Chapter 5
Temporal Flexibility in Online University Courses in Spain and Australia

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ABSTRACT
Temporal flexibility in learning is one of the main promises and advantages of online learning, as well as one of its most important characteristics. This advantage has been widely exploited by institutions, which offer several degrees online or constitute themselves fully online. Although it is clear that online university courses are able to be more flexible in time than face-to-face courses, it is also true that as formal educational institutions with accreditation responsibilities universities face some time constraints that prevent them from being absolutely flexible. In this chapter, the authors present a study to assess the levels of time flexibility of online courses in two universities in Spain and Australia. To do so, they administrated a Likert-scale questionnaire to 413 students at both universities to assess seven items of time flexibility. The results suggest that in both universities some items of time flexibility are quite high but other items are still low. The authors then discuss these results.

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from the point of view of the nature of higher education institutions and their current role in society.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Flexibility in Higher Education

There are several important arguments for higher education to assume the principle of instructional flexibility. From the institutional point of view, increasing flexibility means a competitive advantage for universities in order to attract students. Besides, flexibility is seen as a way to reduce costs and improve efficiency (Normand et al., 2008). From the societal point of view, flexibility is seen as a demand of the knowledge society, and as an opportunity to democratize higher education by widening access to sectors of population which face different kinds of barriers to being engaged, as well as to develop democratic societies by fostering students’ participation with their own voices (Normand et al., 2008; Schweisfurth, 2011). From the psycho-pedagogic point of view, flexibility is seen as a necessary condition for developing learner-centered pedagogies in higher education, which have been argued – with the support of significant amount of research – to be the most appropriate approach to foster successful learning.

The learner-centered approach is oriented by constructivist learning theory, and it was defined by APA (APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs, 1997) by means of 14 research-validated principles of learning. In these principles, the idea that learning is based on the idiosyncratic activity of the learner is pervasive. This approach poses an important challenge to higher education institutions, which need to shift their instructional (and organizational) paradigm from teacher-centered to learner-centered (Harris & Cullen, 2008). One necessary implication of this shift is increasing instructional flexibility (McCombs & Vakili, 2005).

Although it is a commonplace that instructional flexibility implies the provision of choice (Bergamin et al., 2012; Goodyear, 2008), the notion of flexibility is not unique and neither is it agreed by everybody. To begin with, it is possible to distinguish flexibility at least at three levels, in which flexibility means slightly different things: institutional management, operational management and teaching-learning management (Normand et al., 2008). Neither is the meaning of the notion of flexibility unique if we focus solely on the teaching-learning level. After a comprehensive review of literature, Bergamin et al. (2012) identified 22 different definitional categories of flexible learning used by different authors, which Bergamin et al. group in 6 dimensions (time, space, methods, learning styles, content, organization and infrastructure requirements). Bergamin et al. (2012) then conducted
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