

# The Message of Paphos

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## ➤ Introduction

Knowledge societies are characterised by continuous change to which individuals and businesses must adapt if they are to prosper and succeed. Thus, higher education, if it is to play its full role in a knowledge society, must embrace lifelong learning. It must be available to individuals and businesses where and when they need it, responding flexibly to their needs for new knowledge and skills.

Over the past four decades, the model of lifelong, open, flexible higher education in Europe has evolved in Europe's distance teaching universities to demonstrate proven high quality scalable solutions to these needs. Yet, in many European higher education systems, lifelong, open and flexible education plays, at best a marginal role. This major gap in provision is in particular significant for a range of European countries with average or lower participation rates in higher education.

European higher education is fundamentally designed for younger full time students. Two thirds of EU students in higher education are under 25; 80 per cent are under 30. Access to higher education for people over the age of 25 remains severely limited across Europe, yet this group is crucial for the creation of an adaptable, flexible workforce in Europe. Europe cannot depend on young people alone to create the graduate workforce it needs for economic success. Likewise, those in employment cannot depend on the knowledge they gained from higher education in their youth to succeed in the multiple careers that will increasingly be the norm.

But higher education will only meet these emerging needs if it can become more open and more flexible, fitting itself around the demands of work and family life. EADTU has an important role to play in supporting this change by sharing expertise between member institutions, and by sharing expertise with the rest of the HE sector. Action is needed in:

- Open Educational Resources and the new field of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs;
- networked curriculum and virtual mobility;
- quality assurance of e-learning;
- the development of national and European policies.

## ➤ OERs and MOOCs

The days when open and flexible education was a minority activity pursued by specialist distance teaching universities are largely over. Enabled by rapidly evolving technologies, open education is

becoming a desirable business model for many institutions and countries. Pressure on national budgets coupled with ever increasing global economic competition has served to push open and flexible education higher up government priorities. The world is now rediscovering higher education at a distance as open educational resources evolve into MOOCs.

Against this background, we are delighted to see that the European Commission has signalled new investment in Open Education in the public consultation document *Opening up Education*. EADTU and its members will offer strong and practical support to the Commission in this new direction it is taking.

At the centre of the Commission's consultation document lie Open Educational Resources. One of three goals proposed for the initiative is 'opening up content': 'Having open access to quality content, alongside support and assessment services', the Commission declares, 'will reshape the educational paradigm by revisiting fundamental issues such as access to education, supply of quality content or certification of informal learning'.

This is as true for EADTU members, as for other institutions. The growth of OERs is wholly consistent with our missions, but we are still very much coming to terms with what OERs may mean for the future identity of universities – open and conventional – and for their business models.

EADTU already has a strong record in Open Educational Resources (OER), with members who are global leaders in the field. However, recent growth and mainstreaming has happened mainly outside the continent of Europe, and EADTU needs to contribute to ensuring and sustaining a strong European presence in the movement. To that end, we have established a new Task Force to promote further institutional development and collaboration on OERs, and to stimulate their use by individual learners and in businesses. The challenge will be to embed OERs into the mainstream curriculum, extending accessibility, and creating new dynamics between informal to formal learning.

The next challenge for us will be to determine how to respond to the advent of MOOCs. We need to develop a response that is clear in its objectives and its target audience. We need to recognise the rich resources we already have at our disposal that could form the basis of rapid development. We need to understand how our business models should adjust to the new reality. We need to consider how we can establish standards and frameworks that will be sustainable. Above all, we need to ask what it might mean to offer MOOCs that are distinctly European in character, both in content and in teaching style. For MOOCs are not simply new forms of pedagogy, or a new way to access higher education. They are also a new and powerful means of cultural and economic influence.

### ➤ **Networked curricula and virtual mobility**

Our networked curriculum project, NetCU, has taken the lead in providing an analysis of transnational networked curricula in open and distance education, from which models and comprehensive guidelines have been developed. EADTU members now see value in strategic partnerships to develop collaborative curricula at the Bachelors and Masters level as a cost-effective

response to the advanced learning needs of the European citizen and workforce. Curriculum sharing amongst members will enrich the student learning experience, provide students with vital skills in international collaboration, build on members' institutional research strengths and broaden the offer for research-based lifelong learning in a cost-effective way.

Shared curriculum is also an important foundation for the future development of virtual mobility as a practical solution to the challenge of meeting the needs of students whose domestic and working lives make physical mobility impractical. Technology now makes possible a rich mix of learning opportunities - virtual seminars, projects, internships and so on, from which we can begin to expand the mobility of credits and qualifications.

Through virtual mobility, without leaving home, so to speak, students can experience a richer curriculum than is available at their home institution, they can develop the skills of intercultural and international collaboration, and collaboration in virtual environments. At the same time, we can foster a sense of international citizenship.

Traditional student mobility offers immersion and language learning, but virtual mobility offers complementary benefits. It is readily scalable and can overcome capacity constraints. It is extremely flexible, it can engage multiple universities in different countries simultaneously, it is accessible to students with special needs, it is cost effective, and its carbon footprint is small. EADTU will continue its work to embed virtual mobility in the mainstream of European cross-border higher education.

### ➤ **Quality in e-learning**

Increasingly, national quality assurance and accreditation agencies are addressing the need for standards and benchmarks in e-learning, but there remains much work to be done in many European countries whose agencies have yet to establish criteria and procedures that take full account of e-learning.

EADTU, through its access to leading experts in the field has established e-xcellence, an assessment tool with detailed practical guidance for institutions and assessors on benchmarks and their hands-on use. The tool has been extensively revised and updated in its second edition.

E-xcellence is a result of seven years' work with the active involvement of more than 50 universities and several national quality assurance agencies. The original edition of the manual has been fully reviewed and updated by the e-xcellence experts from the UK Open University in consultation with the E-xcellence reviewers and seven test bed universities, incorporating social networking and Open Educational Resources.

The tool is available to all those responsible for the quality of online or blended teaching: teaching staff, course and curriculum teams, internal quality assurance departments in universities, national quality assurance and accreditation agencies. The expert group which developed e-xcellence is ready to organise seminars and master classes for universities and agencies or to participate in external assessments in order to contribute to the professionalisation of quality assurance and accreditation.

## ➤ National policy

Policy at national and European level has yet to fully embrace the role on lifelong, open and flexible higher education in increasing participation in higher education. Part time, flexible higher education remains marginal in most systems, yet offers extensive untapped potential. EADTU emphasises the important role of national policies and national centres of expertise in distance education in stimulating greater flexibility in higher education.

We need national policies that respond to the diversity of learners, especially off campus students, and embed open and flexible education policy as an organic part of national higher education systems. In too many countries, universities that seek to teach through open and flexible methods have still to fight for their legitimacy. Instead of diversification and recognition, we are seeing evidence of a narrow-mindedness with regard to the opportunities of online and blended learning as an extension of conventional teaching and learning environments. This kind of policies is running behind the facts in Europe and the rest of the developed world, e.g. the US and Canada. It is not in Europe's interests to see capacity in flexible higher education threatened. On the contrary a European lifelong learning policy is required to promote citizenship, growth and the fight against unemployment using all means available, provided that they contribute to high quality provisions.

Part-time students in employment should be embraced as transmitters of innovation. They can create the dynamism we need to up-skill the workforce and prepare it for change. Governments have a role to play in stimulating and activating opportunity in higher education for those already in the workforce, whether through qualifications or shorter forms of continuing professional development. Yet funding systems in most European countries tend to hinder the growth of flexible provision. Systems of student finance, whether loans or grants, tend to be designed in favour of younger full-time students, to the extent that the European Commission's recent overview of National Student Fee and Support Systems reported only on provision for full-time students aged up to 27. National governments' funding mechanisms for higher education institutions equally tend to assume in their design traditional, on-campus, full-time education. Other modes are accommodated as exceptions, not as the norm. The financial and policy frameworks we need in the next decade will be those that incentivise the growth of affordable, flexible higher education of high quality. However attractive it may be to governments to turn to markets as the solution, education remains a public good and the only way to create a sustainable knowledge society. Governments' role will remain central.

## ➤ European policy

The European Commission has promoted *the knowledge triangle* as a central concept in the Europe 2020 Strategy. This concept is fully endorsed by EADTU. However, in policy and in practice it is felt that the relationship between research and innovation is much more obvious than the link between

education and innovation. So far, in this link mainly education for entrepreneurship, stimulating students to take initiative and to be involved in innovation, was accentuated.

Education for innovation implies more. It also points to a new role for universities to play in society as nodes of scientifically legitimated knowledge, connecting local and global knowledge networks. To stimulate innovation and inclusion in society, universities as knowledge nodes should take care of continuous knowledge sharing and updating in a lifelong learning context.

Recently, **open education** took off with new formats, based on internet, such as open educational resources, open media, the MOOCs movement. Combined with open access to scientific and innovative research, this will serve users in companies and citizens in society at large, provided that they find systemic ways to retrieve and to select this material. Hence, problems of usability by private and collective users should be addressed.

Innovation is also supported by **flexible training and retraining** for knowledge based jobs in customized education and training programmes (CPD), generic skills development initiatives and **flexible degree education** for those who want to switch or upgrade careers.

Open and flexible education will improve **accessibility and scalability**, which is needed for a sustainable, knowledge based economy and society at large.

To extend opportunities for all students, also **international collaboration and mobility should be promoted in a lifelong learning context**. Open and flexible learning and virtual mobility should be allowed in all strands of Erasmus for All – individual mobility, strategic partnerships, strategic alliances, cooperation with third countries – as it will reach more students and will enrich their curricula.

This should support universities to develop strategies and business models for education and innovation, tailored to the needs of individual learners and collective users in their society.

### ➤ National policies

To make this a reality towards 2020, much more political imagination at the national level is needed to assure the **organic place of lifelong learning in national higher education systems**. In national policies, open education, customized training in university-business collaborations as well as part-time degree study for 25 plus students should be seen as parts of lifelong learning policies, fostering new opportunities for our economies and society. This is urgently needed, as lifelong learning is a condition for sustainable growth and employability. It is a valued supplement to education for the conventional age group under 25.

Hence, national and institutional change should be supported, by creating structures that assure the accessibility of learners to innovative knowledge through informal, formal and non-formal channels. In these structures, also intermediate qualifications and non degree learning should be legitimized as they better correspond with the life situation and needs of learners.



The ***open universities***, which are frontrunners in the open and flexible learning, can be used as agents of change for the whole sector. Hence, collaborations between open and conventional universities to promote lifelong open and flexible learning should be supported, possibly in an international context as in most European countries, no open university is part of the system.

Quality assurance should bring trust and credibility to the systems to be developed. Hence, quality assurance agencies should incorporate the open and flexible learning sector, which is operating increasingly online, requiring a specific approach which is different from face to face teaching. EADTU has developed quality benchmarks for online and flexible learning with the support of the European Commission, which are available as open source on the web ([www.eadtu.eu/excellencelabel](http://www.eadtu.eu/excellencelabel)) and is further cooperating with individual universities and quality assurance agencies.

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