



Summary 16th of May 2022

University Forum

Flexible Learning

Flexible Learning at the UvA

Flexible studying (pay per credit) is a long-cherished wish of the government to accommodate students who take longer to complete their studies, such as top athletes and students with a disability. The UvA has been experimenting with flexible learning on a small scale for several years now, and is now faced with the question whether flexible learning at the UvA has a future and if so, in what form? Discussions about this will be organized after the summer, with an early start at the University Forum on the 16th of May.

Prof. dr. Peter van Baalen

Peter van Baalen, professor at the Faculty of Economics and Business and chairman of the flexible learning working group, was present as introductory guest speaker. The working group has been coordinating the flexible learning pilot at the UvA since 2017. The pilot arose from the wish of the national government to make studying at a lower pace (for example for top athletes) easier. A small group of students of a few Bachelor's (with the exception of the first year) and Master's degree programs are therefore already making use of the option to pay per credit. The pilot has recently been evaluated, mainly to investigate the practical feasibility and costs. The scheme is mainly used by students with study delay in the last phase of their education, who do not have to pay for a full academic year because of the scheme if they only have to finish one or two courses. Due to the financial benefits, it is expected that a large number of students would make use of the scheme if more study programs took part and the awareness of the possibility was greater. Whether upscaling is actually desirable will be discussed extensively within the UvA after the summer. What is already clear is that the possibilities for scaling up are limited by the costs, which could easily become too great with large-scale application (due to missed tuition fees and administration costs). We can derive a lot of information from the pilot about the practical side, but the more fundamental questions need to be discussed in more detail in the UvA. The University Forum has probably taken the first step in this direction.

Subquestions

After the introduction by the three guest speakers, the members and other attendees started working in groups on the four sub-questions below. You can read the results of these group discussions in this report.

1

Statement: regardless of the disadvantages of flexible learning, it is the best answer to the growing pressure on students (from, among other things, the loan system, the labor market and the housing market).

2

Statement: flexible learning contributes to the 'commercialization' of education, with students as customers and education as a product (and therefore we should not facilitate it).

3

Statement: flexible learning is bad for cohesion and continuity in educational curricula (which is why we should not facilitate it).

4

Question: if we want to expand flexible learning, which of Berenschot's four scenarios would be preferable, and why? Are other scenarios conceivable/desirable?

Berenschot Scenarios

'Flexible learning' can mean different things. To prevent us from talking past each other, we made use of the four scenarios below that have been investigated by Berenschot as different directions in which flexible learning could possibly develop. The excerpts are from this report:

[Berkhout, B., De Zwart, S., Das, L. en Van den Berg, T. \(2021\). "Een scenarioanalyse op financiële en uitvoeringseffecten flexibele deelname in het hoger onderwijs: Eindrapport", Berenschot, 11 februari 2021.](#)

Scenario 1 - Selection by Institution

The institution itself may select students who are eligible for flexible learning. For example, students with a company, a top sport career or who (have to) invest time in a board year or informal care. The institution determines which students and in which study programs flexible learning will be possible. It is expected that a relatively low number of students will study flexible hours. In our analysis, we assume 3% of all students at an institution.

Scenario 2 - Right of the student, only by specific program types.

The student may decide for himself whether and when he/she wishes to study flexible hours in the master's phase and/or in a part-time study programme. It is expected that some of these students will study flexible hours and that the master's and part-time courses may become attractive to a new target group. In total, however, this concerns a relatively low number of students. In our analysis, we assume 10% of all students at an institution.

Scenario 3 - Right of the student, for all programs.

The student decides for himself whether and when he/she wants flexible study. Flexible learning is therefore always possible. The expectation is that a medium number of students will study flexible hours. In our analysis, we assume 30% of all students at an institution.

Scenario 4 - Flexible learning for everyone

Flexible learning is becoming the norm for all students. The current study system will be replaced by a flexible study system. Flexible studying therefore applies to 100% of the students at institutions.

Statement: regardless of the disadvantages of flexible learning, it is the best answer to the growing pressure on students (from, among other things, the loan system, the labor market and the housing market).

The proposition has been discussed in the University Forum in two different ways. First of all, there is the question of whether flexible studying can offer a solution to the problems in the proposition. For two different groups, it is quite conceivable that flexible learning can relieve pressure. Students who are currently studying, but who have to work a lot due to the student loan system, for example, are given the option of flexible studying to study at a slower pace and thus save money (or to spread the costs over a longer period). In addition, there is a group of potential students who decide not to study at the university because of the problematic circumstances mentioned. Flexible study would also be a solution for them, because it may lower the threshold enough for them to go to study after all. The full tuition fee adds a financial pressure to the already existing performance pressure to complete a study within a short time. Flexible learning could ease that pressure somewhat. This financial pressure is especially great for students who pay the institutional tuition fees, such as students from outside the EU. The financial pressure that flexible learning should alleviate is greatest among the students who pay the highest tuition fees, but the students who pay the institutional tuition fees have so far always been excluded from the flexible learning pilot. The University Forum's appeal is to explicitly include this point in the discussions about the future of flexible learning at the UvA that will start after the summer. Is there sufficient reason to exclude this group?

The second question addressed is whether it is at all up to the UvA to tackle the problems mentioned in the statement. What we have to watch out for is that we don't make irreparable changes to treat the symptoms, while the underlying problems should actually be tackled. The Hague is unfortunately not active enough, but that does not mean that it is up to us to solve problems that actually lie with the government. We can - where necessary - provide relief, but should not sacrifice too much to do so. Whether expanding flexible learning would amount to a sacrifice is a question addressed by group 2 and 3.

Statement: flexible learning contributes to the ‘commercialization’ of education, with students as customers and education as a product (and therefore we should not facilitate it).

For the discussion about flexible learning, it is important to be specific in what we are talking about. A complete replacement of the old system by a system where you pay per credit is not an option for now. It concerns only a part of the students, so the question is which part that should be. If it concerns a relatively small group of students, as is currently the case, but also after limited expansion, such as in scenario 1 and 2 (Berenschot), we can better understand flexible learning as an addition and not as something that would come at the expense of something. In addition, it is good to ask ourselves where exactly the inconvenience is when we talk about ‘commercialization’. In the discussion in the University Forum it became clear that there is not so much an objection in principle, but rather an objection based on what flexible studying could change in the relationship between student and university. The differences between flexible studying and ‘normal’ studying are greater than just financial. As a flexible student you enter into a different kind of relationship with the university, one with possibly more distance and a more transactional nature. At the UvA, we value the academic community and are sometimes concerned about the apparently increasing number of students who come to university solely for education and do not seek further connection with that academic community. At the same time, we must also recognize and respect that there are many (potential) students who are not looking for that community for good reasons. The question is whether we want to facilitate both forms of studying or whether we want to focus strongly on the – in our view – best form. And if we then opt for different forms, a so-called ‘multi-university’ instead of university, the question is how do we ensure that one form does not supplant the other. It is quite conceivable that if too many students opt for a more non-committal, more distant form, this will detract from the possibilities for the other students to form that ‘full-fledged’ community. Ultimately, it is a search for the right balance.

Statement: flexible learning is bad for cohesion and continuity in educational curricula (which is why we should not facilitate it).

The answer to the statement strongly depends on the precise way in which we design flexible learning. Flexible learning is likely coming our way whether we like it or not, so the question is how we can prevent it having a negative impact on curricula while still profiting from the benefits of flexible learning (for example for students' finances and study pressure). It is easier to introduce freedom than to take it away later, so we have to think carefully about this question. The previous group discussed extensively how flexible studying could potentially make the relationship with the university and the academic community more distant. This group agrees and emphasizes that this is a reason not to make the group of flexible students too large. There must be enough 'regular' students in each working group to ensure cohesion. In order to really get that cohesion off the ground, it helps if we partly work with fixed groups, who stay the same in different subjects. This is currently already being used in the first year of many courses. An expansion of flexible learning should not be at the expense of that continuity, which we not only find desirable in the first year, but also prefer to see it again in the later years. In addition to continuity and cohesion in terms of group composition, we value a well-thought-out curriculum in which subjects connect to each other and jointly contribute to the desired academic training. We must guard against the 'erosion' of curricula, whereby subjects no longer follow each other with an increasingly higher level. Then we would go to a candy store model where almost all subjects should be followed in any order and thus necessarily taught at the same basic level. You avoid this by sticking to admission requirements based on previous courses. We must retain these requirements and even expand them where necessary, even if this is at the expense of flexibility for the student.

Question: if we want to expand flexible learning, which of Berenschot's four scenarios would be preferable, and why? Are other scenarios conceivable/desirable?

One way to turn the question around is to first state that students are adults and we should therefore trust them with the freedom to make their own choices about how they want to relate to their university. The question then does not become why we want to make flexible learning possible, but what reasons we have to not allow it. The most important reason for wanting to limit the student's freedom is to safeguard certain values. In particular, it is about the communality of the academy (as was also discussed in group 2). In the discussion in the University Forum it became clear that different studies have different views on this. Programs with a more anonymous, more massive character may be more inclined to want to work with flexible learning than smaller programs where it is easier to safeguard that community. Because of the differences per study programme, preference was given to scenario 2, which gives all students of specific designated study programs the right to flexible learning. The point about safeguarding the community would then be an important criterion for choosing the right programs.



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