

EADTU Strategy 2019 – 2025

**Background**

# 1. Introduction

This document sets out the strategy for EADTU for the period 2019-2025. The document provides:

* a brief account of the founding purposes and achievements to date of the Association;
* a summary analysis of the changes in the policy environment now impacting open and distance higher education across Europe;
* an analysis of the benefits that the Association seeks to deliver to its members;
* the strategic objectives of the Association;
* indicative action lines based on these objectives.

In the appendix, we summarise EADTU’s approach to ensuring that, day by day and year by year, its activities are aligned with its members’ needs.

EADTU was founded in January 1987 with the following objectives, enshrined in its statutes:

* 1. to promote higher distance education in European countries;
  2. to support bilateral and multilateral contacts of the academic staff of the participating institutions;
  3. to support cooperation in the field of research, course development, course transfer and credit transfer;
  4. to develop new methods and techniques for higher distance education, including new technologies and media;
  5. to organise common projects in these fields in cooperation with European authorities.

The association came into existence at the initiative of the leading institutions of the sector, to work together to serve their mutual interests. Growing from its eleven founding members in ten European nations, EADTU now has a membership of fifteen institutions and fourteen national associations across 25 nations.

In 2017, EADTU celebrated its 30 years of successful advocacy and support to the sector. Over that quarter century, EADTU has:

* established and exploited its role as the recognised interlocutor for the open and distance higher education sector with the European Commission, representing the interests of the sector with the agencies of the European Union;
* provided a collaborative space for educational innovation and development in the sector across Europe, particularly through its annual conference;
* played a leading role in key developments in the sector, in areas such as open educational resources, networked curricula, virtual mobility, MOOCs and quality benchmarking;
* nurtured the development of open and distance higher education across Europe, especially in the accession countries;
* initiated and coordinated a range of collaborative projects;
* extended its activities Europe-wide, with worldwide contacts with key global institutions.

Across the open and distance higher education sector, institutions are aware that we have entered a period of profound change brought by the confluence of ever-accelerating technological development, global financial crisis, and tectonic shifts in global economic power. These changes are creating new demands on the higher education sector as a whole, and will have as yet unknown consequences for the role of open and distance higher education. By now open and online education are seen as an innovation driver to improve education, and as a base for transformation of our (secondary and higher) educational system. So this is an appropriate time for EADTU to reflect on its role and strategic objectives, to refresh its mission, and to ensure that it can continue to serve the interests of its members in the rapidly changing climate of the early 21st century.

# 2. EADTU in a changing environment

We are in a period when the universities of Europe are being asked by the governments that fund them, and by the European Union, to achieve more with less resources, and to demonstrate their continuing relevance to the needs of the economy, culture and civil society.

Higher education now includes three areas of provision: degree education, continuous education / professional development, and open education (OERs, MOOCs). EADTU members are frontrunners in these developments, emerging in many European universities. These evolvements are also supported by the European Union. From 2018, EADTU has taken the road of strategic changes, covering all these areas of digital higher education, including blended on campus degree education, online short learning programs, open education and OERs and collaboration with the European MOOC platforms.

As a consequence, EADTU will extend its membership to blended frontrunner-universities as a new membership category, next to the open and distance universities and the national associations for distance higher education. EADTU will also continue its endeavours for large scale online short learning programs as promoted by the Memorandum of Understanding of the Rectors of open and distance universities in order to meet the needs for continuous education in Europe. EADTU will support the further development of the MOOC movement by OpenupEd and its collaboration with the European MOOCs consortium.

In order to strengthen European networking, EADTU will also develop online models for collaborative programs and virtual mobility.

At the policy level, EADTU will focus on a multi-level support of institutional, governmental and EU policies and strategies. To this end, it will seek collaboration with the Bologna follow Up Group, the Bologna Policy Forum, and the Council of Ministers to integrate lifelong learning (continuing education/SLPs and open education/MOOCs) in the European Higher Education Area.

To meet the needs of employers and employees, EADTU will seek collaboration with professional

organisations, social partners, public employment services, and enterprises.

## *The digital higher education challenge*

## Digital modes of teaching and learning can solve problems higher education is facing today and will offer new opportunities for teaching and learning in each of these areas. They will innovate and even transform higher education provisions in the course of next years:

## - Blended degree education will raise the quality and efficiency of degree education in general, as well as in facing larger numbers of students and lower staff/students ratios.

## - Blended and online education will upscale the area of continuing education and continuous professional development (CPD) by offering flexible courses and short degrees with a large outreach responding to the needs of learners at work, who face longer careers and career shifts.

## - MOOCs are offered online only, providing massive and open learning opportunities for all, promoting engagement in the knowledge society. Open Educational resources which can be use in the public domain by students for lifelong learning and university staff for reuse in educational programmes.

## Blended and online systems are important to accelerate innovation and to keep pace with the needs of learners of all ages, of the economy and of society at large.

***Lifelong learning underdeveloped***

The areas of continuous education / continuous professional development and open education are largely underdeveloped in Europe. Although the European Union is promoting the development of lifelong learning, many countries don’t show a sufficient sense of urgency for implementing the right policies and strategies.

## According to labour experts, the risk that qualifications, obtained by degrees in initial higher education, become obsolete is increasing by the digitalisation wave in the economy and by longer careers. European estimations demonstrate that more than 25% of the 30- to 55-years old employees struggle with this problem. Economic research shows that not following continuous education is an good and early predictor for job loss. In relation to the increasing age of retirement, the social and economic risk of not updating knowledge and skills will become more pronounced. In parallel, the needs for continuing education and CPD become more urgent.

## Also, fact sheets of the European Commission show that neither the EU attainment objectives for higher education nor for lifelong learning are achieved and that there are dramatic differences between member states. Although progress is made, 40% of the employers face problems with recruiting workforce with the right qualifications. The EU employment rate is 53% for low-skilled young people and 80% for high-skilled. SLPs can compensate for these figures at a later stage of life, which is needed in view of these labour market needs.

## To meet these needs, the deployment of short learning programmes (SLPs) is a most important solution. The online provision of SLP`s makes them even more scalable and flexible. Online and flexible learning facilitates the accessibility of courses and can be taken in combination with a job at all stages of life. SLPs can be organised in different sizes (number of credits) and leves (foundation, postgraduate). They should be awarded with appropriate qualifications (e.g. certificates, diplomas), corresponding with the European Qualification Framework.

## Changing times need new solutions, touching upon the structure of higher education provisions. There is a need for investment in lifelong learning in European societies. All member states need to extend their provisions.

**Relevance**

Exchanging expertise and collaboration in digital higher education strengthens universities. It stimulates innovation and quality. This serves national higher education systems and the development of EHEA, with a EU-coverage.

Ultimately, this improves citizenship (European identity, personal development); the European workforce (employability, career development) and European competitiveness (innovation, entrepreneurship). It contributes to the ET2020 benchmarks, the acceleration of the renewed higher education, new skills and modernization agenda of the EC, and the conclusions on European universities of the EU-Summit (15/12/2017).

The European Commission is acutely aware of these trends and, through its modernisation of higher education agenda, is seeking to make a defining contribution.[[1]](#footnote-1) EADTU has been active in working with the Commission over the past years, as it has developed its proposals.

# 3. EADTU and the online, open and flexible higher education sector in Europe

Our sector has a 45 year record to be proud of. European open and distance universities have created a model, complementing the wider higher education systems of which we are part, designed to reach out to students who can’t attend a physical classroom. This model enables EADTU members to offer degree programmes in all three Bologna cycles, which are fully equivalent to those taught in conventional universities. By diversifying the educational offer, more students have been given a chance to study. The European open and distance teaching model is learner-oriented and learning community-based with pedagogy that is interactive, flexible, and responsive. This model does not have its origins in new technologies but they have supported open and distance higher education to maximize the effectiveness of learning and making it ever more flexible.

The open and distance higher education sector therefore entails a learning methodology that fits well with the skills and approaches needed in a knowledge economy. It promotes individual responsibility and collective creativity, and diminishes social and national barriers. EADTU members are able to maximize the time and efforts of individual students, to structure and promote the learner’s achievements, to create and support learning communities, to offer an inclusive learning platform, to offer any interested learner access to high quality resources, to promote virtual mobility and learning diversity, and to innovate repeatedly to strengthen and widen the offer to students. The skills needed to succeed in open and distance higher education are the very same skills needed success in a knowledge economy.

But in the face of the developments described in Section 2, this is an appropriate moment for EADTU to reflect and review. Each member is currently appraising these developments and what they mean for their own future size, shape, national and international role. Driven by member views and needs, EADTU has also considered the implications for its own strategy and role in support to the open and distance sector over the next five years or so, and the outcomes are reflected in the strategic objectives set out below.

EADTU is a membership organisation that exists only to serve its members’ needs and to add value to the sector collectively in ways which could not be achieved, or only achieved with greater difficulty, by members working separately. Its success and sustainability depends on two complementary elements: the active contribution of members and a dynamic, responsive, stable Secretariat. It has thrived in its first thirty years, driven by these two vital forces. Through this strategy, we seek to ensure that both forces continue into the future, and grow in effectiveness and complementarity.

Our sector, like many recent social innovations, is constantly seeking the best way to describe itself. The founders of EADTU used the term ‘higher distance education’. More recently, the expressions ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘flexible higher education’ have come to feature increasingly often, and for some, ‘online, open and flexible’ higher education has become the preferred label.

Distance education is characterized by the openness and flexibility that removes barriers to study, and provides optimal opportunities to access higher education for as many students as possible. But both these terms cover multiple meanings which are reflected to varying degrees in the practice of EADTU members and their programmes.

*Openness* can indicate:

* open access to courses without entry qualifications
* free online available resources (e.g., open educational resources and MOOCs)
* open licensing of educational material permitting reuse, reworking and redistribution (e.g. OER, open access journals, open source applications)
* acceptance of credits for prior learning (APL) or credits from other institutions (ECTS)
* access for everybody, hence also for those with special needs
* open pedagogy
* open in the sense of affordable

*Flexibility* can indicate:

* flexibility in terms of space, time and pace of study
* flexibility in terms of the choice of courses, in order to personalise the curriculum
* flexibility in terms of pedagogy to enable students to adjust study-paths and enable remediation after assessment

Not all EADTU members take the same position on these dimensions. For example, some member institutions share the same entry qualifications as conventional universities, but they are open as to pedagogy, facilitating students to succeed in their studies by independent learning. Our collective commitment to the Open Education as captured by the Cape Town Declaration is as significant as the diverse ways in which we realise it in practice. Under this unifying commitment, EADTU members encompass diverse strategies ranging across pedagogics-didactics with a learner-centred approach that supports independent learning, open entry, freedom of place, pace and time, technologically-enhanced or digital learning, and more recently, open online resources with a range of permissions and licensing. Equally face-to-face learning plays its role in the spectrum of EADTU members’ approaches, increasingly facilitated by online technologies.

1. ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/agenda\_en.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)