

Message of Athens

Open and distance universities: a strong community with a common identity

With EADTU, we form a strong community with a common identity, open to learners, open to other higher education institutions, open to governments and other stakeholders. We have a common mission in lifelong learning and digital education in each of our countries and at EU level to provide accessible, high-quality and affordable higher education for all and contribute to innovation in higher education as a whole, and ultimately, bringing European values to reality in all our societies through education.

Towards a virtual campus

Our members are leaders in digital education. They are living labs for digital innovation in their institutions and in higher education systems. Making use of the best of educational technologies, they are now moving towards virtual campuses. They teach large groups of students while ensuring lively interactions with staff and smaller 'groups of peers', getting the most out of the digital environment. By 2030, many member institutions will have scaled campuses with seamless physical, hybrid, blended and online distance spaces.

As in the past, our members will be the first ones to develop a true culture of lifelong learning: including degree, continuing and open education. They will share their experiences and expertise in a truly European context, for which we continue to organize these IHE conferences and other EADTU activities.

Microcredentials

With the Council Recommendation on Micro-Credentials, (2022), all EU Ministers of Education and Employment have engaged themselves to use micro-credentials as a tool to increase participation in lifelong learning and help achieve the target of 60% of all adults in education annually, as set out in the New European Agenda for Adult Education 2021-2030. They will offer first plans for micro-credentials to the European Commission by December 2023 and to implement them within five years.

This is an important step forward for a genuine development of continuing education and professional development in Europe. This step is important for learners of the future, necessary to generate innovative enterprises and services, SMEs, spin-offs and start-ups, and a condition to activate regional development

Our members are ready for this challenge in dialogue with national governments and thus contributing to the creation of a truly EU space for continuing education in the spirit of the Bologna Process. They will create coherent institutional qualification structures for micro-credentials. They will establish institutional conditions to enable faculties and teachers to design high-quality digital micro-credential courses and programmes.

In search of convergence

A level convergence needs to be found to make micro-credentials of different size and EQF level readable for academia and employers across Europe.

In terms of learning volume, the European Commission's Micro-Credentials Consultation Group has allowed "flexibility for innovation and experimentation, meaning that micro-credentials can range from " one ECTS to less than a full degree". This results in a broad range of possible micro-credential certifications linked to different volumes of learning and EQF/NQF levels.

To be readable and comparable, Institutional qualification structures may converge to different certification levels depending on learning volumes and level of qualification. The levels can for example range from the course level (ECTS credits are awarded) to the Common Micro-Credential Framework qualification (4-6 ECTS, European MOOC Consortium), a micro-degree (30-40 ECTS, UNED), a higher education certificate (UKOU, 60 ECTS) and probably other volumes of learning.

This is exactly what we will discuss in the next phase of the MCE (Modular Continuing Education by Micro-Credentials) project by EADTU involving 13 countries.

Higher education interfaces with the labour market

All this requires higher education institutions to have a new relationship with labor market actors and regions, as has already been the case with research and innovation by knowledge transfer and valorization offices.

In the field of continuing education, HE institutions are not only providers of education, but increasingly also offer an interface between the institution and the labor market, e.g. enterprises, centers of competence, knowledge and innovation communities, professional associations, and public employment services.

A dialogue with these external stakeholders leads to joint operations and the co-creation or professional accreditation of micro-credential learning opportunities. In these cases, micro-credential courses or programs may also provide specific professional credits in addition to the academic award.

Leadership and professionalization for digital higher education

Many higher education institutions have learned from the COVID crisis and are taking this as the basis for the transformation of teaching and learning in 2030 perspective. They are not going back to normal, meaning pre-COVID times.

In higher education institutions across Europe, there is a huge need for professional development of teachers and for the creation of the necessary teaching and support services to achieve educational quality levels. This starts with leadership, developing an institutional vision, strategies and frameworks for digital higher education.

The IHE2022 Conference revealed a demand of rectors and vice-rectors for peer seminars on leadership for digital higher education.

EADTU is already doing so for the middle management in member institutions. It is also organizing Deans meetings for digital collaboration and mobility involving staff and students.

To support continuous professional development on a broader scale, EADTU members in the DigiTeL Pro project have developed online courses on three main approaches to digital higher education: synchronous hybrid, blended and online distance learning.

The course material will be available as open resources on the DigiTeL Pro website to be used for professional development across Europe for teachers and teaching and learning support services.

In the framework of the OpenU project with universities and ministries in France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Latvia and Flanders, EADTU has published eBooks on the BLOOM hub (<https://bloomhub.eu/repository/>) on models and guidelines for the development of digital teaching and learning in higher education, international collaboration and mobility. These are for use by single institutions and EUI alliances.

Equity

Based on their mission, open and distance teaching universities have always embraced the principle of equity in education. All have developed a lot of experience and expertise with regard to diversity and inclusion. The EADTU Task Force for Diversity and Inclusion was established to examine AND MAP current challenges and share solutions for a variety of topics: gender, migrants and ethnicity; Functional disabilities (the blind, the deaf,...); specific learning disabilities (eg dyslexia); prisoners; athletes artists/army staff; social inclusion (affordability of studies; poverty issues) and digital accessibility. The results of this Task Force are published on the EADTU website.

EADTU also created a Special Interest Group on E-assessment sharing institutional strategies and good practices regarding e-assessment in view of needs during and after COVID, AS E ASSESSMENT IS THERE TO STAY. The group was consisting of 17 member universities. A report on this SIG is published as well on the EADTU website

EADTU further provides services to the European Digital Education Hub of the European Commission (EDEH). On behalf of the European Commission, it organizes clinics and mentorships on digital education at the request of individual staff or individual institutions with the support of European experts. This year, it will also organize three short peer learning trajectories on synchronous hybrid, blended and online distance learning.

All this is a significant effort for continuous professional development of university staff and contributes to THE mid- and long-term strategies of universities.

EADTU especially in these challenging times will keep supporting universities European wide in their efforts to use digitalisation of education to its optimum.