of institutional management and the introduction of a 'culture of evaluation' (Lemaître and Zenteno, 2012). As stated previously, QA is the responsibility of two autonomous organizations, CNA and CNED. CNA defines criteria and procedures for accreditation and is mandated to develop and publish new standards and criteria for QA. CNED is the licensing agency which responds to appeals against CNA decisions. The legal and financial aspects of the institutions are overseen by the Superintendency of Higher Education. As mentioned above, the three organizations meet with the Undersecretary in a coordinating commission, SINACES. The autonomy of the QA bodies implies that their links with the government are weak and that the decisions they make are not necessarily aligned with governmental priorities.

QA has been quite successful, insofar as almost all universities and most IPs and CFTs have gone through the accreditation process. HEIs have improved their information systems and managerial capacities, and increasingly make evidence-based decisions. Most HEIs now align their operation to CNA criteria, giving CNA a significant opportunity for prompting the system in the direction it chooses. However, these criteria tend to favour a traditional approach, ignoring the need for diversification of the HE system and greater flexibility for students. Indeed, in some cases these criteria make changes or HEI innovations very difficult or practically impossible (Lemaître et al., 2021).

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Information system

The Ministry of Education (MoE) runs the Higher Education Information Service (SIES), created in 2006. SIES collects and disseminates information on the academic offer, enrolment, graduates, infrastructure and equipment, teaching staff, institutions' financial statements, and employability. Through the My Future (Mi Futuro) platform, it provides potential students with a wide range of data on study opportunities, funding possibilities, employability and expected income, and guidance, among other assistance. CNED also gathers, processes, and integrates statistics on the HE system and makes them available to a wide range of stakeholders. Its platform, Choose Your Career (Elige Carrera), provides interest and skills tests for students, useful tips, and information on programmes, requirements, funding, and other issues. Unfortunately, neither of these mechanisms is currently able to provide specific information about articulation opportunities or FLPs.

National qualifications framework

An NQF contributes to flexibility through the definition of knowledge, skills, and competence levels for each degree. Although the MoE worked on the design of an NQF covering HE globally, only a limited qualifications framework for vocational education, the Qualifications Framework for Vocational Training (MCTP), was finally approved in 2018, for professional and vocational qualifications offered by IPs and CFTs. While this is a positive step in terms of improving flexibility at a vocational level, it has tended to isolate the vocational sector from HE, making articulation between technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and HE more difficult.

Transferable academic credits system

Chile has a decades-long history of developing an academic credits system, which is now widely used in several HEIs and virtually all universities. However, the Academic Credit System (SCT-Chile) is mostly used to calculate and standardize academic work; it is hardly ever used for transferring credits between institutions or even within programmes of the same institution. The SCT-Chile credit system requires a deeper collaborative environment, for which inter-institutional trust is needed to recognize credits as of equivalent quality. Lack of inter-institutional trust is still a major handicap.

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11.3.2 Government instruments that support flexible learning pathways

In Chile, beyond institutional funding (granted to public HEIs to cover part of their operational costs), several types of funds exist for specific purposes, among which the most important are student aid and competitive funds. However, there are also special programmes to support low-income students' entry to HE.

Student aid

The most consistent policy in recent decades has been to improve access, especially for the more disadvantaged groups. All HEIs, both public and private, charge relatively high fees, which poses a significant barrier to the access of lower-income students. During the last 20 years, the portion of public funding for student aid has been systematically increased. In 2019, 857,820 students (or 67 per cent of the total enrolment) received some type of aid; of the total public funding allocated to HE, about 74 per cent corresponded to student funding.

However, student aid is mainly for full-time students studying for their first degree, with limited opportunities for mature students, part-time students, or students who want to upgrade or change their degree to access financial aid. The main funding instruments are the following:

- *Scholarships* for different equity groups, such as students with disabilities, indigenous peoples, or students from isolated regions. They also focus on students from the lowest six income deciles; those who want to train as schoolteachers, whose parents are teachers, or students with vocational degrees who want to continue to a professional or academic degree.
- *Subsidized loans*, with income-contingent repayment after graduation for students in need who are enrolled in accredited institutions.
- *A Free Tuition Program*, established in 2016: the most comprehensive financial aid scheme. It provides free HE in eligible HEIs (mainly accredited HEIs) for students belonging to the lowest six income deciles, but only during the formal length of the programme and excluding online or blended programmes.

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Competitive funds

The MoE also manages a number of competitive funds for HEI that are allocated based on merit. These funds may address any issue of interest to institutions, but, as reported by the MoE, no funding has been specifically requested for increased flexibility or articulation mechanisms.

Compensatory programmes

Access is also promoted through strategies aimed at reducing the impact of poor-quality secondary education. Students must go through a national admission test to enter HEIs. To help students who attend low-quality secondary schools (most of them members of low-income families), a special bonus score (up to 15 per cent extra points), also called a ‘high school grades ranking’ is provided to students who have consistently been at the top of their class during their last three years of secondary schooling (DEMRE, 2020).

In terms of funding, through the Programme for Effective Access and Support (Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso Efectivo, PACE) the government supports HEIs which work with students during their last two years in public secondary schools, prepare them to pass the admission test, and for the best students, guarantee places for them even if they do not get the necessary scores in the admission test. These programmes also support the provision of personal and academic support to students during their first year in HE. Although not massive in terms of numbers, nearly 4,000 a year, the PACE programme supports good students with fewer opportunities to enter and go through HE successfully.

11.4 Institutional policies and practices related to flexible learning pathways

The FLPs research in Chile focused on three HEIs: the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso (PUCV), a traditional university (private, with public funding); the Centre for Technical Training at Los Lagos (CFTLL), a new public vocational training centre; and the Santo Tomás Corporation (CST), a holding including a professional institute and a technical training centre with branches all over the country. They represent different aspects of the system, have a different

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relationship both with the government and the QA mechanisms, and enrol different types of students. This makes their analysis particularly interesting in terms of their response to the need for flexibility and articulation. The three HEIs studied reported that flexibility was one of their main concerns, and all had developed instruments and practices to implement it in different ways.

11.4.1 Alternative admission processes

As mentioned before, the government funds special programmes (e.g. PACE), in agreement with HEIs, and provides students coming from disadvantaged schools with special academic support. These programmes provide special teaching arrangements during the last two years of secondary school, reserved places at participating universities, and continued support during the first year of HE studies. Students must go through the national admission test, but if they have performed well in the pre-university programme they are admitted even if they do not have the required score. Both universities in the case study take part in these programmes. At PUCV, 76 per cent of the students admitted under these programmes enrolled in the second year, whereas at the University Santo Tomás (UST), managed by CST, 80 per cent of the students dropped out during their first year or soon after, partly because of greater prior educational deficiencies and more adverse socioeconomic and family conditions. As these numbers remain high, UST provides supplementary tutoring, counselling, and other initiatives to support the progression of disadvantaged students and reduce attrition.

UST accepts graduates from IPs to earn a bachelor's degree in one and a half years; this enables them to continue studying at graduate level. The IPs have a special admission system for students with TVET degrees, either from their own centre or from other institutions.

11.4.2 Transfer opportunities

Transfer opportunities are a second strategy employed by HEIs to enhance flexibility in progression of students. Transfer depends on the receiving HEI's decision, and many institutions will not accept transfer students, even from their own programmes. However, PUCV will validate up to 50 per cent courses taken either in their own programmes or other HEIs, provided that students can show that

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contents are equivalent. In general, this works well when institutions are recognized as being of similar quality, but is almost impossible when one is perceived as being of lower quality. CST will allow transfer between programmes offered at each of their institutions (University, IP, and CFT) and, in some cases, for students coming from other HEIs. It also allows transfer between branches operating in different cities, so students who move from one city to another will be able to continue in the same programme with the same curriculum, and their grades and approved courses will be recognized.

Transfer also operates downwards. Students who enter the university, or the IP, and then find that they cannot follow the curriculum, can have relevant courses recognized in the CST's IP or the CFT, thus being able to gain either a professional or vocational degree.

A competency-based curriculum, applied in all CST institutions, makes it easier to process transfer applications. In addition, the IPs and the CFTs use the TVET qualifications framework, MCTP, and their competencies are certified by an external body. This certification, which is an MoE programme mostly used for adult education, is now recognized at the vocational level by some HEIs and by employers, though it should be noted that this is a very recent and currently ongoing process.

11.4.3 Recognition of prior learning

In Chile, RPL is not a common practice in most HEIs, and it is encouraged neither by funding mechanisms nor by QA requirements. Nonetheless, some HEIs have autonomously developed practices that, with different names, achieve a similar result. However, no systematic information regarding RPL is currently gathered at the system level.

One example of an autonomous practice is the 'examination of relevant knowledge': applicants for a place at PUCV can sit an exam covering the contents of specific courses. If approved, their learning will be recognized, with a maximum of 10 per cent of the courses in a given programme. This percentage may be increased if students can provide evidence of significant work in the field to the university's academic admission team, especially in programmes with a strong practical content. This practice applied in several universities and was explained in detail in the interviews at PUCV.

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CST recognizes courses taken at the HEIs that are part of the holding, but tends not to recognize studies done in other institutions. This is mainly because of QA restrictions, as reviewers are likely to demand evidence of the equivalence of learning outcomes in the accreditation process.

CFTLL, on the other hand, makes RPL a basic mechanism for admission. Their teaching and learning process is based on a 100 per cent performance in the competencies associated with each teaching and learning module. Therefore, if a student can show that they can demonstrate those competencies through a multi-day examination, the module will be recognized, either partially or in full. In its first year of operation, CFTLL selected students with experience and recognized the relevant competencies so students could complete their two-year curriculum in one year.

11.5 Findings: Evaluation of enablers and obstacles for flexible learning pathways

The governance system of Chilean HE, including its QA processes, funding mechanisms, and institutional autonomy, lays the framework for which FLPs are, and potentially can be, developed in the country. This section reviews some enablers and obstacles in these three areas.

11.5.1 Quality assurance

QA has the potential to be a significant enabler or obstacle for flexibility and articulation in Chilean HE. A study carried out in seven countries showed that any issue that is included as a standard for accreditation tends to have an immediate effect on HEIs which devote time and attention to it (Lemaître and Zenteno, 2012). Therefore, if QA highlighted flexibility and articulation as important components of quality, institutions would work on designing policies and practices in this area. Accreditation also contributes to increasing trust among HEIs, when it is recognized as a reliable badge of the quality of institutions and programmes.

However, in the current context, there are two issues that in practice make flexibility difficult: the first is that the 2018 reform of HE made accreditation of HEIs mandatory but eliminated accreditation of individual study programmes, and much of the flexibility and

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articulation depends on the reliability of learning at the programme level. The second is that the CNA is not fully convinced that flexibility is possible or even desirable to implement at the institutional level, most likely because of a lack of trust in the capacity of HEIs to carry out responsible innovation. One interviewee remarked:

Flexibility is important, but I have serious doubts about the way in which the institutions would act in its implementation. (Chair of the Accrediting Commission, interview, Lemaître, Ramírez, Baeza, and Blanco, 2021)

This reluctance may be based on negative experiences with some institutions, which then taints the way in which QA criteria and standards are established, with a strong focus on control and mistrust of change. Innovation is seen as dangerous as it may entail deviations from a rigid conception of what quality means, which is usually understood as the way in which traditional (and prestigious) HEIs operate. For some institutions, QA acts as an inhibiting factor; ‘paralysing’ was how the UST rector put it (UST Rector, interview, Lemaître, Ramírez, Baeza, and Blanco, 2021).

11.5.2 Financial arrangements

The most important enabler in terms of access for disadvantaged groups has been the systematic increase in student aid. The Free Tuition programme, in addition to scholarships and subsidized loans, has made it possible to widen access to students who had previously been excluded from HE studies: students from lower-income families, with poor secondary education or disabilities, or from isolated regions. Special programmes geared to compensate for the deficiencies in secondary education also act as a strong access enabler. They provide support for promising students from disadvantaged public secondary schools and, in some cases, give them personal and academic support during their first year at university.

Another significant enabler is the provision of competitive funds for HEIs to develop projects. These funds are available for institutions in a wide range of fields, depending on institutional priorities. Unfortunately, there have been almost no bids related to improved articulation or the analysis of possible strategies for FLPs (MoE, Official dealing with universities, interview, Lemaître, Ramírez, Baeza, and Blanco, 2021).

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The funding structure for HE can also be an obstacle for flexibility. Students with free tuition or scholarships receive these benefits only for the formal duration of a programme. They are allowed only one change of programme or institution while receiving these benefits. This curtails flexibility in progression of students through HE. Since most institutional income comes from student fees charged on a yearly basis, part-time students or students taking a reduced study load because of work or family obligations are discouraged from pursuing HE as they must pay from their own resources.

11.5.3 Governance of the system and institutional autonomy

At present, there is no public body in Chile with the capacity to define HE policy over a mid- or long-term perspective. Probably the strongest body for this is the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities (CRUCH). At its inception, it represented the views of the universities, but with the expansion of the system, membership of CRUCH changed from the eight universities which existed in 1980 to 30 out of 60 in 2021, as in 2018 new legislation allowed universities which complied with high quality standards to join the Council. CRUCH is now segmented into sub-groups according to the main characteristics and interests of universities (state-owned, regional universities, private with public funding, and private without public funding) or through informal arrangements based on specific interests. It does not include half of the universities in the system or any non-university HEIs.

The MoE is staffed by leaders who change every four years, if not sooner, and therefore, policy guidelines depend either on the personal or political priorities of the Undersecretary of Higher Education or on the relative power of the groups within CRUCH or the institutions themselves.

Flexibility and articulation have not been high on the policy agenda at a national level, except for TVET. This apparent lack of policy interest is also an opportunity for HEIs to implement their own arrangements to improve flexibility. However, there is a constant tension between institutional autonomy and regulatory requirements. Institutions are aware of the need for increased flexibility in several areas: new qualifications, length of programmes, articulation, and RPL. But they also self-censor their actions out of fear of losing accreditation, which

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would prevent them from benefitting from public programmes, such as free tuition for their students.

Further, there are cultural issues that make the implementation of flexibility at HEIs a challenging task. Although national policies may not promote FLPs, they may not be the main obstacle.

As was stated in one interview, ‘people would like a flexible system, but tradition and practices [of HEIs] have made it rigid. It is a matter of culture, not of law’ (MoE, official from SIES, interview, Lemaitre, Ramírez, Baeza, and Blanco, 2021). This is an allusion to the competitiveness culture prevalent in the Chilean HE context, a consequence of a marketized system. Competition for students, academic staff, resources, and accreditation push HEIs towards adopting more rigid academic models, not necessarily in line with their own values or goals.

11.6 Conclusions

The future development of FLPs in Chile largely depends on whether and how the institutional funding landscape, QA, and governance of the system evolve. Increased funding has helped to widen access and, more recently, participation via student aid, as well as providing opportunities for HEIs through competitive grants. However, rigid student aid schemes tailored towards a traditional full-time student coming directly from secondary school, and a lack of direct funding for institutions to promote flexibility and articulation, are slowing down the development of FLPs in the country.

The QA system has come a long way since its creation and has established itself in a privileged position for system steering, but no specific standards have been set to promote FLPs in HEIs through accreditation. On the contrary, QA can frequently be a barrier to initiatives, which, together with a lack of mutual trust between reviewers and institutions and among institutions, may act against further developing FLPs.

Finally, although HE governance has been strengthened in the recent legislation, there are still no systematic mechanisms that can design, plan, and implement mid- to long-term initiatives for a better-articulated HE system to push forward FLPs in Chile. This lack of a

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unifying concept for post-secondary education, together with strong, competing HE interests, has kept the subject out of the main public priorities.

Differences between the levels of discourse and those of implementation are evident. While most stakeholders who were interviewed considered FLPs to be an important component of quality in HE, at the same time, an intriguing ambivalence became obvious: flexibility was considered important and necessary at the vocational level, but public HE authorities (MoE, CNA) look upon it with mistrust when it comes to universities or academic learning, as it could, for instance, imply lowering quality standards in admissions. Flexibilization and other forms of innovation in HE seem to be perceived as risky in the more traditional settings. Still, there is a growing consensus around the proposition that flexibility does not necessarily imply a reduction in quality but is, rather, a quality imperative for better responding to student needs.

At the institutional level, however, all respondents in the two universities serving as case studies recognized the importance of flexibility and had developed interesting strategies to implement it. This may be the result of the pressure exerted by students who need, and increasingly demand, more flexible approaches to their studies, and understandably are more likely to be heard by the authorities in their own institutions. But it is also the result of HEIs who have decided to act, even in the absence of national policies, and have developed their own instruments and practices to improve flexibility and articulation.

To conclude, HE in Chile must consider the needs of the actual students it enrolls, introducing flexibility as an essential component of HE. In particular, vulnerable students, working students, students re-entering HE, and other non-traditional students require specific consideration and support. This will allow the system to adjust to a wide range of students' needs and demands, rather than forcing them to adjust to a rigid HE system designed for the past. Information systems that cater to the needs of these students, and provide them with friendly, accessible, and timely information, can help ensure that students obtain the desired competencies and learning outcomes.

11. Funding and quality assurance for flexible learning pathways in Chile

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12. Creating a robust policy framework supporting flexible learning pathways in South Africa

Heidi Bolton and Liapeng Matsau

12.1 Introduction

Legalized racial oppression in pre-1994 apartheid South Africa impacted all aspects of life, including education, training, development, and work. The end of apartheid provided the political impetus for critical engagement with this racially segregated and unequal system. Different types of learning did not have equal status, with many qualifications not linked to clear learning pathways. Transforming basic education and post-school education and training (PSET) has become a central element in the post-1994 democratization process.³⁷

The national qualifications framework (NQF) was the means chosen to integrate the education and training system and align it with the values in the new South African Constitution (RSA, 1996). The objectives of the NQF are to facilitate access to and progression in learning-and-work pathways, accelerate redress, and enhance quality and transparency for the benefit of learners individually and socioeconomic development overall (RSA, 1995, 2008). The NQF continues to frame the system for lifelong learning (LLL) in the country (RSA, 2008), and therefore acts as a backbone to flexible learning-and-work pathways.

This chapter emerged from the key findings of the study *Flexible learning pathways: The National Qualifications Framework Backbone* (Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020).³⁸ It elaborates how the NQF legislative framework in South Africa enables these pathways in the PSET system

37 PSET comprises all education and training after leaving school, at whatever stage learners leave school, as well as the education and training of those who never attended school (DHET, 2013).

38 The report was a result of collaboration between IIEP-UNESCO and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

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by outlining its key acts, policies, and instruments and drawing on the documents and interviews analysed in the IIEP-SAQA study. It illustrates how having an NQF embedded in national legislation coupled with a well-coordinated governance structure facilitates articulation and flexible learning pathways (FLPs) in higher education (HE).

12.2 Definition of flexible learning pathways in South Africa

FLPs, also referred to as ‘articulation’ in South Africa, have been a national priority since the establishment of the NQF in 1998. Articulation is understood in at least three ways, as being systemic, specific, and individual (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; DHET, 2017a; SAQA, 2020a, 2020b). *Systemic* articulation comprises ‘joined-up’ qualifications and/or part-qualifications,³⁹ formal workplace learning, professional designations,⁴⁰ and other elements that are part of the official system. *Specific* articulation refers to inter-institutional arrangements, such as recognition of prior learning (RPL), credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), memoranda of understanding and/or agreement, and other arrangements that support systemic articulation. *Individual* articulation refers to support for individuals on their learning-and-work pathways through career advice, flexible learning and teaching provision, and a variety of supportive programmes and structures (DHET, 2017). FLPs are most successful when elements at all three levels are in place and functioning together.

12.3 Legislative framework for national qualifications supports flexible pathways

The NQF legislative framework and a series of policy documents support diverse access and progression pathways of learners between FLPs in South Africa (see *Box 39*).

39 ‘A part-qualification is an assessed unit of learning that is registered as part of a qualification. For example a part-qualification can be a module, unit standard, etc.’ (SAQA, n.d.)

40 A professional designation is any kind of proof (certification or stamp of approval) from an organization demonstrating that a person earned a particular level in a field of work.

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BOX 39

NQF policy suite under the NQF Acts

1995 and 2008 –NQF Acts.

2012 –NQF level descriptors.⁴¹

2012 and 2019 – Policy and criteria for recognizing a professional body and registering a professional designation by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

2013 –White Paper for PSET by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

2013 and 2020 – Policy and criteria for registering qualifications and part-qualifications by SAQA.

2013, 2016, and 2019 – Policy and criteria for implementing RPL by SAQA.

2014 (and 2020) –Policy (and criteria) for implementing CAT by SAQA.

2016 –National policy for the coordination and funding of RPL by DHET.

2017 –National policy for articulation in PSET by DHET.

2019 –National Plan for PSET.

2020 –Policy for misrepresentation in the context of the NQF by SAQA.

Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2021 (South Africa country note).

12.3.1 Coordination of the articulation policies between quality councils supports flexible pathways

In South Africa the NQF is embedded in legislation and supported by a coordinated governance framework. The NQF was established in 1995 by the SAQA Act 58 (RSA, 1995), to integrate and transform the system divided under apartheid. A national review led to the development and promulgation of the 2008 NQF Act 67, which enabled SAQA to implement the NQF Act more effectively with its three differentiated and coordinated NQF sub-frameworks: the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF) overseen by the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi), the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) overseen by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), and the

⁴¹ An NQF level descriptor is a statement demonstrating learning achievement at a particular NQF level, indicating also the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of a qualification at that level.

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Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) overseen by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) (RSA, 2008) (see *Table 15*). In addition, all public and private PSET entities must align their practices with the NQF Act and relevant articulation policies of DHET, the Department of Basic Education, SAQA, and at least one of the quality councils. Thus, the intention under the NQF Act is to enable articulation and FLPs within and across educational levels.

The coordination of the articulation policies between the three quality councils are key for developing and strengthening FLPs. Each quality council must collaborate with SAQA and the other two quality councils, develop and manage its NQF sub-framework so that its qualifications articulate within and between the sub-frameworks, and develop policy and criteria for implementing FLPs within these qualifications.

Table 15. An integrated National Qualifications Framework in South Africa

Level	NQF sub-frameworks and qualification types			
10	HEQSF (Overseen by CHE)	Doctoral degree		
9		Master's degree		
8		Bachelor's Honours degree	Occupational certificate – Level 8	OQSF (Overseen by the QCTO)
7		Bachelor's degree	Occupational certificate – Level 7	
6		Diploma Advanced certificate	Occupational certificate – Level 6	
5		Higher certificate	Occupational certificate – Level 5	
4	GFETQSF (Overseen by Umalusi)	National certificate	Occupational certificate – Level 4	
3		Intermediate certificate	Occupational certificate – Level 3	
2		Elementary certificate	Occupational certificate – Level 2	
1		General certificate	Occupational certificate – Level 1	

Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2021 (South Africa country note).

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12.3.2 Policy suite for national qualifications and instruments offers a backbone for the implementation of flexible pathways

SAQA developed a comprehensive NQF policy suite after consultation with the three quality councils.

National Qualifications Framework level descriptors

Level descriptors ‘have been designed to contribute to coherence in the definition of learning achievement and facilitate evaluation for comparability and thus articulation within the NQF’ (SAQA, 2012: 2). The 10 levels in the South African NQF each have a ‘level descriptor’ which focuses on the same 10 areas of competence (see *Table 15*) (SAQA, 2012). The level descriptors comprise general statements to help qualification designers develop specific content appropriate for their NQF sub-framework contexts. The levels are cumulative: there is progression in terms of complexity from one level to another.

Research by SAQA (2019a) on stakeholder-reported implementation and impact of the NQF level descriptors showed that most NQF stakeholders⁴² are using them; about half of the respondents reported not experiencing difficulties in this regard. Some stakeholders reported difficulties in distinguishing the middle and lower levels of the NQF. Most of the responding stakeholders reported that the descriptors assisted them in developing qualifications that articulate with other qualifications in learning pathways (SAQA, 2012).

Policy and criteria for registering qualifications and part-qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework

SAQA’s (2013b; 2020b) *Policy and Criteria for the Registration of Qualifications and Part-Qualifications on the NQF* lays out a second key policy for articulation. To be registered on the NQF, a qualification or part-qualification must show use of the NQF level descriptors, and indicate the horizontal, vertical, and diagonal articulation⁴³ of FLPs where the qualifications (or part-qualifications) are located. There must be coherence between the constituent parts of the

42 Key NQF stakeholders include public and private providers of education and training in all of the NQF sub-framework contexts, professional bodies, organized business and organized labour, and, at the centre, lifelong learners.

43 *Vertical* articulation refers to transition of students across NQF levels within an NQF sub-framework; *horizontal* articulation occurs within an NQF level either in or across the NQF sub-frameworks; and *diagonal* articulation occurs across NQF levels and sub-frameworks.

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qualification, and between the qualification and others from which, and to which, it leads.

SAQA provides public services that support the development of FLP, such as the registration of qualifications with articulation and RPL options, a qualification verification service, and the NQF-related research.

Policy and criteria for implementing recognition of prior learning

RPL has central importance in the democratic South Africa and the NQF context. It can facilitate access, redress, and progression in FLPs. SAQA has been mandated to develop a policy on RPL⁴⁴ after consultation with the quality councils (RSA, 2008). SAQA's (2019b) *Policy and Criteria for Implementing RPL* enables two types of RPL: for access to learning and advanced standing (joining studies midway) and for credit.⁴⁵

The RPL process is facilitated by the RPL offices located in higher education institutions (HEIs). They provide support to candidates from start of application, throughout their studies, and sometimes with subsequent (further) degrees. RPL includes mediating and assessing non-formal and informal learning, howsoever obtained. The RPL process starts with advice (by appointment or on a walk-in basis), mediation, preparation for assessment, assessment, moderation, and feedback. RPL assessments can be, for example, via portfolios of evidence, testing, observation, interview, or other processes, including combinations of these approaches. The National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) shows that, since 2014, there have been 34,367 qualification achievements and 1,545,305 part-qualifications via RPL.⁴⁶

44 The status of this policy is that of a legal document; its implementation is mandatory. It is distinct from DHET's (2016) policy for coordinating and funding RPL, and is aligned to it.

45 SAQA's (2019b) RPL policy replaces SAQA's 2016 RPL policy.

46 These numbers exclude RPL achievements in public HEIs because these data are submitted to the NLRD via DHET, which currently has 'Senate Discretion' data, or all learning achievements via RPL, CAT, age-exemption, and others: the data are not segregated. These challenges are in the process of being addressed.

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Policy for credit accumulation and transfer

The national *Policy for Credit Accumulation and Transfer* (SAQA, 2020a) provides for credible, efficient, and transparent CAT, to enable optimized learner movements within and between learning entities. Education and training providers need to implement CAT in line with the aligned NQF sub-framework CAT policies developed by the three quality councils. These policies are generally aligned in practice, but work is currently underway to address the non-aligned clauses that deal with the number of credits permitted.⁴⁷ Providers need to demonstrate CAT practices in their quality reviews and to provide career advice services that make CAT opportunities known to learners. HEIs practise CAT, though less often than RPL due to it being complex and time-consuming. Academics sometimes struggle to carry out the evaluations needed in the related processes, and there is also the fact that it leads to the loss of a portion of the state funding for full-time students.

Policy for articulation and coordination, and funding of recognition of prior learning

The national policy for articulation in PSET (DHET, 2017a) and the policy on coordination and funding of RPL (DHET, 2016) play a key role in supporting the NQF to facilitate FLPs. The first policy outlines the articulation principles and responsibilities of all NQF partners and stakeholders. The second policy creates guidance for an RPL coordinating mechanism within DHET and the RPL coordination and funding-related responsibilities of SAQA, the quality councils, and providers of education and training. These two policies create an umbrella for the general requirements of the NQF partners.

12.4 Supporting instruments that govern flexible learning pathways in South Africa

There are several instruments that support alignment of the NQF sub-frameworks and therefore enable articulation and FLPs in South Africa. They refer to quality assurance (QA) and policies which are part of the NQF policy suite.

⁴⁷ DHET's (2017a) articulation policy and SAQA's (2014a) CAT policy do not limit the amount of learning for which CAT is awarded. But CHE specifies that at least 50 per cent of learning must be completed under the certifying HEI.

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12.4.1 Qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework must demonstrate flexibility to ensure quality

QA is one of the key levers in the regulation of FLPs. The three differentiated NQF sub-frameworks in combination with the mandatory articulation of qualifications enable the development of different types of qualifications and FLPs in South Africa.

The three quality councils must develop policies for registering qualifications in their NQF sub-framework contexts that are in line with SAQA policies, and submit the qualifications developed to SAQA for evaluation towards registration on the NQF (RSA, 1995, Clause 27[h](i)). They must also maintain databases of learner achievements in line with the NLRD and submit these data for uploading, and develop policy for RPL, CAT, and assessment after taking SAQA's counterpart policies into account (RSA, 1995, Clauses 27[h](ii) and [j](i-ii)).

The General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Amendment Act, Higher Education Amendment Act, and Skills Development Amendment Act – all of 2008 – are aligned to the NQF Act (RSA, 2008). This legislation provides for the quality councils' QA work in the context of the NQF Act. The National Articulation Baseline Study has shown that the qualifications registered on the NQF under the NQF Act support FLPs to greater extents; this is in part ensured by QA (SAQA, 2018; SAQA-DUT, 2020).

CHE, a quality council overseeing HE, published the HEQSF Qualification Standards in 2013. The HEQSF (CHE, 2013b) is a single framework for a diverse HE system, containing the qualification structures and rules and the roles and responsibilities for implementing them. By making the NQF levels and qualification types, descriptors, naming, entry criteria, and progression rules clear, this framework supports transparency and articulation. The HEQSF outlines CHE's responsibilities to ensure that its 'standards-development mandate takes into account the imperatives of access, articulation, progression, portability, and public accountability' (CHE, 2013a, Clause 8.3). The document specifies that it is not the role of qualification standards to determine progression and CAT. Rather, qualification standards guide articulation, establishing benchmarks for progression between HE qualifications – while articulation is

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forged through collaborative curriculum development. When HEIs develop qualifications, they must ensure that these are aligned with the NQF level descriptors and CHE's qualification standards.

In addition to CHE's qualification standards, all HEIs must seek and achieve accreditation from CHE for particular programmes in order to offer these. For the accreditation of learning programmes, the qualifications to which they link must be registered on the NQF. Also, in accreditation of programmes, CHE requires that each qualification and part-qualification registered on the NQF is part of at least one FLP and contains an articulation statement (SAQA, 2020b). These QA processes create transparency in the system: the criteria are binding for HEIs, the criteria are publicly available, and anyone can access the QA status of learning programmes via the NLRD.

CHE's (2012) criteria for programme accreditation include widened access, equity, and articulation (CHE, 2012, Clause 2). They require that qualifications and their learning programmes must, among other features, be part of the institutions' Programme Qualification Mix, and accredited. The learning outcomes of qualifications, degree of curriculum choice, teaching and learning methods, modes of delivery, learning materials, and expected completion times must also cater for the learning needs of targeted students (CHE, , 2012, Clause 3.1.1[iii]).

In addition, the criteria for programme accreditation require partnerships in HE provision that include collaboration between different types of HEIs and between the public and private sectors. 'Qualification programmes must offer learning and career pathways to students, with opportunities to articulate to other programmes and across institutions where possible' (CHE, 2012, Clause 3.1.1[v]).

There are also requirements for RPL: '[institutions must have] appropriate policies and procedures for RPL, including the identification, documentation, assessment, evaluation, and transcription of prior learning against specified learning outcomes, so that it can be articulated with current programmes and qualifications' (CHE, 2012, Clause 3.1.5 [ii]). Assessment must include an RPL option in line with the institution's RPL policies, and fair and transparent assessment.

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Demographic diversity and equity feature in the requirement for flexible administration criteria: '[To be accredited to offer qualification programmes, HEIs must have] effective administration systems [in] place for ... dealing with the needs of a diverse student population' (CHE, 2012, Clause 3.1.7 [ii]). If HEIs want to offer learning programmes, they need to meet these and other criteria. Over the years CHE has distributed to HEIs a number of guidelines and other documents that support articulation (e.g. CHE, 2016, 2017). While these documents provide a framework for implementing and managing FLPs in HEIs, the HEIs in the Bolton et al. study (2020), purposively selected, showed diverse, innovative, and effective FLP practices – in line with the ideals of the system.

12.4.2 Policies supportive of flexible learning pathways in South Africa

There are many policies and instruments at the national level that support FLPs in South Africa.

First, it is important to mention the White Paper for PSET (DHET, 2013). It sets out the vision, to be realized by 2030, for an integrated PSET system. The policy emphasizes the need to enhance integration and articulation within PSET sub-sectors and sets targets for student enrolment and completion rates by this date. The policy also highlights the importance of the NQF policy suite for supporting an integrated PSET system.

Second, there is a National Plan for PSET (DHET, 2019) developed with timelines to achieve the goals of the White Paper. The National Plan addresses RPL, the protection of credit through certification and regulation (so that students can transfer credits and not repeat unnecessary learning), articulation, and progression pathways per PSET sector – namely, HE, technical and vocational, and community education and training. It notes that in support of articulation, DHET will work with the other relevant government departments to extend the South African National Research and Education Network into all public HEIs and colleges to provide broadband access to all campuses (DHET, 2019: 74). DHET has developed draft policy for open education resources, and has been working for several years on related resources

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with the South African Institute for Distance Education. DHET has also commenced discussions around micro-credentials.

Third, the *National Policy for an Integrated Career Development System for South Africa* (DHET, 2017b) caters for young people and adults, including vulnerable groups. It provides for a comprehensive set of ‘multichannel’ strategies to enhance access, including services via walk-in offices, telephone, email, SMS, and social media; career days and fairs; and radio and television broadcasts. One of its tools is the National Career Advice Portal, in which one can input individual jobs to see the qualifications needed, or in contrast, look up specific qualifications to see possible occupations.

Fourth, there are collaborative structures including an NQF Forum for all NQF stakeholders, an Inter-Departmental NQF Steering Committee, and a CEO’s Committee of SAQA and the quality councils. SAQA must, after consultation with the quality councils, develop and implement a ‘System of Collaboration’ (RSA, 2008, Clause 13f) to guide the mutual relations and constructive cooperation between SAQA and the quality councils.

Lastly, reporting, which is part of the compliance instruments for SAQA, the quality councils, and all providers of education and training, greatly supports FLPs. SAQA, for example, must report annually to DHET on the implementation of articulation, and this report contains inputs from the three quality councils that effectively cover all three NQF sub-framework contexts.

12.5 Findings on the effectiveness of policies and instruments enabling flexible learning pathways in South Africa

The section presents the interview insights regarding the effectiveness of FLPs in the South African PSET system. The interview data were collected as part of the 2020 IIEP-SAQA research ‘SDG-4: Planning for flexible learning pathways in higher education’ (Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020). The data included interviews with senior officials in NQF partner organizations: a public university, a public university of technology (UoT), and a smaller private HEI. In addition, there were focus group discussions with students and alumni who benefitted from flexible pathways.

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From the establishment of the NQF in South Africa there have been strong foci on the implementation of RPL and CAT, enhancing access and redress, and quality and transparency in the PSET system (e.g. SAQA, 2014b, 2017, 2019a). There was a shift after the promulgation of the NQF Act (RSA, 2008), to learning pathways and learner transitioning.

All of the participants in the study strongly espoused the principles underpinning FLPs: diversity and equality, student access and support, student success, accommodating changing student demographics and working students, providing second and further chances, articulation between institutions, and addressing the geographic, linguistic, and fundamental knowledge barriers to access and progression. Commitment to these principles grew from a collective desire to redress the discriminatory practices of the past and eradicate the disadvantages that exist in the present in South Africa.

While there was a shared understanding that RPL, CAT, and articulation policies are key to FLPs, the instruments for, and applications of, these policies differed in practice – in line with policy intentions to provide enabling frameworks while encouraging diverse approaches. One HEI in the study had *fully integrated* RPL, CAT and other flexible pathways into its system; another had *specialized units* for RPL, innovative teaching, and other aspects that provided what the researchers termed *pastoral care* for students; the third offered an *individualized* approach, supporting each student with guidance and other support structures.

Almost all of the respondents in the study pointed to the contradictions between the DHET and SAQA policies for RPL and the quality council (CHE) requirements regarding the amount of learning recognized in RPL and CAT processes.⁴⁸ There were also overlaps between the QA roles of the quality councils under the NQF Act. While the HEIs in the sample dealt with the challenges in different ways, the respondents expressed frustration regarding the lack of coherence between some aspects of the policies.

48 The Quality Council policies stipulate the completion of a minimum of 50 per cent of learning under certifying institutions; these limitations do not feature in the DHET (2017) or SAQA (2013a, 2016, 2019b) policies.

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Despite these challenges, all HEIs – public and private – are obliged to develop and implement the policies and procedures for FLPs (access and articulation), as these are part of the minimum requirements for the registration of qualifications on the NQF by SAQA. The CHE accreditation of learning programmes to be offered by particular HEIs. As seen in the three HEIs in the study, the institutional access and articulation policies align with CHE’s requirements out of necessity.

While RPL for access is widely accepted and implemented, RPL for credit, and CAT, is less so. The reported challenges regarding CAT included ‘the differences in quality’ of offerings across institutions, and the complexity and time-consuming nature of mapping offerings from one institution to those in another.

Respondents also pointed to some contradictions linked to funding. The funding formula for public HEIs,⁴⁹ for example, is calculated based on student full-time equivalents. In CAT processes, both institutions involved lose out on portions of funding: the ‘original’ HEI loses the percentage of funds paid by DHET upon graduation, while the ‘certifying’ HEI loses the initial enrolment portion of the funds.

A further issue identified by respondents is the lack of public trust in private HE, and the lack of articulations between public and private HEIs. While research (SAQA, 2019a) shows increased student movement between public and private HEIs, the issue remains to some extent. However, the three HEIs in the study, while expressing CAT-related challenges, also reported CAT processes to be sufficiently robust to deal with the formal learning presented by the students seeking access in this way.

The responses pointed to the importance of monitoring FLPs in PSET by DHET, SAQA, and the three Quality Councils. There was monitoring in the form of research and development at a national level, which illuminates and enables key dimensions. While this monitoring did not use the phrasing ‘flexible learning pathways’, it focused on flexible aspects of the system, such as RPL, CAT, articulation, learning pathways, flexible teaching and learning practices, and learning support.

49 Private HEIs do not receive funding from the South African State.

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One objective almost universally monitored was ‘equity’ because equity is always part of the aims in democratic South Africa. Some of the equity categories identified by respondents included race, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, and language. While there are historical race-based trends in some HEIs, in general the demographics of students and staff in public HEIs are moving steadily towards the national demographics (CHE, 2020b). The focus has shifted over time to include throughput rates as well as access and achievements of students from different national demographics. In terms of socioeconomic status, access to all education and training has increased over time; the bursary scheme for PSET reaches 90 per cent of households in the country. All of the respondents in the research noted progress towards greater equity and the contributions of FLPs to these trends.

While the importance of the national policy and structures was widely acknowledged, interviewees noted that institutional autonomy enabled some HEIs to implement FLPs, but that it was a barrier in other instances, allowing certain HEIs to avoid implementing such pathways. Policy misalignment also acted as a barrier: such as when funding did not support the implementation of FLPs, or when Quality Council policies contradicted DHET and SAQA policies, or when there were conflicting responsibilities between the NQF bodies and statutory professional bodies, based on old legislation for professional bodies.

12.6 Conclusions

The chapter highlighted that national legislation and policy play a key role in supporting the implementation of FLPs. Specifically, having a comprehensive NQF legislative framework supported by policies, criteria, and standards (the NQF policy suite and other articulation policies) can enhance the access and progression of learners through FLPs. They are integral to the NQF policy basket for education, training, development, and work in South Africa, given that holistic LLL is a key organizing principle for the NQF policy. The NQF aligns the system to the values of the Constitution and there is deep political will to implement it. This commitment is also visible in the practices of NQF stakeholders (DPME, 2018).

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In addition, the coordination of articulation policies between Quality Councils is important to strengthening the implementation of FLPs. Having a coordinated governance framework is important to ensure the articulation of qualifications across the entire NQF and across the three sub-frameworks. The stipulation that qualifications must show articulation for accreditation and their registration on the NQF clearly supports FLPs throughout the South African HE system.

The IIEP-SAQA research also noted the importance of addressing challenges arising from non-alignment of aspects of national RPL and CAT policies. It underscored the need for the current national campaign to strengthen learning pathways in particular sectors to continue and expand. It recommended revisiting the present funding formula to incentivize CAT, and illuminated the reasons for the apparent lack of RPL data from public HEIs. Lastly, it pointed to the need for more specific and detailed articulation-related reporting at national level.

While some aspects of certain policies need to align (Bolton, Matsau, and Blom, 2020), the related policy refinement has commenced (CHE, 2020a). A FLPs monitoring system emerged some time ago in South Africa, and the analysis of data in the NLRD is a powerful tool for tracking progress in terms of RPL, learning pathways, and learner transitioning within and between the NQF sub-frameworks (SAQA, 2017). Also, recent SAQA research and development (SAQA, 2018, 2020c) showed the importance of ‘articulation by design’: in other words, developing FLPs at the design stage of qualifications. Collaboration between the entities from which and into which learners will articulate is key. Career advice, the quality of teaching and learning, and the flexible support of diverse learners play a key role as well.

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Conclusions. Moving flexible learning pathways from policy to practice

Michaela Martin and Uliana Furiv

Introduction

IIEP's research on flexible learning pathways (FLPs) is the first international comparative study of FLP policies and practices. It was initiated in 2018, before the COVID-19 crisis, but the topic of flexibility in higher education (HE) became even more relevant during the pandemic, when shifting rapidly to remote online teaching became essential for both HE systems and institutions to ensure learning continuity. It can be expected that FLPs with a focus on student-centred learning will be even higher on countries' policy agendas in the future. More HE authorities are realizing that FLPs offer much-needed choices to an ever more diverse student population, and that they support equity in educational opportunities and eventually the continuity of learning, labour market entry, and social wellbeing at large.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL), open studies, credit transfer, and programme and institutional articulations have been in existence for some time and to various extents in many HE systems. More recently, a trend that accelerated during the pandemic, massive open online courses (MOOCs), micro-credentials and digital credentials have opened up additional flexible pathways for learners. These various types of flexible provision have not often been put under the same framework and analysed comprehensively to ascertain how effectively they can be adapted to the needs of diverse learners.

This final chapter, derived from the findings of an international survey and eight country case studies, presents lessons learned from the IIEP-UNESCO research *SDG-4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*. It offers recommendations for national-level policy-makers and planners (e.g. regulatory, quality assurance (QA), and funding bodies) and institutional-level policy-makers and planners

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(e.g. rectors, deans) on effective policies and good practices for FLPs for getting into, getting through, and getting out of HE. It also attempts to view these conclusions in the light of necessary HE transformation for (post-)pandemic times.

Creating a favourable policy framework for flexible learning pathways

Develop a comprehensive policy framework for an integrated post-secondary education

The IIEP research highlights that in the United Kingdom (UK), South Africa, and Jamaica, there is a strong policy drive to move towards a post-18 education sector that integrates vocational education, further education, and higher education under a single policy framework. An integrated post-secondary education sector supports pathways between different sub-sectors and so allows different types of learner to have diverse study options, to either pursue academic studies or gain specific skills to enter the labour market.

The K-13 Strategy in Jamaica, for example, demonstrates how the Career Advancement Programme, linked to the Occupational Associate Degree providing access to a full bachelor's via the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) trail, has made it possible to bridge the gap between TVET and academic HE. Even if educational providers do not always treat these programmes as mainstream, students value them as preparation for the labour market and as offering an additional route to enter HE, and this in turn reduces the number of students dropping out from secondary education without a qualification.

However, without a comprehensive policy framework, pathways between the different HE sub-sectors, even when already implemented, may be little used. In Morocco, a number of regulated bridges have been developed to allow mobility both between TVET and professional HE, and between non-selective HE and HE with regulated access (after the second year of studies). And yet only a small number of applicants (5 per cent) see their request for transfer satisfied, owing to insufficient places to satisfy the demand in the regulated HE sector.

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Creating an integrated post-secondary sector with well-articulated pathways to avoid dead ends is the main purpose of FLPs. Having a unified policy framework for post-secondary education supports the integration of all types of higher education, as well as TVET and academic HE.

Approach flexible learning pathways as a coherent and holistic set of policies and practices

The IIEP research highlights that the basic rationale for introducing flexibility in HE is common to all the case countries: both to respond to the needs of individual learners and to make HE systems more efficient and equitable. However, this triple objective can also create tensions, which adds to the challenge of introducing FLPs in HE under a coherent policy. For example, the FLP policies set forth by the Malaysian Government have prioritized the development of human resources, which can conflict with the equity agenda, as limitations to HE access and retention still exist for disadvantaged groups.

The IIEP research also shows that while none of the eight case countries has a unique policy for FLPs, the objective is addressed under separate policies for national qualifications framework (NQF), recognition of prior learning (RPL), and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) policies. The South African case, for example, demonstrates the importance of the NQF acting as a backbone for FLP and enabling policy coherence. The NQF in South Africa creates provisions for articulation, RPL, and CAT tools, across the post-school education and training (PSET) sector. It also covers different levels and all stages of the individual student's journey (entry, progression, and completion of HE).

Implementing FLPs requires an explicit, holistic, and comprehensive policy approach where they are seen as mainstream, rather than 'alternative', 'add-on', or 'non-traditional', covering all stages of students' journeys, for getting into, getting through, and getting out of HE. The national policy agenda should develop a common definition of what FLPs are and what their purpose is in order to prioritize among FLP objectives. It is important to view FLPs as a holistic set of policies encompassing entry, progression, and completion of a student's journey.

Conclusions. Moving flexible learning pathways from policy to practice

Emphasize equity concerns in the national policies on flexible learning pathways

Due to the lack of digital infrastructure, and connectivity issues, millions of students have been deprived of access to online HE studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has also shown that those who are disadvantaged are most in need of flexibility to benefit from HE. Equity remains a moving target in any system, yet research has shown that flexible HE responds well to equity concerns.

In Finland, for example, a country where equity concerns are high on the policy agenda, mature learners are less likely to be accepted on degree programmes or receive student financial support. In India, due to historic discrimination between learners in line with the caste and tribe system, reservation quotas have been introduced to secure educational opportunities for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Finally, in the UK, to reflect the principle of equity, some universities apply contextualized admissions for students from disadvantaged backgrounds; these consider geographical, socioeconomic, and various other factors that might have disrupted students' education.

It is important to create a linkage between equity policies and FLPs to establish stronger policy coherence. Having a dedicated FLP policy with a clear equity objective will allow for clearer policy guidance with related monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the effects of FLPs on disadvantaged groups.

Involve stakeholders in the development of policies for flexible learning pathways

The IIEP research demonstrates the importance of planning for FLPs in a consultative manner, in which policy-makers, HE managers, students, and industry representatives provide input and feedback. In South Africa, for example, a collaboration to map out qualifications between the representatives of three different quality councils has enhanced articulations in the post-secondary education system.

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Cooperation between the HE sector and the labour market is essential for providing work-based learning opportunities for students. Finland is an excellent example: a high-level consultation process led to a shared vision on FLPs through cooperation between HEIs, government, student unions, and labour market actors. As a result of this cooperation, Finland introduced a new concept in HE, ‘studification of work’, which refers to flexible ways of gaining professional experience while studying and is also recognized in the curriculum. Such active cooperation between HEIs and the labour market should be more widely spread in HE.

The implementation of FLPs in all sub-sectors of post-secondary education requires engagement with all stakeholders, government, HEIs, students, and industry. Labour market representatives should be involved in the development of FLPs (for instance a policy framework for RPL), but also in designing more diverse and inclusive curricula that meet the needs of students and society.

Improve awareness about flexible learning pathways among stakeholders involved in their implementation

Awareness of stakeholders, and in particular HEIs, promotes FLP policy at a national level and in its subsequent implementation. The availability of formalized guidelines and relevant tools both improves awareness and guides implementation of FLPs in HEIs. This has been the case in South Africa, where the implementation of FLPs is supported with guidelines to introduce articulation in qualifications across the PSET system.

However, a lack of understanding and awareness of FLP initiatives may lead to slow implementation and uptake. For example, in Malaysia, although the government developed clear strategic directions to implement national goals for the introduction of FLPs in HEIs (especially for disadvantaged students), the lack of awareness of FLP policies among mid-level implementers resulted in the poor functioning of FLP policies at the institutional level. The same was happening with the NQF-J in Jamaica, where actors at the institutional level were not aware of its existence and therefore did not use it to guide credit transfer

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and RPL. Improved awareness can create stronger political support, shape a policy agenda on FLPs, and, most importantly, advance their implementation in HEIs.

Promoting FLPs needs to become a strategic priority of HE stakeholders. Information on FLP policies should be disseminated effectively across all decision-making levels and in particular among HEIs and students. This process needs to be supported with guidelines and readily accessible information for stakeholders.

Constructing flexible learning pathways at different stages

Enable government support and collaboration between sub-sectors to enhance diverse entry pathways to higher education

Data from the IIEP international survey show that alternative entry routes are still not a common practice in HE systems. Short-cycle qualifications⁵⁰ programmes (ISCED Level 5) (e.g. in vocational colleges) provide at present more permeability than academic bachelor's programmes (ISCED Level 6). In case countries where FLPs are practised at ISCED Level 6, the most prominent diverse entry routes are preparatory programmes, RPL, and open entry policies.

Cooperation between HEIs and upper secondary schools or vocational institutions can also facilitate flexible entry through articulation between qualifications. In Finland, for example, the Government Programme 2019 and the Act on General Upper Secondary Education emphasize and incentivize collaboration between upper secondary institutions and HEIs to offer introductory and preparatory courses for admissions. In Chile, HEIs can benefit from special funding if they collaborate with disadvantaged secondary schools to support promising learners to prepare for entry into HE. Similarly, cooperation between TVET institutions and HEIs can allow learners to enter HE, for example, based on the recognition of work experience or vocational qualifications.

⁵⁰ A tertiary-level qualification with a professional and skills orientation, typically obtained at TVET institutions; prepares students for an early labour market entry or for entry to a university.

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Cooperation within upper secondary education, including TVET and HE, is necessary for better articulation of pathways. Government funding policies need to create financial incentives to build cooperation and trust between providers when they offer flexible entry pathways.

Develop an overarching policy for the implementation of recognition of prior learning

Data from the IIEP international survey shows that RPL, gained from non-formal and informal learning, is still not a common practice across the world. RPL is also more often practised by vocational institutions than by academic HEIs. This is the case in Jamaica, where the RPL system is effectively implemented only by TVET providers. In Finland, similarly, universities of applied sciences enrol students via RPL based on vocational qualifications more frequently than universities.

A key point for RPL implementation is, therefore, the development of uniform and transparent criteria for assessing learners' prior experience, supported with appropriate RPL procedures. The Malaysian experience offers a good example of RPL (in Malaysia called Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning or APEL) procedures defined through APEL policy at the national level and communicated via APEL centres to prospective applicants across the country to ensure wider and harmonized implementation.

A national policy framework on RPL is necessary to ensure both standardization of the RPL criteria and assessment methods across TVET institutions and HEIs. Efforts are needed (via training and a set of guidelines from national authorities) to ensure that RPL is applied more widely by HEIs.

Develop flexible progression of learners through effective transfer systems

It is not uncommon that learners who enter through alternative access modalities are expected to strive and compete with full-time 'traditional' learners. This does not acknowledge why these learners needed alternative access modalities in the first place: due to caring

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responsibilities, financial struggles, disability, or other disadvantages based on ethnic, racial, or gender discrimination. Thus, such learners also need to benefit from special support during their studies in terms of pace, place, time, or learning delivery mode. The experience from Chile supports this point: a large majority of the students who entered through special programmes dropped out during the first year.

The IIEP research demonstrates that flexible pathways leading to study progression are widely practised in all case countries. Credit transfers in some case countries also enable the progression of learners in HE. Jamaica, for example, uses a national credit transfer policy – the ‘2+2’ model – which supports easy transfer between community colleges and universities. However, the study also identifies a lack of trust in credits obtained in TVET institutions. There is a perception that quality standards of TVET programmes are lower than those of academic institutions, hence in many countries this limits credit transfer from TVET institutions to universities.

Systems that enable student progression should be supported by a national policy on credit transfer that promotes student mobility across sub-sectors, to ensure uniform implementation. The development of a (credit) transfer system needs to be based on a collaborative effort between national and institutional stakeholders across the HE sector. Disadvantaged students require special support in terms of counselling, tutoring, or mentoring.

Improve the perception of open and distance learning programmes as being on a par with regular face-to-face academic programmes

Open and distance learning (ODL) has become the main mode of delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning during the pandemic was greatly facilitated when HE systems were able to mobilize digital resources from existing ODL platforms. ODL attracts millions of learners worldwide and provides them with more choice in time, pace, and mode of delivery. The IIEP research shows that ODL delivered through a variety of means (e.g. open learning, MOOCs, and micro-credentials) increases access, progression, and skills development for many learners. However, the quality and recognition of ODL courses

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remains a challenge in many countries. In India, ODL programmes are still perceived to be of lower quality, and therefore not equal in their standing, to regular face-to-face programmes.

Often, the lack of parity between online and face-to-face provision stems from ineffective policy guidance to regulate the quality of online learning. In the UK, for instance, due to the lack of national guidance on ODL and the high level of autonomy of HEIs, the implementation of ODL and online courses varies substantially, occasionally suffering from poor quality.

It is necessary to develop policy guidance for digitalization and online learning. National QA bodies need to develop quality standards for ODL aligned to those of regular programmes. At the level of HEIs, there is a need to apply the same quality standards for distance education and regular programmes in terms of curriculum content, examination requirements, guidance to students, and opportunities for training faculty members.

Allow recognized MOOCs to bear credits in regular degree programmes

MOOCs have been introduced as an innovative instrument to engage greater numbers of students in HE, and they have become particularly relevant during the pandemic. In India, for example, MOOCs delivered via the SWAYAM and NPTEL platforms offer HE courses to traditional, non-traditional, and disadvantaged learners, and some HEIs in India have made them a mandatory part of the curriculum. In addition, in India regulation has allowed host institutions of the SWAYAM courses to recognize up to 20 per cent (during COVID-19 this proportion was increased to 40 per cent) of total credits obtained via MOOCs in one semester. This is an important step in giving these courses an equal standing to regular face-to-face courses, and in allowing students to benefit from the recognition of credits obtained by online means to complement the credits obtained through regular full-time courses.

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MOOCs need to be assessed and quality assured against the same standards as traditional courses, and MOOC credits recognized in regular degree programmes, thus contributing to accessibility, flexibility, and affordability in acquiring qualifications. MOOCs should also be converted into stackable micro-credentials building up towards a qualification.

Create a national credit bank system to allow for easier validation and storage of credits

The IIEP research also highlights a global trend, which is to develop a national system for accessibility, portability, and storage of credits. A National Academic Credit Bank (NAC-Bank) system is currently being developed by the Government of India (University Grants Commission) to offer a more effective way to store and recognize credits for (re-)entry and transfer between different HEIs and programmes.

The aim of a credit bank is to store a proof of learning obtained by a student to facilitate (re-)entry into HE based on a formal credit system. A national credit bank can act as a platform for the storage of micro-credentials offered by HEIs. Micro-credentials, which are a proof of short learning experiences and acquired learning outcomes, need to be assessed against transparent standards and a dedicated QA framework. A national credit bank can also act as a storehouse for student data and certified credentials that demonstrate that holders of the credentials achieved learning outcomes and record the assessment methods applied, the credits gained, and the credit-awarding body.

To support stackable learning systems, there is a need to develop national credit banks. They can support clear procedures for credit validation to ensure smooth transfer. A credit bank system can guarantee that the same standards are used to verify credits from both TVET and academic institutions.

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Strengthen pathways for learners to flexibly transition from higher education to the labour market

Flexibility to support transition of students to the labour market is as important as flexible entry and progression. More flexible pathways to complete HE and prepare for the labour market can potentially improve the employability of graduates and accommodate students' different learning styles.

The IIEP research shows that while pathways that support employability through a combination of work and study are less common, they are available in several case countries. For example, Finnish HEIs cooperate with the labour market on the principle of 'studification of work' that allows students to obtain credits for a degree while working, through work placements or student exchange periods included in their study programmes.

It is important to introduce flexibility in the organization of degree programmes by integrating work-based learning into the HE curriculum. Such a policy allows students to combine study and work flexibly (e.g. through work-study placements) and can greatly improve their employability after graduation.

Supporting flexible learning pathways with appropriate governance tools

Balance regulation and autonomy to ensure a comprehensive introduction of flexible learning pathways

The IIEP research spotlights that regulation is necessary but currently not sufficient to ensure effective implementation of FLPs. A governance system based on rigid regulation can constrain institutional initiatives in the area of FLPs and create barriers to flexibilization of HE. At the same time, institutional autonomy is necessary so that HEIs can develop initiatives that suit their local realities. But regulation can also guide implementation for FLPs that are part of a national policy. The Moroccan case study identified lack of guiding regulations for policy implementation as a major obstacle to the implementation of Law 01.00.

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The IIEP research shows that a high level of competition between HEIs can lead to lack of trust between them and become an obstacle to the development of FLPs between universities. In South Africa, for example, lack of parity of esteem between HEIs hinders cooperation between public and private HEIs in the implementation of CAT, RPL, and other articulation policies. The Chile case shows how a system of credit transfer only exists between the most prestigious public universities, thus excluding technical and professional institutions and creating obstacles for articulation across sub-sectors.

National regulations and inclusive policies and instruments play a key role in guiding HEIs to strengthen links between different education providers. Regulation should avoid being too restrictive and encourage and incentivize HEIs to create partnerships for the implementation of FLPs.

Quality assurance should embrace flexible learning pathways as a policy objective

The IIEP research demonstrates that QA can be a powerful tool to promote FLPs. By embracing FLPs as an objective to be promoted, QA can guide HEIs in their implementation and set standards for the implementation of FLPs. In Malaysia, for example, QA steers the implementation of APEL, micro-credentials, and MOOCs, with standards and guidelines for the entire HE sector.

However, when QA policies favour a traditional academic model, they often work as a deterrent to innovation for enhanced flexibility. To preserve accreditation outcomes, some Chilean HEIs, for example, refrain from innovation to make sure of meeting QA standards derived from the model of the more prestigious universities, which commonly use a traditional academic approach.

The international survey also indicates that QA can contribute to the development of FLPs through the alignment of programme standards with the NQF programme and levels descriptors, and therefore supports horizontal and vertical articulation of students. The South Africa programme's accreditation and registration of qualifications

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on the NQF require a clear application of RPL and CAT between programmes, levels, and sub-frameworks.

QA through accreditation should reflect FLPs as a policy objective. It is also important to align the quality criteria for programme accreditation with the NQF level descriptors. By aligning these two aspects, it is possible to stipulate the articulation and FLPs in the qualifications offered.

Create an integrated national qualifications framework system with well-aligned vocational and academic studies sub-sectors

The international survey conducted by IIEP demonstrates that NQFs, which recognize integration of adult education, non-formal, and informal learning, are not yet widespread. Although most countries in the study (e.g. South Africa, Finland, Jamaica, and Malaysia) have qualifications frameworks that support FLPs, issues related to the transition of learners between TVET and HE sub-sectors persist. The South African example shows that the NQF can form a backbone for the articulation of sub-sectors and their programmes. The alignment of pathways is based on the principle of ‘articulation by design’, where cooperation between providers of qualifications is central for their alignment and for FLPs to function.

Countries need to develop integrated NQFs, which allow the recognition of non-formal and informal learning by demonstrating comparisons in the learning outcomes of different programmes, sectors, and contexts. A common NQF system can facilitate the trust and collaboration within and across sub-sectors to promote the mobility of learners through various FLPs, such as, among other mechanisms, RPL and CAT.

Provide financial resources to incentivize the implementation of flexible learning pathways

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that funding is crucial to support the goals of flexibility and equity in HE systems. Many HEIs require investments to develop online infrastructure and provide support for students and staff. The IIEP research further highlights

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the importance of student funding to support HE accessibility. According to the IIEP research, most participating countries support access through scholarships, loans, free tuition programmes, or funding for bridging programmes. For example, in Chile approximately 70 per cent of all public funding for HEIs goes to student support. A policy of free tuition fees was introduced in 2018 and prioritizes disadvantaged 20–24-year-olds enrolled in full-time, face-to-face undergraduate studies for four years. This policy excludes working, part-time, and distance education students, which is a real obstacle to their participation in FLPs.

HEIs also require direct financial support for the implementation of FLPs; this is, however, often not available. In South Africa, for example, universities have to finance RPL offices from their own resources, which is a clear obstacle to engaging in RPL developments. They do not receive funding if they offer less than 50 per cent of a qualification, which also impedes the recognition of credits obtained by a student in another HEI.

In Finland, multiple government projects have financed e-learning, cross-study, open studies, and working and study pathways at HEIs. The new funding model (2021–2024) rewards HEIs for credits taken by students and so enables cross-studying and continuous learning opportunities. Through project-based funding, it creates strong incentives for institutional cross-sector collaboration.

Financial incentives are needed to introduce FLPs in HEIs. Student support needs to be available for all students, including adult learners and HE returnees. Government-funded projects are effective tools to pilot the use of FLPs at HEIs and subsequently promote their wider use. Lastly, national funding models are crucial for incentivizing the implementation of FLPs in HEIs.

Use data to monitor and evaluate the implementation and impact of flexible learning pathways

The IIEP research demonstrates that M&E of FLPs is crucial for identifying and addressing potential barriers and assessing the

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impact of FLPs. In South Africa, a National Learner's Record Database (NLRD) already monitors progress in RPL (although only in public HEIs) across the various NQF sub-frameworks. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is tracking the implementation of RPL and articulation using NLRD data. The quality councils of the three sub-sectors (general education, TVET, and university) also submit annual reports to SAQA on the implementation of articulation in their NQF sub-framework contexts. In Chile, the National Council for Education (CNED) oversees the implementation of FLPs in the admission of working students through RPL to newly established technical training centres. These examples show that a systematic and system-wide monitoring to analyse the impact of FLPs is possible.

However, in most study countries, M&E of FLPs is practised sporadically by HEIs on a voluntary basis. The lack of national comprehensive data on the number of students entering HE via FLPs is striking, and the study of progression is close to absent from information systems. And there are hardly any statistical data available to assess the impact of FLPs on equity groups. Issues related to the lack of capacity for nationwide monitoring, but also data privacy, make it challenging to establish effective national data systems for equity groups.

The IIEP international survey shows that more countries practise policy monitoring through quantitative information than a posteriori evaluation. While data are available, they are not systematically used for evaluation that could support the improvement of policies. The analysis of the impact of FLPs on disadvantaged learners is particularly absent in M&E of FLP policies.

It is important to reinforce data systems that track the implementation of FLPs and share the information with stakeholders. Particular attention should be paid to collecting more data on learners' progression and completion. Also it is essential to disaggregate data by equity groups to be able to understand how FLPs contribute to achieving access, progression, and completion of HE among equity groups. Further, we need an evaluation a posteriori of reform implementation to better understand achievements and obstacles.

Conclusions. Moving flexible learning pathways from policy to practice

Guidance during progression can help students to move to higher levels of education and attain better outcomes

Good information and guidance systems are needed to help students make informed study choices, but they are especially important in contexts where there are multiple pathways. National information platforms play a crucial role in Finland, South Africa, and Chile. They typically offer information on the available national study offer, conditions for admissions, and related career opportunities, but they often do not provide information on alternative pathways into HE and transfer options. They are often not comprehensive and tend to miss information on available MOOCs and micro-credentials.

The IIEP research has noted that in most case countries guidance systems are stronger at the institutional than the national level. At the level of HEIs, more information is available on FLPs at all stages, particularly on transfer opportunities, ways of combining work and study, and transitioning to the labour market. A very interesting example comes from Finland, where students are supported individually by counsellors to prepare personal study plans. The plans assist students in navigating the diverse learning pathways to meet their needs, but, even with the plans, not all advisors are knowledgeable of the various pathways.

There is a need for better information on providers and existing learning pathways. National services for information and career guidance should inform students about alternative admissions, existing articulations, and procedures on RPL and CAT. National information services are especially useful in highly autonomous HE systems in which FLPs are created at the HEI level and where the information on FLPs is not always unified. Learners have to be advised early at the important transition points. The information should focus on reaching the most disadvantaged learners, those who would particularly benefit from FLPs.

Conclusions. Moving flexible learning pathways from policy to practice

Future research

IIEP's multi-year international research on FLPs used a comprehensive process producing a stocktaking exercise, an international survey, and eight country case studies. It highlighted the importance of a holistic approach to the implementation of FLPs for the entire HE system at all stages of the student journey (access, progression, completion, and preparation for the labour market). However, as emphasized in this research, the pathways to completion and preparation for the labour market have not been sufficiently explored. Therefore, the study recommends further research in this area, focusing on pathways that provide flexibility to enhance the employability of students.

The IIEP study attempted to capture the effectiveness of FLPs at both the policy and institutional levels, mainly through qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. While such data certainly provided important first insights into the common challenges faced by learners going through such pathways and the impact FLPs had on their lives, the sample was limited, making it difficult to draw general conclusions on the benefits for learners. Lack of statistical data on the participation and success of disadvantaged groups in FLPs further exacerbated this difficulty. It is therefore recommended that a more detailed assessment of the impact of FLPs on learners is conducted to obtain a wider picture of the effectiveness of FLPs on (disadvantaged) learners.

The study provided key insights into innovative policies and practices of FLPs and how they can function effectively. Through a comparative international review, the study tried to understand the different contexts of FLP development. It captured the relationship between national policies and the institutional context in the implementation of FLPs. The impact of support mechanisms on FLPs, such as QA, NQFs, funding, and guidance, also need to be examined more deeply. As the sample of HEIs studied under each national case study was limited, it would be useful to conduct a broader exploration of institutional practices in follow-up research.

Finally, one has to acknowledge that COVID-19 has made clear the urgent need for countries and institutions to introduce new policies

Conclusions. Moving flexible learning pathways from policy to practice

and practices with regard to flexible delivery. Therefore, follow-up research would be useful to reflect post-crisis realities and the factors that have facilitated and impeded the continuity of learning during the pandemic. In particular, research could take stock of effective ODL models to deliver learning in a more flexible way, to inform future ODL practices. Future research could also focus on newly emerging modes to offer and certify short-term learning, such as the use and effectiveness of MOOCs, micro-credentials, and credit bank systems.

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About the book

Higher education systems across the world are currently faced with a massive influx of learners with more diverse needs. They are expected to respond to this growing diversity through a more flexible learning offer and pathways that allow all learners, including those from disadvantaged groups, to access, progress through, and complete, higher education.

To enhance knowledge on how to provide increased flexibility in higher education, IIEP–UNESCO undertook an international research project on SDG-4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways (FLPs) in Higher Education. The project included a stocktaking of policies, instruments, and practices, an international survey among UNESCO Member States, and eight in-depth country studies on Chile, Finland, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Morocco, South Africa, and the UK.

This book presents the findings from the research, including a cross-country analysis of available FLP policies and practices, and how they enhance equitable higher education systems. It also presents a series of country experiences with innovative approaches to alternative entry, flexible progression, and governance systems in support of FLPs.

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