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Finnish open university education and students' transitions into and within higher education

Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret and Nina Haltia

Abstract

There is a growing number of higher education (HE) students who do not follow the conventional sequential progression from the beginning to the end of their studies. Instead, they may use alternative admission routes, take gap years, delay their studies and transfer from one discipline or institution to another. In particular, students from under-represented social groups tend to follow less linear trajectories. In this article, we are interested in the institutional policies and practices that enable multiple ways for students to navigate into and within HE. As a theoretical lens, we apply Gale and Parker's typology of student transition and the conceptualisation of transition as 'becoming,' which entails rejecting the notion of linearity and normativity. Our empirical case is Finnish open university education (OUE). Using student interviews (N=16) and reflexive thematic analysis, we identified three institutional characteristics: openness of access, flexible mode of studies, and alternative access route to degree studies. These characteristics enabled highly individualised learning trajectories and opportunity to enter, withdraw and return to OUE throughout life. However, the OUE gateway was selective, which limited its potential to reduce social inequality in student transitions. The study advances the policy discussion and development of inclusive universities.

Keywords: alternative route; institutional characteristics; institutional flexibility; open university education; social inequality; student transition

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Introduction

There is a growing need to understand the diversity of student experiences and social inequality in higher education (HE). Because of the global expansion of HE, there is now a large and diversified body of students from various social

backgrounds and prior educational/vocational paths in attendance. An increasing number of students depart from the traditional linear trajectory of their educational journey. Instead, they may pursue alternative admission pathways, take gap years, postpone their studies, or transfer between disciplines or institutions. (Hazel et al., 2016; Quinn, 2010). In particular, students from under-represented social groups, such as first-generation university students and students from minority ethnic backgrounds, tend to follow less linear HE trajectories (Baker & Irwin, 2021; Haas & Hadjar, 2020; Sánchez-Gelabert, 2020). These developments raise concerns about the capacity of different national HE systems and institutions to manage and support students' complex learning trajectories (Martin & Godonoga, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how higher education institutions (HEIs) can facilitate flexible transitions into and within university for a diverse student body. We build our theoretical framework around Gale and Parker's (2014) typology of student transition and Quinn's (2010) conceptualisation of transitions as 'becoming,' which entails a rejection of a notion of linearity and normativity (See also: Baker & Irwin, 2021; Gravett, 2021). Our specific analytical focus is on 'institutional characteristics,' which refer to institutional policies and practices that organise the conduct of university admissions, teaching and learning, as well as administering of information, student support and other services. Institutional policies and practices have implications for social equity in student transitions.

A growing literature have addressed institutional arrangements that can be approached as 'barriers,' meaning practices that prevent access to and participation in HE. Prior studies have shown that students from under-represented groups face more barriers than their socially advantaged peers (Haltia & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2023). Institutional barriers can entail, for example, lack of financial support, rigid course scheduling, location, and insufficient information and support to interpret and navigate educational pathways within HE systems (e.g., Jabbar et al., 2022; Saar et al., 2014). However, we argue that the nature of institutional characteristics can also construct conditions for enhanced participation and help individuals to overcome barriers.

Our empirical case is Finnish open university education (OUE), which is a form of HE offering basic university courses that are open to everyone but do not lead to degrees (Haltia, 2018; Moitus et al., 2020). Each university provides OUE alongside their degree programmes, and in some cases, courses are also organised in cooperation with other educational institutions such as adult education centres, folk high schools and summer universities. Nowadays, most OUE courses are organised online. OUE is a form of university extension aiming to offer educational opportunities for a larger audience but not targeting any specific groups. For individual students, OUE courses may serve as further education, recreational

activity or, in some cases, a route to degree studies. Upon admission to a traditional university, the OUE courses can be integrated as part of a student's degree attainment. The so-called 'open university gateway' offers an alternative access route to degree programmes. The OU gateway was originally developed as a 'second chance' route to adult learners to enhance the equality of educational opportunities; nowadays it serves students of all ages and all social backgrounds.

Our research questions are as follows:

1. What kinds of characteristics define the institutional flexibility of Finnish open university education?
2. How do these characteristics construct conditions for student transition into and within higher education?

We were using thematic student interviews (N=16) as our empirical data. The data was analysed by using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke 2021). The current study provides an advanced perspective on how institutional policies and practices resonate with student experiences and opportunities.

Reconceptualising student transition as 'becoming'

Gale and Parker (2014) have argued that HE policy and practice are informed by different interpretations of 'student transition.' According to their typology, specific institutional practices are connected to three distinct ways of understanding transition:

- 'Transition as induction' (T1): This involves clear, linear pathways and sequentially defined periods of adjustment to the university context.
- 'Transition as development' (T2): This involves transformation from one (student) identity to another.
- 'Transition as becoming' (T3): This refers to a series of fragmented movements and the navigation of multiple subjectivities.

The two conceptions of 'induction' and 'development' have thus far informed most of the empirical literature on barriers and student transitions into and within HE. First, when transitions are understood as 'induction' (T1), the focus is on adjusting to the institutional norms and procedures of HEIs, that is, the traditional university model that informs much of the current practices. Institutions manage this

transition, for instance, by providing information about studies, curriculum and assessment requirements, and organising orientation events and seminars targeting first-year students (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Second, when transitions are understood in terms of students' personal development (T2), the focus is on the qualitatively distinct stages of maturation that involve the navigation of sociocultural norms and expectations in academia. Institutional practices that enhance such transitional dynamics involve mentoring programmes, championing narratives of successful students as well as extracurricular activities, field placements and career development activities during studies (Gale & Parker, 2014). Baker and Irwin (2021) have further clarified the difference between the two conceptions: a period (T1) indicates a sense of a clear chronological timeframe, whereas a stage (T2) 'can extend beyond chronological time as it focuses more on completion of activities that serve to create boundaries for a particular entity' (p. 79).

Some transition-related practices can be limited from the perspective of students' lived experiences and social inclusion. Alternatively, when transitions are regarded as 'becoming,' the linearity and normativity of student transitions are rejected. In Gale and Parker's (2014; see also Quinn, 2010; Gravet, 2021) theorisation, they adopt this third approach as the most student-sympathetic account as it foregrounds students' entire lives and lived realities. Transitions are 'rhizomatic' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), perpetual and fluid. There are no predefined paths, beginnings or endings, just the spiral and continuous movement within flexible systems and multiple subjectivities. Importantly, the terms of the transition are not set by the institution.

Institutions can facilitate 'transition-as-becoming' dynamics only by increasing the flexibility of the system. They can provide flexible study modules, remove strict timelines, minimum and maximum course loads and distinguish between full-time and part-time study; moreover, they can enable and support student transitions by allowing the transfer from one course to another and the opportunity to enter, withdraw and return to study throughout life (Gale & Parker, 2014). As examples of the state of the art in this field, Gravett (2021) has further developed the theory and Baker and Irwin (2021) have conducted empirical studies on refugee students' non-linear transitions into HE.

The reconceptualisation of student transitions push forward the institutional transformation at HEIs. According to Quinn (2010), normalising perpetual transitions into and out of university would not only benefit students from underrepresented groups who are at risk of dropping out but all students.

Institutional barriers and inclusive practices

Higher education institutions differ a great deal in their flexibility and ability to respond to the multiple realities of their students. Traditional universities have been criticised for being conservative institutions that maintain rigid norms and standards that mainly serve privileged students. Prior research on institutional barriers have not only indicated reasons for non-access, such as lack of entry qualification or high fees, but also institutional practices and procedures that reproduce social inequalities and prevent full participation of certain groups of students once they are studying at university (Haltia & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2023; Jabbar et al., 2022; Baker & Irwin, 2021; Saar et al., 2014).

Institutional barriers can be differentiated from situational barriers, which refer to the life situation of students, such as the need to balance studies with family and work responsibilities, and dispositional barriers, which refer to personal qualities and attitudes towards one's own abilities to succeed in education (Saar et al., 2014). According to Schuetze & Slowey's (2002) comparative study, there appear to be six broad institutional factors that can either inhibit or support educational equity and the participation of under-represented student populations: 1) Institutional differentiation of the HE system (and co-ordination between sectors/programs); 2) Institutional governance (flexibility regarding the organisation of curricula and study practices); 3) Flexible (open) access; 4) Mode of study (availability of modular courses and credit transfer, part-time mode, distance learning and independent study); 5) Financial support; and 6) Continuing education opportunities (non-credit programs).

Institutions with flexible enrolment and educational programs can lower the common barriers for participation in HE. As Saar et al. (2014) have addressed, institutional barriers originate from the arrangements within the HE system and particular HEIs. Therefore, they may be easier to overcome than situational or dispositional barriers through institutions' own structural, administrative and educational solutions. The necessary acts to remove barriers for participation include: 1) developing flexible learning pathways; 2) establishing alternative routes to higher education; 3) creating opportunities for the recognition of prior learning; and 4) ensuring the provision of flexible, relevant and innovative programmes targeting a diversified student population.

As an example, online universities can be considered both inclusive and flexible institutions that support diverse student trajectories. Prior research has addressed the advantage of online teaching in terms of accessibility and social inclusion (e.g., Rainford, 2021; Wilkens et al., 2021). Online opportunities facilitate the participation of students with difficulty attending traditional university, for

example, because they live in rural areas, have some disability or seek to combine studying with family and work duties (Sánchez-Gelabert 2020). Student access to online HEIs is usually less competitive in terms of the entry requirements and the applicant/admitted student ratio. There are also fully open-access pathways that allow students without university entry qualifications to attend online university courses (Haltia, 2018; Stone et al., 2016). Study progress is adjusted to students' own pace, and transitions within online universities are rather flexible. However, persistence and successful completion of courses are specific problems in online institutions (Simpson, 2013).

Responsiveness to student diversity involves the development of an inclusive learning environment both in online and on-site university courses. According to Hockings et al. (2010), who conducted research on inclusive pedagogies in the United Kingdom, university teachers are willing to engage all students within socially, culturally and educationally diverse groups. They have a variety of ways to enhance individual and inclusive learning spaces and student-centred strategies to learning. For example, they encourage students to share beliefs, knowledge and life experiences during class and discuss with them informally during breaks in order to create an atmosphere of openness and collaboration. Moreover, they enhance students' engagement by grounding their learning assignments to something relevant to them as individuals, such as something in their present lives or future roles as professionals. Inclusive pedagogies address the importance of being culturally aware, for example, in the choice of learning resources and case examples and the use of humour and anecdotes during lectures.

Engaging students, especially those who are first-generation and new to academic knowledge and culture, requires further consideration from HEIs. The enhancement of inclusive learning processes requires that the pedagogical, technological and humanistic dimensions are all adequately considered (Rainford, 2021). Institutional support starts from students' initial access and continues throughout their complex trajectories until their graduation and even beyond in terms of career guidance and continuing education.

Research context: Finnish open university education

Finland is a particularly interesting country to examine from an international perspective. It has an egalitarian HE system composed of 14 research universities and 25 universities of applied sciences. HE is funded by the state, and there are no tuition fees. At the same time, access to degree studies at Finnish universities is very competitive. Due to the process of selective admission, more than two-thirds

of applicants do not gain admission to a degree programme at university, and a number of applicants try several times before finally accessing HE (Haltia, 2018). Therefore, Finnish university students are relatively old compared to the international norm. Moreover, learning trajectories of university students are often long and complex, involving gap years, delays and study transfers (Haltia & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2023; Stenström et al., 2012).

Unlike the Open University in the United Kingdom and other distance teaching universities (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999), OUE in Finland is not offered by a separate organisation; it is more akin to a network in which all Finnish universities arrange open courses. Courses are modules from conventional degrees where the same teachers often offer courses in both OUE and the traditional university, or OUE students can take part in the same courses as students attending traditional universities. In 2023, there were about 113,000 OU students attending different university and online campuses around the country (Vipunen, 2024).

Over half of the OUE students are in full-time employment, and for the majority, the main reason for studying is to enhance knowledge for working life. A significant number have pursued a university degree and for them OU courses serve as supplementary modules for their existing degrees. Furthermore, the so-called OU gateway offers an alternative access route to traditional university. The gateway means that after completing a certain number of study credits with sufficient grades in OUE, a student may apply for a study place in a degree programme. However, in most degree programmes, a fixed number of students can be admitted via the OU gateway. Therefore the gateway entails uncertainty as to whether the goal of accessing 'real' university will be realised.

The OU gateway was originally created as an opportunity of a second chance into HE (see Orr & Hovdhaugen, 2014), offering a possibility for those without the formal entry qualifications or who had not chosen HE earlier in their lives. The gateway has remained a narrow entry channel, but recently, the proportion of entrants using this route has grown to about five percent of new degree students (Vipunen, 2024). Those utilising the gateway are clearly older than those using the main admission route. They often have a vocational degree from the secondary or lower tertiary level, and some of them lack the traditional university entry qualification (the matriculation examination). Compared to the main admission requirements, the OU gateway has more often served adults and those with non-academic family backgrounds (Haltia & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2023). Prior studies have shown that the gateway has acted as a meaningful option for students and that many feel fortunate to have this opportunity to finalise their university studies and earn a degree (Lahtomaa, 2023; Alho-Malmelin, 2010; Purtilo-Nieminen, 2011).

Research methods

Interview data

Our joint analysis is based on the thematic interviews of 16 adult learners who underwent the Finnish OUE route and transferred to university degree studies via the OU gateway (See: Table 1). The data was produced in two separate research projects. The first project was a national development project that aimed at developing alternative and flexible pathways to university degree studies (the project acronym: TRY). 10 interviews were conducted with degree students who had gained a study place via the OU gateway. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2021, and the participants had gained a study place in the autumn of 2020. All were female, and their age ranged from 24 to 57 years. Eight had no previous HE degrees, but two had a bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences. Many had long working careers, and several had also continued their studies in the same professional field in which they worked. The interviews, which were of a thematic narrative nature, were conducted via Zoom. The themes discussed in the interviews were the participants' previous educational and career trajectories, their OU studies, experiences of the OU pathway and how they envisioned their future.

The second project was a four-year-long qualitative follow-up study on HE graduates' employability and social positioning in the labour market (the project acronym: HIGHEMPLOY). Six interviews were conducted with students who had undergone OUE and the OU gateway. Two of them were women and four were men. Altogether in the project, we conducted 76 graduate interviews in 2019 and 44 follow-up interviews in 2020 with business graduates from Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences. The majority of them had graduated within one year of the interview date, and a few were still finalising their studies. The interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 51 years. Half of them were 'mature students,' that is, 30+ years at the time of graduation.

The interviews lasted from 34 to 176 minutes, the mean length being 87 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to allow in-depth analysis of the data. The combined interview data allowed us to analyse a great array of study experiences in the context of OUE (See: Table 1). The interviewees had attained either vocational qualifications or general upper secondary education. One of them had previously earned a university degree and three had a bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences. The interviewees had transferred from OUE to degree studies at university at different times and at their own pace. For some, the part-time OU studies lasted only about a year, and for the others, they were extended over longer periods.

Table 1

Participants of the study

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Previous education | The project |
|------------------|------------|---------------|---|--------------------|
| Anna | 55 | F | Upper secondary school, vocational qualifications (different field) | TRY |
| Joel | 35 | M | Vocational qualification (related field) | HIGHEMPLOY |
| Julia | 48 | F | Upper secondary school, vocational qualifications (same field) | TRY |
| Katarina | 57 | F | Vocational qualifications (different field), UAS bachelor's degree (different field) | TRY |
| Konsta | 43 | M | Vocational qualifications (different field) | HIGHEMPLOY |
| Kristina | 47 | F | Upper secondary school | TRY |
| Maria | 41 | F | Vocational qualifications (related field) | TRY |
| Meri | 42 | F | Upper secondary school, vocational qualifications (same field), UAS bachelor's degree (different field) | TRY |
| Nico | 33 | M | Vocational qualification (different field) | HIGHEMPLOY |
| Paulina | 45 | F | Upper secondary school, vocational qualifications (same field) | TRY |
| Rosalie | 43 | F | Upper secondary school, vocational qualifications (different field) | TRY |
| Sara | 24 | F | Upper secondary school | HIGHEMPLOY |
| Sofia | 44 | F | Master's degree (different field) | HIGHEMPLOY |
| Tina | 24 | F | Upper secondary school, vocational qualifications (same field) | TRY |
| Tobias | 33 | M | UAS bachelor's degree (different field) | HIGHEMPLOY |
| Veronica | 30 | F | Upper secondary school, vocational qualifications (related field) | TRY |

Reflexive thematic analysis

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which follows a truly qualitative sensibility (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The methodological assumptions were grounded in the socio-constructionist framework that emphasises social practice, interaction and language in the knowledge production. Accordingly, qualitative data does not provide access to an objective reality, but to socially shared ideas and assumptions about what is consider 'reality.' Thus, the focus of analysis was on the interviewees' sense-making of their

educational experiences. Researcher reflexivity—deep reflection on and engagement with theory, data and interpretations—is key for this method and for the quality of research findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, as Braun and Clarke have emphasised (2021), the researcher’s subjectivity was an analytical *resource* in the generation of themes.

The analysis evolved as an iterative and interactive process among the authors (See: Table 2). We began the analysis by reading the interview transcripts and focusing on the interviewees’ narratives about their study experiences. The coding of the data focused on how the interviewees accounted for the institutional practices within Finnish OUE. Moreover, we considered how the students positioned open university studies vis-à-vis the degree-orientated studies at ‘real’ universities, and how such comparisons draw upon institutional and cultural categorizations such as: open/inclusive—exclusive; accessible—selective; flexible—rigid; drifting—planning (or strategic action). Our unit of analysis in the coding process varied from a descriptive sentence(s) to lengthy stories shared by the interviewees. Then, when we were grouping the codes into the actual themes, we paid special attention to how the characteristics of OUE enabled student transition into and within higher education. Following the definition of Braun and Clark (2021, p. 341), themes were understood as ‘stories’ about particular patterns and meanings that were shared across the research interviews.

Table 2

Phases of reflexive thematic analysis (cf. Braun & Clark, 2006)

| Analytic Phase | Description of the process (adapted from Braun & Clarke 2006) | Specific notes on the methodological choices |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Familiarising oneself with the data and generating initial codes</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribing data • Reading and re-reading the data transcriptions • Note taking on initial ideas • Coding interesting features of the data and collating data relevant to each code | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We were reading and coding our interview data with the partial focus on institutional characteristics in mind |
| <i>Searching for themes</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collating codes into broader-level, overarching themes and gathering all relevant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This interpretative process developed through in-depth |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | data into a potential theme | discussions between the authors |
| <i>Reviewing themes</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking if the themes work in relation to the interview extracts and the entire data set • Generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We were refining codes and themes and collapsed together some overlapping themes • Eventually, we identified three main themes (with sub-themes) that evolved into coherent patterns |
| <i>Defining and naming the themes</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating clear definitions and names for each theme • Refining the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We were defining and naming the themes |
| <i>Producing the report</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection of vivid, compelling extracts from the data • Final analysis of the selected extracts • Relating the analysis back to the research questions and literature | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We did not necessarily choose the most common (and commonplace) extracts from the data, but examples that added an interesting point to the discussion about the theme |

As a result of our final analysis, we developed three, interrelated themes:

1. Open access which facilitates gradual engagement in university studies.
2. Flexible modes of study which enable study regardless of time and place.
3. Open university gateway which functions as an alternative access route to degree studies.

The overarching analytical story is that the institutional characteristics of Finnish OUE—openness, flexible mode of studies, and alternative access route—enabled individualised transitions into and within higher education.

Results: Institutional characteristics that support students' transition into and within higher education

Open access facilitating gradual engagement in university studies

The first institutional characteristic of significance is that, as the name indicates, access to OUE is open to everyone, regardless of previous educational attainment or academic merits. The interviewees expressed that open access without a specific application process, entry exams and competition lowered institutional barriers for participation. Such flexibility supported students' trajectories in and out of university studies as well as between disciplinary courses. If there are more applicants than places available in any individual course, students are admitted in the order of registration. Moreover, participants are admitted to one course or course module at a time and have no permanent status as OUE students. They do not register for full-time attendance and do not belong to any class/cohort of students who would follow the same pre-defined course offer and schedule. Furthermore, payment is defined per course credit (and not, e.g., per semester), allowing full flexibility in students' scheduling and transition in and out of their studies throughout the year. Therefore, everyone can progress at their own pace and complete their chosen courses within time-period that suits them.

Without pre-selection and long-term commitment, students could maintain curiosity, 'test' and explore different kinds of study options, including a variety of disciplinary subjects. As one of our interviewees, Rosalie, expressed, '...in a way, I started testing different courses via OUE.' Open access facilitated students' 'becoming' and flexibility in participation and academic engagement. This was important especially for the interviewees who had not previously considered university as an option for themselves or had been thinking that they would not have been able to manage such demanding studies. In our study, some interviewees expressed that they were first hesitant to start their studies; however, once started, they were able to realise their potential:

Then I began my business studies in an open university. I don't even remember which one it was. The point was just to get to study something. I did one course, then another, and realised they went pretty damn well, so I decided to do a third one, which also went pretty smoothly. Then at some point, I decided I might just get myself a degree while I'm at it. That's how I began my studies [laughs]. I kind of just drifted into it... Noticing that I can do it probably mattered. Probably somewhere at the end of basic education or something like that, I wouldn't have really thought that I'd someday go

to university to study. It was somehow a completely different world, and the people who end up there are totally different. (Nico)

Those who came from a working-class background were particularly appreciative of the opportunity to familiarise themselves with academia and ‘test’ their capacity as university students at open access courses. These students often continued their studies little by little, one course after the other, and eventually ended up applying to a degree programme via the OU gateway. Success at initial course work boosted their self-confidence and made them think of themselves as prospective degree students.

Open access also enabled individual pace of learning. Several interviewees maintained that OUE provides flexibility for the students to decide how quickly they want to progress and how many course credits they want to accomplish in a year. It was important to have the possibility to plan one’s own schedule. Meri was one of those who voiced this in her interview:

And then for some years, maybe during two or three years...I pursued these open university studies (as a part-time student). I advanced my studies whenever my work situation permitted. (Meri)

The open access to attain courses allowed student-centred choices, which often derived from students’ lives, especially their working life, and not the pre-defined, disciplinary synopsis. Although students could enrol for an individual course at a time, they could later compile a series of courses into larger study modules that were equivalent to the modules for conventional degrees.

Flexible modes of study

The second institutional characteristic that we identified was the flexibility of the study modes. Although the OUE curriculum and study requirements are equivalent to those of the degree studies of the respective university, the teaching and learning formats had variety. The interviewees appreciated such versatility of OUE courses. Different kinds of blended, hybrid, online and self-study methods are widely utilised. There were also massive open online courses (MOOCs) on offer. Some of the courses were arranged in co-operation with local adult education institutions, and onsite teaching was often provided on evenings and weekends.

These arrangements resonated with the individualised needs of the interviewees to study regardless of time and place. Most of them chose OUE for the flexibility of combining studies with a full-time job. Paulina was one of those for whom the part-time nature of OUE studies was important:

In my opinion, this is a very good alternative, especially for adult learners who can accomplish a certain number [of course credits] beside their work and [have time] to think peacefully about [what they learn]. Not nearly anyone can fully leave their work and go to university during adulthood. So, this [OU] provides a certain freedom. You can accomplish [your courses] up to a certain point [in part-time mode] and only then apply to [a degree programme at a university] in which you have to be a full-time student. (Paulina)

Not being a full-time student suited many working adults well since they were not able to attend courses during office hours or several days per week. There were also students for whom OUE was the only option available for pursuing university studies because of its flexibility in terms of mode of participation. In particular, people whose mobility was restricted for one reason or another and who were unable to travel to university campus belonged to this group. For these students, flexible study opportunities, especially the online courses, allowed participation and helped them to overcome institutional barriers related to location.

The interviewees were also able to combine studies with care responsibilities. For example, Sofia revealed that at one point in her life, she had a career break because she was caring for her sick daughter at home. She needed some rewarding activity that supported her own well-being during that stressful period.

It felt like taking a business class [at OU] was kind of a reward in itself. And it was, like, really inspiring. And while I was at home, while my daughter was sick, I knew I needed something else to occupy myself with besides having my sick kid and all that came with it. I guess I completed business courses worth like 30–40 credits back then. (Sofia)

Sofia's family situation was challenging because her daughter became seriously ill and needed a great deal of care from her. Studying became her lifeline, and flexible arrangements made her active participation possible. This example demonstrates the complexity of educational and professional trajectories and their intertwinement with non-professional elements of life.

From the student's point of view, flexibility of OUE was not tied specifically to any particular institution, as they were able to take advantage of very broad course offerings from all Finnish universities' OUE programmes. Even after being accepted as degree students some of them increased the flexibility of their studies by pursuing OUE courses alongside their regular courses. For example, Konsta had participated in different online courses—offered by several universities

around the country—to bring flexibility to his degree studies at one particular university.

Well, it brings more flexibility, and the open university's online classes made it possible to attend courses which wouldn't have been available until the fall [at my home university] (...) I don't have to go to [campus in another city] to take an exam. Instead, I can just do it online [from home]. (Konsta)

Open university gateway: alternative access route to university degree studies

The third institutional characteristic identified as enabling flexible transitions is the so-called OU gateway, which functions as an alternative access route to university degree studies. Many of the interviewees talked about the gateway as their only option to gain a study place as a degree student. As mentioned above, Finnish OUE itself has no degree-granting rights, even though the courses provided in OUE are equivalent to those provided in degree programmes. The OU gateway means that after completing a certain number of study credits—compiled in pre-defined course modules as part of a bachelor's degree—students can apply for a study place in a degree programme at university. Successfully completed studies in OUE is read as proof of one's ability and motivation to carry on with studies and complete the degree programme. The specific entry criteria in terms of mandatory courses and grades differ between study programmes.

For many of the interviewees, especially for the more mature ones, transition to a degree program resulted only after a long period of part-time studies at OUE, like was the case of Maria:

Since year 2000, I have studied at the OUE. At one point of my career, at work, due to family situations, I was forced to take an absence from work (...) And, then, I was thinking that it's my time to continue my studies further. And I started [the degree orientated] studies in 2017. I completed all the intermediate courses, the bachelor's thesis work, and all that. (Maria)

Maria also emphasised that the OU gateway had permitted her, like other students with vocational qualification, to access university without traditional entry qualifications: 'If you did not go to general upper-secondary school [and participate in the matriculation exam], like in my case, it does not stop there. You can show in another way that you are capable to study [at university].'

The gateway also offers a second chance to students who have not been successful at the competitive student admissions (i.e., the entry exams). Younger students who have just completed their upper secondary schooling but have not

gained a place to pursue degree studies typically belong to this group of people who aim to use the gap year to improve their chances of accessing selective university programmes. For example, Sara considered the main admission route to university as overly competitive and difficult ‘because you need so many exam points to get in.’ She did not gain admission the first year she applied, so she spent her involuntary gap year undertaking OUE studies. She reflected on how she ended up taking these courses as a strategic choice:

...getting into business school is so difficult (...) And there was also the open university option. I think my mum, or maybe it was my dad, had done some background work on that. Guess it was my dad? He’d found out that you could, you know, study in the open university. So, like, why wouldn’t we take advantage of the time we have right now, while we’re not in school yet, and study this stuff beforehand? (...) Because obviously, there was the motivation to get in that way. (Sara)

Therefore, for some students, the OU gateway provided a site for strategizing about student admissions. Students with a clear plan to gain entry to a degree programme via the gateway need knowledge on how the alternative admissions system works and the skills to confidently navigate it. They had to be aware of how to make the right course choices and accomplish a high grade average.

However, although OUE is open access, the gateway has a limited number of places. If there are more applicants than places, the selection appears based on course completion and grade average. With increased competitiveness, only students with the highest educational attainment will be accepted into degree programmes via this route, as Tobias reveals in the following.

The competition would come from the fact that you need to have a certain GPA if you wanted to get in through the open university path. There was a kind of positive competition about who has the highest GPA, like, who’s getting in for sure and who’s kind of on the edge because, before, almost everyone who met the [admission] criteria got in [to a degree programme at university]. Now that it’s getting more popular, which means more people applying and trying to get in that way, it isn’t a sure path anymore. That’s where the competition came from. (Tobias)

The majority of the interviewees, however, described the gateway as less competitive than the regular student admission system. Therefore, they evaluated the OU gateway as the most suitable for them. Even though the gateway entailed

taking courses over a lengthy time period, they saw it as less stressful alternative than the main admission route.

Discussion

In the current study, we examined the institutional characteristics of Finnish open university education (OUE) and demonstrated how the policies and practices constructed conditions for students' flexible transitions into and within HE. OUE aims to serve a diverse body of students and for individual students OUE may serve as further education, recreational activity or, in some cases, a route to degree studies. The study was based on 16 educational life history interviews of university students who had undertaken Finnish OUE and accessed degree studies via the OU gateway.

As a response to our first research question, we identified institutional characteristics that define the institutional flexibility of Finnish OUE: 1) openness of access, 2) flexibility of study formats, and 3) OU gateway as an alternative access route to degree studies. Our findings confirmed that institutional characteristics of OUE lower barriers of participation to higher education (e.g. Saar et al., 2014). Both the openness of access (i.e. the lack of any specific application or selection process) and the flexibility in the course provision (e.g. the variety of courses and different modes of study) contributed to the individualisation and fluidity of student transitions.

As a response to our second research question, we found that these characteristics facilitate gradual, fluid and non-linear progression to university studies. As such, they enable participation of students from diverse backgrounds and life-situations. In particular, the online courses were considered important in terms of study flexibility. Furthermore, our analyses showed the role of the OU gateway in offering an alternative path to the competitive admissions at Finnish universities. Through OUE, and after successfully completing their courses, students were able to progressively engage with more intentional and goal-orientated studies, which was particularly meaningful for those from under-represented student groups (cf. Stone et al., 2016).

Institutional policies and practices related to Finnish OUE can be seen as compatible with Gale & Parker's (2014) reconceptualisation of student transitions as 'becoming,' as fluid, emergent and multiple processes (Baker & Irwin, 2021; Gravett, 2021; Gale & Parker, 2014; Quinn, 2010). Instead of approaching the individualisation of learning trajectories as a cause of institutional ineffectiveness and extra cost, the approach 'normalises' complexities such as part-time mode,

drop-out and returning, transfers and study delays. Thus, the norm of a linear and uninterrupted study progress is rejected. Furthermore, the reconceptualization indicates that institutional support needs to be available throughout the students' university experience as opposed to at particular time or stages, e.g., only at the beginning of studies (Gravett, 2021).

As a limitation of our study, we only accessed those students who had made successful transitions through the OU gateway to the position of a degree student. Not all OU students succeed and their transitions within the HE system are interrupted. In addition to what our findings revealed, it would be important to understand the experiences and (lack of) further opportunities of people who had aspirations but were not admitted to university via the OU gateway. Our approach thus overlooks critical aspects of the open, online education, such as the status of part-time students and high drop-out rates. Due to the limitation of our data, we were not able to fully address social inequalities, particularly in terms of the under-representation of students from a low socio-economic and minority ethnic backgrounds among people who are successfully transferring from open online courses to degree-oriented university studies.

This study has provided a starting point to study Finnish OUE as an exemplary institution for enabling fluidity in student transitions. As such, the current study advances the critical policy discussion and development of inclusive universities (Leišytė et al., 2021). Further theorisation and research is needed in order to relate individual experiences to the socio-political aspects of institutional characteristics. We have focused on those characteristics which enable complex trajectories, but it is good to also acknowledge that flexibility can create new kinds of barriers for some students. For instance, individualised learning pathways imply self-directness and self-discipline, which may be difficult to manage for some students.

Finally, the development of institutional flexibility is bounded by the broader context in which universities operate (Gravett, 2021). For example, there are some new tendencies that limit the institutional flexibility and student-centeredness of OUE. These include increasing competitiveness, scarcity of public funding and marketisation of higher education. Such new policies and practices are in sharp contrast with the institutional characteristics of openness and flexibility that we have identified in this study. Rather than enhancing individuals to overcome institutional barriers, they have a risk of making the OU gateway, and OUE alike, less responsive to the needs of diverse student groups, especially those from under-represented groups. It is important to continue to study how the future reforms in HE policy will affect the flexibility of institutional characteristics and enhance (or restrict) social equity in student transitions.

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