The interlinked terms *flexible learning* and *flexible delivery*, in both skills-based and knowledge-based post-secondary contexts, have been conceptualized in a vast number of ways and according to the perspective of the various stakeholders involved. These stakeholders have been identified as the politicians, managers, administrators, marketers, program and product developers, teachers, support staff, and students involved in any flexible-learning program (Willems 2005).

My focus is on the perceptions held by the end-users of flexible learning and delivery: the students themselves. This client base is far from homogeneous: like other stakeholder groups, students approach flexible learning with diverse perceptions and desires. In terms of learning, what constitutes “flexible” for one student can be “rigid” for another. To inform pedagogy and practice, this chapter explores some of the many interpretations of flexible learning from a student-centred perspective, reinforcing these viewpoints with case study examples (Willems 2004).

Flexible learning is a philosophical perspective. Many definitions of *flexible learning* suggest that it is a student-centred approach to learning, the hallmark of which “is its adaptability to learners’ needs and circumstances” (Bowles 2004, 16). This notion of personal adaptability is certainly a desirable aspect for students, who take quite literally the notion that flexible learning enables “learners to learn when they want (frequency, timing, duration), how they want (modes of learning), and what they want (that is learners can define what constitutes learning to them)” (Van den Brande...
The practical implementation of flexible learning is termed flexible delivery. As with flexible learning, flexible delivery can also be conceptualized in many ways, from traditional correspondence-style approaches to fully online offerings. However, according to Latchem and Moran (1998, 67), the rhetoric of flexible learning “currently outstrips practice,” creating a possible disjuncture between expectations and understandings.

Flexible learning, from a student’s perspective, is premised on the notion of student-centredness (Taylor 2000). Student-centred learning is associated with both humanist and constructivist (e.g., Willis 2009) educational philosophies, which see students as central in their own learning process. The combination of modern technologies and student-centred approaches to learning (Bridgland and Blanchard 2001) has led to a perception of flexible learning as “a movement away from a situation in which key decisions about learning dimensions are made in advance by the instructor or institution, towards a situation where the learner has a range of options from which to choose” (Collis and Moonen 2001, 10).

Research on equity issues in computer-mediated tertiary distance education highlighted a number of discrepancies between students’ perceptions of flexible learning and their actual experiences (Willems 2004). In this case study research, flexibility was a synonym for the diverse characteristics of flexible learning that were desired or required by students. Collis and Margaryan (2007, 272) discern two main ways in which flexible learning and delivery are conceptualized by stakeholders: logistical flexibility, the most common interpretation, which pertains to practical aspects of the course and its delivery (the “when they want” and “what they want”), and pedagogical flexibility, which is less common and relates to student choices in flexible-learning contexts (the “how they want” and “what they want”). These two classifications help us to explore students’ perceptions of flexible learning.

**Students’ Perceptions of Logistical Flexibility: The “When They Want” and “What They Want”**

*Flexible Learning, as in Available Out-of-Hours*

Freeing post-secondary education from the confines of the nine-to-five world, or from the fixed parameters of the academic year, is desirable
for many students in post-secondary education and training. Indeed, it may be the only opportunity for some to improve their personal capital within a competitive job market. Gatta (2005, 15) writes that for many of the working poor, flexible learning is the “third shift” in the working day, after their first shift of paid employment and their second shift of unpaid labour as parents and homemakers.

One third-shift student is “Liz,” a recently separated mother who works full-time during the day to support her family (Willems 2004). After hours, Liz does household chores and helps her teens with their homework. The household has one computer and Liz has had to set up a roster for its use. Her timetabled use of the computer is from 9:00 to 11:00 at night, after her children are in bed.

However, the third shift does not always happen at night. Another example of a third-shift student is “Janette” (Willems 2004), a single parent who has a low-paid, part-time job. Janette studies at home during the day when the children are at school and at times when she is not working. One of the benefits of studying during the day for Janette is that she can better access her dial-up Internet when public demand is not at its premium.

*Flexible Learning, as in Accessible 24/7*

A related perception is that flexible learning is “available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week” (Oblinger, Barone, and Hawkins 2001, 2). “Angelina” is a rural student from a non-English-speaking background (Willems 2004). The combination of 24-hour availability plus the asynchronous nature of the communication tools of email and discussion forum allow her to communicate with her peers “whenever,” even if it is at 2:00 a.m.

For others, 24/7 availability invokes the notion of immediacy. Flexible learners can become frustrated when their system is accessible 24/7 but their lecturers/tutors are only available occasionally. One person who experiences this disjuncture is “Diane,” who gets frustrated at the length of time it takes to get responses back from her lecturers via email or on the subject forum (Willems 2004). She would like to see a maximum time limit established for responses so that students aren’t left frustrated or confused. Often, a timely brief message from the instructor can serve to allay concerns. Powers and Salmon (2007, 202) urge educators to make their
availability clear to their students from the outset. They suggest the development of a tiered priority system for responses, with the base tier being simple generic responses such as “I have received your assignment . . . ” or “When I have completed all assignments . . .” A navigational direction to an online FAQ sheet can also be useful in the tier process. Burge (2007, 36) labels these key elements of effective flexible learning as “respect for and responsiveness to learners’ needs.”

While flexible learning might be the key to institutional longevity, its implementation can be associated with larger teaching loads and class sizes, which in turn impact on both the individuals who deliver the instruction and those who enroll in it. Powers and Salmon (2007) suggest that the best way to overcome workload challenges in flexible-learning environments is through negotiation between staff and students around workload, student contact, and time-management parameters of the learning space. In this way, shared understandings of expectations may be created.

Flexible Learning, as in Available Off-site

Milliron (2008) has argued that with the expectation of blended-learning opportunities in the new generation of flexible learning, the line between face-to-face and distance education is blurred. Latchem (2004, 22) argues that if a flexible learning approach is advocated for the students, it must also be the focus of professional-development programs to train staff in best practice in flexible-learning options. From a student’s perspective, this means being able to pick and choose, creating a mélange of on-campus and off-campus courses in situations, for example, where there are timetable clashes.

Flexible-learning options are sought after by students who are unable to attend on-campus, onsite courses due to a range of issues, from having a disability through to living in rural and remote areas. For “Cindy,” flexible learning has provided entry to university studies (Willems 2004). While she would have preferred to study on campus at one of her local universities, she “missed the cut” of student selection and was instead offered a place at a university on the other side of the country as a flexible learner, for which she is grateful. “Ken” is a flexible learner for the sole reason that his subjects are only available in an off-campus mode.
Students’ Perceptions 33

Ken misses what he considers to be the social and academic benefits of studying on campus and considers flexible learning an “impoverished” way of studying.

For some students, the inverse is true: they may feel impoverished in being required to attend on campus and in person and so have enrolled in flexible, off-campus learning to avoid such challenges as costs, time, travel, or child care issues. Take the story of “Susan,” for example (Willems 2004). Susan, a mature student and mother of two, lives in a coastal town in Australia, some three hours drive from the closest university. In addition to distance issues and income, Susan enrolled to overcome child care problems. While she was reassured that her course was entirely flexible, she did not realize that there was a compulsory on-campus residential computer-and-study-skills workshop to complete prior to her enrolment.

Flexible Learning, as in Extendable Deadlines

Many students choose flexible-learning options so that they can complete their studies over an extended period of time. This key requirement concerns the notion of learner control over the sequence and timing of study (Burns, Williams, and Barnett 1997). However, despite the espoused notions of flexible learning, some institutions or educators may be quite rigid and inflexible when it comes to issues of open-endedness, even in cases of special consideration.

“Sarah,” a student who has a chronic illness that requires occasional admissions to hospital, learned the hard way that flexible learning can indeed be quite inflexible (Willems 2004). Following discharge from one such unexpected two-week hospitalization, Sarah contacted a subject coordinator to ask for an extension for a by-then-overdue assignment. He refused on the grounds that for such a request to be granted, she should have sought an extension from him prior to her unexpected hospitalization! Sarah feels that if students enroll in flexible courses, especially
if they do so for equity reasons, they should be granted true flexibility. Instead, she now has the multiple penalty of paying for a course that she could not complete due to the non-acceptance of her final assignment, carrying an academic record with a failed subject, and having to pay to undertake the subject again next year. She is not happy!

Flexible Learning, as in Lowering Costs
For some students, flexible learning is associated with a reduction of costs that would be incurred if they had to attend in person for further learning or training. Gatta (2005, 14) argues, for example, that flexible learning can help to save on some of the potential study-related costs for low-income families, such as child care and transportation.

Other interpretations of cost reductions are of benefit to institutions or organizations. For example, the placing of unit materials totally online or on CD-ROMs is all part of considering the reduction of production costs and the improvement of return on investment. Yet for students, such moves might actually increase personal costs. For “Sharon,” a mature student who is visually impaired and suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, the move from printed course materials to online study materials has increased the challenges that she faces: the job of downloading and printing flexible-learning materials is both costly and time-consuming (Willems 2004).

Flexible Learning, as in Portability
For many students, especially distance learners, portability is a key synonym for flexibility. Portability can be defined as “the capacity to use resources in multiple settings” (Bridgland and Blanchard 2001, 181). However, there are two ways to interpret this definition. One notion of portability involves flexible-learning materials, assessment repositories, libraries, and peer communities that all exist virtually so that they can be accessible anywhere, at any time. This allows students like “Marianne” (Willems 2004), who lives in a rural town and holds a full-time job, to access materials whenever she needs to. However, for other flexible learners, fully online materials can actually pose difficulties.

The second notion of portability is the antithesis of virtual materials and electronic access. For some students, portability means being able to open—any time, anywhere—print-based documents that have been
provided by the educational institution. “Diane,” another rural student, chose flexible learning for a number of reasons, not least of which were her rural residence, her young family, her work-related travel, and her appreciation of the portability of her printed hard-copy course materials (Willems 2005). She now finds the shift to a fully online system limiting: it requires her to be tethered to electronics. “Sharon,” described earlier, hopes that her institution will return to providing “real” options for flexible learners, which she understands to mean that the necessary materials are available either online or in hard-copy format, thus giving her a choice.

**STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PEDAGOGICAL FLEXIBILITY:**

“HOW THEY WANT” AND “WHAT THEY WANT”

*Flexible Learning, as in Multimedia Formats,*

*Including Social Sharing Applications*

Learning in the new millennium brings with it expectations to learn within multimedia environments that are also social and collaborative. Today, flexible-learning options are associated with the social-sharing software of Web 2.0 such as Facebook and SecondLife. Oblinger (2007, 136–37), writing from the perspective of teaching in flexible-learning environments, notes that “many of our challenges will come from the emerging digital culture. . . . Web 2.0 is all about interacting with information and with people. A few features may be particularly relevant . . . : they are choice, co-creation, distributed cognition, distributed learning communities and multi-modal contexts.”

Yet despite multimedia or social-sharing opportunities, flexible learning may be designed in terms of print-based instructivist environments, and some students may struggle with this predominance of textual communication. Some off-campus students, for example, stated that their learning environment would be better if they could see visual images of the people with whom they are communicating (Willems 2004). “Mary,” who is slowly rebuilding her life after a horrific car accident, suffers from social isolation. She likes her subject forums but would prefer the addition of photos of participants to generate the feeling of a social connection with her learning community.
Flexible Learning, as in Adaptable Learning Environments for Personal Learning Styles

Students vary greatly in their personal, idiosyncratic learning styles, so the use of a variety of formats that store information and enable its processing—alone or in groups—is essential. However, the perception remains that flexible-learning systems are mere reincarnations of former correspondence-style solutions in online formats. “Ruth,” a mother of six who was considering enrolling in a trade-related course to improve family income, stated that she could not “do” flexible learning in the sense of the predominantly print-based coursework and assessment tasks that she sees coming from her local higher-education provider because she is a visual learner (Willems 2009). Instead, she would consider enrolling with a provider that enables her to learn using such visual forms of communication as graphics and video, which she finds personally engaging.

Flexible Learning, as in Content Relevant to the Real World

Flexible learning may also be understood as meaning learning options that are applicable to the real world. Gatta (2005, 5) notes that central to the development of many flexible-learning systems is the “development of a flexible and customized system that addresses the lifelong learning and skills training needs of existing and potential workers in concert with the skills demanded by employers.” However, not all flexible-learning scenarios deliver the required skill sets in a scaffolded manner. I have already touched on the issue of how mature students are sometimes disadvantaged by relatively weak computer skills, a barrier they must work to overcome. Some students feel that they are plunged too early into complex content and left alone to cope—a sink-or-swim mentality.

Flexible Learning, as in Learner Choice in Types of Assessment

The term flexible learning may also have associations with alternative assessment possibilities. Morgan and Bird (2007) argue that this aspect of flexible learning has been a relatively neglected topic of scholarly enquiry. Learner choice in assessment tasks can be an empowering experience, especially for mature learners. Flexible assessment may range from individual to collaborative submissions and from monomedia (a singular
media source such as text) to multimedia. Alternatives to essay submissions may include digital storytelling, online role plays, the creation of e-portfolios, and the like.

However, student choice in assessments can have negative impacts on assessors’ workloads (Morgan and Bird 2007, 257). This problem may be overcome by clearly defining student learning outcomes, establishing parameters for student choices, and constructing assessment rubrics for the range of media that might be used.

CONCLUSION

Learning is a subjective experience, and as a result, the reality of flexible learning from the students’ perspective is that it has many faces. For some, what is offered is indeed flexible and meets their needs and/or expectations. For others, however, what is offered is perceived to be inflexible, despite the espoused name. If the provision of student-centred flexible learning is indeed a stated goal for an institution, then the key stakeholders need to actively listen to the students’ expression of their real needs, as diverse as they are. As Oblinger (2007, 135) argues, “If our programmes are not relevant to learners’ needs, we do everyone a disservice.”

Student-centred flexible learning, then, is defined as meeting the variety of relevant learning needs of students, in terms of logistical and pedagogical perspectives. Those who understand this and work out effective solutions to offer true student choice in the “when they want,” “what they want,” and “how they want” of flexible learning have much to gain in the competitive market of the new millennium.

REFERENCES


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Julie Willems is inclined to be “polymathic.” While training as a registered nurse, she worked as a voluntary youth counsellor and also performed and taught music. After acquiring her nursing qualifications, she began working toward a bachelor’s degree in arts via distance education while she was studying music in Amsterdam. Returning to Australia, she combined raising a family, voluntary community work, and paid employment—nursing, music performance, and teaching in a variety of sectors, ultimately in both face-to-face and distance contexts. Twenty years of flexible studies culminated in her master’s degree in education, during which she examined equity issues in online learning. Her motto? Never give up! Her PhD research explored learning styles in e-environments.
Julie’s current research focus is on best practices in distance and flexible learning, and in particular, on equity issues. She is presently a research academic with DEHub, a consortium of five universities concerned with promoting best practice in distance education. http://wikieducator.org/User:Julie_Willems