



EADTU-EU Summit 2015  
“Flexible education and the future”  
Anja Oskamp, president EADTU / Rector OUNL

## Education for the future: flexibility a keyword?

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Main question; is higher education robust enough to educate future generations? A tour d’horizon exploring some expectations and potentials. Aim is to give food for thought and not conclusions.

### The situation

Information and knowledge are growing ever faster, an explosion. Technology for application of knowledge is growing. More and more tasks are either taken over by technology or are supported by it.

Nature of jobs is changing, jobs are disappearing, new jobs are created. And this will continue over the next decades. Present day students will get jobs we don’t even know about yet.

People live longer, and thus their working life is prolonged.

### Implications educational system

Our present educational system is mainly focused on young people. Higher education is often completed at the age of 25, or younger. This implies that after leaving school people will live for another 50-70 years. And that number is not likely to decrease.

What does this mean for our educational system. What do we educate? And are we able to educate people for the type of jobs that will be invented in the next 25 years. And when will we train and educate people, in their initial training period, when they are still young? Or is it really necessary that we start to become serious about life long education, or at least about education at certain stages of life after 25? And what does that mean for higher education and the higher education system. When do we educate for what.

A fool can ask more questions than a wise man can answer. That is how I feel right now, a fool. Since we are looking at a future we know will come and that will have demands for education and the educational system. And we have no idea what it will look like, and thus how we have to act right now.



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## Distance teaching universities

Fortunately we are not complete clueless, especially not at the distance teaching universities. We have the advantage that we have been educating adults for quite a long period. We have some picture of what our students are aiming for. We have some picture of the difficulties they are confronted with when juggling with work, family and study. And how the cost of studies may influence their behavior.

Especially combined distance teaching universities should have a load of knowledge about the group of students, their aims, their study behavior, their concerns, what works and what doesn't work. But we would have to work together to discover the patterns, and also evaluate whether there are differences, cultural or otherwise. And what the consequences of these differences imply.

At the same time it is important that we will share our findings about our students with the campus universities, catering for younger students. We know there are differences, but we should do more in-depth studies to find what the difference are. And then we have to translate that to the best ways of education in the different phases of studying life.

## Research

What I am really saying now is that we do have to perform focused research on how various groups of students learn. We have to find whether there is a difference in early learning, until 25 and learning later in life. There is a hypothesis that there is a difference, since older students are more mature, have more life and work experience etc. But which factors are contributing to that different style of learning, what is easier, what is harder. And what does this mean for the way in which we educate our different students.

## What are we educating for

Let's go back to the question what we are educating for. Of course children have to learn how to read, write and calculate. And of course they have to get a general education. The knowledge that they gather in primary and secondary education forms the base for everything they will later in life. For it trains them for achieving the correct perspective and enables them to put the knowledge they gather in a broader perspective. But primary and secondary education will also



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have to look ahead. Knowing that pupils will have to be able to adapt to changing situations later in life, to a world that is changing, to knowledge that is growing and changing, to achieve

skills that will only be evident in 20 years' time, means that from an early phase adaptive skills become more and more important, and should be trained.

Changes might be more drastic in higher education. Should we rethink what we educate in higher education? In a knowledge society, we need different kind of roles and skills at a high level. We need thinkers, researchers, developers, actors, explainers. All those role should be combined to be most effective. Not in one person but in teams. And the role a person has may change in phases of life. And that we have to train and educate for.

So not only do we have to gain knowledge later in life, we also may have to train for different roles, with different skills.

### School career paths

It may be time to rethink the school careers we are now accustomed to. Is it really necessary to complete a bachelor and a master when you are young? And then be ready for the next 50 years? Or should we build in more phases? Young people often do not know what they want, nor what and where there strength is. It looks like at that phase we really should keep education broad, interdisciplinary. Of course we have to educate young people how to go in depth and how to reflect, how to solve problems and at the same time problematize the solution. But an interdisciplinary perspective might be more in line in what they encounter later in life. University colleges, offering such a training are becoming more and more popular in my country. And that must be for a reason.

### Learning later in life

But if you are educated in a broad way, there comes a time when you want to go more in depth. Do you have to go back to university then? Cannot you be trained on the job, in the company you work for? My hypothesis is that it is really necessary to go back to a more formal learning environment in later phases of your life. That training in the company itself will by far not always be sufficient. Of course people can train themselves. And with the offerings of online education it becomes easier to get quality education at low or lower costs without having to enroll in formal programs.



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So is there a position for higher education in lifelong learning? I think there is, but it is not as obvious as one would expect. For sure on line education, or other forms as we don't know yet but may arise will play an important part in this. And we have to consider the type of education that is necessary and attractive for learning later in life. The charm of student life, so very important when you are 20, may not be a big asset when you are 45.

However universities still have a lot to offer for that age group, more than a single company usually can with in company training. The strengths of universities is the rather independent position, the quality assurance, but most of all the academic environment, the close connection of the teaching with the research at the university, with different disciplines closely connected, with students and teachers that thrive by academic discussions. Thus students can be educated to go beyond what the teachers know, where they can explore new paths that lead to unknown knowledge, for teachers and students. That is what is needed for new knowledge, for new jobs.

### How to structure new education

Education later in life can and should be structured differently from programs that are designed for young students. But what is as important is certification in visible and recognizable and most important, generally accepted certificates or degrees, regular bachelor and masters or short degrees. For employability it is important to be able to prove that and what you learned.

These certificates in lifelong learning should be shorter than the common bachelor and master programs. And it should be possible to use them as building blocks for bigger degrees. Flexibility is enhanced in this way.

The components of these should include non-traditional forms of learning. Now we could discuss the including of completed MOOCs, the recognition of informal learning. I am sure in future new elements will appear. How the assessment of formal recognition will take place should be part of the research conducted on adult learning, since it may be closely connected. Important is that it will be considered a valid assessment.

Flexibility is now a keyword when talking about education: personalized learning becomes more important. Of course distance teaching universities have a tradition and a lot of experience. Combined with online teaching, and whatever ways of virtual or other techniques may emerge in future should be used to simulate and enhance campus experience. The creation of an



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academic community, so valuable in campus universities, could be copied and even enhanced using new and maybe not even existing technologies. Enhancing the academic community can already be started by present distance teaching universities, using existing technologies, but also by framing the curriculum.

But we already see that some people who have been working in a field for say 20 years, would want to start a new career, for which they need an education. Should they follow the same curriculum as young students, in their initial phase of university education. I would not think so. By presently we do not differ between those groups. That should really be rethought. What do we find important in a curriculum? What do we want students to learn. And don't older students, returning to university really need to follow all parts of the curriculum?

Pedagogies should be more related to the group of students they are used for. We should recognize that students differ in various ways, if only in age group and experience. Clustering students with the same background, or with completely different backgrounds when that would enhance the learning experience, is a lot easier in a more virtual academy. But it asks for close collaboration of institutes for higher education.

## Research

these are only a few examples of adapting higher education. To me it is clear that a real reshape of higher education should lean heavily on research. Research on adequate pedagogies for different groups of students, research on techniques for valid assessment of all kinds of knowledge acquisition, to mention a few. Funding that type of research is crucial for future innovation and for a sustainable education and employability. In short for the future.

## Permanent education

It should become normal that your school career does not end when you are 25. Now we see that the decision to study at a university at an older age is an individual decision. It is up to the student to dedicate time, effort and money to get a certificate or degree. Students who are often not compensated by their employer in time or money. This excludes groups of students from lifelong learning. Can we afford to lay future innovation in the hands of individuals?



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## Concluding

Education and school careers may be reconsidered, with more emphasis on adaptive and permanent education.

Education, especially higher education, should become more flexible, personalized and with more forms of knowledge acquisition including non-traditional, but it should result in accredited formal degrees and certificates. Shorter degrees are an option that should be considered, especially for lifelong learners.

Research on pedagogies and assessment of various forms of learning should become an important priority.

Universities ensure the relation between education and research and create an academic environment. Also when using new technologies and new forms of education.

Distance teaching universities are ahead, but should start to enrich their pedagogies and research. Preferable in combination.

Collaboration will make us stronger.