

# *Learning and Sustainability: The New Ecosystem of Innovation and Knowledge*

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*EUROPEAN DISTANCE EDUCATION NETWORK  
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*Theme: Learning and Sustainability: The New  
Ecosystem of Innovation and Knowledge*

*Keynote Address*

*20 Years of Distance Education in the Garden of EDEN:  
Good News and Bad News*

*Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning*

## *Abstract*

In two decades the distance education scene in Europe has been transformed, partly as a result of EDEN's work. More people are studying at a distance than ever before and the onward march of technology should be enhancing the advantage of open learning. But are we using technology to best advantage and what should we do about the new wave of hostility to distance learning?

## *Introduction*

It is an enormous pleasure to be here. Thank you for inviting me to speak at EDEN's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference. I have greatly enjoyed meeting old friends over the last few days and it is great to be in Dublin again.

Let me begin with an anecdote about Dublin – which does relate to distant education.

Many of you will have seen the film *Educating Rita*, which is about an Open University student. If you haven't you should get hold of it because, as well as being very funny, it contains much wisdom about the impact of distance education on people's lives – both students and tutors.

Much of *Educating Rita* was filmed here in Dublin, with many scenes taking place on the historic campus of Trinity College. Michael Caine plays the Open University tutor and teaches in a conventional

university as well. In one memorable scene he is very drunk when he arrives to give a lecture to his regular students and ends up falling off the stage in the old lecture hall.

During my time as vice-chancellor of the Open University the number of students in Ireland had grown so large that we decided to hold one of our many degree-awarding ceremonies in Dublin. These are grand affairs and we usually held them in a big hall.

However, we chose Trinity College as the venue and when I arrived I found that our event was to be held in the same small lecture hall where Michael Caine fell into his audience. It has a low but very narrow stage, and by the time we had put all the chairs and podiums on it there was very little room to move. I was terrified that, although I was pretty sober, I would follow Michael Caine's example and fall off the stage – watched by the actor Liam Neeson who was our honorary graduate that day. Fortunately I didn't fall off the stage and, as numbers grew in subsequent years, we moved our ceremony to these larger facilities at University College Dublin that are the venue for the EDEN conference. It's good to be back.

I was not directly involved in the earliest days of EDEN. In 1989-90 I was on leave and travelling the world with Canada's National Defence College, but I followed the events leading up to the establishment of the Budapest Platform, EDEN's predecessor. That was a most exciting year for Europe. Our travels took us to Wenceslas Square in Prague in March 1990 where the exciting sensation of a new beginning for Europe was palpable.

In paying homage to those who built EDEN in the early days let me mention six people. Gottfried Leibbrandt, who was an inspiration to all of us, and David Sewart, who was President of the ICDE during the 1990s, played an important role in the transition from the Budapest Platform to EDEN. More recently David salvaged ICDE from the wreckage of mismanagement and misgovernance, for which we owe him a debt of gratitude.

When EDEN was created I was one of those who persuaded Erling Ljosa to be its first president. Tamas Lajos was a tireless campaigner for east-west dialogue and I believe it was thanks to Tamas that EDEN found Andras Szucs, who has been such an effective and faithful Secretary-General, assuring the permanence, as the French would say, for two decades.

Finally, and I apologise for missing many other key players, I must pay tribute to Alan Tait, who worked with me to set up the business framework for EDEN and has been active in its work since the beginning.

In 1990 I arrived back in Europe after 21 years in North America full of enthusiasm for European integration. For me the early years of EDEN were intimately mixed up with the moves that we were making at the Open University to open up to Europe. Many of the same players, David Sewart, Alan Tait and Tamas Lajos were involved in that too. Opening up to western Europe took the form of declaring that all citizens of what we then called the European Community were welcome as OU students and we set up an infrastructure to serve them.

In Central and Eastern Europe we worked through partnerships and at one point the Open University was teaching in Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian and Slovak. Most of those partnerships have continued to this day and I was delighted by this website of our Russian partner, LINK.

LINK is now a respected institution in its country but I remember the very humble beginnings as Sergei Schennikov and a colleague from the Central Aerohydrodynamics Institute (TsAGI) decided that Russia needed new educational models and quit their jobs in order to create an organization that could partner with the OU. The theme of this EDEN conference: *Learning and Sustainability: The New Ecosystem of Innovation and Knowledge*, captures exactly what Sergei and the OU's other partners did.

They sensed that central and eastern Europe needed a new ecosystem of innovation and knowledge to play its full part of the new Europe and they realised that open and distance learning was a key ingredient of that ecosystem. I am proud that this partnership has proved so sustainable. It has trained 60,000 Russian managers over the years and maintains an enrolment of 6,000 today.

I note all this as an illustration of EDEN's impact. EDEN was created to build a bridge between east and west to share know-how about open and distance learning and it has done that brilliantly. I congratulate you all on that achievement. The Open University was just one institution that 'walked the talk' and, from timid beginnings in 1990 became a genuinely pan-European institution.

So where are we today? I have entitled this address *20 Years of Distance Education in the Garden of EDEN: Good News and Bad News*. We have come a long way in those 20 years. Today it is impossible to estimate how many people are studying at a distance in Europe because ODL is now embedded in the programmes of many institutions that we think of as conventional providers. However, I would hazard a guess that there are at least ten times as many people studying at a distance now as there were in 1990. Distance education has been hugely successful and, if we believe the claims that we make, that means that millions more people are now able to reach their potential and lead more fulfilling lives. So what is the bad news? I shall identify two areas of concern.

## The Ying and the Yang

Each is a direct result of some good news, but in life, sadly, upsides often have downsides. There is the ying and there is the yang.

The first element of good news is that evolving technology has the potential to increase further the advantages of distance education, in cost, convenience and effectiveness, over classroom instruction. The bad news is that few distance education providers are exploiting this new asset of eLearning well.

The second element of good news is the success of distance education – as measured simply by the numbers involved. The bad news is that conventional education has woken up to the threat. The empire is striking back and some of the bad apples in our own barrel make it easier for opponents to call the whole enterprise rotten.

## The Iron Triangle: Access, Quality, Cost

I start with technology. Correction! I start with education! What are we trying to achieve? Ministers of Education want to pursue three goals simultaneously. They want to widen access so that education and training can be available to all citizens that aspire to it. Second, the education must be of quality. Why

widen access unless education makes a difference to people's capabilities. Third, the cost must be as low as possible. Governments and individuals never have enough money. It is morally wrong to make education more expensive than necessary, because low cost enables more people to take advantage of it.

The challenge of achieving these outcomes simultaneously becomes clear when you create a triangle of vectors. With traditional methods of face-to-face teaching this is an iron triangle. This iron triangle symbolises the closed system of classroom teaching. You want to stretch the triangle like this to give greater access, higher quality and lower costs.

But you can't!

Try extending access by packing more students into each classroom and you will be accused of damaging quality. Try improving quality by providing more and better learning resources and the cost will go up. Try cutting costs and you will endanger both access and quality.

This iron triangle has hindered the expansion of education throughout history. It has created in the public mind – and probably in your own thinking – an insidious link between quality and exclusivity. This link still drives the admission policies of many universities, which define their quality by the people they exclude. But today's good news is that new waves of technology are sweeping the world – and technology can transform the iron triangle into a flexible triangle.

## The Revolutions of Technology

By using the technology of distance education you can achieve wider access, higher quality and lower cost *all at the same time*. This is a revolution – it has never happened before. This is what educational technology can achieve if used properly.

How does technology work? Some identify several generations of technology but I shall reduce them to two: the productive technology that drove the industrial revolution and the digital technology that surrounds us today. Each of these manifestations of technology has important strengths and we should try to combine them.

The fundamental principles of productive technology, articulated two centuries ago by the economist Adam Smith, are division of labour, specialisation, economies of scale, and the use of machines and communications media. These principles remain very important to the aims of increasing access, cutting costs and improving quality. People often forget these principles when they launch into online delivery – which is why eLearning so often disappoints.

Digital technology has not yet had an intellect like Adam Smith to clarify its essential nature for us but, appropriately perhaps for something essentially unstructured, the concepts of networks, connectedness, collaboration and community capture elements of it.

For us a key question is: what does the incorporation of digital technology add to the use of productive technology – and is it scalable? The aim is increased access, better quality and lower costs.

## Going Backwards with eLearning?

My concern – the bad news – is that on these criteria we seem to be going backwards. I cite as evidence an important report on the *2011 Outlook for Online Learning and Distance Education* by my fellow Vancouverite Professor Tony Bates. Much of his data comes from the US, but then the US is often the first country into the future as well as the last country to leave the past!

I take three key points from his report. First is the rapid growth of eLearning. Enrolment in fully online (distance) courses in the USA expanded by 21% between 2009 and 2010 compared to a 2% expansion in campus-based enrolments.

His second finding is that, despite this growth, institutions are not setting ambitious goals for eLearning. This technology could help institutions to accommodate more students, improve learning outcomes, provide more flexible access and do all this at less cost. Instead he found that costs are rising because investment in technology and staff is increasing without replacing other activities. There is no evidence of improved learning outcomes and often a failure to meet best quality standards for eLearning.

A third finding, which should worry public-sector institutions given the rapid growth of eLearning, is that in the USA the for-profit sector has a much higher proportion of the total online market (32%) compared to its share of the overall higher education market (7%). Seven of the ten US institutions with the highest online enrolments are for-profits. For-profits are better placed to expand online because they do not have to worry about resistance from academic staff, nor about exploiting their earlier investment in campus facilities.

Tony Bates concludes his report by alerting Canadian institutions to a growing market that is not well served by campus-based education. In his view Canadian public colleges and universities are not moving into online distance learning fast enough to meet the demand. "If public institutions do not step up to the plate, then the corporate for-profit sector will". You are better placed than I to predict how this will play out in Europe.

## Will Higher Education Split?

But these US trends pose an interesting question: will higher education split over the coming years into a public sector focussed on research and a for-profit sector doing most of the teaching? Several inputs make such a hypothesis plausible.

Exhibit One is the [communiqué of UNESCO's 2009 World Conference on the New Dynamics of Higher Education](#) which identified massification, or a huge increase in demand as the major trend. Accommodating nearly 100 more million students would require more than four major universities (30,000 students) to open every week for the next fifteen years. Who will respond?

Exhibit Two is Ben Wildavsky's very readable book *The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities are Reshaping the World*. Wildavsky is writing primarily about the 3% of the world's 17,000 higher education institutions that figure in contemporary global rankings. These [rankings, such as those from Shanghai's Jiao Tong University](#), are essentially about performance in research. In response to the question 'where is

teaching in the international rankings?' the American higher education scholar Philip Altbach replies, 'In a word – *nowhere*'. Are public universities ignoring teaching as they try to improve their research rankings?

Exhibit Three is [Archibald and Feldman's book \*Why does College Cost so Much?\*](#) Their implicit conclusion is that universities will not or cannot use technology to be more efficient and cut costs. Sadly, as I just noted, Tony Bates' findings support them, for he finds that in public universities the adoption of eLearning is driving costs up rather than down, is not improving learning outcomes, and is often of poor quality.

Where does this leave us? [A disruptive technology](#), which online learning may prove to be, rarely favours existing providers. When photography went digital the electronics industry displaced the makers of film from the market.

Bates notes that over 80% of US students are expected to be taking courses online in 2014, up from 44% in 2009. Clearly the providers that are already established in this mode of delivery, i.e. the for-profits, will have the advantage. Indeed, the [UK Report \*Collaborate to compete: Seizing the opportunity of online learning for UK higher education\*](#), explicitly recommends that public higher education institutions should link up with for-profit companies in order not to get left behind in offering online learning.

Some governments have long desired to see higher education divided into research universities and teaching institutions. Extrapolating the trends we have identified suggests that their wish may come true, with the added difference that most research will take place in publicly-supported institutions while most teaching will be done by for-profit enterprises.

I hope that the distance-teaching institutions within EDEN will use new technology intelligently to stretch the iron triangle and be part of the response to the world's needs. But even if you are successful with technology there is still bad news. That is because distance education faces a new wave of hostility to its values and methods.

## Hostility to Distance Education

Of course, there has always been hostility to the methods of distance education. Education is a conservative area of human activity and many people, both in universities and among the wider public, do not regard education as legitimate unless a live teacher faces a live class.

More insidious is the opposition to two of the values implicit in open and distance learning. The first contested value is openness to people. Many still consider that quality in education is synonymous with exclusivity. They define the quality of their institution by the numbers of people they *exclude* from it. To such a mindset the notion of an open university, that measures its success by the number and variety of people that it *includes*, is deeply threatening.

The second contested value is openness to ideas. It is generally true that open and distance learning encourages people to think for themselves. They reach their own conclusions about an issue after studying course materials that present a variety of perspectives. The independent thinking that derives naturally

from independent study is threatening to those who would limit debate and constrain thought. They consider face-to-face instruction less risky.

The paradox is strange but simple. Globally, open and distance learning has grown by leaps and bounds since the creation of the first open universities forty years ago. Most importantly, this growth is not only, indeed not mainly, through the multiplication and growth of open universities. The number of mega-universities with over 100,000 enrolled students has indeed grown steadily since I wrote my book, *Mega-universities*, in 1996. But even more dramatic has been the growth of distance learning programmes within conventional campus universities.

Indeed, it is a fair generalisation that, except in those countries where governments control the offering of distance education, there are now very few universities which do not offer some programmes at a distance – or at least, if they want to avoid the ‘d’ word, through forms of blended learning. It has now become impossible to calculate how many of the world’s students are learning at a distance, but they number in the tens of millions.

## Crisis = Danger + Opportunity

The paradox is that at the moment when open and distance education seems to have found its place in the sun by being adopted throughout higher education, opposition to it is emerging all over the globe. But I want to suggest that we should see this as an opportunity – not just to reassert the importance of our values and the effectiveness of our methods, but also to clean house. We must accept that the opposition to ODL is not solely an expression of bad will or fear of change. Some hostility is a reaction to abuses, which we must address. Let me reassure you, however, that the opposition to ODL, although determined, vicious and multi-pronged, will not prevail. As evidence I cite some other conclusions from UNESCO’s 2009 World Conference on Higher Education.

The conference title was *The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development*. What are these new dynamics? They were identified in the conference communiqué and have been articulated by the Executive-Secretary of the Conference, UNESCO’s Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, in various presentations.

The new dynamics are:

1. Rising demand and massification
2. Diversification of providers and methods
3. Private provision
4. Distance education
5. Cross-border higher education
6. Quality assurance
7. Teacher education

## 8. Challenges to the academic profession

You can see that nearly all these issues are related in some way to distance education.

So my message today is that the current wave of opposition to ODL will not prevail against it. Open, distance and technology-mediated education is now intimately bound up with the future of education generally. The clock will not be turned back. The knowledge that ODL will win the battle should give us the confidence us to see today's threats as an opportunity to do more and better tomorrow. Let us analyse the nature of the current opposition and what we should do about it.

### Anti-ODL Policies: a Summary

#### *Ethiopia*

I start with the most egregious and to me the most startling case: Ethiopia. In a directive that came without warning on August 26 last year the Ministry of Education scrapped all distance education programmes provided by both private and public institutions in the country, claiming that 'distance learning education is unnecessary at this stage in the development of the education sector'.

I was particularly surprised by this announcement because in the 1990s the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, and most of his cabinet studied successfully for the UK Open University's MBA. As the then Vice-Chancellor of the UKOU I went to Addis Ababa to award their degrees to this remarkable group. A particularly remarkable feature was that Zenawi himself gained a distinction in every course in programme. I doubt that Meles Zenawi's performance in the OU MBA programme has ever been equalled.

Naturally, these leaders' good experience of ODL initiated a period when ODL was highly regarded and encouraged by the Ethiopian government - hence my surprise at the ban. I cannot speak with authority on the reasons for it, but whatever the motivation, this government action impacted on 64 private institutions enrolling 75,000 students, which represented an expansion of the system from a gross higher education enrolment ratio of 1% a decade ago to a (still pitiful) 5% now. No doubt this rapid expansion of private sector distance education has led to some quality abuses, but the answer is an effective quality assurance regime, not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Fortunately this has now been recognized and the ban has been lifted after intensive negotiations between the government and 64 private institutions. The teaching/learning systems of the many ODL providers clearly needed tightening up, but the agreement to allow the resumption of ODL in Ethiopia is not just about improving these systems through quality assurance. The private universities and colleges must now conform to government policy that their curricula observe a strict 70-to-30 ratio between natural sciences/technology versus social sciences/humanities.

#### *India*

India has a long history of ODL, starting with demonstrably low quality offerings by the correspondence programmes of conventional universities 40 years ago. Offered on a large scale, these shoddy



programmes generated considerable income that was siphoned off to subsidise campus programmes rather than being used to improve the ODL courses.

The creation of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and a network of state open universities were intended to change this, but have not really done so. The main reason is that the Distance Education Council, which was meant to ensure that quality assurance of ODL offerings in all institutions, was placed within the IGNOU structure. This creates a conflict of interest which prevents any serious quality assurance of ODL in either the private or the public sectors.

In another move that threatens to throw the baby out with the bathwater, the very active Indian Minister for Human Resource Development has recently proposed that no new university can offer ODL for five years. As in Ethiopia, setting up a serious quality assurance mechanism would seem to be a better solution.

### *United States*

The United States has created a problem for itself by giving state subsidised loans to people studying with for-profit ODL institutions, subsidies that these institutions now spend millions of dollars lobbying to protect. This system has, inevitably, given rise to serious abuse. Instead of addressing the abuses, however, the US media is in a hue and cry about the quality of distance learning. Media elsewhere pick up on US trends, so this may infect other countries. Another aspect of US policy, blatantly protectionist, is to refuse these state loans to US citizens studying with foreign ODL providers.

## Other Barriers

Alongside these specific national anti-ODL policies are a number of more widespread policies hostile to ODL and its values.

### *Recognition of qualifications*

One example is policies that ban the employment in government of people who have obtained their qualifications by ODL. This will prove unsustainable since, with most universities operating in dual mode, increasing numbers of students will have some distance learning courses in their transcripts.

Sensible institutions stopped distinguishing the mode of study on transcripts long ago, not least because doing so implied that some of their offerings were of lower quality than others. Yet some want to bring this distinction back. Proposed legislation in Ecuador has a clause: ‘(Academic diplomas and degrees) should make mention of the modality in which the studies were completed...’

### *Specifying the blend*

In another tortuous policy institutions or governments specify how much of an ODL course must be offered in face-to-face mode to make it legitimate. Brazil says 80%, Malaysia says 20%. This approach will also prove unsustainable. First, asking how much of a course consists of face-to-face instruction is like asking the length of a piece of string. Second, as students take advantage of technology to learn at any time in any place, institutions will be tempted to make false declarations about how students are

really spending their time. Already we see conventional institutions claiming that a particular course was offered as ‘blended learning’ – or even in purely classroom mode – when the students taking it tell us that it was offered almost purely at a distance.

Most quality ODL programmes make provision for some face-to-face interaction, but to be faithful to the ODL values of openness and choice, attending such sessions should be optional.

## The Opportunity

That is a brief summary of ways in which ODL is under threat. Where is the opportunity? Circumstances require that we act on four fronts.

Most governments still wish to increase participation in higher education but, not least because of the current economic climate, they have less money to spend on it. Expanding ODL must be a major part of the solution to the dilemma. In a nice irony, even the World Bank, long a sceptic about ODL, advised Ethiopia to expand ODL and private institutions in order to increase participation rates. Many governments have got the message and currently a number of new open universities being created across Africa. This is a time when ODL can get the ear of government as never before.

We must make two other points while we have the ear of government. First, there is much talk nowadays about the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that we want our graduates to have. One important skill is to be a self-directed learner. ODL and independent study are more likely to cultivate self directed learning than being spoon fed in a classroom.

The other point for government is that ODL is an effective mechanism for integrating ICTs into higher learning. Letting a thousand flowers bloom is fine, but governments need to be reminded that ODL institutions have the muscle to innovate cost-effectively at scale. It is not an accident that with 300,000 downloads per week the UK Open University’s materials account for 10% of all the downloads from iTunesU.

But fourth and finally, we must clean up our act and remove the bad apples from of the barrel. One of the new dynamics of higher education is the internationalisation of quality assurance. We should campaign for our countries to maintain strong and independent quality assurance agencies that have all higher education under their purview, public and private, classroom and distance. What matters is the quality of the output of higher education, not how it was offered or under what corporate structure.

One area where there is already good international collaboration is the fight against degree mills. We know what needs to be done to discourage degree mills – let’s do it. And let us encourage our governments to participate actively in UNESCO’s portal of recognised higher education institutions, so that students around the world can avoid being hoodwinked by scams and crooks.

## Conclusion

There is much more to say but I shall finish there. It was to be expected that as distance education become more widespread and more successful it would attract more hostility. We must not give in to these threats.

Open and distance learning will prevail. However, we must seize this opportunity to show governments how ODL can help expand higher education, can lead students to acquire 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and can be an example for the effective use of ICTs. But we must also put our own house in order by cleaning out the bad apples, supporting rigorous quality assurance mechanisms and, above all, using new technologies effectively to advance the educational revolution that will expand access while improving quality and cutting costs.