

The Message of Istanbul Innovating Higher Education Conference 2023

Accelerating towards a digital and inclusive campus Empowering Learners: Micro-credentials, Generative AI, and Equity

The IHE-2023 Conference has explored some of the most prominent topics of the year: the use of Large Language Models (LLM) such as ChatGPT in higher education, the conceptualization and implementation of micro-credentials, equity and widening participation, and personalisation..

EADTU and the affiliated universities have worked intensively in these areas in recent years, resulting in reports and input in EU consultation meetings.

Generative AI and LLM in Digital Education

Generative AI and in particular Large Language Models (LLMs) have significantly disrupted higher education, leading to debates about their use and implications. The introduction of LLMs affects all key stakeholders, including students, teachers, support services, institutional leadership, and authorities.

Universities should establish the educational and ethical conditions for using LLMs to enhance education by integrating them into teaching and learning design models. The process of incorporating generative AI and LLMs in higher education requires building trust in what are new and effective ways to teach and learn with AI.

With the support of the European Commission¹, EADTU keeps up with these developments by:

- Continuously monitoring the latest developments in research, innovation, and institutional policies related to LLMs in education;
- Developing frameworks for the deliberate use of LLMs in teaching and learning design based on these developments;
- Implementing and evaluating the use of LLMs in teaching and learning activities in the membership;
- Developing recommendations for the ethical use of LLMs and Generative AI for teachers and students, including institutional policies;
- Providing ongoing professional development for staff and leadership on the use of LLMs and generative AI in higher education.

Micro-Credentials and the Bologna Process

The European Council Recommendation characterizes micro-credentials as short, flexible learning programmes that aid individuals in reskilling, upskilling, or changing careers. The EU encourages

¹ ADMIT, Generative artificial intelligence and large language models in higher education

Member States to use micro-credentials to facilitate lifelong learning, with a goal of 60% of adults participating annually.

Open and distance universities in EADTU have been delivering continuing education online through short courses for many years. The digital delivery of micro-credentials has the benefit to offer flexible and scalable solutions for continuing education and career development for large numbers of students across Europe. However, there is a significant variation in the institutional qualifications for continuing education among universities.

To ensure transparency of micro-credential qualifications for academia and employers, it is crucial for universities and governments to agree on a unified award structure for micro-credentials that aligns with the European Qualification Framework. EADTU and the European MOOC Consortium have already pioneered the Common Microcredential Framework (CMF), which offers consistent microcredential programmes with a total volume of 4-6 ECTS, making it suitable for continuing education for learners who are combining work and study.

The CMF Framework represents an initial common qualification. It's suggested that additional layers or exit points should be defined in a qualification framework for micro-credentials, based on the learning volume and the EQF qualification levels. This would form a comprehensive framework that should be incorporated into the Bologna Process.

Equity and widening participation

In higher education institutions, diversity arises from a variety of factors such as differences in prior knowledge, cultural background, language skills, self-learning abilities, availability of time, and self-esteem. This leads to a variety of needs that must be addressed. As society's need for complex competencies grows, the challenge of promoting key competences for all through high-quality education, training, and lifelong learning becomes even greater.

Higher education institutions have an increasing responsibility to promote inclusion in degree programs as well as in continuing education. This requires implementing measures to widen participation, improve retention, and provide adaptive education that meets the individual needs of learners.

As part of their mission, EADTU member universities have a unique position in national higher education systems to ensure equal opportunities for all to access higher education and the labour market. They have established a task force to optimize participation and retention in higher education and better prepare all individuals for the labour market.

In line with their core mission, EADTU universities are in the fore-front of promoting equity is one of the strategic objectives for cooperation in education and training at the EU-level (European Pillar of Social Rights).

Personalisation

Open and distance teaching universities are committed to providing high-quality, scalable, cost-effective, personalized, and tailored course offerings to meet individual and entrepreneurial needs. This commitment to openness and personalization has been a distinguishing feature of European open and distance universities.

The advent of digital teaching and learning, supported by learning analytics and AI, has created new opportunities for combining openness and scalability with personalization. EADTU members are developing new technology-based strategies and methodologies for teaching and learning to achieve this. However, these are still in the early stages, and the continuous emergence of new technologies provides ongoing opportunities for further exploration and development.

Key strategies include adapting the mode, content, or pace of instruction based on students' learning needs as indicated by learning analytics and AI, and providing real-time pathways and resources that go beyond one-size-fits-all learning experiences.

Also, study counselling plays a crucial role in personalization, especially for part-time students balancing work and family. It assists students in making study career decisions, including advice on study planning, course selections, choosing a major or taking the opportunity of workplace learning. At open and distance teaching universities, study counselling starts when students begin their studies and assess what knowledge and skills they already have and need for potential career and corresponding study options. Technology can play a significant role in assisting with this personal mapping of knowledge and skills and progress made.

Ensuring the well-being of students is another important aspect of study counselling. It helps students feel confident in their studies.

EADTU and the members establish a Task Force Personalization to share expertise and experience and for developing a framework for modelling personalization.

European and global outreach

EADTU is committed to ensuring European and global outreach by initiating European projects that result in generic models and guidelines for digital higher education, collaboration, and mobility. It provides online continuous professional development for higher education staff and leadership through its EMPOWER services. Quality assurance for online and blended education is ensured through the e-excellent scheme.

EADTU maintains an ongoing dialogue with its members, the European Commission, and other authorities. In collaboration with other European organizations, it has a service contract with the European Commission for the European Digital Education Hub.