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ARTICLE

Developing Student Support for Open and Distance Learning: The EMPOWER Project

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European universities face great challenges dealing with twenty-first century world changes. Deep transformations are required to a wide range of life-long learning scenarios, which are replacing traditional modes of university study and giving access to students in more flexible ways. To address the transformation in learning, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) launched the EMPOWER project in 2015 so that the EADTU could share expertise of distance education universities in the field.

The EMPOWER project is organised in 12 areas. One is student support, as the central area for students' success. The project's goal is to empower students to become life-long, self-directed learners in open, online and blended-learning environments. The plan was to increase student retention and enhance academic performance, integration and satisfaction.

This article summarises the work that has been done during the past two years to offer different tools and resources, such as webinars and reports. These can help institutions and academics in their understanding of what underlies student engagement and motivation versus student drop-out. We aim to share expertise about how effective, or not, technology has been for developing innovative, advanced and quality student support services to large and small groups of students.

It is too early to judge the success of the student support group of the EMPOWER project. This paper looks at what has been achieved so far. In particular it outlines the reasons for focusing on the problem of student drop-out and how student support may help to ameliorate the problem.

Keywords: student support; distance learning; online learning; motivation; drop-out; EMPOWER project

Introduction to the EMPOWER Project and the Student Support Group

The European Commission is urging universities to widen the access to university study to a larger number of students using more flexible, innovative and personalised life-long programmes, and thereby strengthen inclusive education. The commission wants to increase participation and improve completion rates (European Commission, 2011, 2017).

To accomplish these goals, campus education should be re-shaped and blended. Online learning should be properly integrated at the university level, according to the proposals and conclusions of the experts of the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education (2013, 2014). In its own words:

> 'Online learning transforms how people access knowledge, and opens up higher education to people for whom it is now out of reach. While opportunities to rethink higher education will abound, this revolution will be challenging on many fronts: the role of the teacher will change radically, with online learning calling for completely new skillsets, and the teaching and learning process becoming increasingly individualised. We will witness teaching moving outside the institutions altogether and into virtual space… Online delivery is not only a challenge to the classroom. It is a challenge to our entire model of higher education. Governance, accreditation and quality assurance will all have to adapt.' (p. 45).

For that matter, open and distance learning (ODL) universities have a long tradition and more than 25 years of experience in online learning. That implies a deeper knowledge and expertise than the mere experience derived from the recent MOOCs movement in which HE institutions, including face-to-face ones, have been actively involved since 2012. In this sense, the EADTU[1] has represented Europe's leading institutional association in online, open and flexible higher education (HE) for years. That implies that the association has been in charge of different projects in the field, the majority of them being developed in conjunction with the most recognised open universities in Europe, as EADTU members.

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At present, the association is highly involved in the Modernisation of European Higher Education and the Opening-Up Education through new technology[2] being also aligned with the objectives of the ET2020 Working Group on Digital Skills and Competences[3] at HE level, among other programmes. The EMPOWER project[4] is an example of this commitment. This programme aims at sharing the expertise of EADTU ODL universities with traditional face-to-face ones, in their transition to technologically enriched teaching and learning. Thus, the project may contribute to answering some of the current HE challenges for a twenty-first century.

The EMPOWER project was launched at the end of 2015 in a foundational meeting in Brussels. As said on its web page, it is 'the biggest pool of leading experts in online, open and flexible higher education'. It aims to:

- challenge universities in innovating their education.
- enhance universities in the uptake of new modes of teaching.
- bring theory into practice together by organising seminars, staff training, supporting materials, institutional implementation, etc.
- work under a multidisciplinary approach within pilots.

EMPOWER actions are organised into 12 pools of expertise. These include course-related expertise, course and curriculum design, access to knowledge resources, student support, online assessment, and institutional development.

This paper is concerned with the role and actions of the student support group in the EMPOWER project. To start with, it is worth recalling the recommendation of the High-Level Group on the Modernisation of HE in its 2013 report to the European Commission:

> 'Higher education institutions and national policy makers in partnership with students should establish counselling, guidance, mentoring and tracking systems to support students into higher education, and on their way to graduation and beyond.' (recommendation 9, p. 45).

This statement ends with a checklist of questions to leaders, managers, and HE teachers about student support actions, among other relevant issues (p. 70):

- *How far does my institution offer transparent information on learning opportunities to prospective and actual students to help them choose the learning offer most appropriate to them?*
- *How and through which structures (e.g. counselling and mentoring services, platforms for exchanges with teachers and fellow students) does my institution support students during the entire student life cycle?*
- *How does my institution monitor student success, i.e. drop-out rates, time to degree, employment rates after graduation? How is the data collected, evaluated and used for constant quality enhancement?*
- *How does my institution provide for and respond to real-time student feedback on the quality of teaching and learning, i.e. not just end of semester or course feedback but in-course feedback for early adjustment where necessary of programmes and methodologies?*

These questions are at the core of what student support services should be. According to Simpson (2012), student support includes, 'All activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students to success in their studies' (p. 13). In other words, everything that could help a student to increase and sustain their learning motivation would be supporting them in their learning process. This idea is also in line with Lehman and Conceição's (2014) definition of support:

> 'Support means creating an environment that is conducive to learning, developing strategies that create community engagement, and incorporating assistance throughout the process. Support provides students with a sense of community, which allows them to avoid the feeling of isolation; gives students a sense of self-direction and management, thus reducing loss of control; contributes to learner satisfaction; and increases motivation, helping students persist in an online course.' (Chapter 4, paragraph 2)

How might students be better supported to achieve their academic and personal goals? Simpson suggests a simple and elegant formula with the main ingredients of student success, derived from the 'retention formula' proposed by Seidman, 2005 (Simpson, 2012, p. 106):

$$S = AC + Eid + (E+C)\,PaM$$

Where S = success, AC = appropriate course choice, Eid = early identification of vulnerable students, (E + C) PaM = early and continuous proactive motivation support.

This formula appears to be a useful tool for the development of institutional support actions. The stress is on the relevance of acting as soon as possible, not only to guide students in the selection of their courses, but also to identify students at higher risk of failure and drop-out. In addition, an institution must be proactive and not just reactive to student demands and difficulties, so that it sustains a student's motivation and promotes engagement.

Therefore, most student support services could be organised around the three areas represented by the terms on the right of the above formula – AC, Eid, and (E + C) PaM. Everyone should be involved, including staff from academic, counselling, administrative, and technical functions. A holistic approach should be at the core of student support services. Academic and non-academic support needs to be provided to give students of different backgrounds a real inclusive education. As such, the early detection of problems is considered crucial for the identification of student needs and, thus, the kind of support they should receive.

Technology gives us, as never before, new opportunities to take advantage of widening support through online, mobile, ubiquitous, hybrid and more personalised and

adaptive support to students (Sánchez-Elvira, 2016; Tait, 2014). According to these approaches, the EMPOWER student support group of expertise[5] aims at helping HE institutions in the development of those student support services whose quality could empower students as self-regulated learners in online and blended-learning environments. Under a student-centred learning perspective, we consider that giving support to students is the most powerful way to engage them by increasing their intrinsic motivation, promoting integration and retention and enhancing their academic performance, satisfaction and wellbeing. Satisfactory learning experiences promote sustainability and continuity of education, that is, life-long learning. As such, we must be first conscious of the pernicious effects of high drop-out rates in distance and online learning environments to be able to subsequently develop better support measures to prevent this first obstacle. Therefore, reducing student drop-out should be a target of student support services and actions.

Finally, we need to be aware that student support in ODL is not only a necessity but a quality issue. Every quality assurance model in ODL includes specific indicators of student support, both for institutional-level and course-level programmes (for example see Kear et al., 2016; Ossiannilsson et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2013). These indicators should guide institutions in the development of their own student support services.

Introduction to the Relevance of Student Support in Drop-out Prevention

In many respects online education is a success. Brown et al. note that:

> '[Online education] is the fastest growing sector of university-level education (Tennant et al., 2009). In the United States, a recent annual survey of online education claims the number of students taking at least one online course has surpassed 6.7 million (Allen and Seaman, 2013). Based on these figures, Allen and Seaman (2013) estimate that 32% of higher education students in the United States now take at least one course online.' (Brown et al., 2015 p. 2)

The situation in Europe is little different. The growth in online education has been following US trends.

Clearly there are a number of reasons for this growth:

- the presumed economies of scale and production for institutions
- the accessibility and financial savings to students
- the 'technophilia' of many of the institutional staff involved
- the recognition by some commercial entities of the possibility of large profits.

But at the heart of this growth there is a category error. A category error is a semantic or ontological error in which things belonging to a particular category are presented as if they belong to a different category (Ryle, 1949). The category error is the use by institutions of the term 'online learning'. What institutions are doing is online teaching. It is the students who are doing the online learning or, all too often, *not* doing the learning. The error is significant because it allows institutions to be complacent about what they are actually doing. The term online teaching is a more accurate phrase to describe their business.

Drop-out in online education

Consequently there is a spectre haunting the world of online education, the spectre of student drop-out. It is clear that there is a high level of drop-out from online education. The data are hard to collect, as institutions are obviously not keen for the publicity that adverse drop-out rates might attract. There is also no agreed format for presenting drop-out rates. However, if the simple measure of graduation rate is used, it is possible to compare some data from a few institutions that do make the data available (**Figure 1**).

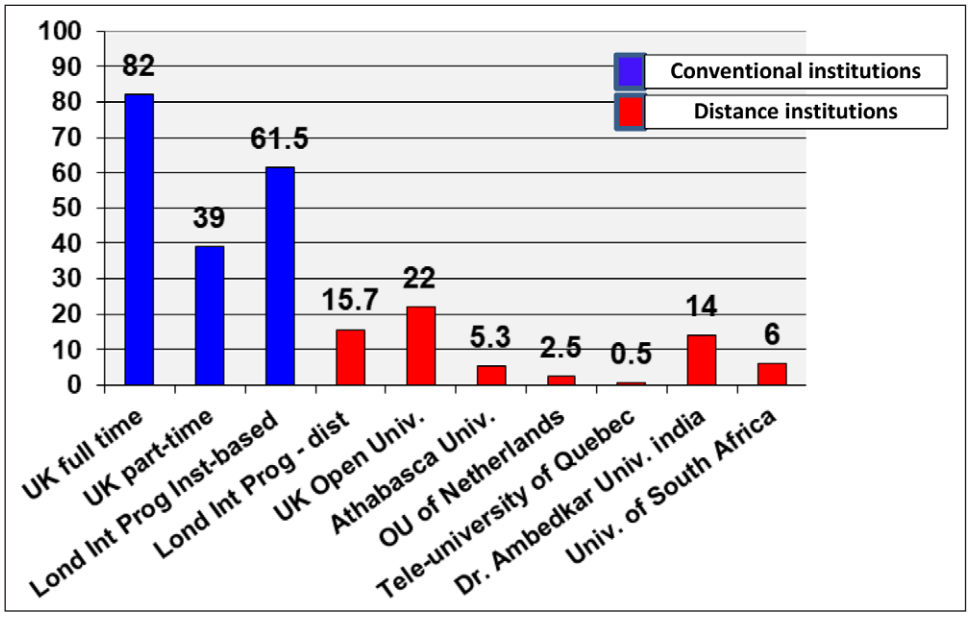

Figure 1: Graduation rates for some conventional and distance institutions compared (Simpson, 2012).

It can be seen that the graduation rates among these online and distance educational institutions are significantly less than among conventional face-to-face institutions. The University of London international programmes rates are particularly interesting. It has identical courses that are presented in two different modes – face-to-face at designated institutions, and entirely online at a distance. The graduation rates are 61.5% and 15.7% respectively – a 'distance education deficit' (Simpson, 2013) of around 45% points in favour of the face-to-face mode.

It is also worth examining the data for the UK Open University in more detail as there have been historical changes with the graduation rate dropping steadily over the 40 years since the OU's beginning. See **Figure 2** that shows the cumulative graduation rates for a number of years of student entry, starting in the OU's first year of intake in 1971.

While this data is now rather old, more recent data suggests the trend is continuing, with the OU's latest graduation rate now down to 13% (Inkelaar and Simpson, 2015, p. 153). During this later period the OU has been moving increasingly to online modes of delivery. While there may be a mix of explanations for the decreasing graduation rate, it is difficult to maintain that the increasing use of online delivery has had a positive effect on graduation rates.

Does student drop-out from online education matter?

There is some evidence from UK full-time higher education that dropping out can increase the likelihood of students experiencing higher probabilities of depression, unemployment, indebtedness and, for women, experiencing violence from their partners (Bynner, 2001). There appears to be no research into the effects of dropping out on online students, although the effects seem unlikely to be positive.

There can, of course, be effects on online institutions in terms of reputation and financial support from governments. It is notable, for example, that the UK OU recently decided not to participate in the UK's recent teaching excellence framework (TEF) exercise. One of the factors determining an institution's award of gold, silver or bronze status in the TEF rating is its retention rates. So non-participation by the OU may have been an inevitable decision given the invidious comparisons with conventional institutions.

Finally and most importantly there is a simple question of ethics. It cannot be right to actively recruit new students to online institutions without at least being up-front with them about their chances of success. But as far as we know there is no institution that does that, despite it being perfectly possible to give intending students that information in statistical form using the new field of learning analytics. It would not be possible to market a new model of car with only an average 10% chance of it reaching its destination. Online students deserve better than this.

Why do online students drop out?

Clearly there are many factors involved in online student drop-out. They often tend to be older than conventional students and have other demands on their time from families and work. And open entry institutions like the UK OU are bound to suffer higher rates through having students with lower previous entry qualifications (Woodman, 1999). But a more detailed examination of the retention data suggests that none of these factors are able to fully explain the discrepancy between graduation rates of more than 80% for conventional UK higher education and the 13% for the UK OU, or the 45% points difference between the University of London international programmes supported and online modes. This latter data may suggest that the difference can be explained at least partially by the lack of student support in the online mode.

Another clue that it is the lack of student support that may lie at the base of these differences can be drawn from the success rates of massive online open courses (MOOCs)

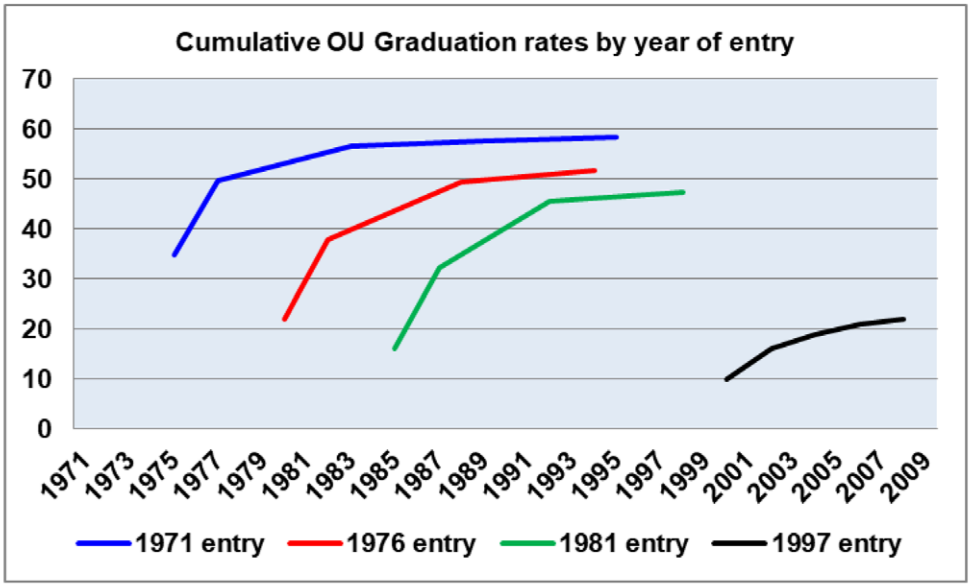

Figure 2: Cumulative UK OU graduation rates 1971 to 1997 (Simpson, 2012).

that have been implemented in online education in the last few years. These are usually unsupported and often have completion rates of less than 10% (Parr, 2013). While there will be other reasons for these low rates, it is hard to dismiss the thought that the lack of student support may be an important factor.

How can online student drop-out be minimised?

The two ways in which online study can be made more effective are through course design and student support.

Course design. This is clearly important and it must be possible to write courses to be retention-friendly. For example, the UK OU has considerable data on the retention rates of its courses compared with benchmarks estimated from the probability of success of students on those courses. This analysis shows that there are courses delivered in similar ways, which nevertheless have very different retention rates. Crooks (2005) examined course modules that were particularly successful in retaining students and suggested that they allowed students greater flexibility in both study materials and assessment. There will be other factors, such as readability, cognitive load, assessment, and workload that will affect a module's success in retaining its students.

Student support. This is the other way of increasing online student success. This paper focuses on student support, which here is defined as all those activities that institutions might undertake to assist students other than course design. The emphasis of this part of the EMPOWER project is on such student support.

Definitions of student support

Student support can be the academic kind or the non-academic.

Academic. This is aimed at developing a student's cognitive and learning skills – in other words teaching or tuition.

Non-academic. This is aimed at developing a student's organisational and affective skills – in other words their ability to manage their employment, family and other demands on their time. It is about the emotional stresses of study and staying motivated.

It is useful to note that non-academic support can include action taken *with* a student, such as giving advice or assessing readiness for study. It can also be action taken *for* a student, such as making out a case for special treatment for a disabled student in an exam or attempting to change the institution in some way. The EMPOWER project has focused on both kinds of support.

EMPOWER Project Vision of Student Support

Since its launch in 2015 the small number of members doing the EMPOWER project has been working on several lines of action:

- attendance and participation in EMPOWER meetings (face-to-face and online)
- development and update of the information and resources of its own space on the EMPOWER public website
- development and update of its private space in the EMPOWER Google+ site
- organisation of a series of webinars and videos on topics related to the field
- contribution to the 2017 report on the *Envisioning Report for Empowering Universities* (Ubachs, Konings, Brown, 2017).

A summary of these actions is explained below.

Development and update of the information and resources of the student support group website

At the EMPOWER website each one of the pools of expertise presents its information. The student support group and the other groups update the information regularly. The information structure is common to all the groups:

- *Introduction*[6] A general overview of the field and past events organised by the group of expertise.
- *Meet the experts*[7] General information about each one of the experts that integrates the group.
- *Tools and resources*[8] A selection of relevant tools and resources available related to the field. Documents are downloadable.
- *Member area* Access to the private site of the group in Google+ sites.

EMPOWER project working space at the Google+ site

As members of a networked community, the experts of each EMPOWER group have at their disposal a private working space in the EMPOWER Google+ site. The space is there to inform about events, news, information, and materials and resources of interest. This is accomplished by using a Google Drive area to upload, share and store documents. The structure of the shared drive of the student support group serves as a basis for the storyline of the group since it was launched.

Webinars and videos on related topics

One of the main lines of action that EADTU proposed for the dissemination of the EMPOWER expertise was the organisation of open and free webinars. A webinar is defined as 'a live online educational presentation during which participating viewers can submit questions and comments' (Merriam-Webster.com, 2017). Webinars would be organised by each of the 12 different expert pools. Since this first proposal by EADTU secretariat, the student support group has offered a total of five webinars using the EADTU ClickMeeting web conference tool. Until now, the webinars of the group have combined synchronous participation of one or two experts with prerecorded videos – some of them offered as introductory of complementary materials to the main presentation. Contributions of each webinar share a common thread, being introduced by the chair of the group. All videos, synchronous and asynchronous, are uploaded to the EADTU[9] YouTube channel and are also available on the EMPOWER website. Webinars are previously announced in EADTU social networks, with Twitter (@EADTU) and Facebook.[10]

From the holistic perspective concerning what student support should be considered, the main aims of the webinars have been, on the one hand, to introduce and discuss

relevant issues concerning students' retention and drop-out in open, distance and online learning. On the other hand, to share innovative solutions for empowering students, increasing their motivation and wellbeing, reducing drop-out and failure rates and promoting success.

In the first year of EMPOWER, the following topics have been addressed in our webinars.[11] Taking part in the webinars were experts from distance education universities, members of EADTU, and the participation of Latin-American institutions.

- **General and broad overview of the student retention and drop-out problematic**
  This tackled major problems in ODL, such as the serious social and financial consequences for students, institutions and society as a whole. Overcoming the problem should involve recognising that funding appropriate student support is not simply a cost but can have a positive financial return for institutions through increased retention (Simpson, 2016).[12]
- **Main learning motivation theories that could contribute to a better understanding of the causes for student drop-out**
  This was useful for the development of actions to promote students retention (Simpson, 2016).[13]
- **Psychological characteristics in the prediction of academic success and failure of ODL students**[14]
  Research has consistently shown that psychological traits and processes have a role in how students cope with learning challenges and difficulties and the learning strategies they use. By integrating the psychological perspective, a better understanding of students' engagement and intrinsic motivation in opposition to pernicious behaviours such as procrastination, avoidance of difficulties, anxiety or academic burnout and its consequences could be attained, not only for academic performance but for wellbeing, as well. Besides, efficient self-regulated learning strategies versus inefficient ones have been found differently related to the psychological profiles above mentioned (Sánchez-Elvira, 2016). That implies that students could be trained to develop more successful ways of coping with their studies, academic demands and stress perception, therefore promoting not only their success but also their satisfaction and welfare.
- **Innovative experiences in ODL student support mediated by technologies**
  How to deal with large number of students.[15] Open and distance education universities are among the largest in the world by number of students enrolled. Efficient support for a large number of students is a challenge that calls for strong and well-organised student support programmes at an institutional level. Innovative and creative solutions are needed for the student's needs in this type of mega-university. EADTU ODL institutions such as the Spanish National Distance Education University (UNED), or the ANADOLU University (Turkey),[16] give support to large student populations. As such, they are investing in the development of more effective ways of supporting students in different areas such as the ANADOLU Hashtag-based FAQ systems to answer frequent questions online (Firhat and Okur, 2016).

The solutions developed by UNED offer:

- synchronous video-tutoring and asynchronous video repositories through AVIP (audio video over IP)
- automatic evaluation of open answers through G-Rubric, a computer solution which combines writing with formative assessment in real time (Santamaría et al., 2017)
- UNED highly sophisticated *Virtual Exam Management System* (VEMS) dealing with:
  - encryption and storing
  - management and control of UNED face-to-face sessions in local centres
  - online return of the scanned exams to UNED main site
  - the use of the corrector software by the academic staff
  - the combination of the exam grade with the continuous assessment grades taken from the university's LMS
  - the communication of the overall grade to students with a mobile app, messaging, email or upon access to the virtual student academic record.

The development of institutional support programmes for prospective and new students.[17] Supporting students during their first year at the university and student problems should be a major concern at an institutional level, as recent reviews on this issue show (Cruz and Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, 2016; Harper et al., 2015). To be efficient, institutional induction programmes should be systemic, on-going processes throughout the student's first year, generating authentic networked learning (Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, 2016). Good examples of specific programmes to support prospective and new students online can be found in ODL institutions, such as the awarded Studiecoach[18] programme of the Open University of the Netherlands, developed by Marion Stevens.

The use of learning analytics to improve student's performance.[19] Undoubtedly, learning analytics is a helpful tool for the identification of relevant issues of student performance and progression (Ferguson et al., 2017). In Rienties et al. words.

'Learning analytics applications in education are expected to provide institutions with opportunities to support learner progression, but more importantly in the near future provide personalised, rich learning on a large scale.' (Rienties et al., 2016, p. 1).

In order to develop a meaningful perspective and intervention approach in the student support domain, learning analytics should be done from a multidisciplinary perspective. The *Analytics4Action* programme (A4A), designed and developed by the Open University in the UK, is a good example of an initiative in which the positive results of several pilot experiences led to the institutional implementation of the programme, as part of the ongoing efforts of the institution to support students in their learning progression (Rienties et al., 2016).

In summary, international webinars, such as those above, should be open spaces for sharing expertise, experiences and discussion. Overall, the first five webinars of the student support group were synchronously attended by a total of 96 participants from 22 different countries and three different continents – with The Netherlands, Spain, Great Britain and Ireland the most represented. Although small in the number of synchronous attendants (mean of 19.2, max. 23 and min. 14), the viewings of the sessions on YouTube keep on growing.

Contribution to the 2017 report on the Envisioning Report for Empowering Universities (first edition)

The student support group has contributed with two articles to the first *Envisioning Report for Empowering Universities*[20] released in May 2017 (Ubachs et al., 2017). In this report, different expert pools of EMPOWER cover the latest trends and developments in new modes of teaching and learning. Under the main title *Supporting the Success of 21st Century Learners*, the student support pool presents two contributions.

On the one hand, there is the summary of the innovative solutions for giving support to large groups of students presented in one of the webinars and based on the years of experience in ODL of the ANADOLU University, Turkey, and UNED, Spain. This contribution is focused on:

> 'some main innovative solutions mediated by technologies, whose aim is to improve student support and the services to large numbers of students in blended and online environments. These solutions are focused on: the optimisation of online students' information and orientation strategies; Synchronous and asynchronous video-tutoring; Automatic formative assessment for open answers and a technologically controlled system for face to face exams.' (Sánchez-Elvira et al., 2017, p. 53)

On the other hand, the second contribution by Ormond Simpson reflects on 'some of the potential innovations in distance education support and estimates the chances of them being mainstreamed in distance education within a five year horizon' (Simpson, 2017, p. 56). The innovations include virtual reality, artificial intelligence systems, emotion detection systems, learning analytics, MOOCs, online feedback and assessment, communication, and social software.

Conclusions

Higher education is facing great challenges in the twenty-first century. Online learning is going to play a more relevant role in the development of new scenarios that contribute to widening the access to tertiary education and life-long learning.

This is one of the main reasons why EADTU launched the EMPOWER project in 2015. An objective is to share the expertise of ODL universities with traditional HE institutions in their transition to an enriched and technologically mediated education. Another objective is to promote innovation in teaching and learning through interactive spaces that disseminate expertise, and exchange good practices and experiences.

This paper presented the work of the student support group of the EMPOWER project in its first year. Student support is central in ODL and it affects the quality of the whole system. This is why every quality assurance model in ODL integrates specific indicators about the suitability of the student support services, both at an institutional and course level (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2013). It is the reason why the third edition of the e-Xcellence manual improved the chapter related to student support benchmarks and indicators (Kear et al., 2016, EADTU). A closer look into the quality issues of student support should also guide our future work within the EMPOWER project.

The quality of the support services delivered by ODL institutions is highlighted by quality agencies. In this respect, Ossiannilsson et al. (2015) point out that:

> 'There is widespread evidence, from Europe, Asia and Americas that open, distance, flexible and online education, including e-learning providers, satisfy national regulators with the quality of their student support services and often rank higher than conventional institutions.' (p. 17)

Nevertheless, although distance and online education has been a great success in many ways in the past, the problem of the 'distance education deficit' remains. Success rates at distance and online institutions are apparently considerably lower than in conventional education. Advances in educational technology do not yet appear to be making much difference to this lack of educational success.

In a Brookings e-newsletter in February 2017 Wildavesky wrote an article entitled *The Open University at 45: What can we learn from Britain's distance education pioneer?* Wildavesky identified a number of critical OU innovations, but the one he picked out as 'the OU's biggest accomplishment' was 'combining scale with personalisation'. He noted that 'for many students... this personal relationship with an instructor is the key'. In other words, it is personal student support that makes the difference between failure and success.

Is it then possible that, so far, inappropriate technology may have depersonalised distance education rather than making personal relationships the key? Can technology be used to overcome the distance education deficit? Much is riding on the answers to these questions. The way to answer them is through research and dissemination. This is exactly what the EMPOWER project on student support is all about.

The student support group is mainly focused on how ODL students should be best supported, mainly in online and blended-learning modes. Special attention is paid to the development of proactive and innovative actions to guarantee effective institutional, administrative and personal academic support. (Simpson, 2012).

Moreover, technologies enable the development of more flexible, interactive, seamless, adaptive and personalised learning environments. These new opportunities require a redefinition of personal support and its requirements in a wider ODL framework; in Alan Tait words, 'support to students should be reconceived in the digital age for distance and e-learning' (Tait, 2014, p. 5). In our current enriched,

complex and technologically mediated scenarios of teaching and learning, more than ever students will need to be conveniently empowered for a successful learning experience. That calls for those in student support to know what works and what does not.

In its first year of collaborative work, the student support group has introduced some topics to be addressed. Based on a 'learning together' and open education perspective, the use of webinars has proved to be a promising tool for creating an international community of inquiry and practices exchange in ODL in different domains. As Creelman points out, webinars offer:

> 'a renewed discussion on what we gain from being in the same place at the same time (either physically or digitally) both for collaboration and for learning.' (Creelman, 2017).

This is what the EMPOWER project is also exploring. As Creelman (2017) proposes in relation to the use of webinars, we should be more ambitious in our objectives and foster higher levels of interaction between participants in this type of synchronous online event.

It is too early to evaluate the success of the project, but it is not too early to publicise its importance and to invite the participation of distance educators everywhere.

Notes

[1] https://eadtu.eu.

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/education-technology_en.

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/expert-groups/digital-skills-competences_en.

[4] https://empower.eadtu.eu/.

[5] https://empower.eadtu.eu/fields-of-expertise/student-support/introduction.

[6] https://empower.eadtu.eu/fields-of-expertise/student-support/introduction.

[7] https://empower.eadtu.eu/fields-of-expertise/student-support/meet-the-experts.

[8] https://empower.eadtu.eu/fields-of-expertise/student-support/tools-resources.

[9] https://www.youtube.com/user/eadtu.

[10] https://www.facebook.com/eadtu/.

[11] https://empower.eadtu.eu/fields-of-expertise/student-support/introduction.

[12] Student dropout in distance education – how many, who, when, why, what are the consequences and how do we overcome them? https://youtu.be/zLIlOURPCec.

[13] Theories of student support for retention https://youtu.be/ykNp_y8JxSw.

[14] Success and risk profiles of distance education student https://youtu.be/St_4K4BQVbE.

[15] Innovative student support solutions for large groups https://youtu.be/l0eCrN5-Z5U.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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