



Editorial

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Editorial

Welcome to the first 2017 issue of *Open Learning*. Not only is this the first issue of a new year, it is also my first editorial as deputy editor. I would like to thank our editor, Simon Bell, for giving me this opportunity to introduce this edition.

This issue begins with a short interview with Paulo Dias, Rector of Universidade Aberta, Portugal by António Teixeira and Sandra Caeiro. This is the last in a series of interviews with senior leaders at European Open and Distance learning institutions. This series began with an interview with Peter Horrocks, the Vice Chancellor of the UK Open University in *Open Learning* Vol. 31, No.1. Our next issue will contain a paper that will present a synthesis of key themes and points that have emerged from all these important interviews. As I write, I know that various authors are working on this synthesis. From my personal perspective, this is a paper that I'm very much looking forward to reading.

This issue contains six substantial papers. The first paper is entitled 'Towards a pedagogical model for science education: bridging educational contexts through a blended learning approach', written by José Bidarra, who is also from Universidade Aberta and Ellen Rusman, from the Welten Institute, Open University of the Netherlands. Their paper introduces a compelling model called the Science Learning Activities Model, which is abbreviated to SLAM. Their model is compelling because of its simplicity; it highlights three key concepts: context, technology and pedagogies. The model also contains a set of dimensions called 'seamless dualities' which address themes such as openness, collaboration and formality. In some respects, Bidarra and Rusman's paper can and should be used to facilitate debate, but it can also be used as a tool to think about our own teaching and educational practice. Although their paper has a science and technology focus, they are keen to emphasise the importance of wider disciplines, underlining the importance of arts in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Their reflections about storytelling, gamification and the notion of the personal learning environment are all worth studying.

The second paper by Pankaj Khanna, entitled 'A conceptual framework for achieving good governance at open and distance learning institutions' has some similarities with the paper by Bidarra and Rusman; it is also about a framework or a model, but it considers an entirely different but complementary perspective: university governance. Drawing upon the work of earlier scholars, Khanna proposes a framework that comprises seven distinct principles. Some of the key principles include the importance of accountability, transparency and openness. Other principles include the importance of freedom of information and expression, and the necessity for sound financial management. Just as Bidarra and Rusman proposed a set of dimensions to add depth to their model, Khanna offers us a set of important governance practices. These practices include the assigning of clear responsibilities, ensuring capacity and capability, and the need to make well-informed decisions with full information, advice and support. Khanna's paper is one that is necessarily provocative; it tells university management what they should be doing, whilst at the same time notes the complexity of university life and comments on the challenges of balancing the essential importance of academic standards, the need to 'bring in business, maximise student satisfaction and develop partnerships'.

A complementary perspective is offered by Ngoni Chipere from the University of the West Indies. Chipere's paper is titled 'A framework for developing sustainable e-learning programmes'. Not only does Chipere present a framework, but also offers a detailed description of how 18 degree programmes were delivered. From my perspective, the strength of Chipere's framework lies with its simple pragmatism; it consists of three key points: the importance of stakeholders, cost effectiveness and operational efficiency. Those involved in the delivery and management of online and distance education will benefit from reading the details, lessons and warnings that are presented in this paper.

Moving from the practical to the pedagogic, Kim Becnel and Robin Moeller from the Appalachian State University write about 'Community-embedded learning experiences: putting the pedagogy of service-learning to work in online courses'. Service-learning was not a concept I had heard about before, which meant I was very intrigued. Becnel and Moeller's paper is an interesting case study which applies an approach that could be loosely described as a variant of blended learning. In their research, their students work in a community library, where they learn how to offer services to the library and its visitors. After a period of practical work, students are asked to participate in online course meetings to reflect on their experiences. The strength of the case study lies with how technology can facilitate the productive sharing of learning experiences.

This issue concludes with two studies. The first is by Isla Gemmell and Roger Harrison who studied whether there are differences in the extent to which students access support materials and experience technical difficulties when studying a Masters of Public Health programme. Two student groups were of primary interest: UK national students and transnational students. Their paper is recommended to anyone who is interested in studying issues that relate to differences in a study population.

The final paper, by John Richardson, titled 'Academic attainment in students with autism spectrum disorders in distance education' also explores differences. Based on data from the UK Open University Richardson compares three groups of students: non-disabled students; students with autism spectrum disorders and students with autism spectrum disorders who also have additional disabilities. Richardson's statistical methods and conclusions are very interesting and are worthy of detailed study. Whilst Richardson states that distance learning may be of benefit to particular student populations, he is also mindful of the importance of ensuring that disabled students are supported through effective teaching and learning environments. On this token, I would like to remind readers about Vol. 30, No.1 of *Open Learning*, a Special issue on the 'Accessibility of open, distance and e-learning for students with disabilities'.

This issue emphasises the international scope of open and distance learning and the diversity of methodological approaches that can be used to contribute to this field. The concluding papers also offer us an important reminder about the importance of the diversity of the students that we all collectively endeavour to support.

Interview with Paulo Dias – Rector of Universidade Aberta, Portugal

by António Teixeira and Sandra Caeiro

Established in 1988, Universidade Aberta (UAb) is the Portuguese public university dedicated to distance education and is responsible for the large majority of the online higher education provision in the country. In spite of its unchallenged leadership in the field, UAb is not a very large scale university, having just close to 10,000 students. But, its student population is quite diverse and comes from all continents. In fact, UAb is the most international university in Portugal, playing a major role in the dissemination of the Portuguese language, culture and values across the globe.

UAb provides access to quality higher education opportunities anywhere in the world at all levels (Undergraduate, Master and Doctorate degrees) as well as Lifelong Learning study programmes. Since 2008, all programmes are delivered in fully virtual eLearning mode. This made

UAb a European reference institution in the field of advanced eLearning and online learning after receiving international recognition and praise for its speedy transformation from a print-based distance education to a fully online one in just three years.

Professor Paulo Dias, UAb's Rector, is an eLearning expert who joined the university five years ago coming from the University of Minho, one of the leading higher education institutions in the country. He has set as his political ambition to consolidate UAb's leadership in open and online education research and provision in Portugal and also to enhance educational innovation as the core of the university's institutional culture. But, he has been also struggling to inspire a national agenda for the regulation of this rapidly expanding field. Recently, he has spearheaded the establishment of a consortium involving UAb and the University of Coimbra aiming at widening participation in higher education in Portuguese-speaking countries through distance education.

In our interview with Professor Paulo Dias, these concerns and their respective social, cultural and political context were always in the background when discussing the different topics. We've started by addressing the key issue for any top university leader: what is the current strategic vision of Universidade Aberta to meet the challenges of the next 20 years?

For Paulo Dias, it is important not to miss the importance of the context in this matter. 'We are in a transition stage to a new social and cultural model and the higher education institutions need to understand the new values, opportunities and problems emerging' – as he pointed out. In this perspective, all universities should adjust their respective way of thinking and institutional culture. He believes that the entire higher education system needs to be re-organised as a dynamic knowledge network in which all institutional and social actors operate interdependently and openly share their resources. In such a scenario, higher education institutions are more sustainable. Instead of every university basically trying to replicate the same dominant comprehensive model of organising teaching and research, we should prepare for a new situation in which all institutions unbundle their teaching, research and even administration services. Across the university systems, each particular university should be a leader in a particular area and reuse the services provided by the others in the other areas.

This new vision for the future of universities should be driven according to Paulo by a systematic and comprehensive organisational change that will enable the institutions to become more flexible and dynamic without any kind of time or space restriction. Also, they should be increasingly more open and connected to society.

In this challenging and complex context, the Rector of UAb recognises that distance learning must invest in its continuous development and should be always at the forefront of technological and pedagogical innovation. Hence, the importance of any distance learning specialised institution as UAb to lead research on new learning methodologies and teaching models.

At this point, we've asked Paulo if this context meant 'business as usual' for Higher Education or instead could we expect to see dramatic change occurring? The answer was clear. A radical change and disruption should be expected, due to the emerging new role of universities in the network society. For UAb's leader all universities will have to embed the use of technological innovation and will have to undergo organisational change. For example, in Portugal universities are already trying to join clusters. There are new challenges related to the changing social environment and also new time and space geometries which indeed need to be addressed by universities and call from them new solutions.

If so, we've asked Paulo how does the University's strategy contribute to the specific international challenge of sustainable development in its many guises? His answer redirected us to the institution's mission statement. In fact, Paulo thinks UAb's strategic action contributes to increase territorial, social and cultural cohesion across the Portuguese territory, but also in the Lusophone world by establishing the most advanced quality standards for open and distance learning, in particular, in the Portuguese-speaking countries. In addition, by being the first fully

virtual University in that region it has been ground-breaking in reducing the carbon footprint in the higher education sector.

At this point, it was important to discuss the impact of MOOCs in the transformation of the higher education landscape. What is Paulo's opinion on the likely future for this new massive format of open online courses? He believes MOOCs represent a sign of transition, a 'trigger' and a way for the wide dissemination and adoption of educational innovation. For Paulo, they are a tool for reaching out to new target groups, to widen higher education outreach and also access, as well as to open up university organisational cultures. Paulo recognises that MOOCs contribute to enrich the learning process and to facilitate the introduction of new methodologies as mobile learning or augmented reality. However good in highlighting the social element of learning, they should be taken only as complimentary resources and not true scenarios of real learning in Paulo's view. We should not see MOOCs in a negative way, though. But, they shouldn't be seen as an aim in themselves either. They represent a moment, a way to facilitate transitions. They will not disappear, but will predictably suffer the usual process of change and evolution. Paulo sees MOOCs as basically a sign of the convergence taking place in the higher education sector between traditional teaching and distance learning universities.

In this changing context, is distance learning going to remain the preserve of a few specialised institutions or does Paulo and the UAb leadership think it will become more widely provided by other agencies? UAb has recently joined in a Consortium with the University of Coimbra, one of the oldest and most prestigious European higher education institutions, thus proving the real convergence taking place between traditional universities, and the open and distance learning field. For Paulo, distance learning is no longer the sole field of dedicated institutions, as traditionally the open universities. On the opposite, this represents a challenge for the traditional dominant dedicated institutions which should be able to preserve the current high quality standards in open and distance learning, as traditional universities do not know how to deal with the administrative part or with the teaching at distance and its specific pedagogy. Initial MOOCs from MIT in USA might represent a good example of this problem. Paulo stresses the importance of open universities assuring the preservation of the legacy of expertise and the high quality standards of open and distance learning practice. This goal creates naturally an obligation to share that expertise and best practice across the public higher education systems. In fact, only open universities have the capacity today to lead the field in this complex transition and dramatic change period.

How can this be achieved? Paulo clearly favours the establishment of alliances and joint agreements between open universities and traditional institutions. In his view, consortiums should be developed between the different agencies, not losing each identity, but having the needed scale to integrate the network of knowledge. Open universities should lead, but not work, rather integrated in networks.

As we've approached the conclusion of our interview, we've challenged Paulo with a final question. As country and language boundaries change – how important is still a sense of place to the University? Paulo enjoyed answering this question as it related significantly with the cultural change background which he believes is framing the technological convergence process in the higher education system. He claims that although geographical representativeness is very much spread in open or virtual universities as there are no limits of time and space, there is however a need of belonging to a place. These institutions still are from somewhere and represent some community. For UAb, that place is not a specific city or country, but the Portuguese-speaking community, with its current 260 million «inhabitants», mostly underserved in terms of training and education. Similarly, the Lusophone world needs to consolidate its presence in the digital world and no better than UAb to help meet that challenge.

This kind of position and ambition is nowadays also claimed by other universities from other countries and regions of the world. However, UAb has been a pioneer in this notion as it this goal is part of its mission statement celebrated as early as the late 1980s. Nevertheless, the cultural

focus is not a limitation. In fact, language is not a definite frontier for the institution. But, there is a specific cultural, political and economic space which is becoming a major global player established by its use. Nevertheless, Paulo Dias recognises English or Spanish are today major cultural mediators and in that sense knowledge creation, development and sharing should be conducted by UAb in a multilingual environment.

As it became clear from our interview with Paulo Dias, the Portuguese Open University, UAb, has a clear strategic vision regarding the coming future and its challenges. Moreover, as it seems the university has been preparing to meet them. A major part of this vision and subsequent strategy lies on the importance given to a culture of academic openness and of institutional cooperation, in particular amongst the European open universities. Summing up, the future of UAb lies, therefore, in rediscovering its oldest and also simplest secret – opening up the University to All, whoever they may be and wherever they may be.

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