

# Looking back: student session on making education more flexible

On 13 May 2019, 15 students took part in a feedback session organised by SURF and the Acceleration Team Flexibility about 'flexibilisation in higher education'. What preferences do students have in this area? What problems do they see? The students provided input to experts from universities of applied sciences, universities, and SURF in six sessions.

## Discussion round At your own pace

led by Lucie Lolkema (HU) and Paul den Hertog (HvA)

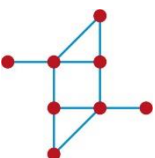
According to the participants, there is certainly a need for students to have their 'own stop and go' ability with regards to full-time education. Currently, they do not experience room to pace their studies. Classes you have not passed, are slowing you down. The system is prevalent, is the sentiment of the students that are present. At the other end of the spectrum, students experience their programme as too easy and therefore wish to increase the pace. This applies both in terms of content, by offering room for deepening the content, as well as opportunities to take extra courses, and by paying per study credit. On a whole, funding is a key question in this problem: what should you pay for as a student? Education, guidance, testing? And how to deal with the fact that some courses are more expensive to offer than others? Another issue is the 'Binding Study Advice' a student receives in their first year of the programme. A student needs a positive advise in order to continue with their studies. This is often based on the number of courses they have passed in their first year. Students indicate that the BSA has two sides: it is a motivator, but also, if studying doesn't go well for a while, you will end up in a hurdle.

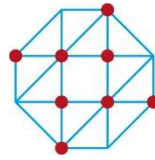
## Discussion round Off the beaten track

led by Menno de Vos (BUAS) and Richard Kempen (WUR)

Students from very different backgrounds joined the session "Off the beaten track" Students ranged from applied sciences bachelor's degrees to university master's degrees, even including a teacher who took retraining courses at a private educational facility. They agreed a foundation is needed at the start of a study programme, before you leave 'the beaten track'. After that initial phase, students are generally willing to look beyond the boundaries of their own study programme, even at different institutions. Students think however, that there should be a condition that you are required to travel only one day a week to study at a different institution. This requires the possibility to follow the major part of the programme online. The need for face-to-face contact will always remain.

The freedom of choice that currently exists within programmes, is largely labelled as 'sham choice' by the participants. To get into some masters, the admissions office requires you to have followed certain minors. Sometimes, they put certain demands on the courses that were taken within the elective space of a programme, which means you are basically forced to make certain choices. Also the lack of insights into courses offered, complicated administrative procedures, and conflicts in schedules, are mentioned as barriers to study off the beaten track. Fortunately, there are also examples of good practices: at Windesheim no scheduled courses are offered on Wednesday afternoon, which allows students to follow courses of their choice outside of their programme.





## Discussion round MyDiploma

led by Ulrike Wild (WUR) and Nanette Verhulst (UU)

'MyDiploma' is a vision of the future in which students compile a study programme by applying their own 'red thread' in the programme through knowledge they acquire within and outside of their courses. They do this under the supervision of a tutor who helps monitor the progress towards a diploma. The latter is essential, according to the students, noting, "*Support, not steer.*"

The concept of MyDiploma appeals to the students. At the bachelor's level, maximum freedom of choice means that you can broadly explore which courses and major suits you best. At the master's level, the freedom of choice can ensure that you put together a very specific course of learning, without courses that are experienced as a burden. Alternating courses, internships, challenges, and projects is viewed positively. In this way, practice and theory optimally reinforce each other. Most students believe it is important their programme is coherent and has a common thread, whilst, amongst other things, sufficient attention is paid to academic skills.

Profiling towards the labour market is a challenge, according to the students. What will the diploma or degree mean? For example, is your degree still considered a Master's degree in economics if you have followed over 50 percent of the courses within a different programme? And if you obtain a 'free' master's degree, this may not be beneficial for entering the labour market, the students fear. They see practical challenges in the organisation of transparent educational mobility without much administrative processing. This would mean enormous profits for students and is a condition for flexible education through the MyDiploma route.

MyDiploma should not mean however, that you study in isolation, the students caution. Flexible education must always have a social component. As a student you must also learn to cooperate, and be able to give and receive feedback. In other words: be part of a learning community.

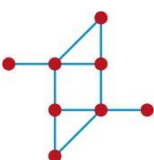
## Discussion round Modular education

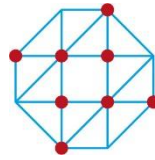
Led by Tineke Kroontje (Hanze University of Applied Sciences) and Robert Bouwhuis (HRO)

The students applaud a modular structure of the curriculum, mainly because it offers the possibility of profiling: "The choices you make show who you are as a person." Modules can also help you discover what suits you and also what does not (any longer). You make your own choices within an organic learning track. Choosing one module is a smaller step than choosing a programme, in terms of both time invested and costs. Students would like to be able to follow modules from different domains, preferably at the institution at which they are enrolled.

The first requirement for this is a good information provision, preferably through a kind of "Stud choice at modular level". All relevant information about a module must be available through this: content/subject emerging through clear naming, level, prior knowledge requirements, timetables, success rate, labour market information, endorsements of employers, and more. Registration for a module should preferably be arranged centrally. (Regional) coordination between institutions about when they offer which module is desirable, so that there is a supply of modules throughout the year. This could also solve the problem of being forced to wait for one year after missing a course within your own programme.

The students also see opportunities for lifelong learning: educational modules make it easier to retrain or follow additional courses during your career. On the other hand, they facilitate institutions to respond quicker to new developments within the professional field by offering relevant modules. However, there was also a critical note: can you safeguard academic skills if students study in separate modules?





## Discussion round Edubadges

led by Rick West (Brigham Young University) and Alexander Blanc (SURF)

The discussion about badges was led by visiting professor from the American Brigham Young University, Rick West. He is researching the use of badges, currently combining this with a sabbatical in The Netherlands, following the Edubadges project at SURF. SURF project manager Alexander Blanc briefly presented the Edubadges' approach: SURF is working on an infrastructure that allows Dutch universities of applied sciences and universities to issue badges to their students as digital certificates for certain acquired skills or knowledge. This might concern both regular components of a programme (*micro credentials*), as well as additions to the curriculum. The students present at the discussion primarily thought of badges as a supplement to regular certificates. For example, concerning presentation and soft skills. If badges are transferable across institutions, you have proof of your (non-subject-related) acquired skills in the case of transferring to another programme. The students thought badges could be beneficial to lifelong learning.

On the other hand, several risks were also identified by the students: the *gamification* design of badges encourages competition between students, which might cause pressure and stress on students to collect (many) badges. Another risk may be that badges will replace diplomas: if employers consider certain badges to be (more) important, why not quit studying once you have acquired those badges? Additionally, one of the students feared that badges will take away the nuances that are more visible on a transcript.

## Discussion round Technology for flexible education

led by Jelmer de Ronde (SURF) and Jocelyn Manderveld (SURF)

This discussion focused on the question which barriers to flexible education students see can be removed by technology. The students had a clear message: if you give multiple choices, students need better tools to make these choices. A hypothetical course catalogue would ideally include information on which courses can be followed, matching the courses already taken. Practical information is also important. For example, whether course schedules overlap. Examination boards could also benefit from easily accessible information about the different curricula. The students indicate decisions on applications for exemptions or taking additional courses, often take a long time. A better exchange of data might be beneficial.

