

Student Success: Flexible learning part three

Podcast transcript

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Key

- + **Stuart:** Stuart Norton (introduction)
- + **Mark:** Mark Loon (host)
- + **Keitha:** Professor Keitha Dunstan
- + **Ruksana:** Professor Ruksana Osman
- + **Lisa:** Professor Lisa Anderson

Transcript

Stuart: Flexible learning is about empowering students by offering them choices in how, what, when and where they learn: the pace, place and mode of delivery. Flexible learning requires a balance of power between institutions and students, and seeks to find ways in which choice can be provided that is economically viable and appropriately manageable for institutions and students alike.

My name is Stuart Norton, senior Adviser in Learning and Teaching at Advance HE and I'm leading the update to the Advance HE Student Success Framework Series. I'm delighted to introduce these podcasts that are part of a range of activity linked to the forthcoming Advance HE literature Review, authored by Professor Mark Loon of Northumbria University.

The flexible learning literature review project looked in-depth into 105 research articles published between 2016 and 2021, including Advance HE's report on the topic. The papers reviewed detailed research undertaken across the world, using quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods.

These podcasts complement this review, looking at different, yet equally important aspects of flexible learning. The whole series of podcasts are available on the Advance HE website alongside all the member benefit work that's been undertaken so far and will continue to do so in the Student Success framework series.

Mark: Hello and welcome to Advance HE's Podcast on flexible learning we have a tremendous panel today made out of three eminent experts from three continents. First we have Professor Ruksana Osman who's Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa and who is also the UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education for Diversity and Development. Then we have Professor Lisa Anderson, Interim Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education at the University of Liverpool in the UK and

is also former Co-Vice Chair of the British Academy of Management, and then we've got Professor Keitha Dunstan, Provost at Bond University in Australia and Chair of Universities Australia Deputy Vice Chancellor's Academic Working Group for Micro Credentials. And I'm Mark Loon, Professor of Management and Organisation Studies at Northumbria University in the UK and the author of the recent literature review on flexible learning published by Advance HE. And in terms of today's format each member will be sharing with us their three views on the state of flexible learning in their own respective context, the key issues in flexible learning as they see it, and their views on the future of flexible learning. So Ruksana, may I please start with you with the first question. What is the state of flexible learning in your respective context?

Ruksana: Thank you for this invitation to be on this panel and it's wonderful to be with Lisa and Keitha, I look forward to this discussion. I think I do want to make the point that the South African context is quite diverse. So we have research intensive universities, we have universities of technologies and then comprehensive universities and I do speak from the perspective of a research intensive university and I think one needs to keep that in mind when I speak about some of the institutional responses. In my response I will inevitably talk about the national context but also the institutional context. So let me give it a go and think about how we think about flexible learning. I do think that we have a problem not just in South Africa or at my university but globally. We have a definitional problem around flexible learning and by that I mean that it's understood in very different ways by different universities globally not just on the continent. And some I think, with the pandemic, associate flexible learning with online learning or emergency remote learning and so I think there is this definitional problem. There's also this problem about seeing it as blended learning or hybrid learning and so on. My sense of what we're doing at our university is we've thought a lot about flexible learning institutionally and even nationally. Nationally I think the tendency is to see it as the distinction between face-to-face full time higher education versus virtual online education. So I think at least nationally they make that distinction.

Particularly at our university we sought to think about flexible learning certainly around modes of learning and modes of delivery but I think our emphasis is far more on the logistics of flexible learning. So in other words, we have five pathways to enable flexible learning for the student. One is face to face, so in other words a student can come full time to the university. Another pathway would be part-time studies particularly for people who are working. Another opportunity, another pathway would be occasional studies as a form of flexible learning. A fourth pathway would be the use of short courses. A fifth pathway would be MOOCs and we have a partnership with Edex where we offer MOOCs, and then micro credentialing is something that we're starting to think about quite a lot and finally we have what is called recognition of prior learning and I think in the Australian context is referred to as accreditation of prior learning (APL) and so on. So our emphasis is quite a lot on different pathways to enable students to flexibly access higher education and this is no coincidence you know that we come from a historical background where access to higher education was

not allowed to the majority of people particularly people of color like myself as well. So with the advent of democracy in 1994 these pathways have opened up to enable higher participation in higher education and of course to remove the barriers. So institutionally and nationally there's quite a lot of thinking and action around flexible learning but most of the thinking and the action is in the domain of pathways. At my own university yes we are looking at pathways and inside of the pathways. We do focus on different pedagogical approaches that allow for flexible learning and those pedagogical approaches may well be experiential learning to problem based learning etc, so ours is a combination of providing pathways and then looking at some pedagogical elements. I have to say at the institutional level the processes and the structures have not matured so well to enable student to take, for example, a MOOC and a short course and build that towards a formal full-time qualification. I think the processes are not that mature but it's quite a broad range of offerings in terms of what flexible learning is.

Mark: Great. Thank you very much Ruksana and Lisa.

Lisa: Yeah, so it's nice to meet you all first of all and thank you for inviting me. I'm always wary about being called an expert so I'll give some views whether they're expert views or not I don't know. So I'll talk first of all about my context in the context of the UK and I think in the UK there are some universities that are really well on in terms of flexible learning and using online resources and you know the Open University of course is a prime example of that who are very sophisticated, very experienced. I think my university, the University of Liverpool is probably and quite typical of lots of universities in terms of what we do with our full-time undergraduate students and before I go on to talk about that we actually also do have a fully online suite of programmes for postgraduates that we've been running since 2001. So we have lots of experience in running online, fully online, fully remote learning that we've been doing for an awful long time with some pretty unsophisticated technology to start with. And actually our technology is still pretty unsophisticated because that helps us get people to get access to it. So it's much more inclusive for students and so I can talk a little bit about that, but in terms of the broad UK context I think our university is fairly typical of lots of others in that we woke up to flexible and online learning as the pandemic happened and thought here's something that we've been thinking about for a long time and now we've really got to do it. So we switched into remote learning mode two years ago along with everybody else and we've learned as we've gone along. I have to say we did draw on some of the things that we've done already with our fully online programmes but before that really I would say that we had pockets of good practice across the university mainly from enthusiasts, people who are really into online and flexible learning who are doing their own thing and doing great things for students but without a fully institutional strategy. And that's the point that we're at now. We're thinking about how do we use all of this learning that we've got across the last two years and turn that into an institutional strategy. And the way that we're doing that is talking to our students about what they've enjoyed, how they've learned, what they've found interesting and helpful for them, what they would like to see persistent in the future and actually a lot of our students are telling us that they did like

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learning online but they actually love coming to campus as well and that is a real authentic university experience for them. So the conundrum that that we're dealing with at the moment is how do we get this this blend? How do we get this so that students can access learning in lots of different ways but still have that authentic university experience? So how do we use all the things that we've learned about pedagogy and how do we use all the things that we've learned about how students like to learn and turn that into something that will give us a model for the future? So that's that's where we are at the moment.

Mark: Great. Thank you very much Lisa that was really interesting. And Keith what is your views on on flexibility in your context?

Keitha: Thank you Mark and again it's wonderful to meet you all as well. I think in Australia our different modes and different approaches to flexible learning are very similar to what the other two speakers mentioned. I think I could say in Australia we have had quite a disruption to the higher education sector. It was already happening well before Covid in a sense largely driven by changes in government policy, much more of a user pay focus. So a lot more competition between universities. So a lot of universities were looking for ways to distinguish themselves and having different approaches and being more flexible were ways to distinguish themselves particularly for some of the regional universities that may not have been as attractive to some students, and you know similar to what others mentioned in terms of online specialisation and so on. I think the other thing that's happened in Australia more recently - and it's kind of like a perfect storm if you like - so we have this government policy where it's very much user pay, a little bit more vocationally focused and applied than maybe universities would like government policy to be, partially because of that increased competition from outside the sector. So I'm from a private university but I'm still from a university. So we have a lot of private providers in Australia who are now in our space. We also have professional bodies who are very much now in our space and that came together with a very favorable employment environment. So so what we've had basically is continually declining postgraduate numbers for for some time. And as as you're all aware and others have already mentioned you know the rise of MOOCs and and so on, we actually found ourselves in an environment where - and I'll focus a little bit on micro credentials at at this stage - if universities didn't change their approach to how they were dealing with this space then we simply would have been left behind and we would have lost what was happening in that postgraduate space, so less emphasis from employers. We used to have the case where employers would pay for the fees for an Mba for example for a staff member. They were no longer interested. They just wanted to have employees work on specific skills. So so very much we have had it hoisted upon us.

From a demand perspective - and I think you're aware of the work that Universities Australia has done on actually trying to have some guidance on micro credentials because this is how all happens so quickly. The regulation hasn't kept up so we don't have standards, we don't have regulation. So it's become a little bit of a wild west and that's in fact what Universities Australia has been trying to do is to try and put some more guidance on it.

Mark: Great. Thank you very much Keitha and I'd like to open the floor to colleagues, if there are any questions that you may have for one another in regards to their own context where flexible learning is concerned.

Ruksana: So maybe I can kick off then and actually engage with yourself Keitha. I do think that the flexible learning is very well intentioned. But I do think that sometimes a business, big business will use it to define what it means to be a university. So there's that constant challenge of this authentic experience that we want to give and the need of the economy and big business are quick, fast credentialing. So if Universities Australia is trying to put some boundedness to it, what is it trying to do? Is it raising some of the conceptual issues or is it going with it and then starting to draft the standards because it almost feels like universities on the back foot.

Keitha: Yes I think very much we have been on the back foot and as I said I think the regulators have been on the back foot as well because we do have a lot of suppliers out there with a whole range of different - we'll just call them all micro credentials but they all look somewhat different. And there are no standards and really, that's what we are trying to do. So while the guidance that we've tried to write isn't rules per se we're basically signaling to the Non-higher education providers unless you design them the way we are saying they should be designed, we're not going to give ready recognition for them. And so we're sort of trying, we're hoping and there has been some positive feedback so far. If we tell them this is the way it should be done and that would give you the opportunity for university recognition in terms of accreditation or prior learning then we can actually improve the quality of what's going on, because as you say it is exactly our fear. We are certainly concerned about ourselves and being the competition that we're facing but the the biggest concern is the very low quality of that competition and the fact that the market can't discern. So in theory, and this is sort of the debate we have with government, it sounds great you know, let the market demand determine it and let universities compete with the private sector. But if the private sector is not regulated in terms of providing quality then the outcome for the country is not what it should be.

Lisa: Can I Just ask what input you get from employers and in terms of developing those micro credentials and how geared they are to the needs of the economy and of those employers?

Keitha: So some of them I guess the what I would say the best case scenario and this I mean if I talk about what Bond's doing at the moment we actually do work in partnership with some of the organizations and ask them what are the schools that they're looking for and what do they want these programmes to be? And then we develop the micro credential to order I suppose. And so rather than what we've traditionally done in the past with postgraduate programmes where we kind of decided what we thought should be in them - and yes we have advisory boards and so on but basically we design the subjects - is that

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they actually directly feed into the micro credentials and then we stack them into subjects. So it's actually been driving our curriculum from the bottom and from the market rather than us pushing down to them. And it does work well.

Lisa: Yeah, sounds great.

Mark: Great. Thank you very much colleagues. Now let's move on to the second question. And I suppose you know that that preceding conversation has touched on this a little bit but this question is really about key issues in flexible learning as you see it. Ruksana, shall we start with with yourself again.

Ruksana: Sure so I think you can see in the different contexts and whether it's a European context the African context or the Australian context, there's a complexity. There's a level of complexity around flexible learning. It's not just about creating opportunities for people to access learning, It's not just that and I think one of the key issues that we need to take into account is we need to be very clear about what we mean by flexible learning and what we are pursuing when we engage in what what we call flexible learning. My fear is that we create a new orthodoxy in a sense that while it can be very innovative it can also be remarkably inflexible by positioning universities merely as service providers to the economy and we know that what it means to be a university is to enable students to have access to a full learning experience, which goes beyond the content. So for me that issue is we need to be very clear about what do we understand by flexible learning and what are we pursuing when we take on the idea of flexible learning. In the South African context yes by all means, we have a history of exclusion. So we're very keen on access. But when you do access you need to think very much about the issue on quality and I think Keitha mentioned the issue about quality. You can certainly increase participation rates but there's no guarantee that you'll increase success rates by flexible pathways or even flexible approaches of flexible pedagogies. The third element is that I do think if universities are engaging in whichever form of flexible learning you want to talk about whether it's just a new mode of delivery like online or a new pedagogy, I do think that we need to take colleagues with us. I think one of the issues is trying to have in the institution a sort of bottom-up approach. By all means design the standards and the content and so on but we're going to need to take colleagues with us. And part of this bottom-up approach will require some kind of professional staff development because we have to reorientate universities to new modes of delivery, new pedagogies new kinds of students and new expectations from students and from the market. So I think for university leaders it's going to be quite an interesting tightrope because you're going to have to manage the tensions in a way that don't compromise who we are as a university and what it means to be a university. So I think this flexible learning is great but you need to keep a pretty good check on what you want from it and what are you trying to do with it so those are for me conceptually those five five issues are some of the big issues. But I also think as you get more and more online you've got to think about how more and more exclusionary you get because the access to bandwidth and data is not quite the same and it's not even across countries, across continents even. Within the same country there

are different levels of access to bandwidth and we need to be careful that this kind of approach doesn't become a new orthodoxy to exclusionary practice and end up having consequences that we never imagined because we didn't think about some of the exclusionary elements that flexible learning and flexible approaches offer us. So for me, those would be the key issues would be being very clear about what you want from this flexible learning, what should it deliver. Number two make sure that you keep your eye on quality and so on. Number three ensure that you take staff with you and try to have a bottom up approach. And number four always keep an eye on who's excluded when we're doing the flexible approaches. I think many imagine everyone is included but there are people who are excluded when you go the flexible route. And finally I certainly I have a stake in ensuring what it means to be a university and who we are as a university, those are important questions that we cannot lose sight of those as we go down this path.

Mark: Great, thank you Ruksana, that's a really interesting. Lots of food for thought. Thank you. Lisa, your views on the issues of flexible learning.

Lisa: Yeah, so just picking up on some of those issues that Ruksana was talking about, I agree and for me the top of my list was thinking about the strategy and how we create a strategy for flexible learning in universities, and very much deciding what we want to do as an institution and the choices that we make as an institution around flexible learning. And I think that will be different for every institution and there are choices to be made there and you know who your students are and how you want them to learn. And those are fairly fundamental questions that I think we make certain assumptions about in universities. And I think those are conversations that we need to have and decisions that we need to make that will influence the strategy that we take for flexible learning because we then have to make decisions about the resources that that we allocate to flexible learning and the investment that we make in that. So every institution is going to be different. We don't all have to be the same and I think there's room for lots of different approaches rather than a one-size fits-all. And I think one of the the main issues for me is again following on from something that Ruksana was talking about these ideas of community and engagement. For me a university is a community of learners and researchers and that's what we do and I think that identity is really important and I think we keep that and I think we can with flexible learning. We certainly have with our wholly fully online learning approach but that was because we thought about it very carefully. We thought about how we created communities, how we developed a pedagogy that was very much focused on community and discussion and engagement, and again it's something that needs careful thought. And I also think we need to think about how different sorts of students want different approaches, so an 18 year old full-time undergraduate wants something very different to somebody who's 35 and wants to do a Master's programme alongside work. It really isn't a one size fits all but actually everybody can be part of that learning community. There are just different pedagogies within it. And just two more points, the second to the last one I would say is I think we need to be careful about using technology for the sake of using technology because it's sexy and a modern thing to do. Actually you know pedagogy should lead, learning should lead and then

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we use technology to support that. There's lots of fantastic technology out there and lots of enthusiasts for it but you know learners first is what I think about, technology second. And finally, my last point is that I think there is a real opportunity here to reach those hard to reach learners and students. So for universities to open up learning to students who've never been able to access it before fully taking on board what Ruksana is saying about technology and how we need to be careful about assuming that everybody has access to it. But I think there are some fantastic opportunities here in thinking about who our hard to reach learners are and how flexible learning can help us reach them.

Mark: Great, thank you Lisa. Absolutely, so being an ambidextrous institution in terms of keep true to oneself but also at the same time moving on with the times. Thank you. Keitha what are your views on the issues on flexibility learning?

Keitha: Thank you, a very comprehensive coverage by both of the other speakers. So in total agreement of the dangers here and as you were both speaking I'm thinking we've just got to be careful that we don't get carried away with the next big thing and that this is something that we all need to do just for the sake of doing it. And I think there is a little bit of danger with that I think for all of us. Universities across the world did a fabulous job in response to Covid and embracing technological solutions to remote learning very very quickly and staff are quite excited about it. But I think we can go too far and so we do have to think about what is it that universities are actually very good at and what have we done for a long time. And we shouldn't just sort of jump to the next thing just because, as you both have already said, that just because the technology is there doesn't mean that we fully have to have it as the only solution for us. And I think you've both already said it in terms of the dangers with the quality because I think there is a temptation sometimes certainly - I'll own up - with my colleagues that I would see sometimes what they are saying is well I'm doing this because I want to be flexible or I want to be innovative, is sometimes excuses for just not doing things thoroughly or the way we would like to do it. So at Bond this year we are back fully face-to-face with students and students are very very excited to be back face to face. But I still have some staff who really enjoyed remote teaching especially if it happened to be asynchronous, remote teaching. And I'm saying no, that's not what the students are looking for which which you know both Ruksana and Lisa have said so so yes it has its benefits but we also have to do have balance and be very careful about quality.

Mark: Thank you very much Keitha. Yeah absolutely and you know the cautious approach is the way to go because you know flexible learning is much more than just technology. It is the whole thing that universities offer. Thank you. Now I'd like to open up the floor for questions for one another in terms of anything that we would like to explore further.

Keitha: I was just going to ask Ruksana, so I guess what I'm struggling with is from a quality assurance point of view. How to encourage people to be innovative, how to respond to student needs in terms of the flexibility that they're looking for but still maintain that quality

and how do we train the staff to be able to deliver it in a quality way. So have you worked out how to do that?

Ruksana: So as you know we're all learning on the go but the one thing here I have done in the last little while with my colleagues with whom my work is the following. So assessment has come up as a big issue during Covid and you'll know that some colleagues are very suspicious of any other form of assessing students other than a high pressure, time-bound form of assessment. So in fact, when we speak about the future of flexible learning I'll speak a little bit more about that. So assessment has been an area that has come up and mostly also to ensure staff that actually when you use an alternate mode of assessment it's not necessarily dilution of how you test content and so on. So one of the things I have done as part of developing the quality assurance is I've revised the standing orders on assessment. So pre-Covid we had standing orders on if you assess you're going to have to have 50% of the work done in this mode, another 50% done in an examination context, another in handing in a take home exam etc. So I've taken a lot of time to revise the standing orders so that there's ample opportunity for innovation for staff members while giving them comfort that you're still operating within the university policy and framework. So one was the revision of the standing orders. The other is establishment of learning community of practice where people come and present their work and talk about different ways in which they're assessing or different ways in which they teaching, and in some ways having that kind of a platform has been very useful because people from Physics are able to see how people in Geography are doing it or in Humanities – there's an assumption that the humanities is the only place where you can do this kind of innovation and you can't do it in Physics or Chemistry and so on. So this community of practice has been very good in presenting work and then talking about it in relation to the standing orders which talk to the quality of the issues. So in some ways in saying the academic is the custodian of the assessment methods and the content you are the disciplinary expert but here are a whole lot of ways in which you can assess that content. So that's the way we've looked at the quality question Keitha, it's almost again a bottom-up approach rather than saying everyone needs to ensure the quality is good, ensuring that we're not lowering standards et cetera. We have created a framework which are the standards and then a community where the two can come together and that seems to be working quite well. Where I can see a greater appetite now institutionally for exploring flexible assessment instead of just imagining that the university just wants everything to be easy for students you know. So that's that's one of the ways we've done it.

Mark: Any other questions, Lisa

Lisa: Yeah I'm I'm interested in how both of you approach this this question of diversity and I'm thinking particularly of neurodiversity and how we actually cater and engage students, neurodiverse students, particularly if we're relying on technology and if you've come across that, if you've tackled that and if so how you've done it.

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Keitha: I mean I'm not sure that we have successfully tackled it but we've certainly come across it and I guess particularly with the challenges we all had with Covid, there were some learners that really struggled with the remote delivery and not being face-to-face and it was difficult. And so it really does highlight that as you mentioned earlier Lisa, it's not the same for everyone and everyone learns differently and everyone has different needs. So I think again whenever we are doing these kinds of innovations that definitely needs to be taken into account because you don't want to change things in a way that is going to be detrimental for those that perhaps have some special needs. In the case of Bond because we're a small private university I guess mainstay is our small face-to-face classes and neurodiverse students tend to flourish in those situations and that's much more difficult to replicate for example in an online environment.

Lisa: Yeah, so I'm thinking particularly in terms of the the learning support that we can give by using flexible learning and how we can give students. Yeah yeah I mean we've not got there yet. This is what we're thinking about in terms of how.

Keitha: Yeah, oh yes on the positive side.

Lisa: Flexible and online can actually offer some opportunities for neurodiverse and all sorts of learners with any kind of support needs. You can create support that learners can access and help them learn how to to access the right kind of support for them.

Ruksana: Yes so what we actually did right in the middle of Covid in fact is we put out a call for accommodating students on campus for social Justice issues. So it included neurodiverse students, students living in homes where there was gender-based harm, students living in homes where they might have been bandwidth problems etc. So by application during the full lockdown we allowed some 5000 students to come back into residence and what that meant was we had to abide by Covid regulations. We had to go to single occupancy rooms and ensure that food was delivered at the individual level etc. So within all the Covid protocols we took a social justice approach and allowed a certain number of students to come back onto campus to be able to access the full range of services from careers counseling to mental health to financial guidance, to gender and bullying support etc. We made a social justice cluster and then we provided the services and those services were provided in an online form and in a face-to-face but within the Covid protocols and this is the first year now 2022 where we will move from single occupancy to two people in a room. But that's how we dealt with the cohort of students that had particular challenges around the issues that I've just mentioned.

Mark: Great. Thank you very much colleagues and now moving on to to the last question. Keitha can I start with yourself. How do you see the future of flexible learning?

Keitha: Yes, so I really do think it relates back to that disruption that I was talking about because I think we do know what universities are very good at but one of the things that we

haven't always been as good at as we would like to be is innovating. So we do tend to sometimes cling to traditions and the way that we have always done things and my concern is if we continue to do that we could go the way of the dinosaurs because there are competitors out there. There are Googles, there are Microsofts, there are others who potentially could replace the education that we have been providing so I don't think we can take for granted that supremacy that we sort of have inherited from the past. So I think we do have to be open to different ways of thinking and doing and behaving and I think flexible learning and different delivery options and different modes of operating are very much part of that. I think others have already mentioned you know recognition of prior learning, accreditation of prior learning. There's been a lot of talk in Australia that particularly in the postgraduate spaces that universities might be likely to become more like curators of the learning packages that students self direct for themselves. That they will actually pick pieces of things and then we will work out how to curate that into a degree. And when we talk about that our expectation is that perhaps universities might become a little more specialized. Because at least in Australia every university is basically a large, broad comprehensive university and we all offer the same programmes and we all offer everything, and does that necessarily need to be the case moving forward where people can pick and choose? And if I bring it back to micro credentials for for a little bit, one of the things that is happening in Australia and as I mentioned that this is very much the focus of government policy at the moment. Is they have invested in developing what's going to be called a national credentials platform and it will - it is intended, It hasn't existed yet I am on an advisory board helping set it up - but its intention is to provide a way for students to collate all of their learning in one place that can gain recognition from others. So the intention is that employers can look up a person and see all of the things that they have done. And potentially at least some in the government believe that might make it less likely that students will want degrees because they won't need degrees because they will have these recognised items of learning on this credentials platform. So these are all things that could be disruptions to us in the future. But I think there'll always be a place for universities as long as we take that higher ground and we do stay high quality and do assure that quality.

Mark: Great wow well, not heard of that Keitha, that's really interesting. I can't wait to see what happens with that. Thank you. Lisa can I come to you.

Lisa: Yeah, that was that was really interesting Keitha thank you for that. We're just thinking about micro credentialing and obviously you're way ahead of us so I'm going to have a look at what Bond are doing and see what we can learn from you and what's happening in Australia as well. Because actually top of my list for the future was really something that comes from the UK government in terms of what it expects from universities and that's around social mobility and employability and what that means and how flexible learning can support and drive that from the government. And obviously something that universities should be engaging in both from a regional, national and international basis. So I think we really need to start exploring what flexible learning actually can help us achieve those objectives.

My other thoughts about the future are this idea of very much keeping that community focused. How do we keep the university as a learning community and how do we make sure that flexible learning and flexible learners are included in that community and what does that sense of community feel like? If you are a remote or a flexible learner who's not on campus all the time, how do we engage students in particular and also how do we provide choice for students and how do we resource that choice for students? So students who might want to come onto campus one week but actually would prefer to study remotely at another time. How can we build in that choice to our design and also how can we resource it and is that something that we can actually do. But I think we really need to think about it. And finally I think we really need to take students with us on this journey. We need to include them in how we design and what works and get them to think about what the future looks like and that's something that we're doing in Liverpool asking our students. You know we've asked them the question how do you think your programme would be run in 20 years time? What kind of things should we be doing? And they came up with all sorts of of great ideas some of which we don't know how to fulfill yet, but it was great to have the ideas anyway.

Mark: Great. Wonderful! Thank you Lisa. Yeah absolutely, you know it will have to mirror government's intention. Thank you and Ruksana, what are your views for the future of flexible learning?

Ruksana: So I think both Lisa and Keitha have covered quite a lot but I do have two or three points that I think we do need to make. So I do think that the future of flexible learning is quite bright indeed and many are interested in it. But I do think we're going to need to get beyond - certainly in our context - about it's not just when students learn. They learn part-time occasionally, full time or through credit but also to get involved in the 'what' of learning and the 'how' of learning. So in terms of the what of learning we're paying quite a lot of attention on student involvement in developing coursework et cetera. You all may know a big movement in South Africa and to some extent in the UK around decolonising higher education. That's a big part of if we're getting involved in the flexible learning then it's what the students need to be involved in, what they learn and how they learn. I also think that Covid has accelerated the interest and the appetite for flexible learning. And a big part of this will be tech driven whether we like it or not. So what does this mean for the future of flexible learning? I do think one area that's going to need attention is assessment. Assessment is definitely going to need attention and I think as universities we need to shift from what we've always worked on; academic honesty and plagiarism to something around academic integrity. And I think as we move to flexible learning we're going to have to start talking about academic integrity and this then becomes a core value of higher education. So Keitha in some ways that gives us a new value to champion, especially with all the competition that's around us who don't always value integrity and so on. I think that's a new clarion call for universities. So in the domain of assessment as we move to flexible learning I think assessment is going to be an issue and particularly academic integrity of assessment. Then I do want to point out that Lisa while I agree that we should move towards a situation where everyone can access anything all of the time, I think Covid has shown us that

universities are high pressure environments and multiple modes can put massive cognitive demands on students and on staff, and the mental health of students and staff. And so taking students and staff with us, making a bottom up approach to flexible learning is going to be key because of this kind of cognitive demand in terms of high flex and hybrid. I also think that tech is going to be a big part of flexible learning in the future. So if it's going to be a big part then I think we need to start thinking about systems and processes that protect the whole sector from unscrupulous, unscrupulous data providers etc. And there I really think we're going to need to be as a global community of academics. We're going to need to be proactive and build solidarity among higher education institutions around governance so that we're not taken in by unscrupulous providers and then we become subservient to the providers because we're so dependent on their technology and on their data. We have to ensure that costs are contained. There's protection of university IP and that actually we're not at the mercy of these providers. So for me as we think about the future I think we need to think about global solidarity as higher education institutions and then the most important point for me would be that we need to ensure that we're inclusive and responsive in whatever form we take in terms of the future of higher of of the future of flexible learning in higher education. We need to find ways in which they do in fact, serve the very populations universities were set out to serve in the first place.

Mark: Great. Thank you very much Ruksana and as a wrap up one last round questions from colleagues in regards to exploring your views on flexible learning.

Keitha: Perhaps if I can just make an observation. I mean as we said we're from three different continents but I hear our issues are very very similar. And so I guess it's wonderful - especially in Australia where we've been closed to the world for so long - it's a nice reminder to remember that we're not alone and that we do as you say Ruksana. And I have colleagues all across the world and there is that possibility for us to be more solid and look after each other. As I was sort of saying, government policy has been very tough on universities in Australia recently and I'm sure you will have your own challenges in your own country. So it's it's great to have mutual support.

Ruksana: Absolutely yeah.

Lisa: Absolutely and I've learned a lot from both of you this morning. It's been great to chat and I'm going to look both of you up and look at both of your universities and see what you're doing and see what we can learn. And I agree with you Ruksana, it's a global issue and we need to address it together.

Ruksana: Absolutely yeah. In fact, something that's really interesting about Covid is it collapsed time and space. That's why the four of us could meet at very different times in the day to be able to share ideas which we never did before Covid, so it has really collapsed time and space in significant ways and that we should really use to our advantage.

Student Success: Flexible learning part three

Podcast transcript

Keitha: Yes I agree.

Lisa: Definitely

Mark: So thank you very much Ruksan, Keitha and Lisa. That was a really insightful discussion – a lot thought provoking and food for thought. Aand I echo Lisa I have certainly learned a lot from this discussion. So thank you very much.



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