

Flexible education in humanities and social sciences: opportunities and threats in Czech, Polish, and Slovak universities

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ABSTRACT: This paper identifies the challenges of flexible education within the humanities and social sciences in higher education. Framed as a response to societal shifts such as individualisation, its functioning is analysed through comparative empirical research conducted at one university in each of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. Drawing on in-depth interviews with university management and students, as well as a quantitative survey, the study constructs a SWOT analysis. This reveals that a key challenge is the potential shift of responsibility for learning effectiveness onto non-institutional actors within the education system.

KEYWORDS: flexible education, learning methods and content, learning time and space, SWOT analysis

INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of late modernity describe several processes that influence changes in social life and the individuals within it. David Riesman (2020) draws attention to the shift from other-directed to inner-directed control—the tendency to make decisions based on one's beliefs and axionormative systems rather than external, institutional pressures. Ronald Inglehart (1977) describes a shift from materialist values, which focus on ensuring well-being and security, to post-materialist values, which seek self-realisation. Anthony Giddens (1991) writes about late-modern uncertainty, ontological insecurity, and efforts to rebalance these dimensions.

These processes also affect the functioning of educational institutions. One response to

the indicated transformations is to make educational processes more flexible. This paper aims to describe the functioning of flexible education in a comparative context of higher education at three universities from Central European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia). It begins by presenting the causes, definitions, and dimensions of flexible education. Then, drawing on international qualitative and quantitative research, it highlights selected aspects of how flexible education operates across three countries. Based on this, a SWOT analysis is developed that presents the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of flexible education.

FLEXIBLE EDUCATION—CAUSES AND DEFINITIONS

Some suggest that the origins of flexible education can be traced back to the late 18th century, in correspondence courses published in newspapers (Barua & Lockee, 2024). However, it was only at the beginning of the 21st century that the phenomenon truly began to flourish. New forms of information circulation and knowledge production are the primary drivers of the contemporary transformations in the educational system. Late-modern society is often referred to as an information society. Information—access to it, the competence to receive and select it, the possibilities to disseminate it—is becoming a socially desirable good. The new ways of gathering it also apply to education. In this context, technological development (Barua & Lockee, 2024) is of particular importance, encompassing the collection and dissemination of information and communication among various actors involved in educational systems. This necessitates adapting the educational system to new ways of managing information and knowledge (Joan, 2013, p. 37) and to the increasing availability of various open-access resources (Juszczyszyn & Kim, 2016, pp. 163-164).

These phenomena were further intensified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Turan, Kucuk & Karabey, 2022). The pandemic disrupted the routines previously practised in everyday life. One way of coping with this disruption was to adopt a more flexible approach to daily activities (Krajewski, Rogowski, & Frąckowiak, 2023). Following the pandemic, these tendencies persisted, and the need for flexibility in various aspects of life, including education, has continued to grow in importance (Müller, Mildenberger, & Steingruber, 2023).

The second reason for the flexibilization of learning processes is the postulated need for increased student involvement and greater openness to articulating their own needs (Müller & Mildenberger, 2021). In a classically understood education, students often fail to see the connection between their everyday life and the learning content (Vadeboncoeur & Padilla-Petry, 2017, pp. 1-2), treating it as purely theoretical constructs with no practical application. Flexible education is therefore not only supposed to teach but also to restore engagement to give voice to those directly affected by it (Te Riele, 2014, p. 21). In this way, the connection between learning content and its application in everyday life

can be restored, thereby making the educational process more meaningful for students. It is not without reason that the pedagogical ideas that accompany flexible education include student empowerment, future-facing education, and transformative capabilities (Schwartz et al., n.d., pp. 12-13).

The third reason for the flexibilization of education is changes in the sources of regulation in education. It is noted that institutional government/state regulations are being replaced by market regulations, where students assume the role of customers of educational institutions (Schwartz et al., n.d., p. 29). Reducing educational processes to their economic dimension and commodifying them disrupts the existing relationship between students, academic institutions, and teachers. Flexibility is a key approach to addressing these challenges. Economic phenomena, however, are not without significance here. Transformations in the modern labour market necessitate that employees be more flexible in balancing various responsibilities (Müller & Mildenberger, 2021). Therefore, flexibility in education has a positive impact on opportunities in other areas of life.

To define flexible education, it is necessary to explain how education itself is understood within it. Two aspects are highlighted here, which relate to the previously mentioned reasons for developing the concept of flexibility in education. The first is social learning—the belief that knowledge and its usage in educational processes are socially constructed, dependent on context and interaction with others (Juszczyk & Kim, 2016, pp. 170-171). They can therefore adapt to their participants' current needs. The second important aspect is open education—an approach to teaching that does not set fixed boundaries and frameworks for its procedures (Juszczyk & Kim, 2016, pp. 164-170). Instead, it promotes openness concerning the various dimensions of the educational process, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Two features are highlighted across the many detailed definitions of flexible education. The first is the escape from formalisation (Vadebonceur & Padilla-Petry, 2017, p. 3), which is primarily reflected in the concept of open education. The second feature is the attention paid to factors central to flexible education. Such education is always student-centred (i.e., oriented towards the subjectivity and well-being of students) and technology-based (i.e., taking advantage of the various possibilities offered by technology, mainly the digital ones) (Cassidy et al., 2016, p. 85).

In this paper, I adopt the definition of flexible learning cited by Joan (2013, p. 37-38): “Flexible learning is a set of educational philosophies and systems, concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalization to suit the learner. In particular, flexible learning provides learners with choices about where, when, and how they learn”. Two elements are worth highlighting in this definition. Firstly, flexible learning is not a specified, concretised curriculum. Instead, it is a particular philosophy, a way of thinking about learning processes that can be freely adapted to a specific situation and context. Secondly, flexible education presupposes choice for its participants. It is

assumed that the participants are aware of their needs and can make choices to personalise different elements of the learning process.

In the remainder of this paper, I will consistently use the term “flexible education.” However, it is worth noting that it also has its synonyms, such as flexible learning, blended learning, or personalised learning (Juszczyk & Kim, 2016).

DIMENSIONS AND AIMS OF FLEXIBLE EDUCATION

The definition quoted above has already indicated several dimensions of flexible education. These three fundamental elements are also repeated in other studies (e.g., McLinden, 2013). First, then, is the question of when education takes place. This includes the daily, weekly, and semester/year schedules. Secondly, it is a question of where the education takes place. This refers to the distinction between home, school, and other spaces (indirectly addressing the issue of distance learning) and to how each space is equipped. Thirdly, flexible education concerns how learning takes place, taking into account, among other things, teaching methods and content.

These three factors, which form the core of flexible education, are often specified and operationalised in more detail. Attention is paid, for example, to issues of accessibility, resources, assessment principles (Schwartz et al., n.d., pp. 4-5), learning style, and collaborative principles (Sinha & Chaudhary, 2004). One of the most detailed proposals for flexible education dimensions was formulated by Collins and van der Wende (2002). Research conducted in 7 countries (Australia, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the USA) distinguishes over 15 specific dimensions of the described processes. The latest studies emphasise the need to consider new dimensions, such as deadlines, modality, assessment type, grading and weighting, and course correspondence (El Galad, Betts, & Campbell, 2024).

It can therefore be stated that the task of flexible education is to shape an appropriate educational environment (Barua & Lockee, 2024). As empirical research shows (Müller, Mildenberger, & Steingruber, 2023, p. 5), the importance of a well-designed environment outweighs that of the content delivered during the learning process. Among the two distinguished types of flexible education—logistical (focused on technology and organisation) and pedagogical (focused on experience) (Barua & Lockee, 2024)—the former has gained particular significance. The environment may refer to both the classroom level (which primarily encompasses spatial and technological considerations) and the whole-school level (which pertains more to institutional arrangements and internal regulations) (Joan, 2013, p. 38). Additionally, two other levels of description of the dimensions of flexible education should be noted. On the one hand, it concerns the individual level, specifically the attitudes of students, teachers, parents, or other individuals involved in educational processes. On the other hand, it encompasses the systemic level, including state and market regulations and other related aspects of the educational system.

Suppose the topic were taken narrowly. In that case, flexible education aims to adapt educational processes to meet participants' needs better and make them more accessible. However, flexible education may—and should—also be considered from a broader perspective, in relation to wider socio-cultural life. In such a view, at least four objectives can be identified.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, flexible education is to empower its participants. Secondly, it aims to redress social inequalities and expand life chances, for example, by stimulating social mobility (Brennan, 2021, 32). Thirdly, it is assumed that one indicator of educational success is the promotion of values (Joan, 2013, pp. 38-39). In this case, it would refer to the values of the broader civil society. Fourthly, the goal of flexible education is to remain open to new needs. One outcome of the student-teacher relationship is the creation of future imaginings (Vadeboncoeur & Padilla-Petry, 2017, pp. 4-5). Designing new needs is also part of such imagination.

It can therefore be stated that flexible education provides the foundation for inclusive education (Baer, 2023). These approaches emphasise the diversity of needs stemming from the diversity of actors participating in educational processes. This is particularly relevant to the needs of individuals with special requirements, such as people with disabilities, as well as members of minority groups, including the LGBTQ+ community or migrants. Thus, we are dealing with a form of humanisation of the educational experience, which emphasises empathy toward diverse life experiences (El Galad, Betts, & Campbell, 2024, p. 6).

METHODS

In this paper, the basic assumptions about flexible education will be examined in light of our research findings. This publication is one of the results of the project Enhancing Quality Teaching of Humanities and Social Sciences in Higher Education for 21+ (2021-1-CZ01-KA220-HED-000031122), which has been funded with support from the European Commission. The project aimed to compare selected dimensions of teaching humanities and social sciences in three countries: the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. The research was conducted at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (UAM), the University of Hradec Králové (HKU), and Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (UKF). Several elements of learning processes were researched, including flexible education, non-formal education, psychological aspects of education, the relationship between the educational system and the labour market, and virtual mobility in the context of education. These dimensions are also present in the different stages of the research. In this paper, I will focus solely on flexible education.

Two stages of the research have been carried out. In the first stage, a survey was conducted with 960 students at all three universities. Separate questionnaire versions were created in Polish, Czech, and Slovak, and distributed online via the mailing lists of all

three universities.

In the second stage, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with lecturers and students. The sampling was purposive, including different categories of staff (deans, lecturers) and students (different faculties and levels of study).

For both stages, drawing on the previously identified understandings of flexible education, eight dimensions were identified and included in the research. These were: the time when the learning process takes place; learning methods; the space where the learning process is implemented; deadlines for evaluations of the learning process; learning content; cooperation with external entities in the learning process; cooperation between lecturers and students in the learning process; resources (e.g., technology, infrastructure, teaching aids) used in the learning process.

Using a survey questionnaire, the first research stage posed four questions that also serve as questions for this paper. These were:

- (1) *Which dimensions of flexible education are perceived by students as important for their efficiency?*
- (2) *What is the level of flexibility of each of the dimensions at the researched universities?*
- (3) *Which way of functioning the different dimensions of flexible education is perceived as more beneficial?*
- (4) *How can the perception of flexible education dimensions be compared in three researched countries?*

To answer the third question, dichotomous responses were created for each dimension of flexible education, with one being extremely inflexible and the other extremely flexible. Respondents were asked to choose, on a semantic differential basis, which option was more favourable to them. The dichotomies are presented in the table below.

The qualitative interviews that followed posed two further questions, the answers to which are also sought in the paper:

- (1) *How are the dimensions of flexible education understood?*
- (2) *What are the connections between the dimensions of flexible education?*

The qualitative interviews were conducted based on a standardised scenario. Interviewees were asked to indicate the dimensions they considered most and least important, and the conversation then focused only on these selected dimensions. Hence, the analysis focuses only on selected understandings and connections.

Before the start of the research, the project received approval from the ethics committee for research involving human subjects at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

| Dimension | Less flexible | More flexible |
|--|---|--|
| The time when the learning process takes place | Strictly fixed and top-down imposed class dates | Class dates that change according to the current needs of the participants |
| Learning methods | Learning methods fixed in the syllabus and impossible to change | Learning methods that change depending on group dynamics and the current topic |
| The space where the learning process is implemented | A common and unchangeable space in which the classes are held | Implementation of classes in a space that everyone chooses and shapes independently |
| Deadlines for evaluations of the learning process | Deadline for evaluation of the learning process common to all, at the end of the semester | Evaluation of the learning process implemented on an ongoing basis and tailored to the individual needs of each participant |
| Learning content | Learning content established in the syllabus and impossible to change | Learning content changing according to the interests of the participants of the learning process and current events |
| Cooperation with external entities in the learning process | Learning process implemented and evaluated entirely within the university | Learning process implemented and evaluated in cooperation with external entities (e.g., expert institutions, internship sites, certificates) |
| Cooperation between lecturers and students in the learning process | Learning process shaped solely by the lecturer | Learning process shaped by students' expectations and needs |
| Resources (e.g., technology, infrastructure, teaching aids) used in the learning process | Use of resources (e.g., technological, teaching aids) provided by the university | Use of resources (e.g., technological, study aids) possessed by participants of the learning process |

Table 1. Dichotomies concerning the dimensions of flexible education

The data collected in the first stage were statistically analysed using SPSS software. The interviews conducted in the second stage were transcribed and then analysed using the typological method.

In this article, the analysis begins with the second stage and then proceeds to the first stage, as this order is more effective for concluding.

RESULTS

SELECTED WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING THE DIMENSIONS OF FLEXIBLE EDUCATION AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THEM

Learning methods and learning content

These dimensions are often discussed together, assuming mutual influence. They are also usually considered to be central in thinking not only about flexible education but about the educational process in general:

Even if we had a perfect space, for example, or if we had super equipment in every

room... When we don't teach what is important or exciting, or we teach badly. It just wouldn't do anything, it wouldn't make sense, I mean. That's why I think that, by far, the most important thing for me is exactly how and what we teach [L4]¹.

Their relevance lies in their influence on people and relationships during the learning process. For example, they determine the graduate's features. At the same time, it is once again pointed out that these dimensions of flexible education are linked to another factor—precisely, the human factor:

The content of education, without good human resources, could be unattractive, not valuable. And they are useful precisely thanks to, among other things, or mainly thanks to teachers—that is how I would see it [L1].

However, both students and lecturers draw attention to the limitations of the flexibility of learning content and methods. These are of two types.

The first limitation concerns the formal requirements for these dimensions. Lecturers, including vice-deans, emphasise the need to maintain these dimensions due to inspections by higher education supervisors. The second limitation relates to situations where organisational criteria, e.g., ECTS credits, influence—usually negatively—the choice of content:

I have the impression that content that would be even more valuable and enrich the whole study process, in general, disappears somewhere along the way. There simply isn't enough to really give the solid knowledge that we want, and that will be useful to us. Instead, there is a course to count the ECTS credits, but it is jammed with silly topics [S1].

The content and methods dimensions also prompt a more general, pessimistic reflection on flexible education. In some opinions, the criteria for students' choices lie outside education-related factors:

The sad problem is that we think a lot about these contents, these alternative paths, and so on. In the end, students choose these courses for their life plans, for their jobs, for their childcare, and so on [L2].

The space where the learning process takes place

Both the understanding of the dimension of space and its role in flexible education are ambivalent. While this dimension is usually referred to the university space—lecture rooms, campuses—other ways of understanding are also emerging. For example, those related to the university's location in an urban area, its communication with different

¹ Interviews are indicated by the letter L (when the interviewee is a lecturer) or S (when the interviewee is a student). The numbers denote the number of the interviewee in the category.

points, etc.:

Well, about space in general. I understand it in the context of the university's location within the city, and I find it a very favourable location. It is a significant advantage that it is relatively close to the centre, but not in the centre itself, and it is possible to get there [S4].

The role of space is also sometimes downplayed. It is pointed out that it is rather a background for the human activities taking place in it, students and teachers:

Somewhere, this lecturer, let's say, can pull it all together independently of space [S4].

However, I will be primarily interested in an understanding of space that highlights its influence on educational processes. This concerns three elements.

Firstly, the importance of space for interpersonal relationships is emphasised. The quality of the space affects relationships—better space promotes cooperation, but worse space hinders it:

In other faculties, it's a bit better. We have what we have, and maybe it will improve, but in my opinion, architecturally, what we have is not conducive to what we would like to achieve, and it's not conducive to the community, and I think that's important [L1].

Secondly, the flexibility of space is connected to its quality. The basic premise here is that space should be tailored to different needs. It is mentioned that various spaces are suitable for small-group work, individual work, large lectures, university authorities' meetings, and activities between classes. Different aesthetic sensibilities regarding space are also indicated. If, on the other hand, we accept the earlier assumption that the quality of the space influences the quality of the work, then the extent to which the space varies should also, in some sense, determine the scope of responsibilities. Lecturers or students cannot be required to perform specific tasks if the space is not conducive to their performance. It is the responsibility of the university authorities to ensure this differentiation.

Thirdly, some contributions also highlight how space affects other dimensions of educational processes. For example, limiting the flexibility in the choice of teaching activities:

We also have these unfortunate limits, and then it turns out that a lot of people can't really choose what they want to study, which is also related to space. For example, we can't accept more people for our classes well because simply more people won't fit into the room [L4].

Among the analysed dimensions of flexible education, space is most often identified as a dimension related to others and as influencing them. Even small changes (e.g., to the acoustics of the rooms) can entail a whole series of further changes in other aspects of

the learning process:

It is known that not every architecturally scarred room can be restored, but a significant amount can be done. As I said, I have classes in such and such rooms, and I am saying that this is a parameter that could definitely be improved here, not with some nightmarish costs, but with, above all, professional knowledge. This would also have a positive knock-on effect. Sitting in such a room for several hours would not be so distressing [L2].

Cooperation between lecturers and students in the learning process

Further dimensions of flexible education were less frequently discussed in detail by the interviewees. However, their relational nature and connection to other dimensions were also noted in these cases when they did appear.

This is also true of collaboration between lecturers and students. This dimension is regarded primarily as the basis for a good atmosphere during the educational process:

Cooperation between lecturers and students is also considered vital. Because it seems to me that even if you have engaging content and good educational methods, when there is no such atmosphere and a good relationship between the group and the teacher, these classes, colloquially speaking, do not work out [L4].

At the same time, the interviewees note that even if cooperation yields positive results, its scope is sometimes limited. This is because it refers mainly to course activities and traditional formal education. Its range in the area of non-formal education, on the other hand, is limited and concerns more enthusiasts, both lecturers and students:

Well, I miss such a kind of collaboration outside. Outside of the classroom, well, I don't think there is much of it at the moment. Well, at least I haven't encountered [S4].

The time when the learning process takes place, and the deadlines for the evaluation of the learning process

These two dimensions—time and deadlines—are very often juxtaposed by the interviewees. At the same time, they appear relatively infrequently in the interviews, and are treated as rather detailed elements, and are sometimes included in other dimensions of flexible education, e.g., educational methods and content.

Time and deadlines are often treated as the least flexible of all the dimensions. This is because they are defined as a critical element of many administrative procedures at the university, which becomes impossible to change:

Well, but on the other hand, I also understand that some things cannot be changed,

that these rigid deadlines, various examination sessions, are somehow justified there [...]. It is simply a kind of, well, an inviolable necessity that must be. Significantly, these deadlines are probably connected precisely with the issues of scholarships and other elements. Also, they are simply formal [L3].

This is also a dimension that, at least from some students, receives a lot of negative feedback due to its low flexibility. Students note that those who plan the classes and their timings often overlook students' needs. This creates difficulties in fixing studying with other dimensions of life:

We have a schedule arranged in such a way that there is one class at, say, 8 a.m., and then some gigantic break, and the next one is at 2 or 3 p.m. This is entirely hopeless. And that's the sense in which I've interpreted time, that instead of having classes and a schedule arranged in such a way that a student, for example, can go to university in the morning and go to work in the evening or something like that, and there's a whole bunch of people in my place who regularly have trouble organizing their working time [S1].

Resources

The resources dimension also appeared relatively infrequently in the interviewees' statements. It was sometimes combined with the dimension of space (infrastructure resources) or methods/content (human resources) and discussed together. In addition to this, it was pointed out that some types of resources—mainly technological—are not necessary to study in specific fields of study, or there is no tradition of their use by teachers:

This knowledge was simply taught in this way to us. This content is in such a theoretical way. If we did some practical classes, well, as far as pedagogy is concerned, you can do without all these technological additions and just these technological resources. Simply because we did it ourselves, I rate it low [S2].

Cooperation with the external entities in the learning process

The status of cooperation with the university's social environment as a dimension of flexible education is specific. There were often opinions that it is essential for the educational process, because of the need to listen to employers' views. Equally frequently, interviewees—especially lecturers—mentioned that they were aware of such cooperation at their faculties. At the same time, this dimension is rarely discussed in detail.

When it is, it is mainly when students speak critically about its implementation. They perceive the need to deepen it, linking cooperation with the environment with making studies more practical:

I have not experienced it, well, because neither has cooperation with external enti-

ties... I mean, well, there was one, let's say, one research-type activity that we were supposed to conduct in collaboration with some external entity, theoretically, but it was one thing for three years of studies. And I probably think there could be more of it because it's more practical. After all, social sciences are practical [S4].

DIMENSIONS OF FLEXIBLE EDUCATION FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

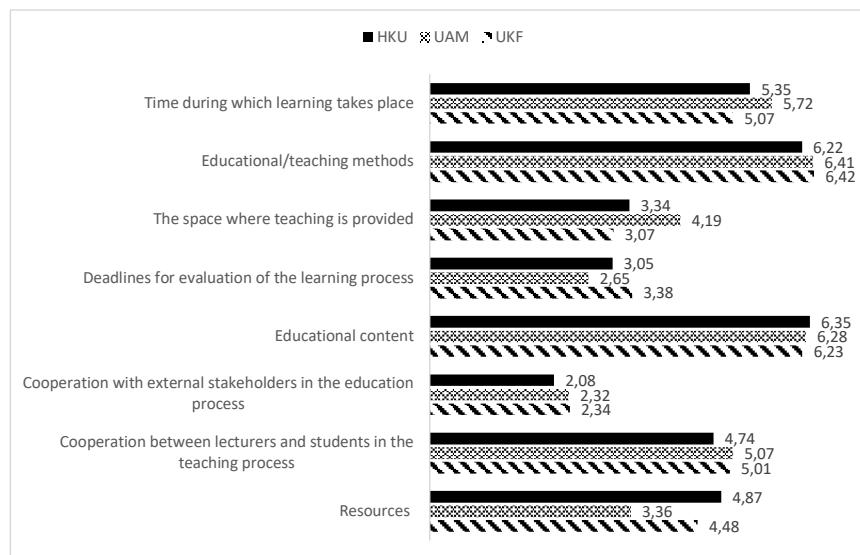


Figure 1. Ability to decide which dimensions of the learning process are important to your effectiveness?

The first question in the quantitative stage of the project concerned the perceived relevance of different dimensions of education, as assessed by students at the three universities surveyed. At all three universities, the key dimensions were the methods and content of learning processes. In third place was the time at which education took place. In contrast, cooperation with external entities was the least important for the effectiveness of education at all three universities.

The placement of methods and content confirms the previously mentioned reflections on these dimensions, as presented in the analysis of the in-depth interviews. However, the importance of time received little attention in the interviews and is treated as a more detailed aspect of the educational process. It is worth remembering that in the interviews, students expressed the opinion that good time organisation is crucial for reconciling education with functioning in other areas of life. This is perhaps the reason for the relatively high position in this ranking, as students relate the efficiency in the question not only to the efficiency of education but, more broadly, to life efficiency, which requires combining various types of activity. This suggests the importance of the university's course planning as a factor influencing the quality of education.

Notably, little importance is attributed to cooperation with external entities. Students are unlikely to encounter this form of educational delivery frequently and, therefore, may not appreciate its value. Contrasting this with the opinions from the interviews, in which the lecturers nevertheless emphasised the availability of such cooperation within the faculties, one may notice significant potential for the development of flexible education.

What is additionally noticeable in the presented results is the considerable discrepancy between UAM and HKU/UKF in assessing the importance of resources for efficiency.

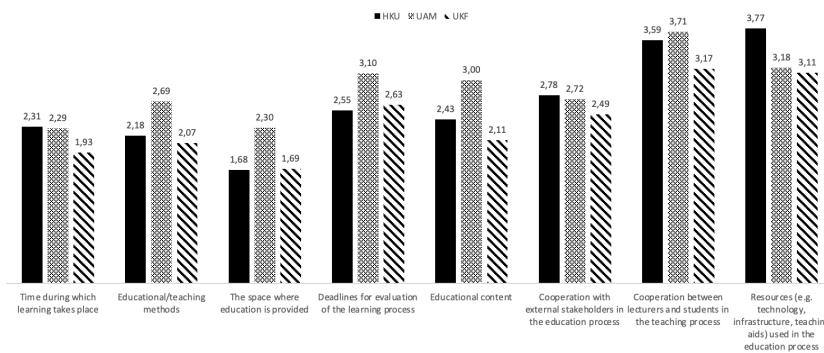


Figure 2. To what extent does your university currently provide opportunities for you to make your own decisions about various dimensions of the learning process?

The second question concerned the possibilities offered by the university across different educational areas. Cooperation between lecturers and students at all the researched universities is regarded as the dimension that provides the most opportunities for independent management. The dimension of resources was similarly highly rated. In contrast, the fewest opportunities are attributed to the time and space in which education takes place.

In the qualitative interviews, cooperation between lecturers and students was regarded as a factor influencing the positive atmosphere of the classes and, thus, the implementation of the educational methods and content. Since the latter are regarded as crucial but at the same time less flexible, cooperation becomes essential, as it provides opportunities for individual support in improving the quality of methods and content. Offering new opportunities for cooperation between lecturers and students can therefore become a positive factor in increasing the quality of education.

The low rating for flexibility of time and space confirms the belief that these are dimensions that are mainly dependent on the university. At the same time, due to the aforementioned importance of time in assessing the effectiveness of education, a particular threat to university teaching, in general, can be observed here.

It is also worth noting that there are significant differences in how flexibility is assessed among students at different universities in some dimensions. UAM has significant-

ly higher perceptions of flexibility concerning space, methods, content, and deadlines. HKU extensively prevails in resources. This means that, apart from some general trends, each university may also develop its own flexibility model, tailored to its specific resources. It is also worth noting that UKF students, across all dimensions except space, rated the flexibility options lowest among the three universities.

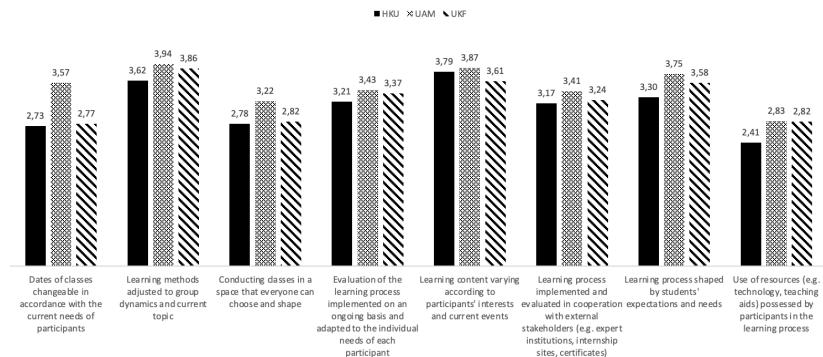


Figure 3. Which organization of the various dimensions of the educational process would be more beneficial to you?

The third question concerned how to organise the different dimensions of education according to their level of flexibility. At all three universities, the dimensions of educational methods and content were found to be most closely aligned with flexibility. The dimension of shaping the educational process according to students' needs, ranking above content, was also ranked high at UKF and UAM, but relatively lower at HKU. At UAM, flexible time organisation was also an essential element, and the perception of the importance of space flexibility was significantly higher at this university than at the others. Also of note is the low importance of resource flexibility at HKU.

The importance of method and content flexibility is unsurprising, as these were the dimensions most relevant to the learning process. Hence, their perceived low flexibility can be treated as a threat to flexible education, as shown in Figure 2. The high flexibility of time at UAM may indicate treating this dimension as a significant opportunity for this university to shape flexible education, as time was considered in Figure 1 to be one of the most essential dimensions influencing educational effectiveness.

Such a low score for the importance of resources at HKU is interesting. The students at this university rated resources as the most significant opportunity offered by their university. A high score for this dimension indicates that students prefer to rely on the educational process, specifically on the resources offered by their university, rather than those they own and provide themselves. This means that flexibility can also be seen as a disadvantage for the educational process when it requires more commitment from students rather than the opportunities offered by the university.

DISCUSSION

In the introduction, I mentioned several processes that can be seen as characteristics of contemporary social life. Based on the analyses, it is possible to indicate how education is a flexible element that can contribute to sustaining those processes. It shifts from the other-directed, institutional control of education to an inner-directed control, where participants can co-create their needs and how they are met. It bases education on post-materialist values, in which self-realisation is also essential, alongside the effectiveness of learning itself. Finally, it builds a sense of ontological security by understanding the undertakings' actions.

Several indicators for developing flexible education at universities can be identified from the analyses presented. Firstly, no single development path is universally applicable to all educational institutions. Each should start by recognising its capabilities and, on this basis, shape the dimensions of flexible education that are most aligned with its profile. For example, all the analyses presented highlight the high importance of the resources dimension at HKU, which, in some sense, shapes the profile of this institution in flexible education. Secondly, it is essential to be aware of the connections between the various dimensions of flexible education. For example, according to the analyses, student-lecturer cooperation positively influences the methods and content of teaching, while poor-quality space results in lower-quality education. Starting with the dimensions most vital for the institution provides the opportunity to develop further ones. Thirdly, for the development of flexible education, it is essential not only to define and utilise the strengths of the educational institution but also to communicate them effectively. Then all participants in educational processes will be aware of the resources they have, thereby improving their joint beneficial use. For example, the dimension of cooperation with external entities, which is relatively crucial for lecturers and is perceived as well developed by them, is somewhat underestimated by students. Effective communication about it can increase the likelihood of its adoption for flexible education. Fourthly, educational institutions need to recognise that educational processes are one of many elements, alongside professional, social, and family life, in students' everyday lives. The choices made in education are not necessarily based on internal factors. It is often a matter of alignment with other external dimensions. Hence, educational institutions should apply the principles of flexible education not only to the processes they implement but also to consider the external factors mentioned. For example, a more flexible arrangement of class time will enable students to perceive its more effective use. As a result, it may also result in their greater involvement in education.

The results of both the qualitative and quantitative parts of the presented research indicate that educational content (teaching methods and materials) is regarded as both the most flexible and the most essential element of the educational process. However, this stands in partial contradiction to the findings of earlier studies, which suggest that the

significance of the academic environment (infrastructure and resources) is greater in supporting flexible education than the pedagogical dimension itself.

Universities with a relatively high level of teaching quality should focus their efforts on enhancing and increasing the flexibility of elements that go beyond teaching methods and content. Such an approach would provide students not only with high-quality education but also with a certain sense of security. From this perspective, flexible education would provide a space that compensates for deficits in private life, thereby enabling flexible functioning in other spheres as well.

A SWOT analysis² of teaching humanities and social sciences in the researched countries can be formulated based on the presented data. At the same time, the dimensions of this analysis may also apply to other countries.

| STRENGTHS | WEAKNESSES |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High-quality educational methods and content that engage students in education and interpersonal relationships Cooperation between students and lecturers which provides high-quality education High-quality technological resources to support the learning process Awareness among academic staff of the importance of cooperation with external entities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal constraints on educational methods and content related to institutional conditions of educational processes Lack of widespread collaboration between students and lecturers outside the classroom, limiting cooperation to enthusiasts Time and deadlines as dimensions with little flexibility depending on institutional conditions Low use of opportunities for cooperation with external entities |
| OPPORTUNITIES | THREATS |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating well-designed and varied spaces influencing the development of learning opportunities A more flexible approach to time management in class schedule as an element increasing students' overall life efficiency Development of collaboration with external entities and increased awareness of this among students as an element increasing the sense of practicality of studying Creating own flexibility rules at each university, depending on their resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The decline of the quality of education in spaces that are unsuitable for different needs and sensitivities The decline in satisfaction with studying while sustaining inflexible time management The decline of the quality of education in the face of low flexibility of educational methods and contents Transfer of responsibility for educational processes to the level of individual attitudes and resources instead of insufficient and ineffective institutional offers |

Table 2. SWOT analysis of flexible education in teaching humanities and social sciences

At the same time, I emphasise that the purpose of this article is not to glorify flexible education. Of course, it provides many positive features to the traditional educational system, allows it to be adapted more to participants' specific needs, and thus has a different impact on social life. However, it is also necessary to mention this attribute, which has already been pointed out at the very end of the threats to flexible education. Flexible education can be a particular excuse for the educational system. Under the guise of

² A SWOT analysis is an analysis of the factors affecting an organization's or process's functioning. The analysis has four dimensions: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Strengths and opportunities are factors that positively influence the course of the analysed processes. Weaknesses and threats have a negative impact. Strengths and weaknesses refer to current factors or those that are internal, dependent on the organization. Opportunities and threats are future/potential factors or those that are external.

empowering participants in educational processes, it can transfer some or most of the responsibility for these processes to them. This happens when the system fails to provide sufficient resources or adequate procedures. It then prompts the individuals involved in the educational processes to change their attitudes and seek ways to improve the situation.

Examples of this situation are evident in the presented data. Students at all universities rate the possibilities for flexibility in teaching methods relatively low, while at the same time considering it desirable. Thus, given this area's low institutional capacity, they may seek ways to change this situation on their own. On the other hand, a high assessment of the importance of resources—in the case of HKU University—results in a decrease in the flexibility of resources, understood as the utilisation of those possessed by students. They are aware of the quality of the university's resources and rely entirely on them without having to increase flexibility.

It is worth appreciating the role of flexible education in promoting new attitudes and values to make learning processes more user-friendly and inclusive. At the same time, we must ensure that flexible education does not exacerbate educational inequalities. It can be hypothesised that it works better at universities that, within the institutional capacity framework, offer a high level of flexibility and good-quality resources. In such cases, students' leaning towards flexibility will exploit existing opportunities. In contrast, for universities with low institutional flexibility, promoting flexible attitudes among students may involve shifting the responsibility to the individual level, as mentioned above. And thus, a self-justification by the educational system of its shortcomings and insufficiencies.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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