

Message of Eskisehir 2011

Anadolu University, Eskisehir, Turkey, 4 November 2011

DRAFT

The Message of Zermatt (EADTU Annual Conference, 2010) spoke of the need for a lifelong learning policy throughout all European countries, in the face of significant differences amongst member states in higher education participation rates for younger people, and in lifelong learning for adults. It will take much more than a year for these differences to fade away.

The modernisation agenda of the European Commission

Nonetheless, the European Commission seems to be confident that an *average* higher education attainment of 40% in the 27 states of the EU is within reach by 2020¹. But differences between countries are still significant, and the need for lifelong learning is still immense.

In its recent report on the modernisation of higher education, the European Commission says that in 2009 the European Union counted around 76 million adults who had not reached the level of upper secondary education². This is a shocking fact. But the number of adults who have not reached higher education level is far far higher.

The European Commission recognizes this. In its recent modernisation agenda document the Commission encourages higher education institutions to reach out to 'nontraditional' learners, including adults³. The Commission understands that above all, this means a flexible responsive higher education system that adapts itself to the constraints of its students' daily lives: it encourages a greater variety of study modes (e.g. part-time, distance and modular learning). The Commission calls too for a better exploitation of "the potential of ICTs to enable more effective and personalised learning experiences, teaching and research methods and to increase the use of virtual learning platforms"⁴

All this is absolutely fine as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough. The European Commission's thinking, like the member governments, is still heavily focused on conventional full time higher education for younger

¹ European Commission, Modernising Higher Education – facts and figures. Education and Culture, Memo/11/613, 20 September 2011, p. 2

² European Commission, Modernisation and employability at heart of new higher education reform strategy, Education and Culture, IP/11/1043, 20/09/2011

³ European Commission, Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems, Education and Culture, COM(2011) 567 final, 20 September 2011, p.4

⁴ European Commission, *ibidem*, p. 6



students. Europe may not be able to afford that narrow vision. There are millions of people already in work who need to extend and refresh their knowledge and skills whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

This is a major underutilization of talent. The Commission itself points to the gap between what a prosperous, successful Europe will require and the current educational profile of the workforce. As it says “while 35% of all jobs in the EU will require high-level qualifications by 2020, only 26% of the workforce currently has a higher education qualification”.

So we urge the European Commission to place lifelong learning at the heart of its educational and economic agenda, and to be bold and imaginative in the solutions that it pursues. We need new open and flexible approaches, developed and delivered at scale. There is still work for the European Commission to do, especially in view of the coming European programme changes. The same is true of national governments if we are to establish a credible lifelong learning policy for a sustainable knowledge economy and society.

We, the European open and distance teaching universities can help, because we have developed high quality scalable solutions. Gathered in Eskisehir, we serve over 3.5 mio students with methods and pedagogies that are recognised and taken over all over the world. Our work during the last four decades, both policy and practice, should give the European Commission and national governments the confidence and inspiration to make open and flexible education an organic part in all higher education systems. EADTU and its members are ready to support the European Commission and for governments across Europe to achieve this.

Three activity zones, three business zones for lifelong learning

So what should the shape of our response be? What will deliver the ambition of a lifelong learning system at higher education level that will sustain the knowledge society of 2020? Universities need to develop three zones of educational activity that we identified in the Message of Zermatt and last year have elaborated further.

First, an ***open knowledge sharing zone***, where universities place knowledge into the public domain, freely accessible and available for all to reuse and repurpose. This knowledge encompasses a relevant selection of course modules released as open educational resources, “open access” publications and illustrations of open innovation. We have rich channels to exploit such YouTube and iTunes U. Universities’ degree programmes, centers of research excellence, and technology transfer divisions are key to delivering the content. We can present it in multiple, flexible ways that respond to users’ interests. This open zone is essentially about informal learning, channeling knowledge to individuals, companies and organizations and to regional development.

Second is a zone of ***open and flexible degree level education*** building on the open university model: high quality self-study content developed by multidisciplinary course teams; student-centered multimedia resources; and personalised tuition, face to face and online, available at the point and place of greatest need. Degree level education is the backbone for learning the complex intellectual skills needed by a knowledge-based workforce.

Third is a zone of ***flexible customised education and training on demand*** for companies, public services and third sector organisations, to support them to up skill their workforce at all levels, and to innovate rapidly and continually. The European economy requires research and innovation to create the products and services for the future, so in principle universities should be in constant demand in this third zone. But the truth is that higher education takes up just a small fraction of the demand for corporate training. We need to look to new forms of university-business cooperation to create an expanded skill base built on new research and development and on new educational content.

Challenges for the Europe 2012-2020 agenda

The Eskisehir Conference has addressed some of the challenges that we as distance teaching universities and networks will face if we are to make a credible contribution to the agenda for Europe 2012-2020.

Innovative courses for smart learners

First and fundamentally, the digital student has arrived: there is no way back. We all lead online lives to a greater or lesser extent, and in future, economic, political and social emancipation will go to those who are able to exploit the new tools and networks.

It should be regarded as a moral obligation on us to empower our students through engagement with online technologies, not just educationally, but socially and politically. It should be our role to bring our students into the digital future.

For those of our students who are already there - the so-called digital natives, there is no choice: play in their space, or they will not play with us at all. Match their expectations for what a teaching and learning environment and experience should be, or they we risk irrelevance.

Open knowledge sharing

The online world has enabled us to create open educational resources that have opened the gateway to free knowledge dissemination and informal learning for all. Together with open access publications, open innovation and current practice in open media we are challenged as universities to extend our mission, if not take on a new mission: open knowledge sharing. Beyond pushing knowledge into the public domain, the strategic challenge is to define the content that will meet the core needs of learners and how it is best channeled to learners, professionals, companies, organisations to benefit from this knowledge.

Excellent Quality

The success of open and flexible learning depends on its quality, and this means above all the quality of the student's learning experience. Our collective challenge is to sustain and drive up that quality.

Quality results from a chain of strategic decisions, from rich content, careful educational design, the exploitation of online and multimedia technologies, and the commitment and skill of tutorial and counseling staff.



For EADTU, it has been important to define and measure the quality of open and flexible learning against benchmarks. This has been achieved through the E-xcellence instrument, now being revised. Simultaneously, E-xcellence acts as a handbook for the design of open and flexible learning⁵. This instrument has gained worldwide authority and EADTU now supports the UNESCO global task force for quality assurance of online learning. Most importantly, EADTU will offer advice on demand to all those directly responsible for managing quality in higher education: universities, and quality assurance and accreditation agencies. Until now, a robust approach and specific criteria for evaluating the quality of online learning were unavailable. E-xcellence fills that gap.

Partnerships

Next is perhaps our greatest challenge: our ability of universities to act in partnership, and to show that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We need to display what we offer together to current and future lifelong learners. Next year, EADTU and the organization StudyPortals will develop an online portal for all bachelors and masters programmes taught at a distance in Europe. The development will complete the set of portals covering conventional face to face courses and scholarships⁶. Millions of visitors every month will also see open and distance courses which they may be able to access.

We can do much to enrich our own programmes, through partnership. EADTU's networked curriculum project⁷ will show how universities become stronger by complementary action to enlarge educational opportunity for their students.

We can also be partners in student mobility. Experiments like the European Virtual Seminars show how students benefit from meeting others online, sharing and comparing content, presenting project results, using a foreign language and presenting case studies. Online mobility should be an opportunity available to all students, since students already live in a digital world. It enhances the quality of the learning experience, builds trans-boundary skills and intercultural competence. EADTU is delighted that the European Commission is listening to this message and is planning to promote online mobility in the new Erasmus programme. The EADTU EPICS project⁸, involving all former European mobility projects, has made a strong contribution to this discussion.

University-business knowledge alliances

The third of our three activity zones, flexible customised education and training on demand depends equally on partnership. The European Commission rightly promotes university-business cooperation as one mechanism to

⁵ www.eadtu.eu/excellence

⁶ See: www.studyportals.eu

⁷ www.eadtu.eu/netcu

⁸ www.eadtu.eu/epics



drive up knowledge use in the economy. This is an area of increasing importance. Open and flexible teaching and learning is a natural way to make knowledge alliances with companies happen.

In partnership together, our three zones of activity, open knowledge sharing, structured open and flexible learning to degree level, and customized on-demand provision should define our contribution to the agenda for Europe in the next eight years. There are tasks for governments. There are tasks for the European Commission. But most important today and tomorrow, there are tasks for us.

Worldwide open education and knowledge sharing

In a worldwide knowledge society, access to knowledge and informal learning modules should be made possible on the public domain for the general public. Many of the EADTU members are using broadcasting and satellite facilities and reach students and the general public (millions of people in the UK (BBC), Italy (RAI), Turkey (TRT,...) with video course material and multimedia. Their current footprint has an outreach from the Far East to Europe and the Mediterranean area. In a first instance, a new channel might be started as the “**Europe and Middle East Open Knowledge and Open Education Channel**”, which allows European universities to share knowledge and education with millions across the world.

A European brand

European open and distance teaching has a lot in common: the quality of the learning experience at all levels (undergraduate and postgraduate), the flexibility of its provision (independent from time, place, personalized learning paths), tutoring and guidance, customized solutions. It is a quality brand in the respective countries and it should become a European brand in EU-27. This is only possible if we deliver across all national borderlines in Europe, together, in all our languages.

Open and flexible education as part of national higher education systems

Only in half of the EU-27, open and flexible education has found an organic place in the higher education system and provides learning provisions for a meaningful number of students. This is not in proportion with the needs. Open and flexible provisions are absent in many countries, even more so in countries with a low participation rate in higher education and in lifelong learning.

Open and flexible learning - open knowledge sharing, degree education and customized provisions on demand - are needed in all knowledge societies. This is a major task for governments. It is also a task for the European Commission. When Europe sets the benchmarks for participation in higher education and lifelong learning, it should also activate governments to achieve them.



Fig. 1 Three complementary business zones, nourishing and strengthening each other