RIDE 2016
DESIGN FOR LEARNING
TECHNOLOGIES FOR LEARNING
STUDENT EXPERIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMMES

CENTRE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION
Research and innovation in flexible and distance teaching and learning

The Centre for Distance Education has held a conference in central London almost every year since its inception in 2005. In 2016, this conference was held in Senate House on Friday 11 March and, as conference co-chair Steven Warburton explained during his introduction, it was the tenth in the series. This in itself provided a cause for celebration. It followed the format used in previous successful conferences, with keynote lectures at the beginning and end of the day and parallel sessions and workshops in between. These were organised under three key themes of 'Design for Learning', 'Technology for Learning' and 'The Student Experience'.

Photo (from left to right): Ayona Silva-Fletcher (Chair of CDE Fellows), Michael Kerrison (Director of Educational Innovation and Development at UoLIP), Professor Steven Warburton (Conference co-chair), Dr Stylianos Hatzipanagos (Conference co-chair).

After Steven's introduction, the chair of the CDE Fellows' group, Ayona Silva-Fletcher from the Royal Veterinary College, welcomed delegates to Senate House on behalf of the fellows and gave a short introduction to their work. She explained that while the first fellows were academic staff members in lead colleges of the University of London's International Programmes, the fellowship has expanded in recent years to include both Visiting Fellows based outside London and International Fellows. Their role is to research and disseminate best practice in distance education and e-learning both within and beyond the University of London, and many would be taking part in the meeting as speakers or session chairs.

Steven then introduced the first keynote speaker, Professor Ilona Buchem from Beuth University of Applied Sciences, Berlin, Germany. Beuth is a small university with a strong focus on the applied sciences, and it belongs to an association of 'virtual universities' – those heavily involved in distance education – in Germany. Her talk was titled, perhaps intriguingly, 'Open Badges – the Missing Link in Open Education'. Open badges were introduced by the Mozilla Foundation, which was set up in 1998 by the developers of the first open-source Web browser Netscape. They can be seen as part of the wider 'Open Movement', along with Creative Commons licensing to protect creative works released into the public domain, open educational resources, and the open courseware projects that were the fore-runners of today's MOOCs. Mozilla Open badges, first released in 2012, are designed to give learners transferable 'credit' for the knowledge and skills that they acquire through these courses, which are generally more informal and collaborative than traditional ones as well as, self-

evidently, being freely available. This fills a gap left by many MOOCs and free online courses as certificates are not always available, and even when they are they may not be free. Furthermore, traditional diplomas do not provide much detail about exactly what each student has learned, particularly in the domain of 'soft skills' such as problem-solving and teamwork that employers find so valuable.

The Open Badge system is designed to be completely flexible. Any organisation, however informal, can design its own badges using Mozilla's open source software to recognise any type of learning or skill development. It is possible for badges to be issued by peers, or even from learners to teachers to recognise teaching skills. Although good design is useful, the most important part of each badge is the rich meta-data that lies behind it: the 90% of the badge system that Buchem described as 'invisible'. The last section of the talk was devoted to challenges: both those faced by promoters of open badges and those that the open badge movement pose to traditional systems of assessment. Buchem is keen to distance badges from gamification and particularly from the idea of badges as collectable 'commodities' when they are perhaps best seen as a method of recognising prior and often informal learning.

Two of the three morning sessions took forward ideas raised by Buchem's keynote lecture and were related to digital badging and student assessment. In the assessment session, Claire Gordon, Jane Hughes and Colleen McKenna from the London School of Economics and educational consultancy HEDERA described an assessment toolkit that they had developed for the University of London International Programmes. This useful, wide-ranging toolkit covers both theories of assessment and assessment techniques. Discussion centred on the value of incorporating interactivity into the current, static PDF toolkit and of involving student voices. Denise Hawkes from the doctoral programme at the UCL Institute of Education then described how feedback on assignments has been re-designed to encourage more systematic and reflective engagement by the advanced students.

The second of these sessions, in the Design for Learning strand, featured a talk on digital badging and peer assessment given jointly by conference co-organisers Steven Warburton (University of Surrey) and Stylianos Hatzipanagos (King's College London), and one by UCL's Jamie Harle on supporting off-campus research projects in a distance learning MSc course in physics and engineering in medicine. Hatzipanagos and Warburton's presentation described the outcomes and impact of a project to investigate the use of digital badges to support peer feedback and assessment in higher education, funded through the CDE's Teaching and Research Award scheme. The intended outcome was a correspondence between the typology of digital badges and peer feedback and assessment practice in online classrooms. Harle, in his talk, described the findings of a study on supervising student projects at a distance. He reported that eleven students in six countries have successfully completed a range of experimental, computational and clinical projects; this scheme continues to expand and evolve with a growing emphasis on the transferable skills that graduates need in order to move into research careers.

Much of the conference highlighted different aspects of massive open online courses (MOOCs). The third of the morning sessions featured two presentations on the history and future of the MOOC activity at the University of London. First, Michael Kerrison of the University of London International Programmes (UoLIP) presented a broad overview of International Programmes and the place of MOOCs within it, starting with a little of its history. Students have taken London University courses by distance learning since 1858, and its distinguished alumni include Nelson Mandela and five other Nobel laureates. Since 2013, UoLIP have been working with US-based Coursera to develop and offer over 20 MOOCs in a range of disciplines, and over a million students have now enrolled. Although these courses have seen drop-out rates that that are this typical to this type of course, student

satisfaction has almost invariably been high. Over 600 students have now registered on formal, paid External System courses after completing one of these MOOCs, and when the fees generated by these students are taken into account the system is seen as cost-effective.

A second presentation, by SOAS' Simon J. Rofe explored links between MOOCs and his own discipline, diplomacy. Rofe claimed that diplomacy was about three things: "negotiation, representation and communication", and discussed how far MOOCs contribute to each of these. A successful MOOC will attract students from a wide range of nationalities and cultures and with different expectations, and therefore contribute to the 'transnational sharing of ideas' that constitutes an important aspect of educational diplomacy. Both the technology used for MOOCs and the policy context in which online education takes place are evolving rapidly and developers will need to adapt to change. Rofe ended his talk by describing a MOOC in global diplomacy that he had recently launched at SOAS, which enrolled over 400 students in its first week to become the largest diplomacy course in the world in terms of student numbers.

As in previous years, the parallel sessions after lunch were billed as 'workshops', with each involving some interactivity. Nicholas Braithwaite from the Open University gave a demonstration of the online Open Science Laboratory, first explaining how it had developed out of the experiment toolkits and Summer Schools that in its first decades the Open University had used to teach practical skills. Residential schools, in particular, though popular with those that were able to attend, did not reach the whole cohort; the decision to change the OU's standard academic year from a February to an October start made them less feasible, and they have become expensive options. Replacing hands-on experiments with increasingly realistic activities in a virtual science lab was an obvious step forward and has proved a viable option for a significant fraction of practical skills development across all scientific disciplines. It is possible to re-use an interactive 'virtual titration' (for example) and to adapt it for different courses at different levels, and, crucially, there is no risk of students breaking expensive equipment. Nevertheless, the OU team have been careful to leave opportunities for things to go wrong so students still learn from their mistakes. There are even options for elementary fieldwork in a startlingly realistic 'field trip' that takes participants into an immersive 3D landscape that accurately replicates a few square km near Skiddaw in the Lake District.

The OpenScience Laboratory boasts real data presented and manipulated via authentic interfaces. And the laboratory has moved beyond virtual recreations of experiments to allow students to manipulate physical apparatus at a distance, using a similar web interface to those used by lab-based researchers. Braithwaite, a physicist, described how students can manipulate an experiment to measure the Bragg scattering of common salt crystals in his lab, changing voltages and currents on the X-ray tube and rotating the crystal. He is currently working on incorporating both sound and haptics, which deepen the sense of engagement with some of the experiments.

A discussion led by a panel comprising Jeff Haywood from the University of Edinburgh, Alan Tait from the Open University, Graham McElearney from the University of Sheffield and Stephen Haggard from Nairobi-based Eneza Education, considered the intriguing question of whether distance education as a separate concept is dying. All the panellists described their institutions' disparate experiences with distance education, reporting on both successes and challenges. After a lively discussion, the participants concluded that distance learning should have a bright future although its practice is changing, with the distinction between on-campus and distance provision becoming increasingly blurred.

The final afternoon session continued the theme of MOOCs, with Yishay Mor of PAU Education in Barcelona, Spain, leading a session entitled 'So you're running a MOOC, but is it any good?'. After a

brief introduction to the EU MOOC Knowledge project for assessing the impact of MOOCs throughout Europe, Mor took participants through an exercise in evaluating the meta-data behind a typical MOOC. A preliminary analysis of participants in a small number of MOOCs, mostly based in Spain, suggests that they principally attracted working age people with a high basic level of education who are resident in the EU.

Conference co-organiser Stylianos Hatzipanagos introduced the final session of the day, a keynote lecture by Jeff Haywood, vice-principal for digital education at the University of Edinburgh. Haywood explained that the term 'MOOC' in his title – 'MOOCS and the taming (or unleashing) of the beast' – could best be taken as a shorthand for 'online education and all that stuff'. He has worked as a consultant for the Scottish Government and the EU investigating the question of how higher education can best be modernised, and he is not optimistic. Many challenges faced by higher education providers across the continent are currently being glossed over or ignored. And some of the most important of these challenges are those posed by digital technologies.

Haywood spent much of his talk exploring the idea of whether MOOCs, open educational resources and similar innovations are sustainable or disruptive. A disruptive innovation is one that displaces established methods, institutions and markets. Although the concept of the MOOC was initially seen as intrinsically disruptive, it did not remain so as universities adapted their financial model to use free online provision as a 'loss-leader' for traditional, fee-paying student enrolment. They may, however, have triggered more disruptive innovation, particularly with state finance for higher education dwindling in the UK and some other countries. These technologies have opened the door to a much wider variety of providers, including for-profit companies as well as other colleges and non-governmental organisations, to enter the higher education marketplace. Part-time students, postgraduates and distance learners are likely to be more at risk from this disruption than campus-based undergraduates in their teens and early twenties, but the latter represent a diminishing proportion of students. Such technologies undoubtedly offer opportunities as well as challenges for 'traditional' universities, but they will need to be agile to take advantage of them.

Co-organisers Hatzipanagos and Warburton closed the conference by offering thanks to all speakers, chairs and CDE Fellows for their contributions, and looking forward to future RIDE conferences as the series enters its second decade. Thus far, delegate feedback has been almost unanimously positive, with several attendees describing RIDE 2016 as the 'best ever'.

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