IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Ten Major Themes Emerged During Very Stimulating EDEN 2023 Annual Conference in Dublin

EDEN is the largest and longest-lasting network of those engaged in open, distance, flexible and online learning. Its annual conference, held in Dublin this year, attracts colleagues from Europe and around the world. Rigorously peer-reviewed papers form the backbone of the two-day event, interspersed with challenging and thoughtful short keynote presentations.

This year's event, the largest in EDEN's history, attracted over three hundred participants. They explored a great many issues and themes, reviewed evidence related to student behaviour and attitudes of instructional colleagues and addressed emerging issues.

The ten major themes that emerged during the two-day event were:

1. **Pathfinding**: The need students have for advice and guidance on course and program choice. Referred to as pathfinding, choices linked to career goals and preferred learning styles are becoming more complex and difficult. AI-enabled systems can help with this work.

2. The Skills Agenda: Every jurisdiction has a skills shortage. The situation is more acute in some jurisdictions than others, but there is a global "war" for talent. But which skills are in demand, how they are developed and supported and how they are sustained are significant issues. The need for quality labour market information, strong links between educators and employers, and the development of effective and efficient routes for upskilling, reskilling and assessment are needed.

3. Dancing with Robots: The way in which technology, teachers and students interact featured prominently in the discussions, both formal and informal. Hybrid learning, personalized learning and the growing use of immersive technologies all suggest that teachers and students will develop a new relationship with technologies. AI featured in this discussion, with a strong set of concerns about the future of teaching and learning, given the power of generative AI.

4. Lifelong Learning: Given that many careers demand constant unlearning, relearning, and upskilling life-long learning is no longer a slogan – it is now the reality in many occupations. This leads to the need to track learning using e-portfolios (the EU has created Europass for this work, and Canada is leveraging MyCreds) and on-demand assessment. The learning ecosystem supporting lifelong learning is becoming much more complex, with those seeking to learn facing many options, not all of them equal in value – hence the need for pathfinding. New forms of learning – boot camps, micro-credentials,

microlearning, learning networks – are all emerging as responses to the need for lifelong learning.

5. Micro-Learning: Many institutions and governments are struggling to focus their efforts on offering short, competency-based courses. Different institutions and jurisdictions across Europe have different understandings of what a micro-credential is, how competencies are assessed and whether they are stackable and transferable to diplomas and degrees. In Ireland, a micro-credential offers 25 hours of learning on a very focused topic or skill and is competency driven.

6. Collaboration: A growing number of courses and programs are being co-created between institutions, and, in some cases, students' help from the partnering institutions are also involved in the design, development and deployment of the courses. There is a growing realization that co-opetition is a better option than competition.

7. Services and Supports: Students leave programs and courses for a variety of reasons. One of them is poor "customer" service. The importance of building strong, focused and effective wrap-around services for students was emphasized across various discussions at the conference. The emergence of 24x7 mental health supports, digital assistants for navigating financial and administrative activities students need to complete, and the challenge of delivering quality services were all topics actively discussed.

8. Barriers to Innovation: Many shared their frustration with the decision-making processes at their institutions which appear to slow innovation and make real-time responses to challenges and opportunities difficult. Since many governance structures were established before the emergence of "just-in-time" technologies, there is a need to fast-track experiments and new development. Equally important is understanding the value of failure as an opportunity to improve.

9. Digital Fluency and Skills: While some students may struggle with effectively leveraging technology to support their learning, many instructors do too. The need for continuous professional development, quality technology support for faculty and a "sandbox" to "play, learn and develop" were all high on the priority list.

10. The Future: There was a great deal of discussion about the possible, probable and preferred futures for higher education. With demand increasing and budgets either flat or declining, institutions will need to be very creative in responding to the challenges of the future. One keynote suggested a need to "rewild" the higher education ecosystem so that new patterns, shapes, and ideas emerge. One suggested that the situation faced by policymakers and higher education administrators was "hopeless, but not serious!" – we have all been here before. Another keynote speaker suggested practicing hopeful, creative thinking ("hope punk") to imagine new possibilities. The future is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, and change is a constant.

There was surprisingly little formal discussion of the impact of ChatGPT and similar AI technologies. In informal discussions, however, this was a major topic. A great many

expressed anxiety related to the potential of academic misconduct. Still, some others pursued a different line of thought: a new form of hybrid learning may well emerge using a combination of the [5,500+ AI-enabled apps](#) now available, and we need to be at the forefront of these developments so that the "technification" of higher education is driven by pedagogy not just a desire to make money.

EDEN conferences are significant networking events, and this was no exception. Dublin City University's organizing team deserves credit for running a world-class event full of inspiration and energy.

Congratulations to EDEN from the Contact North I Contact Nord team

Looking forward to reconnecting with all of you at the next EDEN conference in Graz, Austria June 16-18, 2024!