I-HE 2022 - Digital Reset: European Universities Transforming for a Changing World: Introduction to the Special Issue

Olaf Zawacki-Richter
University of Oldenberg, Germany

Berrin Cefa Sari
University of Oldenberg, Germany

This Special Issue is an outcome of a cooperation between the Online Learning Journal (OLJ), the Center for Open Education Research (COER), and the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)[1] at the Innovating Higher Education Conference 2022 (I-HE 2022), held in Athens on 19-21, October 2022. As part of this cooperation, COER Members[2] organized a research track on open, distance, and digital education at the conference. The call for papers received more than 50 submissions; however, 16 were accepted for presentation in Athens, and four selected authors or author teams were encouraged to submit their papers to the OLJ. We are pleased that the pre-selection at the conference was confirmed by the journal's double-blind review process with all four papers accepted for publication in this COER-EADTU special issue of the OLJ.

Digital Reset: European Universities Transforming for a Changing World, the conference's theme, suggested the ongoing change propelled by the Covid-19 pandemic. Digitalization and transformation are inherit in open, distance, and digital education. ODDE has always been, is, and will be forward-looking by nature. However, the pandemic has pushed all higher education institutions to pass the gate of digitalization at all levels and signaled that such a crisis would not be the last one that compels institutions to move online, which means transformation will and should continue. In this special issue, the four selected studies focus on the field's different yet compelling transformation areas.

The first paper, **Clicking with Confidence**, co-authored by Elaine Beirne, Mairéad Nic Giolla Michíl, Mark Brown, and Conchúr Mac Lochlainn from Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland, brings a new perspective on the use of MOOCs to increase the digital confidence of online learners. As self-efficacy is one of the crucial aspects of retention in online education, the study offers a MOOC course to help learners gain these essential and required mastery skills. In their study, Beirne et al. examined the online learning self-efficacy improvement of 135 MOOC participants and found that besides increased self-efficacy in the pre-defined fields of time management, technology navigation, distance learning, and online communication, the learners also reported increased happiness, hope, and excitement after the course. Overall, the results project a practical and pedagogical use of MOOCs for the readiness of learners in online learning.

The second paper, **Impact of Online Exams on the Quality of Distance learners' exam and exam revision experience** by Simon Cross, Maria Aristeidou, Klaus-Dieter Rossade, Carlton Wood, and Carlton Wood from the Open University UK, problematizes the online exam experience of learners and compares online exams that were held during the pandemic with sit-in exams before the pandemic. The rigorous research design applied a quantitative approach to compare two datasets (pre-pandemic and during-pandemic). Notably, the results demonstrated no significant difference between learners' online and in-person exam experiences. Additionally, the results showed increased satisfaction with the online exam environment. Amidst the increasing tendency of institutions to move to remote exams, the study provides significant evidence for the possibility of sustainable, more accommodating, and quality exams in an online format. This is undoubtedly a topic of interest not only for institutions teaching at scale and looking for online solutions, but also for institutions seeking paths to sustain their internationalization and quality enhancement even during crises.

---

[1] https://eadtu.eu/
[2] https://uol.de/coer/coer-members

Gabi Witthaus, in her paper titled **A capabilitarian model for online engagement derived from an exploration of the experiences of refugees in online higher education**, zoomed out on the pandemic-oriented crises and took our attention to the refugee crisis. This study connected a sociological derivative -capabilitarian understanding- adroitly with the engagement phenomenon to propose a resilient approach to the refugee problem. As a result of the qualitative analysis, Witthaus suggests a capabilitarian engagement model for online learning. The model is promising in many aspects given that engagement is a crucial element of learning, specifically online education. While this is the case, admittedly, the engagement of disadvantaged learners has yet to be widely addressed or examined. The author built the online engagement guidelines for the displaced learners on the engagement model of Bond et al. (2020) and Redmond et al.'s (2018) framework. The study is evidently one that will be referred to extensively by online education specialists who work with and for humanitarian programs.

The last paper, **Massive Omission of Consent** by Eamon Costello, James Brunton, Richard Bolger, Tiziana Soverino, and Clément Juillerac from DCU, brings the relatively ignored subject of "consent" in big data use to the attention of the reader by means of a systematic review. Referring to big data that have been introduced to our lives with the increasing pace of digitalization, Costello et al. problematize the ethics approval omission in one of the big data pools, namely MOOCs research. The authors conducted a systematic review to seek an answer to whether the studies in the field adhere to the basic ethics requirements in their practice by reporting ethics-related consent, issues, and processes in the manuscript. The study found that only a small fraction of reviewed studies reported the ethical processes satisfactorily. This is a significant result since it underscores the need for researchers to consider rigor not only in terms of methodology but also in the approach to ethics in the analysis of big data.

This special issue enables us to read and reflect on four papers that intertwined the challenges of digital transformation with new evidence through rigorous and comprehensive research. We are happy to present the interesting results of these four papers; a) a successful utilization of MOOCs for increased digital confidence by Beirne et al.; b) promising results in terms of online examination compared to in-person exams by Cross et al.; c) a gap-filling approach to the engagement to accommodate displaced learners in the digital learning world by Witthaus; and d) a crucial reminder, if not a warning, to pay more attention to ethics in big data research in the digital education field by Costello et al.

Olaf Zawacki-Richter & Berrin Cefa Sari

Oldenburg, 17 May 2023

References

Bond, M., Buntins, K., Bedenlier, S., Zawacki-Richter, O., & Kerres, M. (2020). Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: A systematic evidence map. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 17*(1), 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0176-8

Redmond, P., Heffernan, A., Abawi, L., Brown, A., & Henderson, R. (2018). An online engagement framework for higher education. *Online Learning, 22*(1), 183–204. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1175