International education conference emphasizes the importance of opening up quality education and access to knowledge for the population of the world.

The world conference of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) held in Tianjin, China heard repeated calls for post-secondary education to meet demand for learning and knowledge from a young worldwide population. 700 conference participants from 40 countries heard Paulina Gonzalez-Pose, Chief of Section for Higher Education at UNESCO underline that online and distance learning is needed more than ever before for increased opportunity and access. “Blended learning is a new form for higher education”, she said, referring to the integration of online learning with traditional classroom teaching. “At no time in history has it been more important to invest in higher education – towards an inclusive and diverse knowledge society, to advance research, innovation and creativity.”

Yang Zhijian, President of the Open University of China, which has 3.7 million students in distance education, spoke of how they are facilitating online offerings to increase accessibility, affordability and quality. The government of China is supporting and promoting this as a key element of its national digitalization strategy.

Massive Open and Online Courses – the opportunity and the leadership challenge

Speakers shared analyses of the new and growing phenomenon of Massive Open and Online Courses (MOOCs) – a radical learning delivery mode, which brings both opportunity and considerable challenges to existing education. The MOOCs phenomenon finds its origins both in open and distance learning universities, which offer a degree of opportunity of access unparalleled in any other form of traditional post-secondary education, and in the increasing implementation of open educational resources worldwide in place of commercial textbooks and other learning materials. ICDE members such as The Open University, UK, which is leading a consortium of 26 mainly UK universities in the FutureLearn MOOCs initiative will now join forces to support post-secondary education leaders in this high-paced environment of change.

Elite US institutions have been most visibly at the forefront of the development and marketing of MOOCs, with Coursera, and edX from Harvard and MIT perhaps the best known. Supporters argue that MOOCs should now be embraced as an integral element of a modern post-secondary education system, while detractors point to the lack of business model, recognition, and limited learner support. Rory McGreal, Professor at Athabasca University, Canada, pointed out that Coursera’s terms and conditions state clearly that course completion cannot under any circumstances be used to obtain a qualification.

Vijay Kumar, Dean of Educational Innovation at MIT, meanwhile, demonstrated the tangible benefits for the learner of edX’s online course in molecular biology in terms of instant feedback, varying pace of study according to the needs of the learner, and the opportunity to run virtual experiments which immediately anchor learning in practical experience. But more than this, he showed how the data about learning which large-scale online courses provide are enabling a revolution in pedagogy and a reassessment in elite universities such as his own to the provision of continual improvements to teaching across all courses.

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Guaranteeing quality

Universities which offer open and distance education have a long tradition of academic support with counsellors on-hand to guide and ensure student engagement. Yngve Nordkvelle of Norway Opening Universities noted the diversity of successful models for student support in his country. Asha Kanwar pointed to the example of the Uganda Teaching Training College where each professor takes personal responsibility for following up students who have not met course deadlines. “The ultimate culture of quality is a culture of care”, she said.

Opening up education

The open universities represented within ICDE have helped to spur increasing opportunity and access in education today. But, as Fred Mulder, UNESCO Chair in Open Educational Resources noted, “open education is not a solution to all educational challenges – it is a part of the process”. ICDE, its members, and the game changers driving forward this process are therefore uniquely placed to promote and support the whole community of post-secondary education and beyond as it works to improve and lobby for the greater acceptance of open courses, open educational resources and open access to knowledge and wisdom in order to prepare young people for today’s dynamic and fast changing labour market.

ICDE’s next event will be a meeting of university senior management on the theme of leadership for change to be held in Lisbon Portugal, 27-30 November 2013: http://scop2013.uab.pt.

Further information

The ICDE World Conference is held every two years hosted by an ICDE member institution. This year’s, 26th ICDE World Conference was hosted by Tianjin Open University, China. Conference website: www.tjrtvu.edu.cn/icde/en/index-en.html

The International Council for Open and Distance Education is a membership organization of 130 institutions and organizations responsible for educating between 5 and 10% of the world’s post-secondary student population through open, distance, flexible and online learning, including e-learning. ICDE is supported by partial funding from the Government of Norway, and the organization is a consultative partner at UNESCO. For more information about ICDE: www.icde.org/en/about

Images: http://icde.org/b7C_wRfU1w.ips

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