Growing capacity for distance e-learning

A Special Report on the 26th ICDE World Conference

University of South Africa (UNISA)

ICDE

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)

Council for International Quality in Online, Graduate, and Professional Education (CIQG)
YOU HAVE got to get good at managing ongoing uncertainty,” was Laura Czerniewicz’s blunt message to higher education leaders. Online and onsite learning are being blended and learning technologies are advancing at breakneck speed. “The educational landscape has got a lot more complicated.

“There is a shift to internet support in tertiary education institutions and in the future, some researchers say, you won’t be able to tell the difference between online and conventional methods of teaching. This will mean developing different course delivery models; new forms of pedagogy.”

There would be a need for greater advance planning and working in teams. There was much to be learnt from MOOCs – massive open online courses – and “the rise of learning analytics”.

Czerniewicz, director of the new Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, was a keynote speaker at both the 26th ICDE World Conference and the ICDE Presidents’ Summit, which ran for the first time in parallel.

An unclear future
How educational entities would respond to emergent online technology would be shaped by their institutional cultures. “Those cultures are loose or tight,” said Czerniewicz.

“At my university we like to imagine we have a collegial culture – one that is very strong on academic freedom. But now there is a shift to an entrepreneurial approach, one that is neither a corporate nor a bureaucratic culture.

“The higher education environment is a fluid one and it’s not clear what the future holds – we don’t know! That’s our biggest challenge. We didn’t see MOOCs coming and there will be something else coming, and we won’t see it.”

In such an environment the big question for leaders is how to manage change?

“The shift from a collegial approach to one that is entrepreneurial is difficult,” Czerniewicz argued. There were also tensions over limited finances, and centralised and decentralised balances. “There will have to be difficult governance decisions in either shifting or not shifting online. These will involve making decisions about external partners... It will mean exploring the limits of software and the limits of licences as well as online facilitation.”

A survey of heads of department at the University of Cape Town found that all accepted the future of education as online. But such acceptance came with caveats: concerns over a one-size-fits-all approach; Would teaching become separate from research? Would teachers become tutors and get paid less? There was consensus that an environment had to be created where teaching was taken seriously.

Trouble in higher education
Such concerns neatly dovetailed into Czerniewicz’s keynote address delivered to the ICDE World Conference. “There is trouble in higher education – what is the role of open education in those troubles and how do we reclaim open education?” she wondered.

Over the past decade, countries of the OECD had cut spending on education by two-thirds; in developing countries it had been cut by half. The institutional response to austerity had been cost sharing – “this means sharing costs with students. But the cost of tuition and books has gone up dramatically” and prices varied greatly between countries. Despite rising costs to students their numbers were showing a 5% yearly growth.

All this activity was set against a background of inequality. The World Economic Forum identified the top trend for 2015 as ‘deepening income inequality’. “And where is knowledge in all of this?” asked Czerniewicz.
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“...It’s becoming increasingly privatised and commodified. There is what has been called the ‘McDonaldisation’ of knowledge.”

In higher education, where “every single part is mediated by technology”, open education is viewed as the solution that can bring it all together. “But is it? In South Africa we have an Afrikaans saying: Ja, nee – ‘yes, no’.”

Copyright elephant
“Open education is a site of confusion and serious contestation,” she continued. “Is it indeed that open? There was also a perception that “open equals free equals digital”, which had seen new cultural practices come into being, such as piracy. “But there are ownership rights, digital rights, management restrictions, copyrights.”

Czerniewicz referred to copyright as the metaphorical elephant in the room. “Copyright needs rethinking. In the digital world copying is an essential act. This goes way beyond current laws of copyright.”

Copyright was initially devised to protect authors who benefited the greater good, and with the objective of keeping works in copyright for the shortest amount of time.

“For us the core issue is ‘knowledge should be free’, but now knowledge is in the grip of commercial interests. We are in an age of enclosure. We need to look at copyright laws that are out of sync with the current space.”

Czerniewicz proposed an alliance with lawyers. “We need to look at intellectual property contracts in higher education. We have to look for a new business model that supports knowledge sharing and treats its producers well.”

‘In the future, some researchers say, you won’t be able to tell the difference between online and conventional methods of teaching. This will lead to different course delivery models’

Educators should see reclaiming knowledge as a public good. “The role of the university is to assert academics and authors as agents and owners of knowledge. We must see open education as a means to an end. A strategy to achieve an equalised, democratic and peaceful world.”

The students are online but are the lecturers?

While universities increasingly expand e-learning and online capacities, they often fail to back up the educational technology with adequate lecturer knowledge to deliver it effectively and sustainably. A solution to this dilemma was offered by Joy Mighty, associate vice-president for teaching and learning at Carleton University in Canada.

Tertiary education institutions provide plenty of development opportunities for face-to-face interactions with students, said Mighty, but little is on offer on how to teach in blended and online contexts. “Everyone knows there has been a massification of higher education with an emphasis on increased universal access but there are barriers to sustainability.”

One of those barriers is educators themselves. Lecturers often exhibit negative attitudes towards online teaching while also having few opportunities to teach in online and blended contexts. In addition, there are often no professional certificates available for such teaching.

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Stephen Coan reports

Joy Mighty and her team have developed a blended and online teaching programme.

Teaching the teachers
In order to address this failing, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities awarded Carleton University CAD225,000 (US$172,000) in funding in February 2014 to enable them to create a Certificate in Blended and Online Teaching programme. Mighty and her team developed the certificate programme cuOpen. “It’s an open strategy with a variety of tools – a platform for e-text books, course modules, open access publication and repository.”

Carleton’s repository of open educational resources includes materials and modules licensed under Creative Commons available on the cuOpen website in editable formats which can be adapted according to the needs of other institutions.

A multidisciplinary team created 11 blended and online modules. “The course is 35 hours in length and combines theory and practical application,” said Mighty. “By the end students will have developed a course and taught the course they have developed. And it’s free.”

There are some challenges. The course “cannot be done without strong administrative support and buy-in, and it requires dedicated resources,” said Mighty.

A longer version of this article can be read here.
Online education can help break down barriers to access to tertiary education for disadvantaged students but only if there is equal access to resources or if imbalances are addressed affirmatively, said Tressie McMillan Cottom, and that requires government policy changes. Munyaradzi Makoni reports.

Continuing inequalities
According to the sociology of education, McMillan Cottom said, access and expansion were not shown to address inequality for disadvantaged groups.

For at least 60 years, sociologists had studied education as an institutional process of qualification — both formal and informal education, and in terms of defining skills, abilities and talents — but education should not be treated in isolation.

“We say that education as an institution is interrelated to other institutions and that they all work together. To understand one you have to understand the other. More importantly you have to understand how they interact with each other.”

McMillan Cottom said that as in many other countries, the US was battling demons around expansion. “We are dealing with some very similar issues. We have greater demand and we have the ability to expand our core secondary institutions to meet that demand. Our response to demand has primarily emerged out of the market sector — for-profit private institutes.”

Also as elsewhere, America was struggling with how to meet the needs of older students, disadvantaged students who were poorly prepared for higher education, and students who wanted vocational training that institutions were not offering. “We are struggling with how people would pay for that type of education,” she said.

The question was what education could and could not do. “If you expand education without attention to the unequal distribution of resources, you will reproduce inequality,” McMillan Cottom argued.

Education and jobs
For-profit colleges and universities that offered certificates and degrees as job training were devised as a response to demand, but this came at high individual and social cost.

“By expanding higher education without paying attention to the mechanisms by which we expanded, we created a two-tier system where the most disadvantaged students paid the most for the least quality of education,” she said.

Although it was debatable,
ICDE awards for excellence in open, distance and e-learning

The promise of open and distance learning
In the US, the system had created a permanently disadvantaged, over-educated and under-employed group of people who happened to be black, female and low-income.

“Access has to be affirmative for disadvantaged groups to benefit. You have to make up the difference in resource allocation for those groups, and that happens with deliberate education policy,” McMillan Cottom said.

“We can do this for students wherever they are, to help them get where they want to be. Not just for individuals but also for groups,” McMillan Cottom said.

There should be access not just to content, but also to high quality knowledge.

As skills developed and technological changes happened, there was a transition point where students needed to obtain a certificate that would get them accepted at university, but disadvantaged groups could get lost in the process.

“The process of learning is social, but we are producing online and distance education curricula that for most do not play a part in developing the social aspects of learning. It is the social aspect that turns content into knowledge.”

She said students valued instruction through social networks highly. The issue was how to make tools and social aspects more robust in the educational delivery system, in an integrated system of knowledge production.

Access could be balanced with equality if it was accepted that tools alone could not achieve this, McMillan Cottom concluded. For those who cared about education, affirmative distribution to the disadvantaged had to be paired with funding.

A prize giving ceremony led by ICDE Secretary General Gard Titlestad shone a light on outstanding work by people and institutions around the world.

Institutional Prize for Excellence
**African Virtual University**
The African Virtual University, or AVU, was acknowledged for achieving remarkable success in delivering e-learning programmes to 57 countries. Despite limited resources, and working with network partner universities, it has educated students across cultural and linguistic barriers. Rector Dr Bakary Diallo said: “I deeply believe innovation in education is instrumental to the development of human capital. We must therefore exploit it to make a lasting impact on learners and communities.”

**Lifelong Contribution to the Field**
**Professor Olugbemiro Jegede**
Founding vice-chancellor of the National Open University of Nigeria and former secretary general of the Association of African Universities, Jegede is now secretary to the Kogi state government, the Oguruefa of Ogongland, in Nigeria. “This award has reinforced my conviction that the open and distance learning that I first came into contact with in 1981 has become mainstream in my lifetime and is not just on the periphery,” he said.

**Individual Prize for Excellence**
**Dr Irina Smirnova**
Head of the department for international projects at Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics, Dr Irina Smirnova was honoured in absentia for her academic leadership at regional, national and global level.

**ICDE Prize for Innovation and Best Practice in Open, Distance, Flexible, Online Education and E-learning**
There were five prizes for excellent work by young academics. The winners were: Asamenew Demesse Bireda; Ashok Gaba and Wei Li; Maximus Gorky Sembiring; Shironecia P Karunanayaka, Som Naido, JCN Rajendra and HUW Ratnayake; and Patrina Law.

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quality assurance in a changing world
A Special Report on CHEA 2015 and CIQG 2015

education expansion alone did not produce more and better jobs. Jobs and education could go hand in hand, but this was not currently the relationship and would not necessarily be achieved without extra institutional investment.

“Education alone does not produce a job structure that facilitates upward social mobility,” McMillan Cottom emphasised. “If we ask education to do certain things without the mechanisms to do it, we set educational expansion up to fail.”

Public and private provision should match skills with the requirements of the market for mobility towards employment to happen. This rarely happened incidentally but had to be affirmative and deliberate.

The civic sphere – which includes government, universities, markets and students – needed to consult more broadly, to make credentials matter to the disadvantaged. “What purpose does it serve to broaden access to educational access without broadening access to labour markets?”

If you expand education without attention to the unequal distribution of resources, you will reproduce inequality. We created a two-tier system where disadvantaged students paid the most’
"TRICKY WORLD with pervasive war and tragedy" is nevertheless one that “could see the golden age of open learning”. This was the prophetic view of Barney Pityana, a keynote speaker at the Presidents’ Summit that ran alongside the 26th ICDE World Conference.

He and fellow keynote speaker, Switzerland’s Christoph Stückelberger, viewed current political and financial world crises as opportunities for open, distance and e-learning, both to support human development and spread a global ethical culture. The Presidents’ Summit focused on themes of leadership and governance.

A world in crisis
Pityana, former vice-chancellor of the University of South Africa and current president of the convocation at the University of Cape Town, sketched a backdrop of a world in “its worse situation since World War Two”.

“He cited events in Syria, the Middle East and Ukraine, the rise of militaristic Islamic fundamentalist groups and “a Europe that, hot on the heels of the Greek financial crisis, finds itself dealing with a huge humanitarian problem”.

The current state of world affairs reinforced the social purpose of education. “Distance education comes into its own in times of crisis as human ingenuity seeks alternative means for survival.”

New role for distance learning
Pityana cautioned against tertiary education being seen as merely preparation for work. “Economists have said that full employment is a pipe dream in our world of rising populations and increasing technological innovation. Educational attainment is not a ticket out of poverty.

“There is a shift to lifelong learning involving creativity and intellectual output, not employment.

We must look at sustainable human living that affirms human possibility rather than exploitation, and is not dictated to by employment.

“This point of crisis and difficulties could lead to a golden age of distance and e-learning. The idea of a certificate no longer being a guarantee of sustainable employment is a major shift and a tremendous opportunity for distance and e-learning.”

According to Pityana, such a shift would require more critical thinking concerning the moral implications of thoughts and actions outside formal academics. “Education must sustain the values of human freedom.”

A global ethical culture
This view was reinforced by Stückelberger, executive director and founder of Globethics.net, who spoke on the role higher education can play in developing a global ethical culture in a world also traumatised by financial and corporate scandals where both reputation and capital were intimately connected.

Stückelberger cited the manipulation of diesel engine emissions by Volkswagen, “which took £25 billion (US$29 billion) off the company’s market value.” On Stückelberger’s Geneva doorstep was Sepp Blatter of international football

Open learning must support global ethics and development

After the banking crisis people asked: how could people of such high culture, with higher education, manipulate the markets almost to the point of collapse? Is there a need for changes in the distance and open learning curricula to make students value literate, value conscious and value driven, not just exam and job-driven? Stephen Coan reports
The ethical quandary over student learning analytics

Collecting student data is vital for improving online education but it is open to abuse and can be exploited for financial gain, and administrators who have access to the information are not necessarily trained in ethics. Sungula Nkabinde reports

"There’s a danger of our institutions becoming more powerful than our ethical standards," he said. "Because, while educators are trained in ethics, administrators who have access to this information [learning analytics] aren’t necessarily trained in ethics. It is certainly open to abuse from people who have political agendas, and it can be exploited for financial gain."

Getting smarter
Rob Paddock, founder of the Cape Town-Based online learning provider GetSmarter, said learning analytics were core to its teaching model. Tracking students' online activity allowed GetSmarter to continuously improve future students' learning experiences through post-course data analyses. Although less controversial, this retrospective approach is less effective than recent trends in real-time data analytics. "We have an entire department dedicated to [post-course analyses]. But, while it is very useful, it is of no benefit to students currently enrolled in the course," said Paddock.

Over the last year, GetSmarter has also adopted a real-time approach. Students' marks, online forum participation and other academic performance indicators are monitored throughout the duration of a course. Those at risk of falling behind are provided with assistance before it is too late.

A Catch 22
But it’s a ‘Catch 22’. On the one hand, intervention improves online education – GetSmarter has an average 94% completion rate and 90% graduations – but on the other, the monitoring and collection of specific student data that it requires borders on an intrusive level.

Paddock said the company had been working on an approach that allowed students to opt out if they weren’t comfortable with being monitored. Said Desbiens: “There’s a real hesitancy in our culture in Canada because of the potential misuse of that data, especially for underrepresented groups, who would get labelled because they may not be participating as much, and that information is consequently used against rather than for them.”

Professor Carlos Alberto Pereira de Oliveira, from the Federal University of Rio De Janeiro in Brazil, said educators should be given priority over students: “They give all their information to Facebook, Google and other such companies, so why not learning institutions? In a sense, that would only be privatising information that is already public for the most part."

EDUCATORS HAVE no doubt over the efficacy and need for learning analytics, but the invasion of privacy that it entails makes it an ethically grey area – because more often than not, the data is collected without students’ knowledge or consent. This is overlooked supposedly because it is done in the interest of better education.

Learning analytics – which can be loosely defined as the subject of collecting and reviewing student data to enhance the quality of teaching – made for an engaging discussion during a break-away session at the 26th ICDE World Conference.

Dr Brian Desbiens from Canada’s distance education and training network, Contact North, warned against the danger of institutions becoming a power unto themselves in their quest to provide better education.

“Research done by faculty members is thoroughly questioned and analysed, but institutional research on the other hand is a different story altogether. Do we really review the methodology with the same rigour? I'm not so sure.”

Not interrogated
Dr Tony Thistoll from the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand said that, in his experience, such institutional research was indeed not interrogated. In New Zealand, there is already a system in place that tracks school students' data, which is called the Student Record Transfer.

“We will also be working with various universities and tracking students' employment patterns to find out, for example, what their income was after graduation,” said Thistoll. While having this information is useful, it is not difficult to imagine that information collected could be open to abuse, and that was Desbiens’ main concern.
MOOCs offer opportunities to contribute to sustainable development but to do so they must focus on students from the poorest areas with poorly trained teachers and poor infrastructure. The challenge is to address more diverse learners while delivering on quality and credentials, reports Munyaradzi Makoni.

MOOCs – massive open online courses – have the potential to build new learning pathways. Governments, universities and stakeholders have a duty to scrutinise how the opportunities MOOCs offer can best be harnessed for development.

There are both challenges and opportunities for helping the poor by responding with MOOCs to the new United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, said Dan Wagner, UNESCO chair in learning and literacy and director of the University of Pennsylvania’s International Education Development Program, in the United States. Wagner was a keynote speaker for the MOOCs4D II track at the 26th ICDE World Conference.

**Backdrop**
The 2015 MOOCs4D stream – which followed a first MOOCs4D conference at the University of Pennsylvania in April 2014 – was held under the theme “The potential of MOOCs as a transformative lever for promoting education as a global common good”.

The first MOOCs4D, according to the ICDE conference website, reflected on “the role of MOOCs in international development, expanding inclusion, transforming institutions and curriculum innovation”, as well as building capacity to create digital information resources and overcoming infrastructural constraints.

Since then the SDGs, particularly Goal 4 – “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” – have evoked global responses. The World Education Forum reaffirmed education as a public good, stating in the Incheon Declaration that it is “a fundamental human right and a basis for guaranteeing the realisation of other rights”.

A focus of this year’s MOOCs4D was on developing economies, particularly in Africa, through South-South-North collaboration. Wagner said for the world to be sustainable, there had to be more focus on learning.

**If you are in the field of education you have a stake in the SDGs. All of the SDGs present opportunities for universities to contribute towards development through MOOCs’**

**Robust debate boosts the MOOCs agenda in development**

**Bottom of the pyramid**
Implementing MOOCs had its pitfalls, however. “If we buy MOOCs as promised, we are eliminating some opportunities for specificity. Can they increase access? Well, for some people yes, maybe not for everybody, and not all the time,” said Wagner.

Global attention should include those at the bottom of the pyramid, in rural areas, contending with poorly trained teachers and poor infrastructure – the poorest families, with parents with low levels of education.

Wagner said the rapid increase in mobile practices and penetration of technology opened up new opportunities for education, but certain criteria had to be followed.

“To design a solution, which in this case is a MOOC, you have to know what the purpose is, what device you will be able to use, who the client is, in what context and in which language,” he said.

Irrespective of the design chosen, he added, MOOCs raise a lot of issues. They offer opportunities but also pose challenges. Can MOOCs address more diverse learners? Can they deliver quality and credentials?

He said major MOOC providers – mostly universities in the North – claim to reach global learners but in reality are still sampling from elite populations, neglecting those at the bottom of the pyramid who might not even realise MOOCs exist. “It’s low hanging fruit out there.”

**Lessons learned**
Countries starting out with MOOCs learned about critical challenges and issues faced, said Rachel Prinsloo, MOOCs programme director and head of planning and strategy at the
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University of South Africa, UNISA, as the MOOCs4D stream ended.

Emerging themes for MOOCs were there. “We saw evidence of reflective and research-based developments in curriculum innovation and integration that adds transformative value to both institutional and community contexts.” There was “deep conceptual embeddedness”.

Prinsloo said the meeting was fortunate to benefit from dialogues between education providers and UNESCO, the International Labour Organization and the German International Academy, and funding bodies gave insights into their funding models.

Discussions ranged from using open courseware for MOOCs and infusing online education into MOOCs to contextualising collaborative design and development of MOOCs and sharing a global study on Open Educational Resources for development that sought to improve the curriculum fabric of research-intensive universities. “Topics also focused on faculty skills development, the need to break down resistance, critical skills shortages, teacher development, maths teaching, health and land degradation,” Prinsloo said.

“Completion is not the only powerful success indicator, there are many other things,” said Prinsloo, adding that delegates learned how MOOCs could expand and diversify student learning and progression, and create new pathways for learning.

**Giving MOOCs some mileage**

Stakeholders were called on to play a role in the design of scalable projects and to integrate funding mechanisms to unleash the full potential of MOOCs. Responding to a new policy agenda, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and national or regional policies, would give mileage to MOOCs.

Professor Catherine Odora Hoppers, who has a research chair in development education at UNISA, warned that a good part of education was chopped off when MooCs were prepared. “Let us pay attention to various issues of the curriculum, otherwise we are lost.”

“When we think of our mode of transmission, let us remember that our national yearning was for education, and use that as a base to link up with a mode of transmission.”

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**Improving MOOC retention by a multiple of five**

**Sungula Nkabinde** reports on an exception to the trend of low completion rates for online MOOCs compared to courses at traditional universities

The availability of credits for a MOOC at St George’s University in Grenada in the Caribbean was a prime driver of a more than five-fold rise in student retention, from 11% completion in 2013 to 58% the following year.

Professor Glen Jacobs outlined this exception to the rule of alarmingly low completion rates for online MOOCs compared to those of bricks-and-mortar universities, achieved by a St George’s MOOC titled “One Health One Medicine”.

The low student retention rates of MOOCs was one of the topical issues at the 26th ICDe World Conference, viewed as one of the foremost challenges for the online learning format.

“We gave credits for the course the second time around,” said Jacobs. “The course was introduced as a requirement in a lot of degree programmes, and as soon as that happened, student commitment went way up. It was probably the main reason for the improvement in retention.”

Other changes made to the course endeavoured to reduce the level of isolation that a student feels when studying from a remote location. Barriers to active participation also included language, educational diversity, lack of interactivity and lack of technological proficiency.

Even the time zone can be an obstacle, where students can’t immediately find answers to immediate problems. Real-time accessibility goes a long-way towards improving retention. It is similarly effective to design a course so that it stimulates interaction.

For “One Health One Medicine” there were live weekly interactive sessions, while students also had to submit interactive blogs wherein other students could comment and critique each other’s work. If there’s anything that you should take from this, it should be that. A main reason for low retention is that students feel isolated.”

A longer version of this article can be read here.
Changing higher education leadership in a network era

Today societies are moving from market domination to network domination, an era where being productive is not as important as being creative and collaborative, where the learning that we need changes from explicit, in codified books and manuals, to the implicit, such as understanding how to negotiate, reports Sungula Nkabinde.

As societies change, so must leadership. Today’s higher education leaders must be ready to adapt to the new era of fast-paced technology, and to understand and engage in the complex environment in which it operates. Reputation and connectedness will be real assets, according to Harold Jarche, an internationally renowned expert on workplace transformation.

Canadian Jarche, a keynote speaker at the 26th ICDE World Conference, said that as education institutions increasingly grapple with adapting to new challenges and optimising the potential of new technologies, solutions lie in simple structures that foster an organisational culture.

The network era

“As we enter what I call the network era, we are seeing fundamental shifts in society, in our institutions and the way in which we do business, shaking the foundations,” said Jarche.

Over the centuries, shifts have happened when societies have changed the way they communicate, Jarche argued. For instance, the printing press led to industrialisation, and religious institutions had changed communication, also changing the way societies were organised.

Today, societies were moving from market domination to network domination. “We have no clue what is going to happen. But we see the signs of this everywhere.” An example was changes in financial technology and banking, and the ‘bit coin’.

“All of a sudden, every aspect of our lives is going to shift.” The Arab Spring heralded major changes, and the ‘Occupy

‘As we enter what I call the network era, we are seeing fundamental shifts in society, in our institutions and the way in which we do business, shaking the foundations.’

Harold Jarche: ‘In future every aspect of our lives is going to shift’
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movement’ was an experiment in how to organise as a networked society.”

Collaboration and cooperation

The networked society demanded collaboration and cooperation, Jarche said. The market sector thrived on competition, and the power of competing rested on people with better and dominant ideas.

Moving into the networking era, reputation would be earned through cooperation. People with strong reputations would be influential and fare better in the network society. “In 2003 I was unemployed in Canada. I started writing a blog. The reason that you know me is my blog. I built a reputation by giving to the network. My blog has given me everything.”

Jarche is convinced that the network era, with its digital prowess, will extend productivity.

“In this age, he said, individuals have incredible productivity and even a small team can get a lot done. The smart way of not employing a lot of people can be witnessed in Silicon Valley. “It obsoletes industrial labour. But being productive is not as important as being creative.”

What about education?

Using digital networks, and extending individual learning, anybody could work at any time.

The education discourse was being transformed, and the academy was becoming obsolete, questioned by distributed networks of open educational resources. Jarche said the new era retrieved the age of discourse, of which Greek philosopher Socrates was a major proponent, as people connect on Facebook or Twitter.

“There will be increasing need for empathy as a critical skill while machines handle the rest. ‘Doctors might become redundant if we get robots in future, but nurses will be in demand’

Regional support on way for open and distance education

A regional network is being set up to grow, galvanise and invigorate online and distance learning across five regions globally. Karen MacGregor reports

• The Swedish National Organisation for Distance Education, a professional body for people and organisations involved in distance and flexible learning.
• Italy’s public International Telematic University, UNINETTUNO, a distance education university founded in 2005 and based on close cooperation with traditional universities from Europe, the Arab World, the United States and Asia.
• Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia’s only higher education institution delivering learning entirely through distance education. It has 406,000 students enrolled in more than 1,000 courses, an internal network of 39 regional offices and operations in 26 countries.

The networks will be in four regions – Africa, Asia Pacific, the Mediterranean and Southern Europe, and the Baltic states.

Gard Titestad, ICDe secretary general, said regional networks would enable the council to provide “a more localised, personalised, on the ground support network system and offer its members regional tailored events and resources – something that is very much needed”.

A longer version of this article can be read here.
Tech imperialism versus education idealism in California

Audrey Watters ‘Silicon Valley says education is broken and technology will fix it’

Technology writer Audrey Watters is not swayed by claims that we are on the cusp of a techo-utopia, where all our problems will be solved by connectivity, and warns that if the development of education technology is left to Silicon Valley leaders it could become perilously exclusive. Sungula Nkabinde reports

The future of technology is being shaped in Silicon Valley and California’s global innovation hub will thus dictate the evolution of education technology. The digital revolution and the ‘sharing economy’ mean education will
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become more accessible, but education technology writer Audrey Watters believes that does not necessarily bode well for the greater good that is the transfer of knowledge to the world’s most economically vulnerable people.

The profit-seeking, although seemingly altruistic, ventures of many Silicon Valley companies means that education in the future – if it were left to California’s technology leaders – could be perilously exclusive.

“California produces two-thirds of the United States’ produce and over a third of the nation’s farmworkers work in California, 95% of whom were born outside the United States,” Watters told the 26th ICDE World Conference.

“The California ideology ignores race and labour and the water supply. It is sustained by air and fantasy. It is built upon white supremacy and imperialism. As is the technology sector, which has its own history, of course, in warfare and cryptography.”

The Silicon Valley narrative

“I am not swayed by arguments that we’re on the cusp of some sort of techno-utopia where all our problems are about to be solved by connectivity,” said Watters, referring to what she called ‘the Silicon Valley Narrative’, which heralds the Internet and technological innovation as the silver bullet to all life’s challenges.

“It celebrates the new, is quick to discard anything it deems old as obsolete, and invokes themes of innovation and disruption. It is also often characterised by a hero. The technology entrepreneur characterised by a ‘smart, independent, bold, risk-taking, white male’.

“The Silicon Valley Narrative has no memory, no history, although it can invent or invoke one to suit its purposes. It fosters a distrust of institutions – the government, the university. It is neoliberal. It hates paying taxes,” she continued.

“It does not neatly co-exist with public education. We forget this at our peril. This really does make education technology, specifically, an incredibly fraught area.”

Techno-imperialism

Watters added that a record-setting US$3.76 billion of venture capital had already been invested in education technology this year, and this money would change the landscape. “That money carries with it a story about the future. It carries with it an ideology,” she said.

Facebook, for example, has partnered with six telecommunications companies and phone manufacturers to form a new organisation called Internet.org that is attempting to bring Internet access to the some five billion people on the planet who do not currently have it.

The company was announced by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg in 2013, when he then argued that connectivity was a human right, and that Internet.org would also partner with MOOCs platform cDx to offer free online education.

However, it later emerged that several Indian companies had backed out of the initiative, claiming that Internet.org gave preference to those paying to be part of the platform, and restricted access to sites not approved by Facebook. “Mark Zuckerberg’s altruistic rhetoric aside, this is their plan. It’s an economic plan to monetise the world’s poor.”

Watters continued: “Researchers have found that in certain countries a number of people say they do not use the Internet yet they talk about how much time they spend on Facebook.

“According to one survey, 11% of Indonesians who said they used Facebook also said they did not use the Internet. A survey in Nigeria had similar results: 9% of Facebook users there said they do not use the Internet.

“In other words, Facebook is ‘the Internet’ for a fairly sizable number of people. They know nothing else – conceptually, experientially.” She called this ‘techno-imperialism’, where the content, form and perceptions of ‘connectivity’ perpetuate a cultural and technological imperialism, “not only in Africa but in all of our lives”.

Opening opportunities

In an ideal world the story of education technology, particularly regarding distance learning and connectivity, is one where ‘ed-tech’ is supportive, not exploitative.

It should open opportunities instead of closing them. And it should meet individual and institutional and community goals and be driven by a rethinking of teaching and learning – not by expanding markets or empire.

“That’s not really what the ‘Silicon Valley Narrative’ says about education,” argued Watters. “Sometimes it does, I suppose when it wants to appeal to us as consumers; rather that’s not all that Silicon Valley really does.

“It is interested in data extraction and monetisation and standardisation and scale. It is interested in markets and return on investment.

“It says ‘education is broken’ and technology will fix it.”

Although the argument she put forward was an ideological one, Watters told delegates that it mattered to those in education as it represented forces that were at play in shaping the education technology space.

“Facebook is really just anecdotal here – just one example of the forces I think are at play, politically, economically, technologically, culturally.

“The new infrastructure – ‘the Internet’ if you will – has a particular political, economic and cultural bent to it. It is not neutral. Who controls the networks, who controls the servers who controls our personal devices, who controls the software that’s installed on them?”

‘The new infrastructure is not neutral. Who controls the networks, who controls the servers, who controls our personal devices, who controls the software that’s installed on them?’
Global policy forum agrees on HE actions to support SDGs

A High Level Policy Forum highlighted crucial issues – including equitable access and success, the skills gap and transnational qualifications – as areas requiring greater investment if education is to reduce inequality and accelerate progress towards achieving other sustainable development goals. Karen MacGregor reports

This has been a ‘Year of Education’, with a flurry of global policy statements key to online, open and flexible education, said Gard Titlestad, secretary general of the ICDE. At a High Level Policy Forum, 130 leaders and policymakers went a step further, identifying actions that would help higher education to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

“Business as usual will not produce the breakthroughs in social and economic development the world needs,” Titlestad said. “Innovation in how we deliver education, as well as what that education is focused on, are needed for all of our futures.”

The forum was “intended to apply regional lenses, to take the temperature and discuss the state of play with regard to online, open and flexible learning contributing to sustainability”. It aimed to make regional voices “visible and action-oriented”.

Participants from Africa, Arab countries, Asia, North America, Oceania and Latin America discussed developments and regional agendas for action, at the forum titled “Higher
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Education for the Sustainable Future We Want – The way ahead for online, open and flexible learning: Opportunities and actions”.

All regions agreed on the need for greater investment in higher education if it is to help the world meet the Sustainable Development Goals, and highlighted crucial issues including equitable access and success, the skills gap and transnational qualifications. Education was not only a driver of development and key to reducing inequality, but was also essential to accelerating progress towards achieving other SDGs, said the ICDe in a statement.

The forum
The forum organised by the ICDe with UNESCO, the Commonwealth of Learning and the Open Education Consortium, was hosted by the University of South Africa – UNISA – in Pretoria on 17 October, a day after the conclusion of the 26th ICDE World Conference.

It followed the UNESCO-ICDe Global High Level Policy Forum on “Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want”, held in Paris in June, which itself followed meetings including UNESCO’s World Education Forum at Incheon in Korea in May, and forums in Bali and Qingdao, China.

The aim in Paris was to take forward declarations from those meetings in order to strengthen educational equity, access and quality – and particularly to respond to the urgent need for more higher education up to 2030 in the face of massive student demand.

In the words of Professor Mandla Makhanya, vice-chancellor of UNISA: “Just expanding existing universities or building new ones based on classroom teaching will not meet the demand or the need for higher education in the developing world.”

The final draft of Education 2030: A framework for action was adopted on 4 November in a high-level meeting alongside the 38th UNESCO General Conference.

The bottom line
At the forum, delegates split into regional groups to brainstorm strategies and actions to advance open, distance and online education globally. The organisers found commonalities across regions and delegations, including the needs to:

- Strengthen quality assurance processes and practices in higher education.
- Make available affordable broadband infrastructure to more people throughout the world.
- Implement policies and supports for learners often unable to access higher education, to ensure their ready access and success.
- Implement policies and practices that support widespread access to and use of open educational resources.
- Treat online learning equally with face-to-face learning.
- Invest in professional development for staff engaged in supporting learners.
- Strengthen collaboration between universities and with employers so as to narrow the skills gap and ensure the relevance and value of university education.
- Engage and involve students in the planning and development of higher education.

The forum developed preliminary action plans for each region “aimed at leveraging higher education to help achieve sustainable development worldwide,” said the ICDe statement.

Some conclusions
Dr Bakary Diallo, rector of the African Virtual University, pointed out at the forum’s conclusion that education was no longer the exclusive domain of schools and universities, and distance education was no longer the preserve of distance universities.

He highlighted four keywords for the way forward – communication, implementation, collaboration and monitoring – and saw a role for the ICDe in monitoring progress.

In terms of communicating and implementing, the policy foundation should be engaging effectively with governments, employers, regional players and the private sector. “Let’s be able to communicate effectively with stakeholders, so that they understand where we are coming from, and make them part of the implementation process.”

What he had learned at the forum, said Diallo, was the importance of collaboration within and between regions to solve problems. “In terms of sharing, one thing that came through strongly in some regions is that we need to share best practices and open educational resources.” This was especially so in the global South, where resources were a common problem.

It was important to clearly demonstrate how open, flexible and online education was contributing to the SDGs – including Goal 4 on education quality – Diallo continued. And given that most innovations in the sector were being driven by private initiatives, it was crucial for open and distance institutions to engage far more actively in research and innovation “if we want to claim that we are true leaders in this field”.

Business as usual will not produce the breakthroughs in social and economic development the world needs. Innovation in how we deliver education is needed’
Defining tomorrow, by shaping futures

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is the only higher education institution to carry the name of the country, and is the people’s university in every sense of the word. Throughout its history, spanning more than 142 years, Unisa has shaped futures through education. Committed to providing inclusive education and keeping abreast of an ever-evolving higher education landscape, Unisa’s journey has been one of continuous growth and transformation.

Unisa is a comprehensive university offering both vocational and academic programmes from the level of short courses, and under- and postgraduate certificates and diplomas to degrees, including honours, master’s and doctoral qualifications.

As an open distance learning pioneer, Unisa is known for delivering well-designed, interactive study material and integrated student support. Learning programmes in a wide spectrum of disciplines are offered at Unisa’s eight colleges, comprising the following:

**College of Accounting Sciences, College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, College of Economic and Management Sciences, College of Education, College of Human Sciences, College of Law, College of Science, Engineering and Technology, College of Graduate Studies.**

Unisa has a strong commitment to conducting basic, strategic and applied research and the university aims to build research capacity and address challenges pertinent to the country and the African continent. With leadingedge laboratories (facilities not generally associated with open and distance e-learning institutions) the Science Campus is the place where scientists get to do what they love to do – putting theory into practice.

Unisa takes pride in its identity and has the interests of the continent at heart. Through its academic programmes, relevant research and innovation, and community engagement initiatives, the university acknowledges its African roots and acts on the needs of South Africa and the continent.

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