

What is “flexible learning” ?

Flexible learning is a macro concept and education philosophy that focuses on student centeredness, learning centeredness and flexibility in terms of learning environments and learning opportunities.

The international trend is that successful and effective tertiary education is linked to the creation of student-centred flexible learning environments that provide for flexibility in terms of:

- access to and exit from several learning programmes;
- accreditation and portability of qualifications;
- modes in which education takes place;
- modes in which communication and interaction takes place;
- programme compilation;
- study material;
- evaluation and assessment methods;
- time and place of study; and
- pace at which learning takes place.

Besides the fact that the concept, flexible learning, refers to a philosophy of education, the concept flexible learning is also used as an umbrella concept for the provision of flexible delivery systems. It refers to a mixed or multimode of education that includes all modes of contact and distance education, as well as all possible combinations thereof.

What is “telematic education” ?

Telematic education, as operated at the University of Pretoria, can be considered as **technology-enhanced flexible learning**. The following *definition* of telematic education can be offered:

Telematic education refers to a comprehensive system of flexible learning. The use of ICT (information and communication technology) to enhance the learning environment, is emphasised. (Note that paper material is considered as a low level of technology and is thus included in the use of the word ‘technology’).

Telematic education includes the full spectrum of education modes, from contact education to paper-based and web-based distance education, as well as all possible combinations of residential and distance education. It also includes supportive modes such as interactive television, video conferencing and interactive multimedia.

A new Education Model for the University, that promotes flexible learning

Why a new education model ?

Internationally, universities are subjected to renewal, because of technological and social changes, changes in the educational paradigm, an increase in the importance of distance education, open learning and flexible learning, the massification and industrialisation of education, digitalisation of information and communication media, commercialisation and globalisation of education and the pursuit of quality. Besides these changes, education institutions are increasingly exposed to a growing number of new learners with a variety of needs and preferences. Students, for example, demand more flexibility with regards to time, place, pace and mode of studying which suits their specific circumstances, wider acceptance and portability of qualifications, more say in programme compilation, etc.

It is furthermore important to acknowledge the increasing role and function of technology in the education environment. Possibly the most important impact of ICT on education, is the fact that it offers universities the opportunity to effectively provide flexible learning. ICT plays an important role in the creation of flexible learning environments. The barriers of distance and time are disappearing daily. ICT continuously offers new opportunities for the optimising of interaction and contact between lecturers and students, as well as between students.

The classical separation between contact and distance education institutions is consequently disappearing. Contact and distance education practices are being integrated with the emphasis on the provision of flexible learning opportunities for students who wants to be freed from the limits of time, place or pace of learning.

In the light of the preceding, a **new education model** was developed to enable the University to remain internationally competitive and locally relevant.

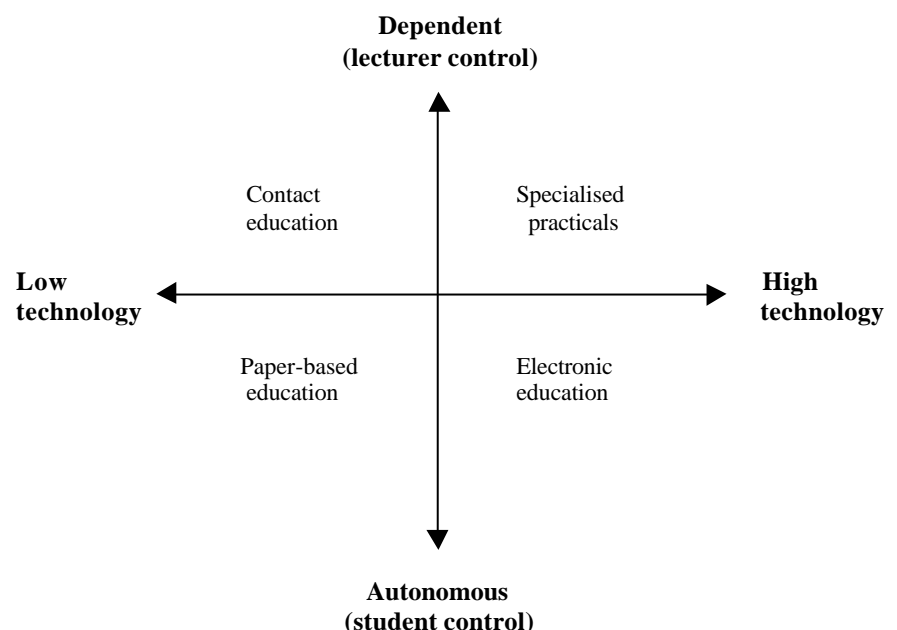
What does the new education model look like ?

During September 1997, Top Management accepted a new education model based on flexible learning. The education model is based on two key factors that constitute the primary driving forces behind the contemporary paradigm shifts and trends in education. These two key factors are briefly:

- the increasing impact of technology on education; and
- the flexible needs of learners.

When these two factors are brought into relation, it leads to a framework within which the development and promotion of flexible learning environments can be made possible.

The two key factors can be presented on two axes. The x-axis depicts the continuum from low to high technology while the y-axis depicts the students’ needs to study either dependant on a lecturer or autonomously. Flexible learning environments can be created for a particular programme according to the particular learner’s needs of the target group. Each quadrant represents a primary education mode, namely contact education, paper-based education, electronic education and specialised practical training.



By means of **instructional design** a primary education mode is determined, which is supported by one or more secondary education modes.

An example would be where a paper-based distance education is chosen as primary education mode for an undergraduate target population, situated in a rural environment with little or no access to the Internet. Secondary education modes can be supportive to the paper-based mode: contact sessions are provided at nearby learning centres; international guest lecturers present an interactive television discussion opportunity one Saturday per semester; during a week of study leave, students receive computer literacy training based on a multimedia package available on CD-ROM at a nearby learning centre operated by FutureKids.

Naturally, there are a number of decision making factors that play a role in the development of the flexible learning environment, but the determining decision making factors are the needs and possibilities of the target group (the students) and the specific nature and possibilities of the particular subject.

This new education model allows for a **learner/learning centered** approach to education. The lecturer is no longer seen as the primary source of knowledge and “teaching” does not relate to the “transfer of content/knowledge”, but to “**learning facilitation**”. The emphasis is now on the learning activity and learning process. Learning facilitation has to do with the lecturer’s activities, focussed on the optimising of the student’s learning process. Just as the word indicates, the emphasis is on the facilitation of learning.

The student is thus the central focus in the design and development of learning opportunities within this new education model. The diagram below illustrates this concept very well:

The student, with his/her unique needs and circumstances, is the focus of the teaching-learning environment. The student has the choice to study full time or part time (own pace) either at home, work, a learning centre or on campus (own place). The student also has a choice, according to preference and circumstances, to study through either contact learning, electronic learning or paper-based learning (mode of education). The University thus provides a flexible learning environment that suits the specific needs and preferences of the student.

