

Innovation, research and best practice in open and distance education

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This last issue of *Open Praxis* in 2015 includes eight articles. Five of them were awarded an ICDE Prize for Innovation and Best Practice in the field of open and distance education (2nd edition), selected among papers presented at the 26th ICDE World Conference, held in Sun City (South Africa) from 14 to 16th October 2015. The last three papers were submitted to the open section of the journal.

In line with ICDE's mission and objectives as described in its Strategic Plan 2013-2016, and following the experience at the 25th ICDE World Conference in Tianjin (China) in 2013, the ICDE aims to stimulate innovation and best practices in the fields of open, distance and online learning by launching several prizes. In this second edition, linked to the 26th World Conference, 14 participants submitted their papers to be considered for the best paper award. The criteria for evaluation were as follows:

- Link to the conference theme
- Originality of the contribution
- Scholarly nature of the work
- Significance of the contribution
- Adherence to the author guidelines of *Open Praxis*

According to the criteria in the call for ICDE Prizes for Innovation and Best Practice in Open, Distance, Flexible, Online Education and E-learning (2nd edition), the Editorial Board of the ICDE journal *Open Praxis* selected five papers to receive the award. The Journal Editor coordinated the double blind evaluation process; each paper was reviewed by at least two Editorial Board members, who filled a rubric, assessing each criterion from 0 to 10. To be awarded, the papers needed to score a minimum of 6 in each of the criteria, a minimum of 35 as a total score, and be recommended for the award by at least two reviewers. The paper had to be original and not published before.

The following *Open Praxis* Editorial Board members participated in the process:

- Prof. Marta Mena, from the National Technological University (Universidad Tecnológica Nacional), Argentina
- Dr. Thomas P. Mackey, from SUNY Empire State College, New York, United States
- Dr. Gangappa Kuruba, from University of Botswana, Botswana
- Dr. Suresh Garg, from Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India
- Prof. Alan Tait, from Open University UK
- Dr. Beatriz Malik, from the Spanish National Distance Education University (UNED), Spain, and
- Dr. Inés Gil-Jaurena, from Spanish National Distance Education University (UNED), Spain, editor for *Open Praxis*.

The awarded papers, published in this *Open Praxis* issue, are:

Asamenew Demessie Bireda, from UNISA, was awarded the ICDE Prize for Innovation and Best Practice in Open, Distance, Flexible, Online Education and E-learning for the paper *Challenges to the Doctoral Journey: a Case of Female Doctoral Students from Ethiopia*. The Editorial Board highlighted the qualitative approach of this paper, which identifies female students' concerns and provides insight to organize student support services. The author explores issues faced by doctoral students in general, and by female students in particular in the course of their doctoral studies, conducting a qualitative in-depth study with five female doctoral students. The results identified several topics grouped in three major areas of concern: academic, psychosocial and home/work related. The author suggests some strategies to meet the challenges posed by women scholars in the doctoral journey, and contends that universities should provide support structures to facilitate these strategies, making students aware of such structures during orientation sessions.

Patrina Law, from the Open University UK, was awarded the ICDE Prize for Innovation and Best Practice for the paper *Recognising Informal Elearning with Digital Badging: Evidence for a Sustainable Business Model*. The Editorial Board of *Open Praxis* valued the originality of this paper, which presents a good research in an innovative area. The author describes the evaluation process of a suite of free Badged Open Courses (BOCs), launched by the Open University, drawing from previous data on the increasing proportion of learners who are keen to have their informal learning achievements recognized. The outcomes provide insight into the strategic importance of informal learning recognition, e.g. to provide accessible routes into formal learning for those who might not otherwise have the opportunity. Based on the evaluation carried out, the advantages and potential uses of BOC's are discussed, providing evidence on their value to institutions.

Ashok Gaba, from Indira Gandhi National Open University, & Wei Li, from Open University of China, were awarded the ICDE Prize for Innovation and Best Practice for the paper *Growth and Development of Distance Education in India and China: A Study on Policy Perspectives*. The Editorial Board of *Open Praxis* valued the comparative approach to the development of open and distance education in the two most populated countries, including mentions to recent trends in the field. The authors compare four relevant dimensions related to ODL in India and China: the development of economy and distance education with reference to policy perspectives; course design, development and delivery of distance education programmes in Indira Gandhi National Open University of India (IGNOU) and Open University of China (OUC); the trend of enrollment in both universities; and the recognition /accreditation and quality control process of distance learning. Findings of the study are not conclusive; nevertheless, they provide an in-depth knowledge of these two mega Open Universities, and raise some issues which are of interest to ODL world-wide, i.e. the credibility and quality of open and distance education. The authors conclude with some recommendations to ODL institutions and to ICDE.

Maximus Gorky Sembiring, from Universitas Terbuka Indonesia, was awarded the ICDE Prize for Innovation and Best Practice for the paper *Validating Student Satisfaction Related to Persistence, Academic Performance, Retention, and Career Advancement within ODL Perspectives*. The Editorial Board valued the relevant aspects for open and distance education that this paper puts in focus and its practical outcomes and implications. A major current concern in Universitas Terbuka, common to most universities, is maintaining the size and growth of the student body, without decreasing the quality of the services provided, such that all services meet as many students' needs and expectations as possible. The author describes a study of which the primary aim is to evaluate the service quality (Servqual) implemented in this university, concerning those factors that lead to student satisfaction, in relation to persistence, academic performance, retention, and career advancement in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) settings. The research has created a quantitative framework of student

satisfaction and its dimensions, specifically to meet the needs of ODL students, and further lines of research are suggested at the end, to provide a more comprehensive perspective.

Shironica P. Karunanayaka; Som Naidu; J.C.N. Rajendra & H.U.W. Ratnayake, from The Open University of Sri Lanka and Monash University, were awarded the ICDE Prize for Innovation and Best Practice for the paper *From OER to OEP: Shifting Practitioner Perspectives and Practices with Innovative Learning Experience Design*. The Editorial Board of *Open Praxis* valued the scholarly nature of this paper and its significance in the field, as it provides an important best practice that will inspire others. The authors present a professional development course on OER-based e-learning, designed and implemented to assist and support teaching staff in the integration of OER in their teaching practice. The course modules incorporated the use of learning scenarios and learning tasks that facilitated capacity building in a collaborative manner. The paper reports the impact of this course on shifting the participants' perspectives and practices in relation to open educational practices. Their expectations were met, and they were very satisfied with the development of their knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to OER-based e-learning. They also developed competencies in designing, developing and implementation of an OER-based e-Learning course.

Besides the ICDE prizes, this issue includes three research articles in the open section.

Martin Weller, Bea de los Arcos, Rob Farrow, Beck Pitt and Patrick McAndrew, from the Open University UK, present a paper on *The impact of OER on teaching and learning practice*, based on the work they develop at the OER Research Hub. With responses from different OER initiatives in the world, the survey results show that OER has direct and indirect impact on teaching and learning practice, such as positive impact of OER on learners' engagement and on increasing educators' reflection on their own practices. These and other evidences advocate for a wider and better use of OER.

Manuel Flores Fahara and Armida Lozano Castro, from Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico, in their paper *Teaching Strategies to Promote Immediacy in Online Graduate Courses*, present a virtual ethnography developed in their institution, where they have analyzed academic and administrative fora to identify instructional design, online communication and teaching strategies that make students feel psychologically closer to teachers in online environments. The findings are of interest to other e-learning researchers and practitioners.

Finally, Javiera Atenas, Leo Havemann and Ernesto Priego, from different institutions in the UK, present the paper *Open Data as Open Educational Resources: Towards Transversal Skills and Global Citizenship*. They identify a set of relevant skills that open data can help to develop. Survey results show different experiences in the use of open data in teaching around the world, and the authors advocate for open data as a resource for developing core skills in research-based curricula. The paper includes two examples of rubrics that can help teachers evaluate the acquisition of transversal skills by using open data.

It is our desire that the diverse perspectives, results and recommendations in these papers are useful to our readers, and inspire future research and innovative practices.

We would like to congratulate all the awarded authors at the 26th ICDE World Conference and thank all authors for their contributions. Thanks are extended to the members of the journal's Editorial Board, which selected the winning papers.

Regarding the overall volume 7 in 2015, we specially thank all the reviewers who have collaborated in the four issues. Their names and affiliations are listed in the full issue and in the journal website (<http://openpraxis.org/index.php/OpenPraxis/pages/view/reviewer>).

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