CONCLUSIONS OF THE 12th EADTU-EU SUMMIT 2024:
Leading the Future of Learning

Lifelong learning remains a cornerstone for ensuring continuous education for all, especially for the most vulnerable populations. Achieving the European Union's goal of 60% adult participation in lifelong learning by 2030 requires clear and accessible educational pathways.

A unified and comprehensive strategy is crucial for advancing lifelong learning. Universities, traditionally focused on formal degrees, can broaden their impact by offering courses designed to reach a wider audience and enhance accessibility. Recognising prior learning and ensuring permeability between different education sectors are also critical. Micro-credentials can play a decisive role in this effort, as they serve as a tool to consolidate the value and recognise the knowledge and skills acquired in these courses.

Moreover, linking informal learning with formal education, promoting inclusive pedagogies and digital skills, together with a robust funding that supports those who need it the most, are all key considerations in this matter. To ensure continuity in education and avoid dropout, micro-credentials must clearly communicate their content and certification processes, ensuring that students understand their commitments, including learning outcomes and workload. Ultimately, lifelong learning should be flexible and adaptable to accommodate individual life situations and goals.

EADTU and its network have focused on these domains in recent years, generating significant input and contributing to societal, academic, and political discussions on these issues. The EADTU-EU 2024 Summit emphasised the critical roles of personalised learning, retention, and mental wellbeing in achieving the EU's ambitious target.

KEY TAKEWAYS

➢ We need to make sure we are doing everything we can to help students to succeed, and to meet their success criteria which may not be the same as ours. The way we do that is listening to the student voice. If you don't have students involved in your programme committees, in your boards of study, contributing to your thinking about curriculum, you are not really engaging people in an academic community.

(Liz Marr | Centre for Online and Distance Education | University of London)

➢ Personalised learning is a tool to help students achieve learning outcomes that are expected. It is not to send them off on a path which may be different from the rest of the group: they need to come to the same destination.

(Stefaan Hermans | European Commission)

➢ Communication is key. Communication in terms of institutions and policy makers understanding what the expectations of the students and the industry are. Communication, also, in terms of setting and managing expectations so the learner is not unrealistic about what they are

approaching. We need to be very careful about the language that we use (e.g., micro-credentials means different things for different institutions and instructors). If we want to break down the silos between HE, professional development, and the world of work, we need to be very careful about the language that we're using, both at the professional level and towards students, ensuring that language is accessible and we are not talking about the same things using different words; nor talking about different things and calling them the same.

(Anna Gover | Director of ENQA)

PERSONALISATION OF EDUCATION BY AI AND BIG DATA

The goal of personalised learning is to create dynamic educational experiences, enhancing motivation and achievement while meeting educational objectives. Continuous improvement involves refining personalised approaches to optimise learning outcomes.

AI and learning analytics support educators by enabling data-driven insights and personalised interventions, helping identify learning needs and track progress. These technologies offer continuous assessments and automated grading, providing real-time feedback and consistent evaluations. Moreover, AI-powered tools assist students in setting meaningful goals and developing essential skills for lifelong learning.

Advances in AI and big data are revolutionising education by enabling a new era of personalised learning. Leveraging Learning Analytics (LA), educators can gain deeper insights into student needs, allowing for customised instruction that supports both individual and group learning. AI adapts learning paths and provides targeted feedback, while LA gives teachers real-time data on student performance. These technologies free up teachers to focus on individualised instruction and help students understand their strengths and weaknesses, making learning more engaging and tailored to their needs.

Despite their many benefits, several challenges must be addressed to realise the full potential of AI and big data in education. Ensuring data privacy, teacher readiness, equitable access, scalability, sustainability, bias, transparency, and accountability are crucial considerations. Additionally, educators and institutions must also consider social-emotional learning aspects alongside data analytics.

The quality and completeness of data are essential for effective AI-driven personalization, and teacher interpretation remains necessary for actionable insights from LA. Adopting a centralised approach to optimise data-driven innovation and knowledge sharing, supports personalised education tailored to individual needs. However, managing raw, unstructured data to create actionable information remains a significant challenge. Standardising course structures and mapping diverse learning activities are critical steps in using big data for teaching and learning. By categorising and aggregating learning activities, educators can better track and understand student progress. Balancing personalised learning with maintaining academic standards and fostering resilience is essential to ensure a comprehensive educational experience.

RETENTION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Online distance education institutions face significant challenges in maintaining student retention and preventing dropouts, with rates reaching up to 50% in some cases. Factors contributing to high dropout rates include personal issues, inflexibility in examination schedules, and large study module sizes. Personal challenges such as workload management, financial difficulties, life events, employment responsibilities, lack of motivation, insufficient preparation, and limited interaction with peers and faculty further exacerbate the issue.

Identified strategies to mitigate these issues include offering certificate programmes as alternatives to full degrees, which helps students achieve recognised qualifications, maintaining their motivation. Moreover, smaller study modules can also boost motivation by showing quicker progress. A personalised study experiences can be supported by using data and learning analytics as well as a pro-active intervention approach at critical stages of the study path.

Managing student expectations from the beginning is crucial. Providing realistic information about time commitments and course flexibility helps students prepare better. Pre-entry guidance, including diagnostic tools and bridging courses, ensures students start at the right level and build necessary skills before coursework begins.

Enhancing emotional (motivation), behavioural (active participation), social (sense of community) and cognitive (critical thinking) engagement is essential for fostering retention. Effective strategies encompass establishing clear course structures, providing consistent feedback, managing workloads appropriately, and fostering meaningful interactions. A supportive on-course experience is vital, with manageable workloads, regular feedback, accessible materials, and supportive environments which significantly enhance retention. Building a sense of community helps students feel connected and supported. Continuous support, including career guidance, support for re-assessment, and maintaining alumni connections, is essential.

In summary, improving student retention in online distance education requires flexible and supportive strategies that enhance engagement, satisfaction, and success, ultimately reducing dropout rates and fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

STUDENT AND STAFF MENTAL WELLBEING IN ONLINE, OPEN AND DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION

Mental wellbeing is a critical concern for both students and staff in online, open, and distance higher education. Research has identified numerous barriers and enablers to mental wellbeing, including academic culture, workload, competition, presenteeism, casualisation, burnout, and various forms of discrimination. To foster a supportive environment, institutions must integrate wellbeing strategies that promote a culture of compassion, belonging, and equality.

For students, positive digital practices and resources can help address the unique challenges of distance learning. Creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment is essential for enhancing student wellbeing and academic success. For staff, addressing workplace culture and providing support for professional development can mitigate stress and burnout, improving overall job satisfaction and effectiveness.

A holistic approach to mental wellbeing involves recognizing the interconnectedness of student and staff wellbeing. Universities must counter toxic and competitive cultures and implement strategic visions that support both students and staff. This includes fostering a sense of community, promoting work-life balance, and ensuring access to mental health resources and support services.

Further efforts are needed to develop and evaluate practices that enhance wellbeing across different institutions. This involves trialling and assessing various approaches to identify what works best in different contexts. Collaboration between institutions can help share successful practices and create a more supportive and inclusive environment for all members of the university community.