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# Haaga-Helia: new opportunities for flexible study

by **Marjaana Mäkelä**

## 1 Context for the reform

Higher education institutions currently face an increasing number of challenges, and expectations of flexibility are one of the most up-to-date among these. However, the concept of flexibility needs to be defined in function of the context and the counterparts: for students, “flexible studies” might signify liberty of choice and stretching of deadlines, whilst on the institutional level flexibility should be perceived in a wider perspective. As stated in the AQ Austria 2019 conference programme, there are both structural, organisational and didactic components in flexibilisation.

Topics raised for the 2019 AQ Austria conference included e. g. questions on how flexibility in higher education can be achieved, and what options can be found for diverse study formats. Moreover, processes of teaching and learning should be under scrutiny, without compromising the requirements of quality assurance in the HE sector. In this paper, the author’s stance is that to be able to address these issues, the status quo of higher education must be disrupted – we simply cannot continue to operate as if the society and the students hadn’t changed. The paper describes, with a pragmatic approach, the contextual changes that have led to the need of a significantly profound reform of the current study offer at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (UAS), and the planning and initial implementation phases of this reform.

### **1.1 Haaga-Helia as an education provider**

With more than 10,000 students and 630 staff members, as well as with over 200 international and 100 corporate partners, Haaga-Helia UAS is the second largest UAS institution in Finland and one of the most important educators e. g. in fields of business and hospitality (Haaga-Helia 2019). Hence, it is an important player in Finnish higher education – the nation has only 5.3 million

inhabitants. Haaga-Helia provides professionally oriented higher education that leads to approximately 2,500 awarded Bachelor's degrees annually. Master level education holds a minor position in terms of volume, and therefore the reform of Master programmes was conducted as a pilot phase to the larger reform where all the Bachelor level degree programmes are being remodelled.

The institution comprises four academic units: Business Studies; Experience and Wellness (including programmes in hospitality, tourism and sports); Digital Business (ICT, Business Studies for Management Assistants, Communications), and a School of Vocational Teacher Education. Moreover, there are a lot of bespoke solutions catering for companies and organisations, as well as continuing and further education courses, specialisation programmes and modules on a smaller scale, and an Open UAS sector that offers the same courses as in degree programmes, however with a semester-based tuition fee, whilst degree studies in all levels of education are free of charge in Finland. Haaga-Helia is also active in exports of education, throughout its commercial services and the limited company EduExcellence, owned and run together with two major UAS institutions in the metropolitan Helsinki area.

In this complex and multifaceted learning environment, current developments have led to a situation where the structure and pedagogy of degree programmes need to be re-evaluated and re-organised. External drivers leading to this necessity are entailed by challenges and opportunities that various technological developments and an evolving economy imply, on both national and global levels. Mutations in the world of work inevitably lead to shifting competence needs in all sectors, and extending careers set expectancies for continuous learning. This means learning that is both life-long and life-wide. A Finnish particularity in student life is that more than 50 % of higher education students work alongside their degree studies, and an increasing number of them already possess qualifications that are relevant in their field of study. This means that whatever changes are made in degree programme structures, their implementation must include an efficient dimension of recognition of prior learning mechanisms. All these have an ingrained implication of flexibility.

## **1.2 Finnish system of UAS education on Bachelor level**

Since higher education is free for students, apart from some material and book costs, it is funded by the state that regulates HEI with annual negotiations

of performance and follow-up. The overall funding mechanism of higher education (on both research university and UAS sectors) is currently undergoing an extensive mutation, and from 2021 onwards the principal variable in funding will be timely graduation (Minedu 2019). This means an estimated and recommended study cycle of 3.5 years for a Bachelor's degree, for which the institution gets funding. Depending on the sector, this degree consists of 21–270 ECTS credits. (For some degrees, recommended studies may be extended to four years.)

For the student, the system allows significant possibilities of flexibility. Currently, if the degree is not completed within 3.5 years, the student can continue for one additional year without any extra procedure. He or she is naturally encouraged and supported by study advisors and lecturers to complete the degree, but the student encounters an administrative procedure only after 4.5 years, where he or she must apply for extension of study time. If graduation is realistic, extension is granted and the time for this may vary, upon perusal of the degree programme director. If graduation in the near future still does not seem likely, recommendation on continuing studies in the Open UAS sector is oftentimes a flexible solution, until re-enrolment for graduation. Graduation itself is possible whenever degree studies and the mandatory Bachelor's thesis are completed, and there is no minimum time-frame for this. RPL is one possible pathway for faster graduation, and many students with their own entrepreneurial activities or with good positions in relevant professional fields indeed take opportunity of this.

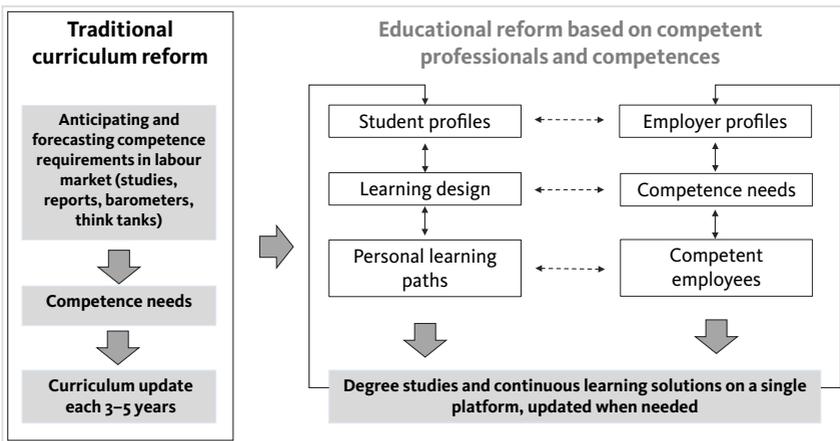
It can be concluded that the UAS sector in Finland and Bachelor studies conducted at Haaga-Helia already are articulated in a relatively flexible structure that allows individual advancement as well as recognition of prior and work-integrated learning. In order to make the study paths even more flexible and to address challenges described above, an extensive education reform will however provide a substantially novel way of approaching degree studies at Haaga-Helia.

## 2 Objectives of the reform: towards an organic study offer

“Being a change maker rather than a target of changes made elsewhere” is a leading principle for the reform. Haaga-Helia’s education services will be redesigned in order to better meet the demand of our society in the coming years. The reform has been launched in 2019 and will be implemented by 2023.

Figure 1 suggests a comparison across a traditional vision on curriculum development, ie. a status quo in most HEIs, that is developed into a more global vision of a reform that entails changes in the entire system of an institution rather than a plan of making changes on course and syllabus level.

Figure 1: Traditional curriculum reform vs. educational reform



Source: Haaga-Helia 2019.

The objectives of the reform are to prepare the institution for expectations of continuous learning, to face shifts in application numbers due to decreasing age cohorts of students, and to develop genuine flexibility in study paths that cater for a student body which continues to be more and more heterogenic: students from all age groups, with or without prior knowledge, with full- or part-time jobs, from Finnish and international backgrounds ... Hence, reforming the entire educational offer of a large institution is a process where

curriculum development, corporate cooperation, student services and internationalisation are considered synchronically. Moreover, needs of further training of pedagogic and administrative staff are involved.

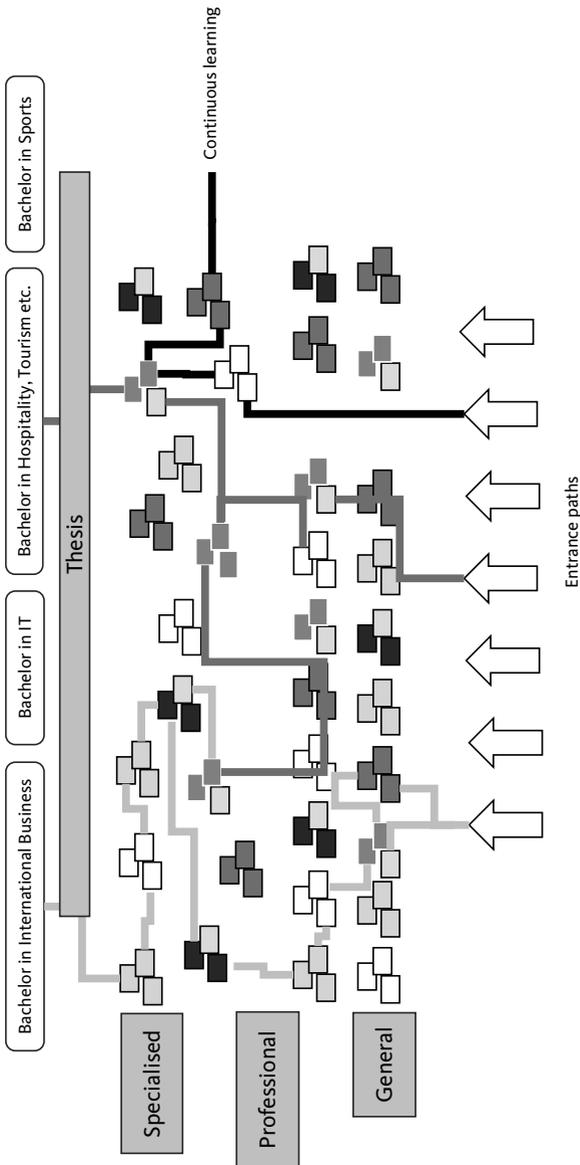
The underpinning philosophy is to offer a dynamic learning platform that will allow for more personalised and flexible learning paths both for regular degree students as well as for seekers of continuous education. This said, the current strategy of articulating studies in distinct degree programmes with a specified curriculum to be completed and annual syllabi where courses are offered on a degree programme basis is going to be discarded.

At present, there are 22 Bachelor's degree programmes at Haaga-Helia, and the student applies to one of them, completes mandatory studies, internships and the final thesis in the framework of this programme, and graduates from it. From 2023 onwards, the entire study offer of Haaga-Helia on Bachelor level will be organised in a huge platform of study choices where distinct programmes have been replaced by study paths. This enables a large variety of course choices for students heading for different degrees. Obviously, the reform includes a clear objective to design and indicate template study paths, to facilitate orientation across the variety of options. Moreover, needs of redesigning student guidance services that meet the new study environment have already been identified and will be addressed accordingly.

Technically, choices are made in and individual study planning facilitated by a digital enrolment platform, building up one's personal study path. The platform is connected to the study register and a number of other administrative affordances. The individual study plan, with respective choices, is checked twice a year by the study counselor, personally assigned to each student, in order to help in practical questions on studies as well as with more substantial and longitudinal issues of career planning and personal and professional development. Moreover, sub-projects of the reform already include a set of dispositives where artificial intelligence can assist with routine-type tasks across study choices.

Figure 2 displays a first version of a possible approach to the forthcoming platform model, and whilst the reform advances, more detailed plans will be available.

Figure 2: Reform: a vision of students' personal learning paths



Source: Haaga-Helia 2019.

Different paths display various options to achieve the same degree, ending up in qualifications that have been obtained partly with different studies. Shortcuts for students with a solid basis or prior learning are offered, which is a practice already in use at present. In this pedagogical philosophy, the curriculum is perceived as an organic entity rather than a list of courses and assignments to be completed. Opportunities of internationalisation will be wider, since recognition of exchange studies and internships is easier to embed in individual learning paths. Moreover, e- and blended learning as well as work-integrated learning (“Work & Study”) provide optional ways to conduct studies in a more coherent way in the new study model.

All this disrupts a number of assumptions on higher education and requires a certain spirit of pedagogical adventure. From the management, the process requires encouragement to an environment of trust, to engage staff members in co-creation. Trials also entail errors, which must be tolerated.

In practice, the challenge has been tackled by the entire community, and the reform process is facilitated by a project manager and a project team. Extensive rounds of brainstorming, workshops, think tanks and learning cafes featured in the initial phase, to collect all viewpoints possible and to observe weak points in current state of curriculum design and possible dead ends in study choices. Given the profoundness of the reform, it is considered important that all counterparts can have their voices heard, including students, corporate advisory boards and alumni.

Collecting and consulting extensive student feedback data is a mandatory process for HEI in Finland, and in the reform it is an ongoing process to gather data on the parts of the current offer that need to be maintained and developed and the ones that are outdated or dysfunctional and can hence be discarded. The following figure 3 shows the process.

Figure 3: Stages of education reform project 2019–2023

2019–6/2020	8/2020–6/2021	8/2021–6/2022	8/2022–6/2023
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student profiles</li> <li>• Education structure</li> <li>• Application targets</li> <li>• Glossary</li> <li>• Identification of competence areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic competence offering</li> <li>• Continuous learning solutions</li> <li>• Commercial offerings</li> <li>• Application targets' details</li> <li>• Study paths</li> <li>• Counselling needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expert competence offering</li> <li>• Study planning using the virtual tool</li> <li>• Student counselling on new study offering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final harmonisation</li> <li>• Fine-tuning of tools</li> <li>• Evaluation and updates</li> </ul>

Source: Haaga-Helia 2019.

The new study offer will be characterised by modularity, which means that the needs of degree students, of further education, of corporate training and of those seeking for continuous learning can be met with the same study offer, instead of organising a wide selection of short-term solutions for non-degree students on top of the degree courses.

How the reform will influence study times, academic achievement and student satisfaction can only be anticipated at present. Scenarios are being made, and different models are tested by the project manager and her team. A core tool consists of definition of student profiles, where variables feature e. g. starting level, language of study, preferred ways of conducting studies, learning abilities, degree of self-directedness, career aspirations, work situation and the study goal (whether this is degree-oriented or not). A number of “prototypes” have been designed in this process, and yet it is vital to approve that all kinds of scenario design can be but approximative, since characteristics in a student’s life and study facilities evolve and change. Aspirations may overlap, and the unexpected tends to happen. The institution needs to prepare for all this.

### 3 Concerns raised by the forthcoming model

Whilst the future model sounds promising and will undoubtedly generate more flexible studies for the majority of Haaga-Helia students, there are

certain concerns that lecturers, study counselors and the administrative staff have raised. There is a risk that especially new students will feel disoriented, if needs of individual guidance and counseling are not met, and if the options and their consequences in future choices and employment opportunities seem undefined. Templates and guidelines for study paths, heading for a certain degree, therefore need to be clearly and explicitly communicated already during the application phase, and even more solidly when studies commence.

Tolerance limits towards individual choices need to be specified: What will be possible and what is not? How to identify core competencies in a given field continues to remain a key approach, regardless of the focus shifting from competence needs to identification of student and employer profiles.

Another concern is related to student community; when traditional classes and groups are dissipated, does this endanger the feeling of togetherness and solidarity among students? Moreover, there is a risk that the professional identity of e. g. a graduate in business administration, in journalism or in hospitality is somewhat less solid, if there are multiple ways to attain the same degree. A concern that current students also have expressed is that guidance and counseling should not rely too much on AI, human contact should be overarching the entire cycle of studies.

Haaga-Helia staff endeavors to address these concerns by different scenarios on how to find the most viable technical solutions without insecurity, lack of trust or frustration impending among future students. "Change can't really be managed – but development should be facilitated."

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