



# Unite! Flexible Study Pathways Report 2021

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

The rapid societal transformations, together with digital transition and technological change, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, pose new challenges to Education in the European setting. The European Universities Initiative aims to answer these challenges in the context of higher education, whilst at the same time promoting European values and identity and revolutionizing the quality and competitiveness of European Higher Education.

The University Network for Innovation, Technology and Engineering (Unite!) was one of the first 17 transnational alliances funded by the EU in 2019 within the scope of this “European Universities Initiative”. Unite! is working on developing a Joint Program (JP) offer with embedded mobility and flexibility. Namely, the construction of JP with numerous partner universities will enable students to develop individualized professional profiles, where they can be co-creators of their learning. These JP’s also require from teachers the openness and mentoring skills to develop and embrace innovative pedagogies.

The present work was developed within Task Force 5 (TF5), the Teaching and Learning Academy initiative on Development of Innovative Pedagogies for Teaching and Learning, and was carried out by the Flexible Study Pathways (FSPways) workgroup. The goal of this task force was to propose a working definition for FSPways, and to build a framework that provides Unite! with a common language and guidance for the design of future JP’s.

As a first step to achieve this goal, the workgroup conducted a survey to collect data on what forms of flexibility are already present in the different universities of the Unite! alliance, the forms that would be desirable and the constraints and difficulties to achieve broader levels of, and perhaps more innovative forms of, flexibility. This report summarizes the main results of this first step.

### Materials and Methodology

The information on the Unite! partners perceptions regarding FSPways was collected through a survey designed to cover four major topics: (i) the FSPways already present in Unite! Universities, as perceived by respondents; (ii) the most desirable forms of flexibility; (iii) the perceived difficulties to achieve higher levels of flexibility; (iv) the factors that can facilitate the implementation of greater flexibility.

The survey considered three different complementary types of flexibility: Choice (what, how, where, when to learn), Curricular Mobility (mobility within cycles, credit transfer, joint programs, Erasmus) and Engagement (accreditation of skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal education, intercultural and professional experiences).

The targeted sample of respondents for the survey was typified and included informed directors, coordinators, student representatives, administrative staff and the like (target A) and professors, students, and administrative staff randomly selected (target B), a total of 20 to 30 surveys were sent per target (A and B) and per partner. The survey was sent to respondents via email through Unite! partner universities representatives, and data were collected from October 2020 to the first week of January 2021. The aim was to collect at least 15 answers from each partner university, having obtained a total of 112 answers. The survey included close and open questions, promoting both quantitative and qualitative data.

## Results and Discussion

The quantitative analysis was complemented and backed by the answers to the open questions. When asked about existing forms of flexibility in their Universities, a considerable share of respondents did not know if they existed or not. It is also clear that, due to the way some questions were formulated, the overall diffuse terminology of FSPways and the possibility of multiple interpretations, some respondents had difficulties understanding what was asked. Overall, elective courses inside the degree specialization area were the most frequent form of flexibility, in opposition to the perception of little flexibility regarding scheduling and time. Considering content and course formats, professors perceived that there was more flexibility than the study programme's responsables actually identified, and both perceived that there is more flexibility than students actually practice. Most desired forms of flexibility were almost consensual, and included courses outside the domain and inside the degree (regarding content), collaboration with research units and industry and the possibility to take part in virtual classes within Unite! universities (regarding the amount of choice allowed to students), part-time studying and program modularization (regarding schedule and time), international mobility and credit recognition from different Universities (regarding mobility) and possibility for long life learning and student co-responsibility in designing personal curricula (regarding type of student engagement).

The respondents anticipated possible difficulties regarding the implementation of FSPways. Communication related issues such as **Miscommunication among the Unite! Partners**, were mentioned, targeting the lack of information dissemination and overall knowledge about new possibilities for flexibility (e.g. through exchange programs and virtual online courses); the **Lost-in-translation effect** was also mentioned, pointing out that, although English is used as a common language of communication, that does not prevent misinterpretation by the multilingual speakers of the Unite! Community. **Natural resistance to change from current models of degree structures and teaching models** was also indicated as a drawback, considering that there is an inherent inertia and reluctance to make major changes in the existing structures, requirements and methods. On the other hand, **national settings and constraints** can also limit the way towards new forms of flexibility as "practical issues" are oftentimes tied to legal constraints and national regulations. A common "practical issue" identified by all partners are the differences in the timing of academic calendars which hinders the implementation of flexibility.

The factors that favor flexibility in the context of Unite! were summarized in the form of enablers resulting from the open-ended questions: there should be an effective compromise between the European University Alliances (EUAs) Initiative, and the European Union (EU), both willing to back the structural **transformation of HEI's** and to empower the unique conditions of the **favorable European setting**. Relying on a **reciprocal trust and reward system**, and combining the robustness of each partner's academic offer, Unite! JP's should work as a flagship –

the idea that Unite! should be more than just the sum of its parts. **Effectively integrated communication** within the Unite! community is also key to the progress of activities but also to avoid possible overlaps in seeking solutions. An **Embedded Global Competences Course for students, staff and faculty**, already proposed (Multilingual & Global Competence Course), is a strong contribution to a clear communication flow, but requires more support for its implementation.

## Recommendations

Considering the survey results and the Unite! goals, some suggested recommendations could be collected:

- **Achieve a common understanding** by clarifying what these new forms of flexibility mean and create a common terminology shared by all the players within the system.
- **Create a strong bond of trust** between all stakeholders, ensuring more student engagement and satisfaction and creating conditions for a successful implementation of FSPways.
- **Build a common framework** based on already existing kinds of flexibility, enabling the sustained implementation of a European degree.
- **Take measures to ensure greater levels of flexibility in Unite! partner universities** making it easier to develop even more JP's.
- **Develop a joint system for student information, guidance and counseling**, supporting students' choices and allowing them to succeed in their chosen pathway.
- **Explore new forms of flexibility within Unite!**, complementing the traditional mobility offer and representing new venues for Teaching & Learning.
- **Identify existing legal restrictions** to anticipate possible legal constraints at local, national and European levels.
- **Improve student experience and success and increase responsibility** as the path towards employability.

## Conclusions

FSPways is a pivotal element of the transformation of higher education in Europe and on the top of the list of priorities of the European Universities Initiative. Accordingly, FSPways should be at the core of the education development activities in Unite! and essential to the implementation of JP's. To be able to offer meaningful experiences to students-as-individuals, and to prepare them for the future, stretching them cognitively and experientially, demands that all of us are committed to the development of new avenues for generating new solutions for teaching and learning in higher education, and ultimately to the integration in rapidly changing job market.