

**International Conference on Scientific Research:  
Role of Distance Education in Human Resource Development**

Nha Trang City, The Socialist Republic of Vietnam  
8-10 September 2015

***Distance Learning and Human Resource Development:  
What does the Research Tell Us?***

Sir John Daniel<sup>1</sup> & Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić<sup>2</sup>

Distance Education – now often called Open, Distance and Online Learning (ODL) – has long played a significant role in Human Resource Development because it allows education/training to be conducted at scale with consistent quality. After recalling ODL’s earlier contribution to HRD we explore four contemporary developments that make ODL an even more powerful tool to help countries match education to employment.

First, online technologies both increase the reach of ODL and also provide the rapid feedback that is a major contributor to learner success.

Second, the many universities that now offer MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) include prestigious names that have given ODL a new respectability.

Third, although the early MOOCs did not lead to certification, they have spawned the development of new and shorter qualifications targeted directly at employment-related skills.

Fourth, these developments, taken together are stimulating a rethink of quality criteria in education.

The presentation will draw on two recent guides, published as Open Educational Resources in Chinese and English: *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning*<sup>3</sup> and *A Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning (2013)*, Academic Partnerships & CCRTVU Press

<sup>4</sup> *A Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education (2014)*, Academic Partnerships & CCRTVU Press

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Introduction

**Sir John Daniel**

It is a pleasure to address you with my former UNESCO colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić. This is our first time in Vietnam for both of us and we are delighted to be here. This conference is about the great role - the increasing role - that distance education can play in human resource development. You have given us the title *Distance Learning and Human Resource Development: What does the Research Tell Us?*

Our keynote will be in four parts. First, I shall give a brief summary of the research, going back almost 100 years, showing that student achievement in distance learning is as good as, or better than face-to-face teaching for most audiences and many topics. It also gives learners convenience and flexibility.

Despite these advantages, traditional institutions have long regarded distance learning as a lower quality option.

My second point is that this attitude changed suddenly in 2012 when some elite American universities started offering Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs. Higher education institutions all over the world sat up and took notice of online learning and wondered what to do about it. I shall examine some of the strengths and weakness of MOOCs.

I shall then hand over to Stamenka, who will explore our third topic, which is the development of new and shorter qualifications targeted directly at employment related skills. MOOCs were partly responsible for these developments because, when people complained that MOOCs did not lead to normal university credit and certification, some institutions began to look for alternative ways of recognising students' learning.

Stamenka will also address our fourth point. All these developments are stimulating a rethink of quality criteria in postsecondary education and Stamenka will present two guides that she edited on this topic.

Distance Learning: history, research and advantages

So let me begin with a little history, a summary of research and some comments on the advantages of distance learning. I shall use the abbreviation ODL - Open and Distance Learning.

The use of ODL for human resource development goes back a long way. As soon as postal services began in the mid 19th century Isaac Pitman offered a correspondence course in Shorthand for office workers.

Almost at the same time London University began offering degrees by examination for people all over the world. The novelist Charles Dickens called it 'The People's University'. One of the first women to graduate from London University took this route.

And since that time five graduates of this University of London External Programme have won Nobel Prizes. More generally, millions of people have gained professional qualifications through distance learning over the last 150 years. Its role in human resource development is well established. What does the research say? We shall summarise briefly three important studies.

Fifty years ago Dubin and Taveggia (1950) concluded that there was no measurable difference among truly distinctive methods of instruction when evaluated by student performance on examinations.

Later researchers conducted meta-analyses to bring together the results of many investigations.

Bernard et al. (2004) compared distance education with classroom instruction for a variety of learners, from young children to adults, on measures of achievement, attitudes, and course completion, by examining 232 studies published from 1985 to 2001. They found that asynchronous distance learning had a small but significant positive effect on student achievement.

Means et al. (2013) compared blended learning with face-to-face teaching on the basis of articles published between 1996 and 2008. They found that, on average, students in online learning conditions performed modestly better than those receiving face-to-face instruction.

These authors warn that online learning is not necessarily superior as a medium. It is the inclusion of different kinds of learning activities that is effective, because blended learning involved more learning time, additional instructional resources, and course elements that encourage interactions among learners.

The research findings indicate that we should redesign instruction to incorporate online learning while retaining elements of face-to-face instruction.

The lesson from nearly a century of comparative research is that face-to-face teaching is not better than distance or online learning.

When we consider the benefits that it presents to students in terms of convenience and flexibility, ODL clearly represents the future of human resource development.

MOOCs: the Eureka moment - if Harvard is going online...

But why, since the research is pretty clear about the superiority of ODL, was higher education so slow to adopt it?

Many countries, including Vietnam, have created distance-teaching open universities, but most institutions around the world did little to explore distance learning until three years ago.

That was 2012, the year of the MOOC. Several elite US universities, including Harvard and MIT, launched Massive Open Online Courses. The term MOOC had been invented in Canada four years earlier for a free course on Connectivism, but these US courses involved much larger numbers and a simple behavioural instructional style.

This early MIT MOOC is an example. It was **massive**, with over 150,000 registrations. It was **open**, because it was free, and it was online. Was it a course? Not really because less than 5% of learners passed the tests. Those that did were not given credit that they could use at MIT. We believe that higher education is not just about teaching and learning but also about assessment and credentials. Stamenka will return to this.

Since 2012 there has been rapid growth in the number of MOOCs. One observatory counted nearly 4,000 at the end of last year. The number of MOOC platforms has also grown. Stamenka and I have each taken several MOOCs from FutureLearn, which was created by the UK Open University and has 70 partner universities around the world.

The most recent MOOC that I took was from the University of Cape Town in South Africa and it was excellent. Stamenka and I are typical of the majority of MOOC learners. We already have degrees and we are looking to MOOCs for free recreational learning with no obligations.

The growth in the number of MOOCs has been accompanied by considerable diversification. This cartoon jokes that the meaning of every letter in the acronym MOOC is now negotiable. MOOCs have stimulated four developments in particular.

First, the majority of higher education institutions are now creating strategies for online learning. Indeed, the proportion of courses being taken online in the US has been rising steadily for years. Most strategies involved blended learning, which is the name of any kind of mix of technology-based and face-to-face teaching.

Second, they want to solve the two big problems of MOOCs, which are that they do not offer credentials and they do not have a viable economic model. The two problems are related, as are the solutions. Institutions earn income from fees and government grants because they offer programmes leading to credentials. So the answer is to offer online programmes that do offer credentials and therefore earn income.

Third, the future of MOOCs is probably not in higher education but in human resource development at other levels. In 2012 some were arguing, stupidly, that MOOCs were the answer to the crisis of higher education in the developing world. They are not, because those students seek credible qualifications.

But we are seeing an increasing number of MOOCs addressing development issues that mainly attract learners in developing countries. A national programme of MOOCs to address the huge human resource development needs in Indian agriculture is just one example.

But now let me hand you over to Stamenka to address our third and fourth points.

### **Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić**

Thank you Sir John - and good morning! It is indeed a great pleasure to be with you all and to visit Vietnam for the first time.

#### New qualifications and credentials

I shall begin by asking: could new and shorter qualifications and credentials facilitate work human resource development through distance learning?

Things are changing!

In 2012, at a conference of the European Association for International Education, Allan Pall, then president of the European Students Union, presented a paper entitled *'The death of the degree'*. He argued that higher learning should focus more on validating students' learning outcomes so that employers have access to the right mix of skills and competences to match labour market needs. He suggested that traditional degrees no longer fulfill their function.

Three years later, new qualifications and credentials are multiplying. They are part of the mushrooming of new and alternative providers in higher education. These in turn are a response to unprecedented change in higher education prompted primarily by the growing and unmet demand by traditional higher education institutions.

This slide shows that global enrolments are predicted to double in the next 20 years. Already half of world enrolments are in Asia and this pattern will continue.

Although we do not believe that the traditional degree is likely to disappear completely, it is certain that new ways of validating learning are appearing. I would like to mention some of the most recent ones, especially in the context of facilitating work-integrated learning.

Let me begin with Open Badges.

Open badges were developed by the Mozilla Foundation as part of the Open Education Movement. The badges are digital, can be customized to the needs of the learners and their learning trajectories and contain more information about their knowledge, competences and skills than a traditional transcript of records.

Another response to the disconnect between the traditional university degrees and the needs of the labour market are online 'specializations' developed by Academic Partnerships, a private company based in Texas. Online courses – representing the core curriculum in high demand disciplines – are prepared by prestigious universities around the world and offered online through host universities that include them in their programmes.

The successful completion of such courses leads to a new Global Specializations Credential that is part of the traditional university degree issued by the home institution. The Specialization Diploma can be earned in approximately 100 days, and is made up of several Specialization Certificates that can be completed in four to six weeks. The special value of a Specialization is the relevance of the courses to the labour market, the shorter time required to earn the diploma and the quality that is associated with the provider institution.

New entrants like College for America, which now offers Bachelor's degrees are also teaming up with major employers such as Anthem Blue Cross, Gulf Oil, and McDonald's to offer customized degrees.

These are not new phenomena. Not long ago we used to joke about Hamburger University, the McDonald's training centre that has campuses in seven countries. These have prepared generations of McDonald's managers since 1977 and now offer accredited degrees. Margaret Thatcher shocked the other UK universities when she gave it her seal of approval with a visit in 1989. But today, in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University, McDonald's is training dozens of staff in a custom-designed foundation degree in managing business operations, building on already recognised courses. This is yet another example of many links being developed between business and education.

A different model of accumulating credits from various sources comes from Asia. It could possibly serve as a facilitator for work-integrated learning. South Korea's Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) is an original example of an institution that grants degrees by combining credits from different sources. Although students prefer more prestigious qualifications from traditional universities, credits earned through national certificates or recognized private certificates can contribute to earning a degree from ACBS.

Competency-based education is not a new phenomenon. In the US it goes back to the mid-90s when the Western Governor's University began to offer online courses with flexible academic calendars so that you can start a course every month. In particular it certifies competences that seem to be valued by employers.

In this era of new credentialing, let me warn against an old phenomenon that continues to be a threat: degree mills, or online providers of fake diplomas. A recent example is the MUST University – Misr University for Science and Technology.

As a global network of fraudulent online universities it uses high-pressure sales tactics and phony scholarships to extract money from students who end up with worthless degrees.

We need to take this very seriously. Fraudsters either operating bogus institutions or accreditation bodies or offering counterfeit certificates of legitimate credentials are already a plague on traditional formal higher education. The diversification of credentials offers even more scope for such criminals to deceive people.

Some years ago UNESCO worked with CHEA, the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation, on a document aimed at discouraged degree mills. Degree mills are one reason why we must still ask the question whether employers are ready to take new types of qualifications seriously? Some analysts predict that the transition will take at least a decade. This is partly because many of the credentials mentioned above are digital. Employers need to become more aware of their existence, develop software for their effective use and adopt new and more receptive mindsets.

However, the increase in digitally based credentials has the great advantage that they can be made more secure than convention credentials on paper. As well as providing more detail about the content and results of an individual's studies, they also provide a way of verifying the authenticity of the institution and the fact the student was enrolled there.

Nonetheless, what is common to most examples given in this presentation is that they are a product of close collaboration between higher education, learners and corporate bodies.

#### What about quality?

Obviously this process of diversification in higher education poses challenges for quality assurance. How can students be sure that the services they are paying for are reputable and effective?

Let me start with two guides about quality in online learning that I have helped to edit.

The first, published simultaneously in Chinese and English in 2013 was *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning*. It was published as an Open Educational Resource so you can download it free, distribute it, translate it, adapt it or generally do what you like with it. That Guide, which is the form of frequently asked questions, deals with what I call 'traditional' online learning that leads to credits and credentials.

But when the MOOCs craze gathered speed and Open Educational Resources began to multiply, people asked us to do a second guide dealing with those more informal aspects of higher education.

So last year we published, also in Chinese and English as an Open Educational Resource, a *Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education*. This Guide stresses that quality assurance for Post-Traditional Higher Education – like its various manifestations – is a work in progress. It is too early for hard and fast rules.

Today I am working as Senior Advisor on International Affairs to CHEA. In this capacity I helped CHEA to launch an International Quality Group last year. Although organised from the US, it has a global outreach and is open to membership from a wide range of higher education stakeholders worldwide.

The primary mission of CIQG is to promote policy dialogue on these emerging challenges to quality assurance in an international perspective. One important function is the publication of its newsletter, *Quality International*. Another is developing policy briefs on topical issues in quality assurance and accreditation worldwide.

Under the leadership of CHEA President Judith Eaton, CHEA's CIQG is also addressing the quality assurance of informal online offerings such as MOOCs, OERs, experiential learning and other innovations that we call post-traditional higher education. It is doing this through a "quality platform" for reviewing the quality of post-traditional provision. The overall aim is to facilitate judgements on the performance and effectiveness of post-traditional higher education. Such provision has diverse aims so these reviews would begin by judging the provision against its primary purposes: what is it offering to the student? Is the aim the award of degrees or not? Is the learning experience at the appropriate level?

They could use standards to judge the provider's success with regard to student learning and might benchmark the capacity of the provider and its performance in relation to comparable providers. Peers with expertise in this non-traditional sector would conduct the reviews. A provider that successfully completes the review would be identified as a "Quality Platform Provider."

Colleges and universities could use the Quality Platform designation as an indicator of quality when considering the award of credit or recognition. Quality assurance agencies could refer to the Quality Platform in reviews of these providers that they might conduct.

### Conclusions

I shall end there. It has been a pleasure for Sir John and I to address you. I hope we have convinced you that distance learning will play a major role in human resource development all over the world.