

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Rethinking flexibility in online learning: lessons from a study about Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs)

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This study is providing the findings and lessons of research on Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs), a variation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in China. Since 2013, more than 1,700 universities in China have launched SPOCs and millions of students have registered for credit courses. The growing use of SPOCs in Chinese higher education has reshaped how universities deliver personalised and flexible learning.

Despite widespread adoption, limited research has explored how flexibility of student learning has been integrated into SPOCs. By extending the Advance HE Flexible Learning Framework (Loon, 2021), this study proposes the Flexibility for SPOC-based Online Learning (FSOL) model, a tool designed to assess the multifaceted factors of student flexibility in online learning. This model categorises the complexity of flexibility in online learning with five critical factors: institutional support, teacher support, information quality, system quality and perceived employability.

A survey of 294 university students in China was conducted. Exploratory factor analysis and Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed a five-factor model with high internal consistency and strong construct validity. The results, analysed with FSOL, demonstrated that the proposed factors explained 60.3% of the variance in flexibility. Findings revealed that strong institutional and teacher support enhance students' overall learning flexibility. This is an important finding especially in a collectivist cultural context in China, where hierarchical student-institution structures affected educational experiences (Hofstede, 2001). Quality of the SPOCs, reflected in the content, layout and available support, influenced student's use and further affected their flexibility. Embedding content for employability development also increased students' flexibility in SPOCs-based online learning by enabling them to customise their learning paths to align with career goals.

The FSOL model offers an innovative and practical contribution for evaluating flexible learning strategies in technology-enhanced learning settings. The focus on employability in the model highlights the importance of aligning course design with students' future career goals. The FSOL model can further inform future technology-enhanced learning and research to support more inclusive and effective learning in diverse global settings.

This study will be beneficial to teachers who use blended and online learning. It will provide strategies on how to effectively integrate the FSOL flexibility framework, which can be adapted to non-Chinese online learning contexts.

Keywords: SPOCs, flexible learning, FSOL model, higher education, technology-enhanced learning

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Serrano, D. R., Dea-Ayuela, M. A., Gonzalez-Burgos, E., Serrano-Gil, A., & Lalatsa, A. (2019). Technology-enhanced learning in higher education: How to enhance student engagement through blended learning. *European Journal of Education*, 54(2), 273–286. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12330>

Chen, Y., Palmer, E., & Wanner, T. (2025, Nov 30 – Dec 3). Rethinking flexibility in online learning: lessons from a study about Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs) [Pecha Kucha Presentation]. Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education Conference, Adelaide, Australia. DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2025.2734>

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.

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