



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Institute
for Educational Planning

SDG-4: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education

Presentation at CGHE
22 June 2022

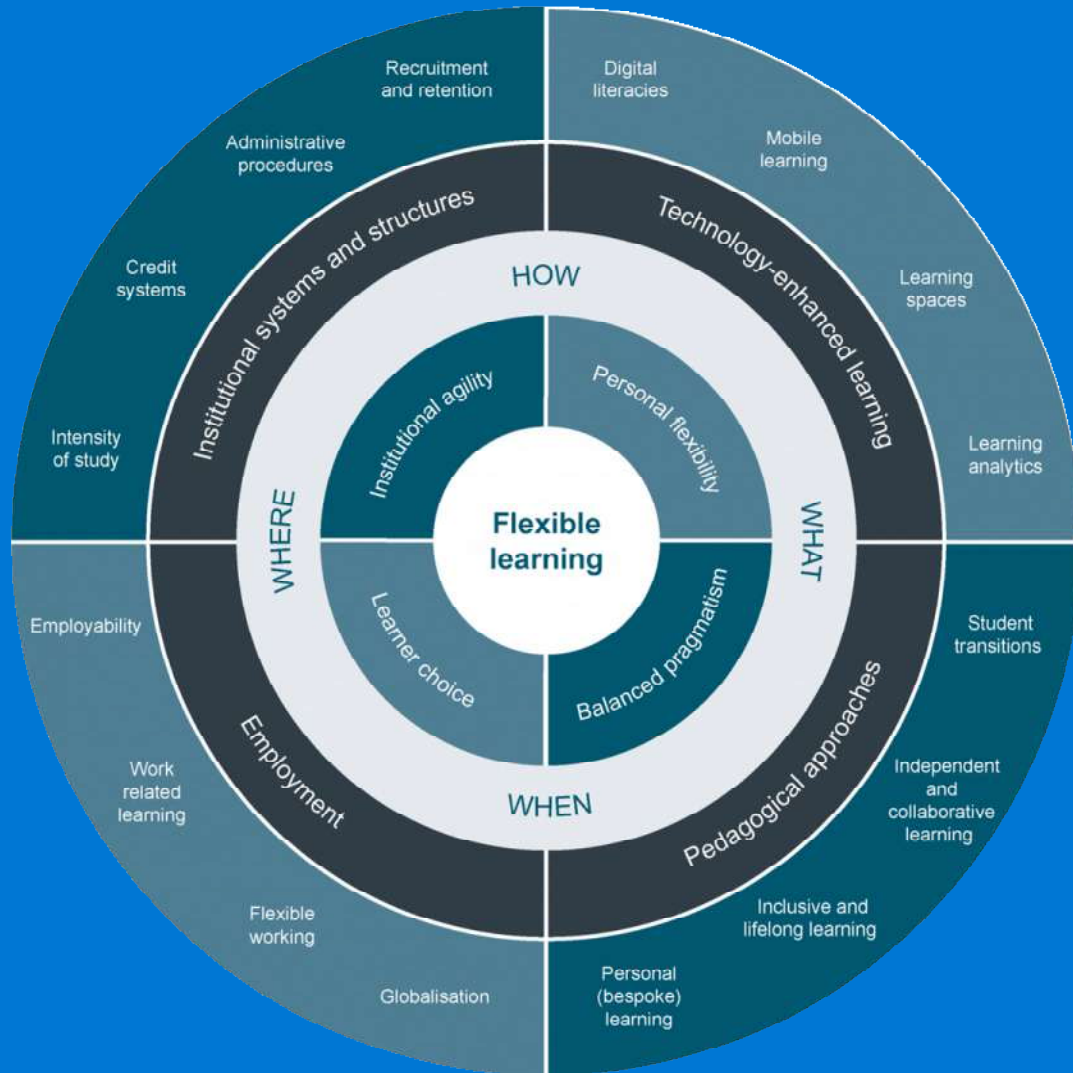
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Rationale behind the research

- Rapid increase in student enrolments
- Diversification of learners and HE providers
- HE systems increasingly complex and fragmented
- COVID-19 crisis has shown the importance of flexible learning

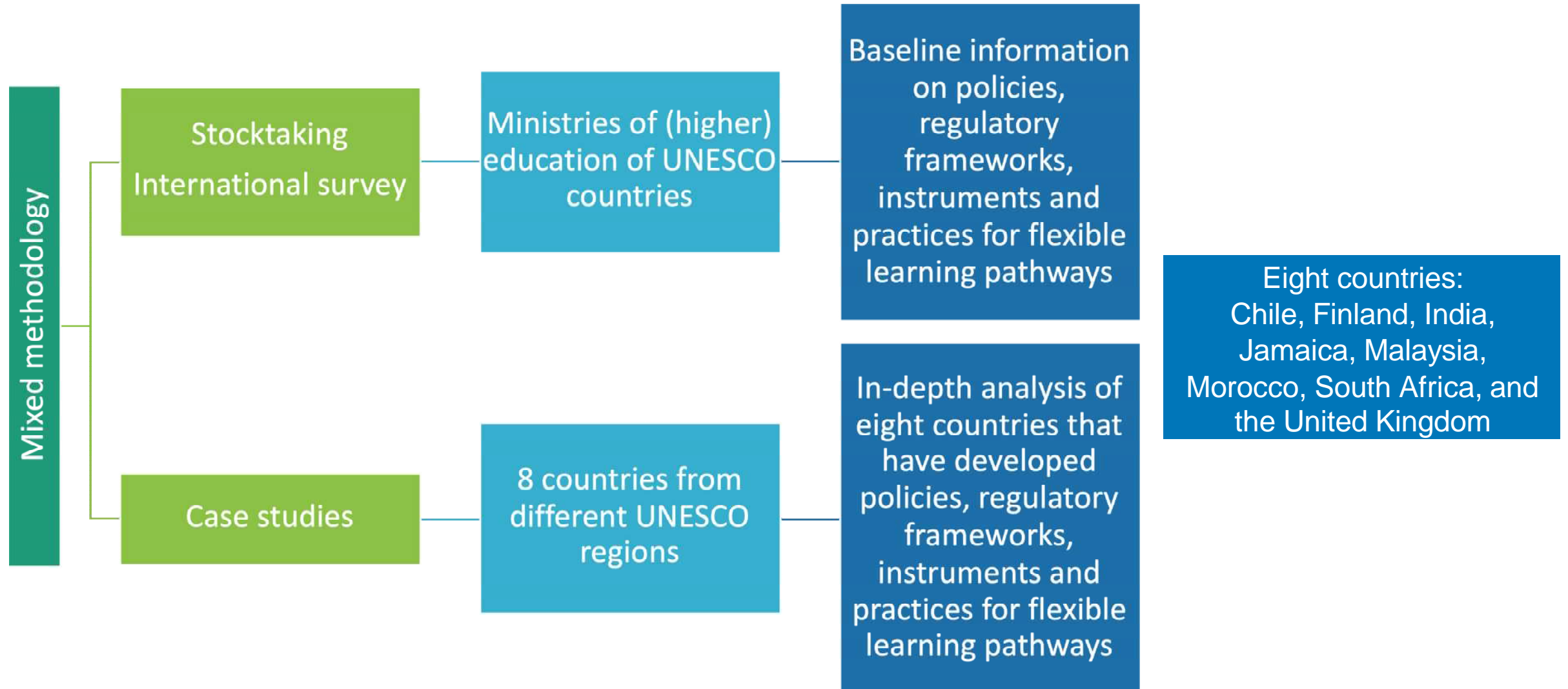


Flexible learning pathways



- Flexible learning: “learning and teaching is increasingly freed from the limitations of the time, place and pace of study” (Naidu, 2017, 269).
- “Entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 33).

IIEP's research on flexible learning pathways



Flexible learning pathways: taking the student's perspective

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Pathways for getting into higher education: alternative admission policies and practices (open studies, recognition of prior learning)

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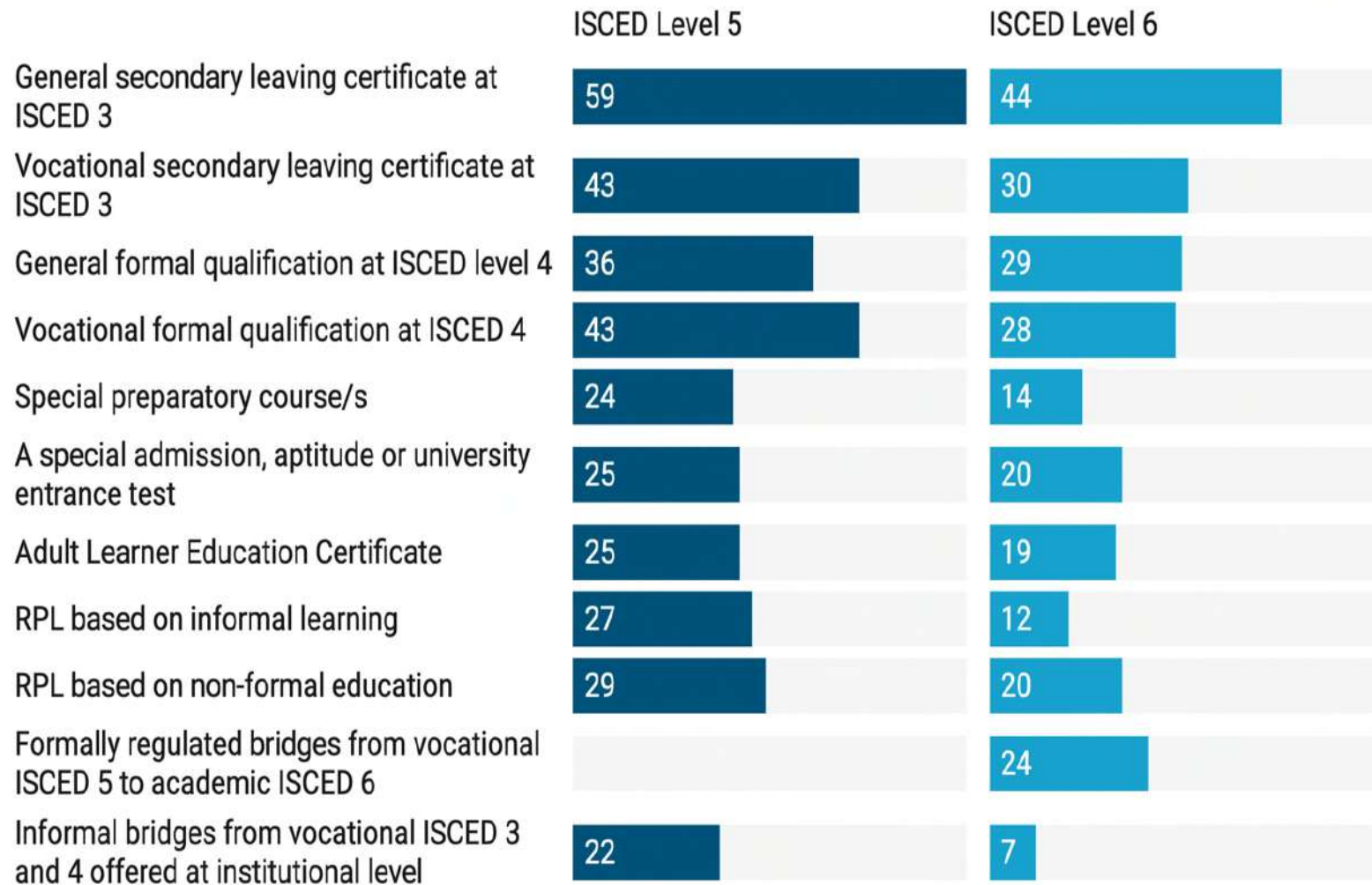
Pathways for getting through higher education: flexibility in pace, in delivery, study transfer

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Pathways for transitioning to the labour market (work-based learning and flexible degree structures).

Flexible entry pathways

Diverse entry pathways into higher education



- Access to higher education is generally granted upon completion of a secondary education qualification
- But a more diverse range of pathways are available to facilitate entry to a short-cycle programme (ISCED level 5)
- A bachelor's degree programme (ISCED 6) is more difficult to access through diverse pathways
- Recognition and validation of prior learning is not yet a common practice.



Recognition of prior learning

- RPL can focus on formal, non formal and informal learning
- Often practiced by vocational institutions for recognition of labour competences



Good practices:

- National system: RPL for access and credit in Malaysia (APEL-A)
- Institution-led: RPL for certifying labour competencies in Chile



Open entry

- For continuous learning, re-skilling or up-skilling, updating competencies
- May be recognised but typically this pathway does not lead to a formal degree
- HEIs have begun offering digital credentials or opportunities to recognise a certain share of open entry credits when a student enrolls in a formal degree programme



Good practices:

- Open studies pathway in Finland

Flexible progression pathways

Flexibility in the pace of study



Students can choose how to combine their studies and work:

- part-time, evening, weekend, holiday season or other types of provision as opposed to full-time day study



Good practices:

Accelerated degree in the UK



Good practice:

The SWAYAM platform India

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Flexibility in delivery

- Open (online) and distance learning **enables flexibility in terms of location of learning and pace**
- **Expands access to education**
- **Enables continuity of learning opportunities for diverse types of students**
- **Both offered by single mode (open universities) and dual mode institutions**



Governance in support of flexible learning pathways

Funding in support of flexible learning pathways

- Special government funding mechanisms strongly support FLPs (Finland, India, Malaysia, South Africa)
- Funding for credits favours transfer



Good practices:

In Finland, the new funding model for 2021-2024 rewards universities and Universities of Applied Sciences (UASs) for 'cross-study' and students who take courses in other institutions.

Quality assurance in support of flexible pathways

- Quality assurance with focus on the implementation of flexible pathways (e.g., Finland, India)
- Guidelines for implementation of RPL and open (online) and distance learning (e.g., Jamaica, India, Malaysia)



Good practice:

In India, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council is involved in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of a Choice Based Credit System and MOOCs.



Drawing from the UK experience: Some questions and challenges



The UK Higher Education System(s)

- A large diverse higher education system
- Traditions of institutional autonomy
- A competitive market of institutional providers
- National policies which ‘allow’ more than they ‘require’
- Over 50% of population now receiving some form of higher education
- Students pay. National policies for Lifelong Learning Loans
- Growth of ‘blended’ learning (online and face-to-face)



Destinations of learning pathways

- Does the student know their desired destination?
- Is the student well-informed? Who by? Where from?
- Can the student change direction?
- Does the university know the planned destination?
- Will boundaries need to be crossed? – disciplines? institutions? countries?
- Destinations = Jobs? What else?
- Might the student ‘get lost’?



Quality issues

- Where does responsibility lie when institutional boundaries are crossed?
- Who awards the qualification when learning has occurred at different institutions?
- What are the responsibilities of national and institutional quality assurance?
- Are students sufficiently well-informed to construct their own degrees?
- Are teaching staff sufficiently well informed about their students' pathways?
- Does multi-disciplinarity become the new norm?
- How can students move between differently structured curricula at different institutions?



More quality issues?

Teaching students travelling on different pathways:

- where have they come from?
- where are they going?

Student learning:

- a lot about a little? Or
- a little about a lot?


Important decisions for students

- what? when? where? how? to learn



Equality issues?

- Different pathways for different students? (Class, race, gender, age etc)
- Can boundaries be crossed between high and lower reputation institutions?
- Who travels on which pathways, and to which destinations?
- A more or less socially stratified higher education system?
- A more or less socially stratified society?
- Combining work with study: need the money? need the experience?



Flexible Learning Pathways? Still higher education?

- Or 'post-18', 'adult learning', 'lifetime', 'post-school'?
- Or all of these combined?
- Learners crossing boundaries? educational sectors? work-based? online?
- Training for jobs?
- Still a social as well as an educational experience?
- Critical thinking? Making a better world??