



The Centre for Distance Education has held a conference in central London almost every year since its inception in 2005. In 2016, this conference was held in Senate House on Friday 11 March and, as conference co-chair Steven Warburton explained during his introduction, it was the tenth in the series. This in itself provided a cause for celebration. It followed the format used in previous successful conferences, with keynote lectures at the beginning and end of the day and parallel sessions and workshops in between. These were organised under three key themes of 'Design for Learning', 'Technology for Learning' and 'The Student Experience'.



*Photo (from left to right): Ayona Silva-Fletcher (Chair of CDE Fellows of CDE*

After Steven's introduction, the chair of the CDE Fellows' group, Ayona Silva-Fletcher from the Royal Veterinary College, welcomed delegates to Senate House on behalf of the fellows and gave a short introduction to their work. She explained that while the first fellows were academic staff members in lead colleges of the University of London's International Programmes, the fellowship has expanded in recent years to include both Visiting Fellows based outside London and International Fellows. Their role is

to research and disseminate best practice in distance education and e-learning both within and beyond the University of London, and many would be taking part in the meeting as speakers or session chairs.

Steven then introduced the first keynote speaker, Professor Ilona Buchem from Beuth University of Applied Sciences, Berlin, Germany. Beuth is a small university with a strong focus on the applied sciences, and it belongs to an association of 'virtual universities' – those heavily involved in distance education – in Germany. Her talk was titled, perhaps intriguingly, 'Open Badges – the Missing Link in Open Education'. Open badges were introduced by the Mozilla Foundation, which was set up in 1998 by the developers of the first open-source Web browser Netscape. They can be seen as part of the wider 'Open Movement', along with Creative Commons licensing to protect creative works released into the public domain, open educational resources, and the open courseware projects that were the fore-runners of today's MOOCs. Mozilla Open badges, first released in 2012, are designed to give learners transferable 'credit' for the knowledge and skills that they acquire through these courses, which are generally more informal and collaborative than traditional ones as well as, self-

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evidently, being freely available. This fills a gap left by many MOOCs and free online courses as certificates are not always available, and even when they are they may not be free. Furthermore, traditional diplomas do not provide much detail about exactly what each student has learned, particularly in the domain of 'soft skills' such as problem-solving and teamwork that employers find so valuable.

The Open Badge system is designed to be completely flexible. Any organisation, however informal, can design its own badges using Mozilla's open source software to recognise any type of learning or skill development. It is possible for badges to be issued by peers, or even from learners to teachers to recognise teaching skills. Although good design is useful, the most important part of each badge is the rich meta-data that lies behind it: the 90% of the badge system that Buchem described as 'invisible'. The last section of the talk was devoted to challenges: both those faced by promoters of open badges and those that the open badge movement pose to traditional systems of assessment. Buchem is keen to distance badges from gamification and particularly from the idea of badges as collectable 'commodities' when they are perhaps best seen as a method of recognising prior and often informal learning.

Two of the three morning sessions took forward ideas raised by Buchem's keynote lecture and were related to digital badging and student assessment. In the assessment session, Claire Gordon, Jane Hughes and Colleen McKenna from the London School of Economics and educational consultancy HEDERA described an assessment toolkit that they had developed for the University of London International Programmes. This useful, wide-ranging toolkit covers both theories of assessment and assessment techniques. Discussion centred on the value of incorporating interactivity into the current, static PDF toolkit and of involving student voices. Denise Hawkes from the doctoral programme at the UCL Institute of Education then described how feedback on assignments has been re-designed to encourage more systematic and reflective engagement by the advanced students.

The second of these sessions, in the Design for Learning strand, featured a talk on digital badging and peer assessment given jointly by conference co-organisers

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brief introduction to the EU MOOC Knowledge project for assessing the impact of MOOCs throughout Europe, Mor took participants through an exercise in evaluating the meta-data behind a typical MOOC. A preliminary analysis of participants in a small number of MOOCs, mostly based in Spain, suggests that they principally attracted working age people with a high basic level of education who are resident in the EU.

Conference co-organiser Stylianos Hatzipanagos introduced the final session of the day, a keynote lecture by Jeff Haywood, vice-principal for digital education at the University of Edinburgh. Haywood explained that the term 'MOOC' in his title – 'MOOCs and the taming (or unleashing) of the beast' – could best be taken as a shorthand for 'online education and all that stuff'. He has worked as a consultant for the Scottish Government and the EU investigating the question of how higher education can best be modernised, and he is not optimistic. Many challenges faced by higher education providers across the continent are currently being glossed over or ignored. And some of the most important of these challenges are those posed by digital technologies.

Haywood spent much of his talk exploring the idea of whether MOOCs, open educational resources and similar innovations are sustainable or disruptive. A disruptive innovation is one that displaces established methods, institutions and markets. Although the concept of the MOOC was initially seen as intrinsically disruptive, it did not remain so as universities adapted their financial model to use free online provision as a 'loss-leader' for traditional, fee-paying student enrolment. They may, however, have triggered more disruptive innovation, particularly with state finance for higher