



Promoting Open, Flexible and Distance Learning in Increasingly Challenging Times

Niki Davis, Editor-in-Chief, University of Canterbury

Alison Fields, Associate Editor, Open Polytechnic of New Zealand

Maggie Hartnett, Associate Editor, Massey University

Abstract

Although the potential to increase equitable access to education is threatened by economic and technical developments, the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* is working to address these threats. This editorial describes actions over the lifetime of one leader in the field and the lifetime of this journal. Our move to align with and take advantage of the Public Knowledge Project in Canada is the most recent action. The articles and book reviews in this issue also provide a number of illustrations of the open scholarship that is working to increase equitable access for adults and children in this region and around the world.

Keyword: open scholarship

Introduction

The potential to increase equitable access to education is threatened by economic and technical developments. However, when our field was young it was easier to naively imagine that things would be better in the future, when digital technologies would become ubiquitous. Our field of open, flexible, and distance learning—and our choice of an open access platform—is based on equity, which is expressed by our sponsoring professional association the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand (FLANZ), as “making ako accessible to all/kia hora nga mahi ako ki te katoa” (Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand, n.d.). This editorial therefore looks at our work to promote research and its application in increasingly challenging times.

Our changing world

There is increasing awareness that “the compelling ideology of the web as a public good” (Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000, p. 178) is naive. Economic changes cause stress in many places, including in Aotearoa New Zealand where a Productivity Commission is currently reviewing tertiary education to inform policy development. The New Zealand Government has commissioned the Productivity Commission to investigate “how trends in technology, internationalisation, population, tuition costs and demand for skills may drive changes in models of tertiary education” (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2016). This inquiry follows the 2014 “Innovations in Tertiary Education Delivery Summit”, which considered emerging models of tertiary education provision and discussed challenges to more traditional models. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) were a central theme of the summit, and were perceived by many participants to indicate increasing threats to the viability of existing models. A number of the FLANZ Executive contributed to that summit, bringing the association’s research to bear—including the research that produced future scenarios for tertiary education in New Zealand and

brought them to the notice of tertiary leaders (Davis & Higgins, 2015). The current inquiry focuses on how New Zealand's institutional and policy settings help or hinder the adoption of new models of tertiary education, and is undertaking a broad review of new and potential future models. This matter is of interest to nations worldwide and draws upon international scholarship in our field. The FLANZ Executive drew on their collective expertise to make a submission that will be available on the association's website (Stein et al., 2016, in press). The submission concludes with this summary and recommendations:

Competitive funding drives margins lower and, while this may be seen as efficient, the consequences could equally be compromised student support and increasing cost of quality assurance (Liefner, 2003). It has been shown that funding awards based on development plans rather than performance will have more equity (Tadjudin, 2007).

There is a tenuous connection between growing numbers of graduates and productivity. In part, this can be explained by policy settings that prioritise full time youth students and produce graduates that often have no previous connection with the industry workplaces they will be going to. To produce dividends of productivity from education investment, policy must support greater integration of industry with education.

[Recommended ways forward are to:]

- Invest in, rather than fund education. Invest in collaborative infrastructure such as data sharing, common platforms and support.
- Move from central control to sector control. Support increased collaboration with Iwi/community/industry and between TEOs.
- Value vocational, distance, part time and lifelong learning: measure outcomes over longer periods and using rubrics generated and agreed with the sector(s).
- Recognise the increasing potential of workplace learning/training through flexible e-learning
- Support workplace based and part time students to study at a pace that suits them by removing minimum course requirements for financial support.
- Recognise and support diversity within clear high-level frameworks; including allowing a proportion of NZ Qualifications to be defined by institutions through collaboration with Iwi/ community/ employers.
- Support systems that provide for movement of students between providers. Competitive funding encourages behaviour that seeks to retain students regardless of the fit with students' profiles that can change over time.
- Accept some national responsibility for risk in the sector. For example, replace the EFT target achievement with less punitive measures of funding management that better enable TEOs to adapt to contracting markets. (Stein et al., 2016, p. 16, in press).

This editorial continues by celebrating a significant birthday for the journal, and awards that celebrate past achievements in the school and tertiary sectors in Australasia and beyond.

JOFDL turns 21!

The *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (JOFDL)* celebrates its 21st birthday this year, so it has truly come of age! Since 1995 we have contributed to the current body of literature on distance learning and, more recently, on open and flexible learning, with a strong focus on material from the Pacific Rim.

Our story begins with DEANZ (now FLANZ) being established in 1984 and using “publication as a vehicle to disseminate information about distance education” (McIlroy & Hearn, 1995, p. 2). The DEANZ *Newsletter*, *Bulletin*, and *Flier* were used for this purpose and in 1991 “the need for a professional journal of international calibre was identified” (McIlroy & Hearn 1995, p. 2). There was only a handful of journals in this subject area in the world at that time, so for DEANZ to establish their own journal was a world-class step. The process took a little while to set up, but the first issue of the journal was published in 1995 by its first editor, Terry Hearn, under the title *Journal of Distance Learning*.

In the following years the journal appeared annually, with a succession of editors—and others—ensuring content continued to reach its audience in this growing area of education. Sweeping changes were made to the format and delivery of the journal in 2008 when the new editor, Mark Nichols, began to take the journal online and make it open access. Mark worked with copy editor Kate Hunt to raise the standard of copy and strengthen the quality of the published journal. In 2010 the name of the journal changed to the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, and the occasional themed issue was introduced to highlight specific areas of flexible learning. In 2011 Ben Kehrwald joined Mark, and the editorial team’s work continued.

In 2013 the DEANZ Executive commissioned Peter Albion to review *JOFDL*, and to give both strategic direction and practical advice to further strengthen the quality of the publication. Following this review and a call for editors, the current editorial team of Niki Davis, Maggie Hartnett, and Alison Fields was appointed and has carried out many of the recommendations from the Albion report. The journal now publishes quality content twice a year, meets regularly with its strong international Editorial Advisory Board, and is more visible through a growing number of indexing services and access points. It is committed to the principles of open scholarship and publishes under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License.

In addition to thanking those in the Association who had the foresight to create and support the journal, all of the editors have made a significant contribution to the direction and success of the journal. We also thank authors, reviewers, and the Editorial Advisory Board, all of whom have contributed their research and thought to assure the quality of the content that promotes scholarship in the theory and practice of open, flexible, and distance learning in this part of the world. We look forward to seeing what the next 21 years brings for this journal.

DEANZ Lifetime Achievement Award: Andrew Higgins

Past President Andrew Higgins was honoured with the FLANZ Lifetime Achievement Award at the recent DEANZ/FLANZ Conference in Hamilton. The award was presented at the conference dinner following an engaging account of Andrew’s career-long contributions to the field of open, flexible and distance learning, which was read by current FLANZ President Sarah Stein. Andrew’s early contributions to the field were based on his work in rural Australia, where distance education remains a necessity for many children due to sheer remoteness (Higgins, 1994). Having trained as a teacher and completed a doctorate that considered the education of isolated children, Andrew worked for the Queensland Department of Education to improve practice. This work included secondary teaching in rural schools, restructuring of the Australian Correspondence School, and the Rural Secondary School Support Scheme. He also developed an education training programme for the Queensland Police Service, and gained a prestigious Police Commissioner’s Award for this work. The succession of appointments at universities, government organisations and associations that followed eventually brought him to New Zealand as a Deputy Vice Chancellor of Otago University. Among these roles he found time to become involved with DEANZ, and became DEANZ President and later the DEANZ Secretary. Andrew’s additional roles with the Commonwealth of Learning and other organisations helped DEANZ to build strong relationships with global organisations, and these partnerships continue

today. Subsequent service included many international projects, forums, commissioned reports, and advisory bodies—too many for us to list here. Andrew’s Lifetime Achievement Award citation sums his achievements up in its concluding sentence: “It would be fair to comment that Andrew, in his roles of President and Secretary of DEANZ, advanced the association’s cause and reputation and helped transform how students in remote, rural as well as on-campus students learn. Perhaps that is what a teacher is supposed to do.”

We agree. That is, indeed, making ako accessible to all. Congratulations Andrew!

JOFDL Best Paper Awards 2016

The journal’s editors also take the opportunity provided by the association’s biennial conference to recognise the authors of the best papers published in *JOFDL* every two years. In addition to acting as a reward for the best work, this recognition enables the editors to signal exemplars of particular aspects of research and writing. This year, two papers published in *JOFDL* in 2014 were selected as joint winners of the *JOFDL* Best Paper Awards 2016 because they provide exemplars for different types of article. The two papers selected are:

- *Software literacy and student learning in the tertiary environment: PowerPoint and beyond*, by Elaine Khoo, Craig Hight, Bronwen Cowie, Rob Torrens, and Lisabeth Ferrarelli, *JOFDL* 18(1) 2014. These authors were recognised for their well-written article that reported high-quality research on the relationship between students’ software literacy and their subsequent engagement and knowledge in a range of disciplines.
- *The disruptive potential of the massive open online course: A literature review* by Jean Jacoby, *JOFDL* 18(1) 2014. Jacoby was recognised for her high-quality literature review, which provided a valuable overview of the influence of MOOCs in higher education using disruptive innovation theory, and relating this clearly and purposefully to the New Zealand context.

JOFDL moves overseas to join the Public Knowledge Project

As noted earlier, *JOFDL* has come of age—if the journal were an Kiwi adult it might be expected that ‘she’ would value some overseas experience (OE)—and *JOFDL* is now enjoying her OE in Canada! However, the real reason that *JOFDL* has moved to join the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform in Canada is that New Zealand does not have sufficient open journals to justify the hosting service in this country. *JOFDL*’s move to be hosted in the northern hemisphere is, therefore, the result of an economic challenge.

JOFDL and FLANZ are fortunate to be supported by Ako Aotearoa, the New Zealand Center for Tertiary Teaching Excellence (Ako Aotearoa, n.d.). Since 2011, Ako Aotearoa has enabled *JOFDL* to be an open access journal by hosting the journal on its website (on a server provided by Catalyst). Ako expected a number of journals to join *JOFDL* on the Catalyst OJS server, but that did not occur, so it was with regret that Catalyst gave notice that the service would be discontinued. The editors consulted and searched to see if it was possible for the journal to remain in New Zealand, but no alternative host could be found. Supportive discussions with other New Zealand editors identified the issue as economic, and related to the volume of publishing in the region. It is more efficient for a large number of journals to be hosted by one service than for them to be scattered across services, and so we are delighted to have been supported by Ako Aotearoa to move the whole journal and its archive to join the prestigious PKP project and its stable of high quality open access journals in Canada. *JOFDL* is in good company that spans the world. Examples of relevant journals and related services that *JOFDL* has joined include:

- [The Australian Computer Society \(ACS\) Digital Library](#)
- [AISHE-J](#) (the journal of the All Ireland Society for Higher Education)
- [Higher Learning Research Communications](#)

JOFDL is delighted to be hosted by PKP, a service that shares our equitable mission of access for all. According to PKP's website:

PKP is a multi-university initiative developing (free) open source software and conducting research to improve the quality and reach of scholarly publishing ... PKP was founded in 1998 by John Willinsky in the Faculty of Education at UBC [University of British Columbia], with Pacific Press Professorship endowment, dedicated to improving the scholarly and public quality of research. (PKP, n.d.) (<https://pkp.sfu.ca/about/history/>)

Open Journals Systems is the world's most widely used journal management and publishing system. It was released as open source software in 2001, version 2 was released in 2005, and version 3 is emerging. A number of articles have been written on the beneficial effects of PKP, including OJS (e.g., Owen & Stranack, 2012).

Articles in this issue

Articles in this issue of *JOFDL* raise awareness of the challenges of increasing accessibility alongside the continual development of systems and technologies. The article by Parton reports on using YouTube auto-generated video captions to meet the needs of deaf students. This software's potential to increase access for all has not been realised—at least, not yet. This original research focused on the use of such video captions for weekly news updates in an online course. Results showed that auto-generated sub-titles are not accurate enough on their own to meet the needs of deaf students and Parton recommends more attention be paid to this strategy. In a recent guest lecture on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and e-learning at the University of Canterbury, United States expert Ray Rose (2016) was asked about the issue by his host, the first author. Ray responded that YouTube clearly states that the subtitling provided is 50 to 80 per cent accurate. He also provided details of other software and indicated that enabling access for all students is a responsibility increasingly enshrined in law. Actions have been taken against Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States, citing the lack of subtitles in their MOOCs. In New Zealand, Human Rights law has not yet been cited in this way, but it may be only a matter of time.

In the first of two articles, past DEANZ president Mark Nichols reports original research that compares two online learning systems (Moodle and the new iQualify platform) from the perspective of users in the context of the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. Nichols's second article is a review of the literature relating to on-screen reading from the perspective of good online learning design. The final article, by Una Cunningham, who is an expert in computer assisted learning (CALL) and teaching, sets out a position for the flipped class in tertiary language teaching and learning that will be valuable to all teachers who aim to support the development of their students' languages. Language learning is also part of study skills for many students for whom English is not a first language.

These original articles are followed by the first two book reviews to be edited by *JOFDL*'s new book review editor, Adrienne Moyle. The first is by well-known FLANZ member and past president, Bill Anderson, who reviews the recently published book by *JOFDL*'s associate editor, Maggie Hartnett. Titled *Motivation in Online Education*, this book explores the nature of motivation of learners learning online, including a range of considerations that can influence motivation. A second book review is contributed by FLANZ treasurer, Rachel Whalley, who has extensive experience of open, flexible and distance learning in her role as ePrincipal of the Virtual Learning Network Primary network of schools. (This collaborative community of schools

throughout New Zealand is working to provide improved educational opportunities for students through online learning. The community aims to meet the needs of students in the primary-school sector for the first 8 years of schooling and includes all types of schools.) Rachel reviews the 2015 book, *Online, blended, and distance education in schools: Building successful programs*, which is edited by Tom Clark and Michael Barbour. Rachel recognises the growing interest and research in online and distance learning in the compulsory schooling sector—particularly in the United States—and sets that research and developing practice within her own context.

Conclusion

Although the potential to increase equitable access to education is threatened by economic and technical developments, *JOFDL* is working to address these ongoing challenges. This editorial has celebrated *JOFDL*'s 21st birthday and Higgins's FLANZ lifetime achievement award for service to our association, which includes reviewing for this journal. With support from our association and Ako Aotearoa, *JOFDL* has moved to be hosted by PKP alongside many other openly accessible journals. The articles and book reviews have also provided a number of illustrations of open scholarship, which is working to increase equitable access for adults and children in this region and around the world.

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Biographical notes

Niki Davis

niki.davis@canterbury.ac.nz

Niki is Distinguished Professor of e-Learning and Director of the e-Learning Lab in the University of Canterbury College of Education, Health and Human Development in Christchurch, New Zealand. In addition to researching e-learning in teacher education and professional development, Niki teaches and researches about change with digital technologies in education and related areas of scholarship. Niki is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

Alison Fields

alison.fields@openpolytechnic.ac.nz

Alison is a senior lecturer at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand where she teaches Information and Library Studies. She also sits on the Professional Registration Board of the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA). Her research areas encompass e-learning, library services, and continuing professional development. She is currently enrolled in EdD studies at the University of Otago. Alison is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

Maggie Hartnett

m.hartnett@massey.ac.nz

Maggie is a senior lecturer in the Institute of Education at Massey University, New Zealand, where she teaches in the areas of e-learning and digital technologies. Her research interests include motivation and engagement in digital environments, teaching and learning with digital technologies, electronic portfolios, support for digital learners, digital places, and spaces of learning. Maggie is an executive member of DEANZ and an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

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