FROM DISTANCE LEARNING TO OPEN EDUCATION: A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

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My intention is that this paper leads to consideration of difficult questions. It does not attempt at this stage to give answers. It should also be said that the questions derive from an analysis from the European region, which can be of course be contested. The analysis is based on the proposition that there is a significant change taking place in the landscape of technology enhanced education, flexibility and access, where the mantle of innovation is now passing from the world of open, distance and e-learning (ODEL), to a much more distributed range of actors, including many on campuses who do not use the language of ODEL at all. This matters to professional associations in the field of distance and e-learning such as EDEN because their sphere of interest is defined, as the organisational title suggests, by ODEL. If issues of technology enhanced learning, flexibility and access – the principle defining characteristics of organisations that choose that identity – move elsewhere this poses significant strategic issues for ODEL associations for the future. We may find that the new landscape will grow different kinds of professional associations, seemingly more relevant and attractive. Indeed there is evidence that this has already begun from the mid 1990's to take place, and that the pace of change is now accelerating. Hence the need for discussion now.

I would like to begin by looking at the landscape in Europe, the world region I know best, starting from the 1970's and 1980's. In this period the lead organisations in the field of flexible technology enhanced learning that provide access at scale for new categories of learners were the single mode distance teaching or open universities, of whom there were 5, in Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, Germany and the UK, being joined later by the open universities of Greece, Catalonia and Cyprus. These universities organised from 1987 a network, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) that acted as an influential voice effectively to assert that the distance teaching universities represented the paradigms of innovation in technology enhanced teaching, lifelong learning and access. Initially and for a significant period thereafter only one distance teaching university per country was allowed membership, and although this has more recently been relaxed somewhat the core membership remains single-mode distance teaching universities, an increasingly small proportion of the ODEL actors in Europe. Nonetheless EADTU's view of the ODEL landscape continues largely unchanged until today, with the EADTU website currently claiming that

> *EADTU is Europe's leading institutional association for open and distance higher Education, and is at the heart of the modernisation agenda of European universities.*
> *www.eadtu.eu/about-eadtu/mission-straegy.*

Both phrases in this sentence suggest a pre-eminence of role in the field of post-secondary ODEL in Europe that seemed contestable even in the 1990's. At the heart of this discussion is the view that this perspective is even harder to maintain now.

EDEN, the European Distance and E-Learning Network, was founded in 1991, and took a different approach to professional identity, deriving from a different understanding of the landscape of ODEL. The most important difference was to admit all educational institutions who had some part of their provision in distance mode (the dual mode or blended institutions) or those who expressed an interest in distance and e-learning, recognising that innovation in flexible and open learning was already, and was going in the future to be distributed across a wide range of organisations, and not monopolised by the open universities, important though their places in the landscape were. EDEN's purpose is expressed more modestly and realistically as

> *To share knowledge and improve understanding amongst professionals in distance and e-learning and to promote policy and practice across the whole of Europe and beyond.*
> *www.eden-online.org/introducing-eden.html*

EDEN's activities are present through its conferences twice per year which in total attract some 600-700 participants, and its journal EURODL, together with a wide range of projects in which it primarily supports member institutions. The identity of EDEN is clearly and singularly based on distance and e-learning, and I want to suggest that this too is now a strategically vulnerable position, as the field of innovation in the use of technologies for flexible learning and access has grown so much more diverse to include many people and institutions who focus their activities now on campus without the concepts, vocabulary, or identity of ODEL.

The reason for saying this is that many, in the UK at least the majority of campus-based institutions now use learning management systems on which they place learning resources, to include both course based study and more general study support modules; students communicate with their lecturers and tutors by email; students learn using the LMS with laptops and tablets with Wi-Fi in their homes, in cafes, on trains etc., in other words off campus. The sharp distinction between ODEL practice and that which the ODEL world used to term, somewhat disparagingly 'conventional' education is thus diminishing, as the digital revolution accelerates its transformation through the campuses. This is not to say that the lecture, so regularly held up as an object of derision as a method of teaching in the rhetoric of ODEL, has completely disappeared. But conventional campus-based education of the 1990's is no longer what it was. Technology enhanced education (TEL) is very active on campus, and

indeed as I hope to demonstrate below, has seized a considerable part of the agenda for innovation.

The open education movement is led, though not exclusively, by two main strands, those of Open Educational Resources (OER's) and those of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). OER's have led discussion about the need to reduce or remove the cost of text books, and to extend access by creating cheaper courses, as well as driving an anti-commoditisation rhetoric which seeks to change the structure of cost in learning resources and to defend the notion of education as a public good. It has been an important contributor to rhetoric such as 'content is now free', that drives pedagogic innovation on as well as off campus. These seminal developments of the last 10 years or so have been rooted in exploration of the power of digital resources, conceived primarily within frameworks of TEL , not ODEL. Leadership for OER's originally came, as with MOOCs, not from ODEL institutions but from research-led universities such as MIT. While there might be concerns about the extent to which OER's are delivering on their promise – many repositories have been created but use and adaption lags significantly even after a decade – there is no doubt that the open education movement has captured the mantle for innovation for technology and the discourse for inclusion. The story is the same with MOOCs, with initial scepticism on the part of some leading ODEL figures, which clearly resented the step by new entrants from outside ODEL into the digital learning field without paying their respects to those who felt they had occupied it, and indeed led it. While it is true that some (but not all) MOOCs were pedestrian or worse in their pedagogy, MOOCs captured the imagination of politicians, funding and philanthropic agencies, as well as venture capitalists, not to speak of millions of learners, in ways that open universities may have felt was their prerogative. It is also true to say now that open universities have fought their way back into the field, above all with the Future Learn MOOC platform built by the Open University, where the large majority of MOOCs are however provided by research-led campus universities. More recently we have begun to see MOOCs being used as short courses within on-campus programmes, further eroding the position of ODEL as a distinct and separate field of practice.

This is evidenced at the level of new and increasingly rival professional associations in the European context. The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) was founded in 1993 in the UK, and runs a journal, conferences and a professional certification programme. It sets out as its purpose:

> *to ensure that use of learning technology is effective and efficient, informed by research and practice, and grounded in an understanding of the underlying technologies, their capabilities and the situations into which they are placed. www.alt.ac.uk*

If we review the 2014 Volume of the Research in Learning Technology Journal managed by ALT, of the 21 articles, only 3 explicitly mention online learning. The remainder relate to TEL innovation on campus, or do not specify if on-or off- campus. The Editorial by O'Reilly surveying the 2014 volume refers to OER's and open badges, but not to ODEL. It can be

suggested that ALT's view of the world sees ODEL as a feature in the TEL landscape but not the landscape itself, and that this is becoming an increasingly plausible understanding.

This is true too for another significant and energetic competitor, Online Educa Berlin, founded in 1995. Online Educa Berlin is an organisation that exists primarily for its annual conference, which in 2014 attracted 2400 participants and some 70 trade stalls promoting products and services, a far larger event than those driven by the narrower agendas of ODEL. Its purpose is expressed thus:

> *ONLINE EDUCA BERLIN is the event for learning professionals to discover innovative solutions, absorb new thinking and take action by implementing changes in the field of learning and technology.*

Once again we have no explicit reference to ODEL. Where ODEL is mentioned in the 2014 Conference programme it is in dual-mode or blended contexts. Open Universities are marginal to this landscape. There is as much if not more focus on TEL solutions on campus.

So if we look at the terminology of the last 20 years we can recall at least the following:

- Open Learning;
- ODL: Open and Distance Learning;
- E-learning;
- ODEL: Open, Distance and E-Learning;
- Web-based learning;
- Online learning;
- Mobile learning;
- Flexible learning;
- Distributed learning.

Some of these terms are difficult to distinguish from others; some have not stood the test of time; and some current terms risk extinction. For example, the advent of tablet computers and Wi-Fi may, according to a recent UNESCO report, may make the term 'mobile learning' redundant:

> *gradually even the term 'mobile learning' will fall into disuse as it is increasingly associated with learning in a more holistic rather than a more specialized or peripheral sense*
> *(UNESCO, 2013, p.71)*

The UNESCO report is suggesting that once technology becomes naturalised in a landscape it loses the specific attention it had in the phase of innovation. I am suggesting that something of this sort is happening with ODEL also. It is noteworthy that post-2000, as the digital revolution has fast made its impact in educational contexts, the newer terminology of TEL and Open Education has been qualitatively different. It is not a variant of what has gone before, where central to the definitions in most instances has been the mediation by

technology of distance between teacher and learner, distinctive to distance education. The newer terms and activities that support them take digital technology for granted, as it has been normalised and needs no explicit identification. People learn anywhere, whether in off or on-campus systems. This creates the question as to where this leaves distance education as a separate field of practice in the future?

So the core question for the professional associations based on ODEL is whether the identity of ODEL will remain compelling and engaging, and for how long, or whether the new landscape I have set out threatens it in such a way that we have to adapt and seek to create a new identity. In summary, I would suggest not that ODEL professional associations are threatened immediately, as the combination of brand and the current landscape of mixed understandings is such that I believe there is a 3 year window for reflection and change. It may also be that the European and North American regions where this analysis is most advanced, in my view, is not representative.

In summary I believe the likely outcomes for ODEL professional associations would be:

1. Continue substantially as they are, as contrary to the proposition expressed here the threat is judged to be fact low;

2. Adapt the organisational identity to the new landscape of TEL and the still important issues, globally of widening access and inclusion;

3. Accept that the job of promoting and supporting ODEL will be completed at some time in the mid-term, and that the organisation's role may come to a natural end.

My own view is that 2 above is both necessary and possible, and that a network such as EDEN stands in a strong position to lead the necessary revised understanding of the new landscape. EDEN's history, strong and developing brand, and significant links with a range of institutions internationally, give confidence that IT can avoid the third option. However, going on for the next decade without adapting to the new landscape will I think make EDEN and other ODEL focused organisations vulnerable to rather than strengthened by environmental change

References

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