

Dr Michaela Martin, Programme Specialist at IIEP-UNESCO, described flexible learning pathways (FLPs) as routes for getting into, through and out of higher education. She highlighted the key questions that guided the research, considering the policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments and practices that impact the development, application and effectiveness of the flexible learning pathways available in a number of countries. Michaela noted that providers in the UK generally benefit from greater levels of autonomy than providers in other countries and, as such, UK providers have a strong role to play in designing and implementing flexible pathways for students.

Emeritus Professor John Brennan, author of [Flexible Learning Pathways in British Higher Education](#), identified both the opportunities and challenges that accompany the UK's diverse institutional systems, programmes and experiences. He set out a series of questions for providers and students to consider in relation to student pathways, emphasising that the ever-increasing variety of opportunities and choices available to students made it more important to think about how students will inform their choices and where that information will come from.

'Flexible learning pathways need to take learners to their desired destinations. Though sometimes learners may not be sure what their desired destinations are. Therefore, they also need a good learning journey, an experience to enjoy.'

Emeritus Professor John Brennan

Provider perspectives

- Focused on the creation of intellectual identity and practical expertise, Professor Diana Spencer introduced the University of Birmingham's Liberal Arts

micro-credentials or degrees in ways and at times to suit their work and life commitments.

- Professor Paul Crawshaw introduced the Teesside University College Partnership (TUCP), a place-based further education/higher education partnership for the design and delivery of higher-level skills across the Tees Valley. With 1938 individuals achieving higher education qualifications through TUCP over the past three years, this distinctive network approach offers courses in a diverse range of locations within Tees Valley according to student demand and employer need.

Policy panel

Governments across the UK are united in their enthusiasm for considering greater flexibility in student journeys. Our lively policy discussion was led by colleagues from Scotland, Wales and England and chaired by Vicki Stott (QAA). Panellists were James Dunphy (Scottish Funding Council), Cliona O'Neill (Jand,ifouncil

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- How does the notion of flexible learning work for the 'typical' undergraduate cohorts of school/college leavers? Is there a danger that all the talk of low-value degrees will push students towards degrees for specific employment and work against flexible approaches? The panel emphasised that the drive toward greater flexibility is about widening access to higher education for different types of students. Some students in the diverse cohort might want the fastest journey to employment, but others will want to keep more options open. Flexibility leads to more options and it is important to ensure those options are of appropriate quality, experience and outcomes.

Next steps

Dr Suzanne Grant Lewis (Director, IIEP-UNESCO) and Dr Ailsa Crum (QAA) confirmed their intention to offer further joint events, linked to each organisation's future work streams. Further information about IIEP-UNESCO's research in this area can be found on their [website](#).

For QAA, the event links to an ongoing strand of activity focused on flexible delivery. A related [roundtable](#) discussion in December 2020 was held jointly with HEPI and attended by the Prime Minister's special adviser, Professor Alison Wolf.

The most recent edition of QAA's [Quality Compass](#) spotlights micro-credentials and QAA intends to produce a characteristics statement for micro-credentials to support the sector in designing and offering these qualifications. Materials from the February Quality Insights conference - including the keynote address by Emeritus Professor Beverley Oliver, 'Micro-Credentials: Connected to Value' - are also available on our [Membership Resources site](#) (accessible to QAA Members).

In addition, QAA is supporting a number of [Collaborative Enhancement Projects](#), two of which focus on aspects of flexible student pathways. One project, led by Bath College, explores a model for recognition and transfer