

## **Flexible Learning and Teaching: Looking Beyond the Binary of Full-time/Part-time Provision in South African Higher Education**

Barbara Jones and Shirley Walters<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper engages with literature on flexible learning and teaching in order to explore whether it may be possible, within the South African context, to have flexible learning and teaching provide a third way which goes beyond the current practice of full-time/part-time provision. This binary classification of students is a proxy for day-time/after-hours delivery. The argument is made that effective, flexible learning and teaching requires a fundamental shift in thinking about learning and teaching in higher education that moves us beyond such binaries. The paper proposes that in order to ensure access and success for students, ‘common knowledge’ (Edwards, 2010) will need to be co-constructed which understands flexible learning and teaching in ways which will meet needs of a diversity of students, including working students. It will require ‘resourceful leadership’ (Edwards, 2014) within the university that recognises, enhances and gives purpose to the capability of colleagues at every level of the systems they lead. Also, it will require the building of ‘common knowledge’ between certain sectors of universities and particular workplaces.

**Keywords:** common knowledge, flexible learning and teaching, full-time and part-time studies, higher education, lifelong learning, resourceful leadership, working students.

### **Introduction**

Lifelong learning implies flexible provision of learning opportunities across the lifespan of individuals that recognises different forms of knowledge across and between sectors, sites of

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author email: [ferris@iafrica.com](mailto:ferris@iafrica.com)

practice or institutions. It affirms the importance of a learning culture which enables all people to learn. The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was understood as a key lever towards embedding lifelong learning, emphasising flexibility, portability and accessibility of learning across the system, with articulation between academic and vocational forms of knowledge (Parker and Walters, 2008).

Lifelong learning was one of the major justifications for the establishment of the South African NQF in 1995. Lifelong learning is not a new concept. As early as 1972, the Faure Report recognised that education was no longer the privilege of an élite, or a matter for only one age group. Instead, it should be both universal and lifelong (Dave, 1976). The Delors Report of 1996 saw learning throughout life as the ‘heartbeat’ of a society and envisaged a learning society in which everyone can learn according to his or her individual needs and interests, anywhere and anytime in an unrestricted, flexible and constructive way. International education organisations<sup>2</sup> have continued to endorse the critical role that lifelong learning plays in individual empowerment, in social and economic development and the reduction of poverty, and in moving societies towards viable and sustainable futures.

In reality, however, the understanding of the concept of lifelong learning and its importance to sustainable socio-economic development is still limited, both nationally and internationally. The paradigm shift to lifelong learning as the master concept for education and training systems - away from a ‘front-end loading’ understanding of education, where the major provision is for the young - has been uneven (Torres, 2004; Preece, 2009; Walters, 2006; Yang and Valdés-Cotera, 2011). In South Africa, few higher education institutions have consistently explored what it means in theory and in practice to ‘open (their) doors in the spirit of lifelong learning to workers and professionals in pursuit of multi-skilling and re-skilling, and adult learners whose access to higher education had been thwarted in the past’ (Department of Education, 1997: 11). But the University of the Western Cape (UWC) has been a leader in taking on this challenge, being recognised nationally and internationally for its efforts.

For the most part, South African public universities have been very traditional in their responses to the needs of working students and are still largely geared to a conception of mainstream learning that is for young people, and is residential and full time, with limited

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<sup>2</sup> The *Dakar Framework for Action* (2000); the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD); the Belém Framework for Action adopted by the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in 2009; UNESCO Member States (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), 2011).

‘part-time’ provision for working adults<sup>3</sup>. UWC, however, has, over the years, provided rich part-time study opportunities for adults seeking to enter higher education for the first time. But in recent years, along with all South African universities, UWC has been under pressure to ensure greatly increased enrolments of young, full-time undergraduates, while part-time enrolments have remained comparatively low or have even decreased. In this scenario, the strain on faculty capacity and institutional resources has made the continuation of the parallel system of undergraduate provision increasingly unsustainable for staff, for the academy and for students, and a growing number of part-time offerings have closed. Hence an alternative model of access to higher education undergraduate qualifications for working students is urgently needed at UWC.

Parallels can be seen in the United Kingdom (UK), where numbers of part-time enrolments are said to have declined ‘dramatically’ in the past few years. Alongside this the ‘traditional division between full-time and part-time learning is increasingly becoming less distinct’ (McLinden, 2013: 6), and learners are looking for more flexible ways of studying that fit with their work, family and other commitments. Similarly, Pollard, Newton and Hillage (2012) point out that full-time students are increasingly working part-time; working and non-working students are seeking accelerated, decelerated and other flexible study options; and their studies at higher levels are more likely to be work-related. They argue that the more flexible options there are the less valid are the distinctions between part-time and full-time students or education (Pollard et al., 2012: 268). In other words, students should be defined by their enrolment on a course, not by whether they are ‘distant learners’ or ‘on campus’ (Kinuthia, 2014).

This must be viewed in a context where the notion of a ‘traditional’ student is no longer valid, either in South Africa or in other parts of the world. The majority of *all* students either work in the formal or informal sector; care for the old or the young; are parents and/or surrogate parents to siblings; live and learn with disability or chronic illness; are returning or interrupting students; and live and learn in formal or informal housing environments. This ‘non-traditional’ student life has become the norm (Schreiber and Moja, 2014). Recognising this, the Division for Lifelong Learning (DLL) has been leading action research at UWC to shift thinking about teaching and learning towards more flexible provision, which problematises binary notions of students and learning as ‘full-time’/‘part-time’,

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<sup>3</sup> The University of South Africa (UNISA) is the main ‘distance learning’ institution for undergraduate study.

‘working’/‘not working’, ‘distance’/‘residential’, in order to ensure that working people and adults can continue to access professional development and lifelong learning opportunities.

The point of departure for this article is to examine what it would mean for a South African university, like UWC, to undertake more sustainable, flexible approaches to learning and teaching that enable both working and non-working students equal access to and success in undergraduate studies<sup>4</sup>. The possible challenges, especially in how to bring about institutional change, are explored.

This article is based on a review of the literature and current debates on flexible learning and teaching in higher education. The next section touches on the policy context and understandings and definitions of flexible learning and teaching. Following this, the article explores certain dimensions of flexible learning and teaching for universities, in particular in relation to working students, the use of educational technologies and related pedagogical concerns. The penultimate section looks at the implications of embracing flexible learning and teaching provision for institutional change, systems, staff and leadership. The final section summarises key points and suggests certain conditions towards achieving quality flexible learning and teaching provision which may help move certain universities beyond the binary of full- and part-time provision.

## **Policy context and definitions of flexibility in higher education**

### ***Policy***

The need for greater flexibility and diversity of learning provision has been variously argued at national policy level in South Africa (e.g. Department of Education, 1997; RSA, 2013; Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2014), emphasising the continuum of learning possibilities from distance through to contact learning in higher education residential institutions. In particular, the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (RSA, 2013) advocates for much greater responsiveness and flexibility to cater for a very wide variety of possible student needs and current realities, ‘which take into account their varying life and work contexts, rather than requiring them to attend daily classes at fixed times and central venues’ (RSA, 2013: 48). It acknowledges the role that educational technology can

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<sup>4</sup> The focus is on undergraduate degrees because this is the core business of most universities and because post-graduate, diploma and certificate courses are often offered flexibly on the assumption that the learners are working.

play in enabling flexibility and encourages the expansion of quality ‘online’, ‘blended’ and distance learning into all colleges and universities. Significant investment in developing dedicated distance education programmes is already being made by some traditionally ‘residential’ South African universities (DHET, 2014), while many are exploring blended learning options. In addition, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) has proposed a flexible, four-year model for reforming the undergraduate curriculum (CHE, 2013).

### ***Understandings and definitions of flexible learning and teaching***

While South African higher education policy documents talk of flexible learning in terms of distance and blended learning, it seems as if there is no commonly accepted meaning globally; rather, flexibility is a wide range of responses to different situations, to different needs, underpinned by different discourses. Therefore, ‘flexibility’ needs to be clearly defined and articulated institutionally, or it can lead to division, multiple contesting discourses and the duplication of effort and resources (Kirkpatrick and Jakupec, 1997; Johnston, 1997). For example, Van Der Linden (2014) argues that the meaning and purpose of ‘blended learning’ need to be interrogated to prevent misinterpretation and to ensure that it is transformative for learning and teaching design, institutionally. The risk, otherwise, is that this becomes merely a descriptor of a singular course rather than an institutional strategy. For universities, therefore, the meaning of flexibility may need to be extensively debated and an agreed definition adopted.

Nevertheless, there is some agreement among educationists that flexible learning is about when, where, how and at what pace learning occurs, providing choices for an increasingly diverse student body (Outram, 2011). These concepts relate to the *delivery* of learning and can be unpacked as follows. First, ‘**pace**’, includes accelerated and decelerated programmes and degrees; learning part-time; arrangements that allow learners to ‘roll on/roll off’ (‘stop in/stop out’); and systems for recognition of prior learning and for credit accumulation and transfer. Second, ‘**place**’ can relate to work-based learning with employer engagement; learning at home, on campus, while travelling or in any other place, often aided by technology which can enable the flexibility of learning across geographical boundaries and at convenient times. Third, ‘**mode**’ includes the use of learning technologies to enhance flexibility and enrich the quality of learning experiences, in blended or distance learning and in synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning (Tallantyne, 2012: 4; Gordon, 2014).

Other commonalities in the literature about what constitutes flexible learning are: that it is about access and success in higher education; that it is founded on good pedagogy that puts the learner at the centre of learning (Alexander, 2010, Edwards, 2014); that it develops well-rounded, knowledgeable and capable graduates who can make a positive difference in the world (Edwards, 2014); that it is about developing graduates who are flexible in their thinking and can hold their own in a rapidly changing and uncertain world (Barnett, 2014). All of these understandings are congruent with UWC's official stances on teaching and learning, as articulated in the Institutional Operating Plan (2010-2014) and in the graduate attributes.

Universal design for learning (UDL) takes an even broader and firmly inclusive approach to flexibility. Usually associated with accommodating disabilities, universal design is not only about ensuring inclusive learning spaces for all students, with or without learning disabilities, but also about flexible learning activities to accommodate a diversity of students and their equally diverse learning needs and knowledge backgrounds. UDL allows for personalised learning, following the principles of: multiple representations of knowledge for a range of different learning styles and for a variety of different assessment methods, in order to develop resourceful, knowledgeable learners; multiple means of action and expression, including building capacity for managing learning, in order to develop strategic, goal-directed learners; and multiple means of engagement and options for self-regulation, so as to develop purposeful, motivated learners (CAST, 2011). These principles foreground pedagogy and curriculum.

The University of Southern Queensland, Australia (2011), suggests a definition of flexible learning as:

- *flexible curriculum design*, including flexible forms of assessment which take into account different learning styles of students;
- *flexible admissions criteria*, including mechanisms for recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT);
- *flexible delivery*, including distance, online, on campus, a mix of these modes as well as accelerated or decelerated options.

However, this definition does not encompass the necessity of inclusive support, for both students and staff, to effect a successful transition to more flexible forms of learning and teaching provision. Therefore we would argue that this definition should include *flexible*

*support systems and services* that cater for working and non-working students, those with disabilities, and staff. This adapted definition we find useful as it seems to encapsulate the primary pillars of concern. It signals a broader higher education responsibility for flexible learning and teaching provision that can sustain the educational changes that are needed to support the lived realities of students, especially adult and working students, for learning success, and frames the thinking about flexible learning and teaching in this article.

Flexible learning and teaching, then, is more than simply re-packaging existing materials; as Outram (2009: 9) asserts: ‘We are not just selling a new course but a new concept in education’. It is a philosophy which frames strategies and approaches to learning and teaching, the university culture and its operations and systems (Kinuthia, 2014), requiring the development of distinctive, more *holistic* forms of provision. In order to achieve this, a coordinated response for enabling institutional changes is required (Outram, 2009; Green, Woldoko, Foskey and Brooks, 2013), which implies that strong institutional leadership would be a prerequisite.

### **Dimensions of flexible learning and teaching**

There are many more dimensions of flexible learning and teaching than can be dealt with here that would need to be considered for a university to adopt a holistic stance to the issue. For example, admissions criteria, such RPL and CAT are studies in their own right, and so will not be addressed. Suffice to say that many universities in South Africa are implementing RPL in one form or another as access into undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications, while CAT as credit for prior learning or for transferability of learning between and across institutions and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is under scrutiny. Flexible support systems and services, as within the ambit of universities’ student affairs portfolios, will similarly not be discussed here, although they play essential roles in effective, flexible learning and teaching provision.

The realities of working students need to be engaged with critically by universities as there are inherent tensions between the motivations of universities and of workplaces regarding flexibility, among other issues. As the majority of full- and part-time students in South Africa are working or needing to work for economic reasons, the dimensions of flexible learning and teaching which can assist working students to succeed in their studies are an important but complex issue which we touch on below.

A further critical dimension which we address is the use of technology to enable flexible learning and teaching and the pedagogical implications that arise from this. The key point is that the pervasiveness of technology means that all learners are or will become ‘online learners’ to some degree. Therefore we need to understand how technological developments are enabling changes in pedagogy, and how these in turn affect the way in which universities operate (Contact North)<sup>5</sup>.

### ***Working Adult Students***

The difficulties that working adults have in accessing higher education have been well documented (Buchler, Castle, Osman, and Walters, 2007; Division for Lifelong Learning, 2010). However, Allais (2014) argues that their difficulties are unsurprising as the worlds of work and education have very different logics. In her chapter on education/labour market relationships, she provides a penetrating analysis of the different logics at play which help to contextualise the difficulties of achieving success across labour markets and education. She challenges simplistic understandings of these relationships where education is so often ‘blamed’; for example, for being non-responsive to the needs of the economy. She quotes Freidson’s three ‘ideal types’ or logics of labour market organisations; ‘free market’, ‘bureaucratically controlled division of labour’, and ‘occupationally controlled division of labour’. Each provides very different options for relationships between labour markets and education and training. The important point she is making is that the nature of the labour market for particular qualifications will determine what is possible in terms of relationships between universities, workplaces, occupations and professions. As perhaps illustrative of Allais’ (2014) point, many faculties at universities offer continuing professional development courses, or professional qualifications in the form of certificates, diplomas, or full qualifications to working adults, particularly at postgraduate level, in a variety of flexible forms, for specific professions or occupations.

Kettle (2013), in her report on employer engagement and work-based learning in UK higher education, suggests that, although there is a continuum of inter-related elements for work-related learning, there are primarily two categories of engagement: work-based learning for learners to enhance their learning from the workplace, which could involve individual learning contracts, action research and problem-based learning; and experiential, work-

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<sup>5</sup> <http://contactnorth.ca/trends-directions/evolving-pedagogy/5-ways-online-learning-enabling-change-post-secondary-education>.



related learning for students. For the latter, this could include real-world projects, work simulations, internships and employer mentoring schemes (Kettle, 2013). However, there are a number of inherent tensions in such engagements, between different forms of knowledge; competing agendas; practical arrangements for learners and workplaces; and the autonomy of the university, of the employer, and of the learner. It is a challenge to accommodate the interests of all three players equally or even sufficiently through flexible pedagogies. Therefore Kettle (2013: 31) suggests opening communication to invite the perspectives of the university, student and employer while acknowledging compromises and limitations. Discussions, she suggests, should centre on learning and teaching, but policies, procedures and business models – both of employers and universities - must enable such educational alliances.

Abrahams' (2014) study which obtains the perspectives of working students at UWC, describes 'transitional maelstroms' of students, which illustrate the various 'barriers' they experience. 'Situational barriers' arise from the individual's life situation, and include issues such as work commitments, domestic responsibilities, as well as problems of child care, finance and transport; 'institutional barriers' include physical location, entry requirements, timetabling problems, as well as practices and procedures which hinder participation; and 'dispositional barriers' are attributed to factors such as self-esteem, past educational experiences, values, attitudes and beliefs about learning. In his study, Abrahams shows that the relationships between students and their employers are very mixed, with some employers being very supportive and others not being supportive at all. In some instances, education and training policies may be in place in workplaces but individual managers may obstruct the progress of working students; other policies, for example restricting the use of computers for study, can have major implications for the ability of working students to succeed in their studies.

As alluded to above, developing flexible learning and teaching strategies for working adult students needs to take into account the education/labour market relationships which vary in relation to the different labour market organisations. The strategies need to recognise the different logics of different workplaces and universities and the complex life circumstances of the working students. There cannot be a 'one size fits all' approach but, as Kettle (2013) argues, systematic communications will be required between workplaces and universities which enable a truly flexible pedagogy to support working students. Put another

way, it will require the building of ‘common knowledge’ (Edwards, 2014) - as elaborated later in this article - across different workplaces and the university.

### ***Technology-enhanced learning***

Although flexible learning and teaching is much more than using technology, such as learning management systems, the internet, a personal computer and mobile technologies, these technologies do afford great opportunities for flexibility. There are a multitude of terms for learning and teaching using technology: e-learning, online learning, technology-enhanced learning, technology-enabled learning, and so on. In this article the term technology-enhanced learning is used.

Technology plays an essential role for students to succeed in the local and global economy and in providing quality flexible learning and teaching opportunities. Technology-enhanced learning can mitigate the attendance requirements of full-time study, enabling students to learn in their own time and place and at their own pace; it enables easier delivery of materials from lecturers to students and vice versa; and it connects learners to people and resources that can support their educational needs online (Lai and Chong, 2007), such as open education resources (OERs) (Boer, 2014). Technology allows universities to extend their traditional campus-based services to distant (off-campus) and online modes, and has formed the basis of distance education for many years. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are promoted as the answer to flexibility in education, enabling thousands of learners access to learning in new ways, but there are many concerns about pedagogy and sometimes hidden costs to learners, and course completion rates tend to be low (Gordon, 2014).

McLoughlin and Lee argue that today’s students ‘want an active learning experience that is social, participatory and supported by rich media’ (2010: 28), which is possible through the continual expansion of Web 2.0 social networking tools. The use of these tools and technologies can, providing appropriate pedagogies are guiding the learning process, promote learner agency, increase students’ control over the learning process, and facilitate the development of graduate attributes and flexible graduates (McLoughlin and Lee, 2010). Also, emerging technologies can allow for authentic learning experiences, providing complexity in the learning process that prepares learners for the challenges of professional practice after graduation (Bozalek, Gachago, Alexander, Watters, Wood, Ivala and Herrington, 2013).

The Flexible Learning Institute (FLI) at Charles Sturt University<sup>6</sup> distinguishes between *blended* learning, which provides all learners with the same set of resources, and *personalised* learning which allows for flexibility and adaptability of the content - including of assessment - and its sequencing and pacing, according to learners' individual desires and needs, as in UDL. Forms of blended learning are increasingly being implemented in South African universities, but it will be some time before personalised learning approaches are widely adopted.

Barnett strikes a cautionary note when he argues that flexibility is 'not an absolute good' (2014:7) and that there may be unintended consequences. For example, access to digital devices and technologies and the individual skills and dispositions of users must be taken into account when designing learning activities, so as not to lead to digital exclusion of those already marginalised. This is particularly pertinent in Africa where access to the internet may pose problems or where wifi coverage is poor, and for learners who do not have ready access to these technologies or who cannot afford the costs of connectivity (Kinuthia, 2014). Therefore the limits of flexibility in different contexts need to be recognised and careful monitoring is necessary to ensure quality flexible learning and teaching.

### ***Pedagogical implications for FLTP***

As suggested by the definitions of flexible learning presented here, and by the brief discussion of technology-enhanced learning, it is clear that pedagogy is central to the use of technology in education. The issue is that technology should never drive flexible learning and teaching: its function is to *enable* learning and teaching (Contact North), and the focus of the design process should be on how to best merge pedagogy with appropriate technology (Kinuthia, 2014).

Proponents of good technology-enhanced learning often suggest a mixed or blended pedagogical approach, where conventional methods of instruction such as face-to-face lectures and tutorials, seminars, small-group discussions, etc., are complemented by digital methods (Laurillard, 2008: 143). But these digital methods need to engage learners, transforming contact sessions into active learning opportunities, effecting a paradigm shift from a traditional teacher-centred to a student-centred learning environment for more

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<sup>6</sup> <https://blendedandflexiblelearning.wikispaces.com/principles> In <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/flexible-learning/bestpractice>

effective learning (Gordon, 2014; Macharia and Pelsler, 2012: 2-3); or as Boer (2014) argues, a shift from learning as acquisition using ‘chalk and talk’, to learning as participation using technology-integrated pedagogies.

It is widely accepted that student engagement is essential for meaningful learning to take place (Dereshiwsky and Moan, 2000; Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke, 2013; among others) and that it is an important predictor of retention and success in higher education. Edwards (2014) argues that learning activities need to be specifically designed to help students engage with knowledge that is ‘culturally powerful’, to become productive members of society. At the heart of Edwards’ approach is Zimmerman’s (2001) notion of the self-regulating learner – ‘positioning students as agentially in control of their own learning’, for which an appropriately supportive learning environment and the appropriate learning tools are essential.

Emerging and Web 2.0 technologies can offer such learning opportunities but an online learning and teaching environment requires a completely new educational approach (Green et al., 2013) and the emergence of ‘new’ pedagogies (Contact North). In Africa, the use of mobile technology such as smartphones has greatly outstripped the use of laptops and personal computers (Boer, 2014) and as educators we need to consider aligning our pedagogies with the emerging technologies and media that our students have access to and are familiar with, such as social media. Social media-enabled learning causes boundaries between formal and informal learning to become blurred (Boer, 2014), disrupts the established knowledge hierarchies that define higher education, and challenges normative assumptions about curriculum design and assessment. The interactive and collaborative aspects of social media-enabled learning increasingly shift the position of the learner - rather than the content or the institution - to the centre of learning, demanding a curriculum design process that is learner-centred and collaborative (Green et al., 2013). But, because of the open and distributive nature of social media, educators need to monitor and control the quality of interaction in the learning process while at the same time developing greater levels of responsibility and self-regulation in learners (Boer, 2014). The agency of the learner, or ‘learner-centredness’, becomes a significant aspect not only of effective technology-enhanced learning, but also of any flexible modes of provision that engage the learner effectively.

The use of technologies in flexible learning and teaching therefore needs to be carefully considered and pedagogically informed in order to promote active engagement in learning. However, it is said that the organisational emphasis on research credentials, rather

than teaching, means that efforts to implement effective pedagogies may be neglected (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada and Freeman, 2014: 24).

### **Flexible learning and teaching: implementation and organisational change**

Burge, Gibson and Gibson (2011) caution against an uncritical stance to flexible learning, saying that we need to pre-empt any institutional changes by questioning who is going to benefit most: the students, the academic staff, the academy, or employers? Moreover, the benefits of flexible learning and the ‘allure’ of emerging technologies in achieving more flexibility must not cause us to lose sight of the impact of such changes and how they will need to be managed. Nevertheless, as Bozalek, Ng’ambi and Gachago (2011) point out, the consequences of universities not engaging with technology-enhanced learning are that the gap between those who are exploring these modes and those who are not will continue to grow; students will become increasingly disenchanted with higher education and disengaged from learning; assessment of non-visible skills will be compromised; and opportunities for preparing appropriate graduates attributes will be lost.

Barnett (2014) argues that flexibility needs to occur at different levels of the educational system: at sector level, at institutional level and in the learning process - pedagogical flexibility. At sector level, flexibility can be exhibited directly such as through systemic mechanisms for credit accumulation and transfer, or indirectly such as through establishing enabling conditions for institutions to develop flexibility. Barnett suggests fifteen conditions for flexibility, ‘to safeguard educational integrity’ (2014: 9) and to evaluate flexibility, but that these conditions are common to and should inform *all* good learning and teaching practices.

Barnett (2014: 60) further argues that flexibility may vary not only within and across departments and disciplines in universities, but also across professional fields. In departments, this may be less about epistemological differences than about the internal educational cultures of departments which have developed over time; what Edwards and Thompson (2013: 99) might call ‘organisational narratives’. These differences may make it very difficult to attempt to orchestrate moves towards greater flexibility from the centre. Bozalek et al. (2011) claim that although emerging technologies are being taken up by students and academics for learning and teaching, institutional policy-makers may be much slower in understanding their potential and engaging with them. As a consequence,

administrative policies may constrain or obstruct the adoption of emerging technologies for learning and teaching.

Green et al. (2013: 26) propose that because higher education is a complex system consisting of ‘four inter-dependent sub-systems: the teacher sub-system, learner sub-system, delivery sub-system and administrative sub-system’, flexible approaches to learning and teaching require profound shifts in the way that the entire university views, engages with and develops knowledge.

Shifting engagement with knowledge work in higher education requires the active collaboration, not only of academic staff across disciplinary boundaries, but also instructional designers, educational technologists and students. It also requires those involved in the institutional management and administration to take a risk in creating the opportunities for innovation not only to emerge, but also to be sustained and diffused throughout the sector (Green et al., 2013: 23).

This echoes Outram’s assertion that flexible learning cannot take place within an inflexible infrastructure (2009: 7). Similarly, Barnett points out that university structures and systems need to be integrated at multiple levels, and that ‘the development of highly complex and interactive systems that have to withstand severe tests of their integrity and robustness’ (2014: 59) are needed to be able to support institutional responsiveness. He asserts that there needs to be articulation of institutional leadership at all levels, from the bottom to the top, but expresses his doubts as to whether there is currently ‘an adequate understanding of the complexities of such management and leadership challenges’ (2014: 59).

Johnston (1997) similarly suggests that both top-down (centralised) and bottom-up (decentralised) change strategies are necessary, but adds that every person is a change agent and the best organisations learn from the external environment as well as from their own internal staff. Overall, Johnston advocates for a change process that can shift pockets of enthusiasm of flexible learning and teaching towards a coherent, institutionalised outcome.

### ***Building ‘common knowledge’***

Given that flexible learning and teaching means so many different things and is challenging the dominant approaches to teaching and learning in South Africa, a common understanding of what it means institutionally needs to be developed and embraced. At a theoretical level, we find Edwards’ (2011) notion of building ‘common knowledge’ useful as it speaks to the

fact that bringing about change in institutions demands not only the transformation of surface behaviours, but also of the underlying philosophical tenets, or the ‘motives’, on which they are built. This requires deep and sustained dialogue.

Edwards introduces the concepts of *common knowledge* together with *relational expertise*, and *relational agency*. Very briefly, *relational expertise* is about acquiring a professional sensitivity to others when working jointly with them on common work-related problems towards mutually agreed outcomes. Developing the skill of relational expertise demands a capacity to work collaboratively and for each participating practitioner to articulate what matters for them in their contexts, while understanding and taking the standpoint of others and recognising what matters for them. Relational expertise can therefore be seen as an additional expertise to disciplinary and specific professional expertise and is a prerequisite for relational agency.

As Edwards (2011: 34) argues, in the process of developing relational expertise, where collaborators engage in negotiating enhanced interpretations of a complex problem, a ‘discursive meeting of minds that give rise to *common knowledge*’ occurs. In other words, collaborators decide on the collective motive (what matters for all) of the activity. It is at this stage that it becomes possible to build knowledge that will be held in common by all collaborators. Hence common knowledge constitutes the ‘motives’ – the ‘what matters’ – for each party and is respected by the collaborators. It is elicited by employing relational expertise and then operates as a resource which mediates collaboration on complex problems. As Edwards (2010) explains, this shared knowledge of what matters for the other arises from new ways of understanding and acting which develop over time.

*Relational agency*, on the other hand, is the capacity that is exercised when collaborators need to take the action together, i.e. it is the exercise of relational expertise and common knowledge as practitioners jointly respond to the object of activity, such as developing a flexible learning and teaching programme. Both relational expertise and core professional knowledge are necessary when working relationally. In brief, relational agency enables an outward looking disposition when liaising with others on complex problems and it is a capacity that can be learnt (Edwards, 2010). The concepts of relational expertise, relational agency, and building common knowledge have been used by various scholars in different contexts in different parts of the world to confront complex problems, including across professional and knowledge boundaries.

Given that flexible learning and teaching is a complex problem involving the four inter-dependent sub-systems of the academy (Green et al., 2013), it will require committed collaboration across all systems and sectors within the institution in order to come to a common understanding of flexible learning and teaching which is inclusive of a diversity of students, among them working students. It will also need collaboration to build ‘common knowledge’ between certain sectors of the university and particular employers. We would argue that only if this occurs will there be a chance for implementing a flexible learning and teaching provision framework that can supersede the parallel binary system, which enables access and success for working students.

In addition, embedding flexible learning and teaching institutionally will need what Edwards refers to as ‘resourceful leadership’ (Edwards, 2014). She argues that at a time of austerity, when material resources are stripped away and workforces are drastically reduced, as is the case in many universities, professional development of the remaining workforce becomes vital to ensure their engagement with the long term purposes of the organisation. When these reductions are occurring at the same time as a fundamental change is required, then leadership must be able to recognise, enhance and give purpose to the capability of colleagues at every level of the systems they lead.

There is a key link to the development of ‘common knowledge’ in her argument. Developing and moving ‘common knowledge’ horizontally is, she states, much easier than moving it upstream, or vertically. The creative leadership that is required must listen, tap into and harvest the knowledge within innovations that are occurring at every level and assist with their movement upstream. We argue that for flexible learning and teaching to become institutionalised in ways which will include a diversity of working and non-working students, changes needs to impact every level of the institution, including the bottom, middle and the top decision-making structures. We concur with Johnston (1997) that both centralised and decentralised change strategies are necessary; the best organisations learn from the external environment as well as from their own internal staff, and every member of staff is a change agent. Resourceful leadership is required to facilitate this occurrence.

### **Towards a conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored the flexible learning and teaching literature and find that there is no one stable definition of what it means; it is at best a contested concept which is gaining



traction rapidly across the world. The argument has emerged that flexible learning and teaching is not simply a mechanistic approach to flexibility, achieved by inserting technology into existing face-to-face pedagogies and tweaking a few activities and assessments: it is a fundamental shift in thinking about learning and teaching in higher education. It is essential, therefore, that universities come to common critical understandings of flexible learning and teaching if it is to flourish within institutions. We have argued that developing ‘common knowledge’ of flexible learning and teaching at the academy would mean bringing together the expertise of all four institutional ‘sub-systems’ into dialogue with each other – of teaching and learning specialists, of academics in the different knowledge fields and disciplines, of champions of flexible pedagogical practices, of relevant administrators, of student support services, of ICT experts, of institutional management and of institutional leadership. The process of building common knowledge would need to recognise relational expertise which enables creative conversations about ‘what matters’ in and across disciplines and sectors. The same commitment necessary to build common knowledge within the university itself would be required between particular workplaces and sections of the university, if working students are to be supported by employers in their studies.

However, in the South African context, with the demographic realities of over fifty percent of the population being under twenty-five years old and the strong political imperative to take care of those not in education, employment or training, the emergence of a conception of flexible learning and teaching which takes into account the needs of working students would require a dialogue to address the central question of ‘what kind of learners do we need for what kind of society?’ (Edwards, 2014). There would need to be general acceptance that higher education must engage a diverse range of students across their lifespan, in order to meet the socio-economic needs and aspirations of the country and the continent within a lifelong learning philosophy and approach. This would imply that teaching and learning would need to change, and be responsive to varying conditions and circumstances of all students – accepting the reality of a diversity of students most of whom are working and studying simultaneously, and are in fact ‘part-time’. This would need to include collaborative dialogue to develop ‘common knowledge’ between universities and specific workplaces, respecting their different logics and the complex lives of working students.

A strategy of bottom-up, middle-out and top-down change management is required within the university which has ‘resourceful leadership’ who enhance and give purpose to the

capability of colleagues at every level of the systems they lead. If this is to occur within the institution, and between the university and particular workplaces, it may be possible for flexible learning and teaching to assist universities in South Africa ‘look beyond the binary’.

### **Author bionotes**

**Shirley Walters** is professor emerita at the University of Western Cape; she is the founding director of the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) and Division for Lifelong Learning (DLL) at UWC, where she has been professor of adult and continuing education since 1985. She was chair of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) from 2004-2010, and is a member of the Ministerial Transformation of Public Higher Education Oversight Committee (TOC). She has been awarded a doctorate *honoris causa* from University of Linköping. Her more recent books include, with Linda Cooper (2009), *Learning/Work: Turning work and lifelong learning inside out* (HSRC Press, Cape Town); with Linzi Manicom (2012) *Feminist popular education in transnational debates: Building pedagogies of possibility* (Palgrave MacMillan, USA).

**Barbara Jones** has worked in the field of education for many years: first as a high school teacher, then in adult education and training in the NGO sector, and for the last ten years in higher education freelancing as an adult educator and as a researcher. Research interests include how we learn, the relationship between work and learning, recognition of prior learning, and pedagogical theory and practice. Academic publications include: ‘Training for the Future? A case study of emerging education, training and development practitioners in the South African clothing manufacturing industry’ (*Perspectives in Education*, 24(3)); ‘Anonymous examination marking at the University of Cape Town: The quest for an “agonizing-free zone”’ (*South African Journal of Higher Education*, 20(3)); ‘Recognition of prior learning as “radical pedagogy”: A case study of the Workers’ College in South Africa’ (*McGill Journal of Education*, 48 (3)).

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