

Student Success: Flexible learning part one

Podcast transcript

—

Stuart Norton, Senior Advisor, Advance HE

Dave Thomas, Senior Advisor, Advance HE

Key

- + **Stuart:** Stuart Norton (host)
- + **Dave:** Dave Thomas

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.

Hello and welcome colleagues to this podcast series. My name's Stuart Norton I'm a Senior Advisor in Learning and Teaching at Advance HE and overseeing the student success framework updates. I'm absolutely delighted to be joined for this podcast by Dave Thomas who is a Senior Advisor also of Advance HE with a specialism in equality, diversity, inclusion and leadership. He's a Fellow of the HEA and has over two decades of experience in teaching and research in a range of educational sectors globally. Dave brings an intersectional and critical perspective to his teaching. Dave recently completed his PhD at the University Of Kent where he was investigating students' perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of the higher education curricula and its impact on shaping their engagement and that was in regards to two measures of engagement interaction with teachers and interest in their subject. Dave is also a member of the Health and Care Professions Council Diversity

and Inclusion Forum. Critical friend to the Royal College of Occupational Therapists and he has several publications in the areas of race, racial justice, inequality, educational psychology, occupational justice and social justice. He's also the lead editor of *Doing Equity and Diversity for Success in Higher Education* and *Towards Decolonizing the University: a colleidoscope for empowered action*. Dave is also the co-editor of *Doing Diversity in Academia: Practices and Pitfalls* and most recently - and to pass my own personal congratulations to you - Dave has been inducted into the American Association of Colleges and University's Future Leaders Society. So Dave an absolute honour to have you join us for this podcast and I know some area's very close to your heart. We are discussing flexible learning. We do have our recent literature review published through Advance HE in 2022 by Professor Mark Loon of Northumbria University. So Dave I'd like to pose a question to you. And that first question really is in terms of pedagogical approaches that facilitate flexible learning, what are your perspectives?

Dave: Thank you very much Stuart. And thanks for your very very generous introduction. In terms of our pedagogical approaches that facilitate flexible learning I believe we have an opportunity to reflect as a sector and forecast in light of the challenges that we have seen certainly over the past twenty months or so, and also the appetite for diversity across the sector. And when I mention diversity here I'm specifically speaking to the extent to which through initiatives like our internationalisation agenda an or widening participation agenda we are seeing our institutions becoming increasingly more diverse and so in my opinion, the opportunity arises whereby we can infuse diversity as integral to our processes and practices to ensure that our learning processes and practices are indeed flexible to promote the outcomes and success for increasingly diverse cohorts.

Stuart: Thanks Dave, that's really interesting and I'm just going to pick up on a couple of points there. And you know what really struck a cord with me, internationalizing higher education. Recently Advance HE have put a call out to tender for looking at that area of the framework. I know from previous conversations we've spoken around employability and also spoke around widening participation and again recently - just last year - our reviews in both employability and access, retention, attainment and progression. How do you see us doing this? I mean there's so many different integral areas. There's all those nodes of intersection. In your view, where is it we need to start?

Dave: Another brilliant question Stuart. So the power of our success lies in diversity and I say that unequivocally. So when I say diversity I'm specifically departing from traditional measures of diversity that focuses on protected characteristics as we say and visible markers of diversity. And I'm leaning towards cognitive diversity as well. So it's a mixed approach in terms of promoting diversity, whereby we are harmonizing cognitive and demographic diversity to enhance our provisions. So when we speak about cognitive diversity. We're thinking about the different ways of knowing, different ways of being, the different lenses that are learners and our educators are using to to view our ecosystems and

how we can utilize those as instruments to ensure that our curricula or pedagogy processes and our practices serve the needs of a diverse group of learners.

Stuart: Yeah, it's really interesting and that that concept of diverse thinking and different diversity beyond demographics I think is absolutely fundamental, and also a challenge as well but but you're absolutely right. You know we need to be able to draw on our alumni, we need to be able to draw on our stakeholders, we need to be able to engage at much more strategic and policy level and how we're including these different types of approaches to pedagogy and learning as well. So taking that and thinking about those very thought-provoking ideas. How do institutional systems and structures support flexible learning?

Dave: So I think the first port of call here is to investigate the extent to which all provisions are actually commensurate with the aims that we are intending to achieve currently, so 2022 and beyond. So being retrospective but prospective, looking forward, looking back to look forward. And so if we look back we notice that some groups, intersectionally, have been underserved in the way that we have provided our learning. And so that offers us an opportunity, a real opportunity at this time to ensure that we redress those structural inequalities or deficits in our provision. And utilize this - as I keep saying - this power of diversity. So demographically and cognitively to ensure that we investigate our systems, structures, policies or pedagogical approaches and ensure that they are fit for purpose. Not just for today but for the future of our educational ecosystems.

Stuart: Yeah, thanks Dave. One thing that's come to me just as you're talking there is if we're talking about people being in various different roles and guises listening to this podcast. As a practitioner, as a lecturer sitting there teaching their course really interested and wishing to do that more. What kind of practical advice and guidance can you give? You know what is it they should be doing? Is it asking questions, is it stopping doing something? What advice would you give to someone that that's interested but this is a new area. This is something that perhaps they're not as aware of the literature. Where should they start?

Dave: Well I think a starting point is reflection. Reflection is a powerful tool right? So reflecting on action, reflecting in action and reflecting for action. So for example, what practices have I enacted as an educator in the recent past and how have my practices proven effective or not in shaping optimum outcomes for learners? What processes or policies guide my practice and how can I review these practices and processes in order to ensure that they're commensurate with the needs of my learners? I also would encourage all educators to reflect in action. So what have I done? What am I doing now? And then reflect for action. What do I need to do now? What informs my decision making, right? What literature am I utilizing as my frames of references? What conversations am I currently having? Whose opinions count? Whose opinions are valued? So what constitutes authentic knowledge and what doesn't? Who are the ones who need to know? And these are a lot of questions and this is why we need frameworks to guide our thoughts. So for example I have

recently developed a set of culturally sensitive curricula scales, and these scales enable learners to reflect on their curriculum in terms of the extent to which they are culturally sensitive or not, and also they act as a framework for educators to reflect on their curriculum. And when I say cultural sensitivity in a curriculum or culturally sensitive education I'm referring to the extent to which the policies practices processes knowledge theory are relevant to learners' histories, contexts, the culture, skills, abilities, their needs... And so if you view flexible learning from that perspective it offers - again as I keep saying - opportunities to interrogate our institutional systems and structures. So are these structures fit for purpose? It gives us opportunities to reflect on our own pedagogical approaches and it also provides us with opportunities to collaborate in power-sharing relationships with learners to co-create knowledge and scholarship that will inform or practices, processes and structures.

Stuart: Thank you Dave, and again just as you're speaking you know springing into mind - student engagement through partnership. The work that will be or continues by a number of colleagues across the sector around inclusive curriculum and developing that area as well. I really really like your idea of having those conversations and taking on board different diverse views and starting just to enable that process where you're listening to different voices. Indeed perhaps we we all need to reflect and consider who we're following on LinkedIn, Twitter and just having that different diversity of voices that are coming out from that angle as well. Dave just another question if I may, one of the aspects - and I'm aware that the framework is under review - one of the aspects of the flexible pedagogy framework is around something called balance pragmatism. And that really is there because you know in an ideal ideal world, we would absolutely love to do anything and everything but sometimes it's not necessary or it's not possible and sometimes we've been impacted greatly by structural forces that don't enable different types of flexibility. Whether that be an assessment, whether it be in the modes of learning etc. What's your view on that and is balanced pragmatism an excuse or or is it something that we do still need to adopt but perhaps from a different angle?

Dave: I think that's a very interesting question. So as you posed that question I reflected on Lord Robbins, 1963 when he spoke about education. What is it for? You know and I come back to that fundamental question. What is it for? Is it to grow learners who can play a part or a role in society or is it the pursuit of knowledge, for the pure pursuit of knowledge? So I think those are fundamental questions. What are the aims and outcomes that we are trying to achieve through education? So our learners intending to achieve educational mobility? So in terms of employability. Or are we utilizing the approaches whereby we are learning to transition to other stages of learning. For example, postgraduate learning. And so that drives in some quarters that drives our assessments, drives our pedagogical approaches. So I'm answering your question unfortunately with a series of questions Stuart. You know what is it for, what what is education for in 2022? What are learners wanting from education? And what aims and ends are we providing these knowledges in plural.

Stuart: Yeah, really valid point of view there Dave and I think one that I'm going to avoid by not answering because I'm currently not learning, and I think it will be unfair to step into the shoes of someone and answer for them. And again a nod to future work around student engagement through partnership. But as a personal view, I think it's a mixture and perhaps that's where the balance pragmatism has to come in. Do students go to university just to just to gain employment at graduate level? No but that's one aspect of it. And I think we need to have that kind of that balance in there to see how we do take things forward because there's always going to have to be a flexibility in approaches, and learners all come in for a range of different needs and you know ultimately our job is there to to enable student success.

Dave: Exactly and I will add there learners come in with a range of different needs and myriad cultural markers as well, and varying ranges of experiences as well. So traditionally when we think about students our default is to probably a 19 year old student fresh out of secondary school and that challenges our thinking somewhat because what we're seeing now and our data tells us, for example in the Advance HE statistical report, that we are seeing an increase in mature learners. And mind you a mature learn is considered over the age of 22 and above. But but when I say mature learner I'm referring to colleagues who might be 35 plus and we're also we're also seeing learners who are learning for professional accreditation. So we're seeing an increase there and so it comes back to my question, what is the learning for and how can we ensure that all learners achieve the aims and ends that they intend to achieve? So when we look at the diverse range of scholarship, the diverse range of approaches, I contend that diversity should be represented. So over and above inclusivity and accessibility diversity should be represented but positively portrayed, and it should enable our learners to to gain graduate attributes whereby they can become critical and analytical thinkers in challenging taken for granted assumptions for example and hegemonic structures. But most importantly, learning should promote inclusive classroom interactions, so inclusive interactions. And for me that's the power of flexible learning. To what extent can we promote inclusive interactions for all learners irrespective of their skills, and abilities, irrespective of the modes of learning. To what extent can we promote those egalitarian and equitable outcomes?

Stuart: Dave thank you so much. I think that's a fabulous point to end on and also a fabulous point to draw the attention of colleagues to the forthcoming literature review in flexible learning as well as forthcoming webinars and summits.

Colleagues I would urge you to take the opportunity to connect with Dave. You will find him through through Advance HE and such good platforms as LinkedIn - other platforms are available. You'll also find him on Twitter @DaveThomasOt that's Dave Thomas Oscar tango the initials. Thank you.

Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201
enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500
communications@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

   @AdvanceHE

Advance HE helps HE and research be the best they can be.

We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address systemic inequalities and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector. We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607 Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

© 2021 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at Advance HE:

+44 (0) 3300 416201 or publications@advance-he.ac.uk