



Unite! European University: Main difficulties regarding Flexible Study Pathways identified by Partners with Impact on Joint Programmes – Results of a survey across Europe

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Conference Key Areas: *Challenges of new European Universities*

Keywords: *Flexible Study Pathways, European Universities Initiative, European Degree, Survey Results, Joint Programmes*

ABSTRACT

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) promotes European values and identity and aims to revolutionise the quality and competitiveness of European Higher Education. As part of this effort, the University Network for Innovation, Technology and Engineering (Unite!) is working on developing a Joint Program (JP) offer with embedded mobility and flexibility. To achieve this goal, we present in this paper the major challenges in implementing Flexible Study Pathways (FSP) at a transnational level identified in a survey conducted at the seven partner Universities of Unite!.

The most desirable forms of flexibility regarding content of course/program were Elective Courses outside the domain and inside the degree of specialisation. Main difficulties identified by partners are related to academic calendars, time cost to organise FSP, legal matters, program agendas and ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes.

The results of this analysis show possible directions for the development of a European degree, which will require effective communication and stakeholder coordination and engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

European Universities are key players in the establishment of a more resilient, progressive and thriving European Higher Education and Research, particularly by facilitating the implementation of Joint Programmes, pooling capacity and resources, and ultimately, to work together towards a joint European Degree.

The University Network for Innovation, Technology and Engineering (Unite!) [1] was one of the first 17 transnational alliances funded in the context of the European Universities Initiative [2] by the EU in 2019. Within this context, Unite! is working on developing Joint Programmes with embedded mobility and flexibility, allowing for students to develop individualised professional profiles, co-creating their learning. As part of this effort, and together with other European University Alliances, Unite! has published a Joint Position paper on the European Degree [3], collectively signalling the possible implementation bottlenecks, as well as pointing out some measures to ensure its success. These ideas are aligned with the step-by-step approach towards the Joint European Degree, as suggested by the European Commission [4]: exploring the scope, benefit and feasibility of a joint European degree as well as mapping obstacles and key enablers to foster joint study programmes and establishing European criteria for creating a joint European Degree.

Accordingly, this work aims to identify most desirable types of flexibility and major difficulties in achieving higher degrees of flexibility at a transnational level, discussing them as possible obstacles in implementing Joint Programmes.

2. METHODOLOGY

Information was collected through a survey [5] designed to cover four major topics: (i) the FSP forms, 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. Accordingly, and considering this publication's objective, this work focuses mainly in sections (ii) and (iii). The survey included closed and open questions, which allowed for both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, thus increasing the questionnaire's robustness and completeness.

The targeted sample of respondents for the survey included informed directors, coordinators, student representatives, administrators and the like (target A); professors, students and administrators randomly selected (target B). About 20 to 30 surveys were sent per target (A and B) and per partner. The aim was to collect at least 15 answers from each partner university. Data were collected from October 2020 to January 2021. The collected answers were sorted by (i) Type of Participant and by (ii) University. Regarding the distribution by type of participant, respondents

were classified into four major categories departing from a previous set of options (see parenthesis): Study Programme’s Responsibles (Mobility Office Staff; Study Programme Scientific/Academic Coordinator/Manager), Students (Student at decision level/Student representative/Student delegate), Professors (Joint programme Faculty/Teacher/Lecturer) and Others (Quality Assurance of Study Programmes Faculty or Staff; Other).

3. RESULTS

A total of 112 answers from all partners were received. Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to (a) Type of Participant and (b) University:

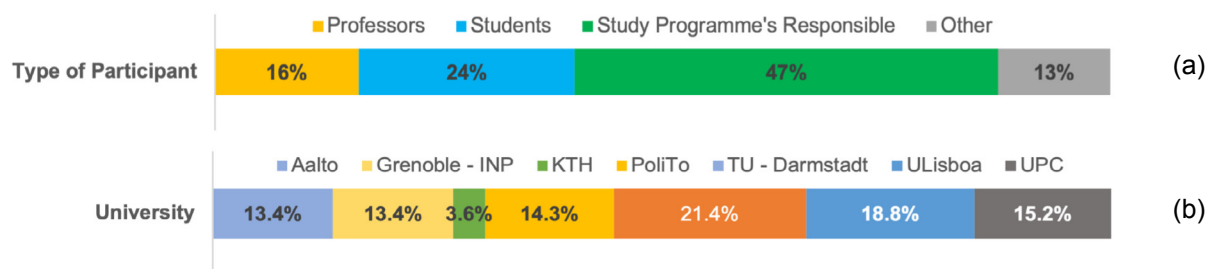


Fig. 1. Distribution of respondents (%) by (a) Type of Participant (b) University

The survey required respondents to choose the most desirable forms of flexibility from a closed list, with a possibility of indicating other options not included in the short list. The distribution of answers given on the most desirable forms of flexibility regarding content of course/program (%) is shown below in Fig. 2 by (a) Type of Participant (b) University:

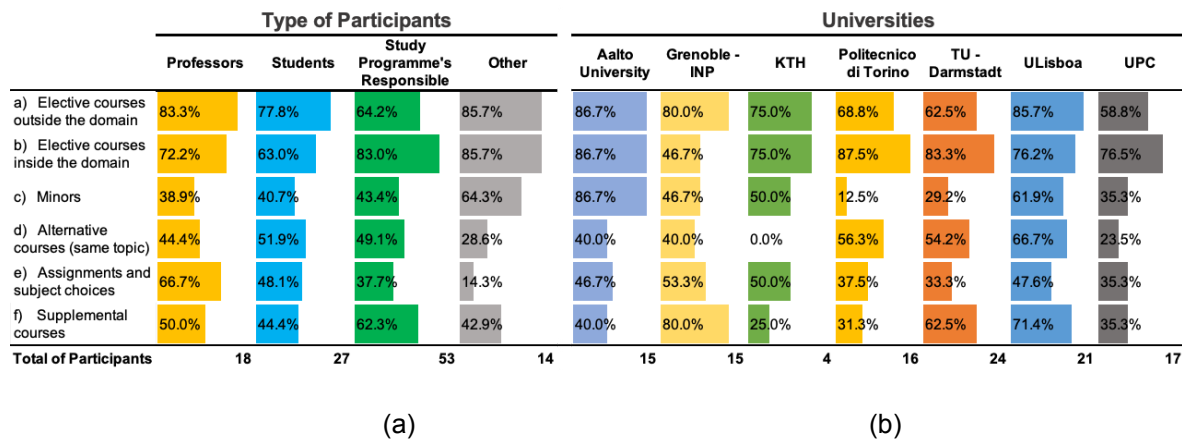


Fig. 2. Distribution of answers given on the most desirable forms of flexibility regarding content of course/program (%) by (a) Type of Participant (b) University

The desirable forms of flexibility regarding content of course/program were flagged if reported by around 60% or more of the respondents. Elective Courses both inside and outside the domain (options a) and b)) are predominant and evenly distributed (around half the type of participants and Universities prefer outside the domain flexibility, whereas the other half favours having options inside the specialisation).

Considering these desirable forms of flexibility, the partners were asked what were the major obstacles to the implementation of FSP, and were given a series of possible reasons. The answers are synthesised below in Fig. 3:

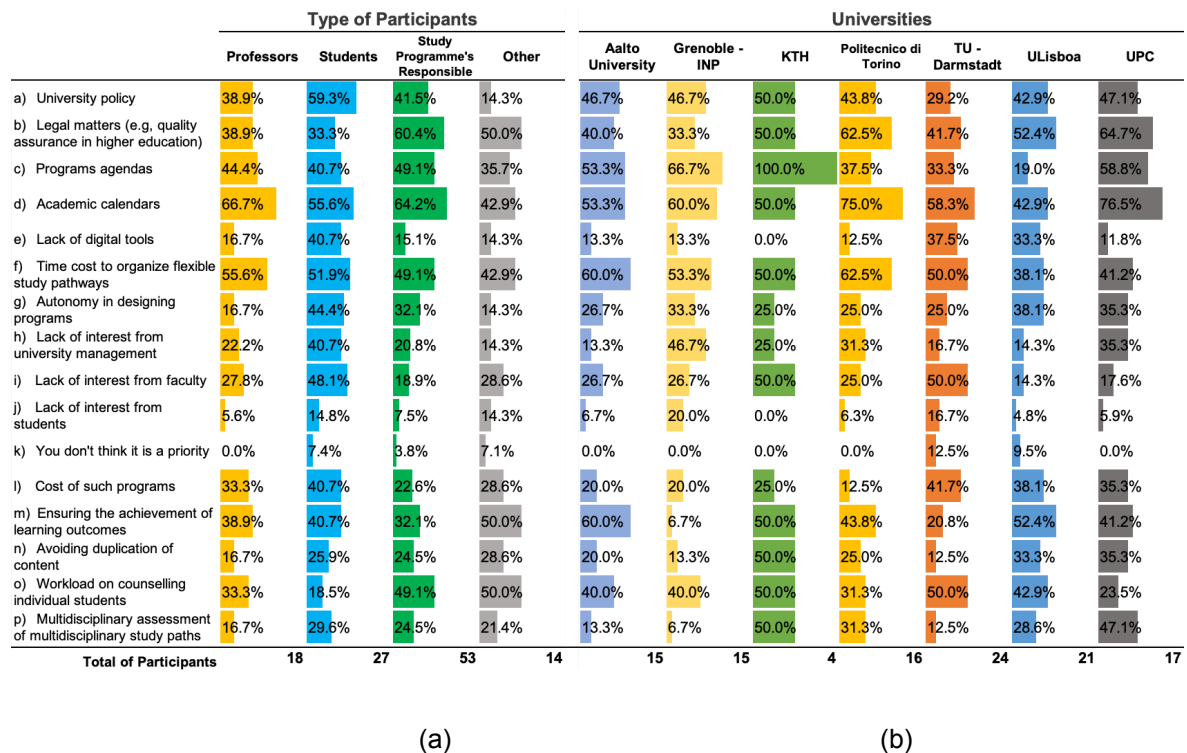


Fig. 3. Distribution of answers given on the main difficulties in implementing the Flexible Study Pathways (%) by (a) Type of Participant (b) University

The obstacles were flagged if referred by around 60% of the respondents. They are mostly associated with two types of difficulties: practical issues (academic calendars, legal matters, time cost to implement higher levels of flexibility) and content of courses/programmes (program agendas and ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes). Regarding practical issues, it might be worth putting the effort into harmonising academic calendars in order to allow timely adjustments between partners. Regarding legal constraints, collected data indicate that further research needs to be done to identify the restrictions at the local and national level. For instance, in the case of ULisboa, these issues are often connected with the existence of a national accreditation agency and requirements imposed by professional orders.

The present study shows that the path towards FSP will demand effective communication and stakeholder coordination to overcome the practical and administrative issues, as well as the development of a common European Higher Education framework that ensures strong and coherent scientific and pedagogical offerings. Strong and consistent engagement from decision makers to provide flexible options that better prepare students for existing and future challenges will



have to address policy-relevant issues such as coordination, articulation and transfer policies, as well as legislative and regulatory matters.

The development of innovative approaches to teaching and learning specifically targets the creation of Unite! Joint Programmes with integrated flexible study pathways and embedded mobility [5], expanding beyond the traditional dual and double-degree ideology. It is clear that it will be necessary to deepen the present analysis of data in order to properly design specific measures, eventually bycross-checking the most desirable forms of flexibility with the expected difficulties, thus establishing a potential correlation between them, in order to draw more accurate conclusions regarding both anticipated difficulties and possible solutions for identified roadblocks, paving the way towards a European Degree.

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