

EDEN Conference 2016, Budapest
Conference Dinner

Can EDEN help Europe rise to its major challenge?

Remarks by Sir John Daniel, O.C

EDEN Colleagues; Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour to speak to you. Tonight we celebrate EDEN's Silver Jubilee and its remarkable contribution to the development of open, distance and online learning in Europe over a quarter of a century. EDEN stands for the European Distance Education Network. These 25 years have been times of great change for Europe, for Distance Education, and even for the notion of Network.

EDEN was created in 1991 because Central Europe was in the throes of major political changes. In the late 1980s Hungary had appeared to be the first country to anticipate the implications of those changes, so it is appropriate that we celebrate this anniversary in Budapest.

Hungary had realised that the politics and economics of Central and Eastern Europe were about to undergo radical change. Massive re-training and re-education programmes might be necessary, so Hungary sent a delegation around Western Europe to find out how best to deliver such programmes at scale. When it returned home the delegation reported that distance education was the solution and cited the UK Open University as a powerful example.

In 1990 I arrived from Canada to be vice-chancellor of the UKOU. Over the subsequent years first Hungary, represented here tonight by Tibor Dori of Eurocontact, and then four other Central European countries and Russia came to us at the UKOU to negotiate partnership agreements for offering our business courses in their local languages. It became a remarkable operation that reached tens of thousands of working people in those countries over the next decade and more. Some of those partnerships remain active today.

In the late 1980s some practitioners of ODL in Western Europe learned of Hungary's interest in distance learning through the UKOU. A group of them, who wanted to share good distance learning practice with their colleagues in Central Europe, met in this city and created a mechanism for collaboration called the Budapest Platform, which mutated into EDEN in 1991. It gives me special pleasure that Professor Tamas Lajos, who played an important role in bringing things together in those early days, is here with us.

I must recall too that EADTU, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, had been established in January 1987 by the principals of Europe's major distance teaching institutions. Today EADTU is comprised of 21 national members from 19 countries collectively providing distance education programmes to over 2,000,000 students. All members of EADTU are non-profit institutions.

The prior existence of EADTU helped EDEN to define its own purpose. Whereas the members of EADTU were institutions - and just a handful of them in those early days - EDEN planned to be a network of individuals.

It was clear that campus universities across Europe would start offering distance education programmes, so the need for professional development in ODL spread well beyond the open universities. Moreover, developments in distance education were not limited to the public sector. Indeed, the UK Open University's partners that I referred to earlier in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Russia and Slovakia were all private institutions.

EDEN did a remarkable job in helping hundreds of professionals in Central and Eastern Europe to acquire the skills to develop ODL programmes in a great variety of settings. Nearly all our EDEN conferences were held in those parts of the continent to keep travel costs low. Great idealism inspired those meetings. Even in the West distance learning was still struggling to acquire a reputation for quality and it felt good to have a pan-European vehicle for pressing our case, not least in Brussels.

Indeed, the European Commission had a very favourable view of EDEN, both because it united the whole of Europe and also because the EC realised, perhaps before some national governments, that new technology-based approaches to education and training would be needed. Putting together projects for the European Commission gave added vibrancy to the network that EDEN was becoming.

We were most fortunate to have some enormously able and dedicated individuals to build EDEN. I ask the forgiveness of other devoted and long-serving members if I make special mention of two of them.

First, EDEN owes a great debt to Alan Tait. I worked with Alan to set up EDEN as a legal entity in the 1990s and he has remained deeply involved in EDEN's development ever since. Second, we have been extraordinarily lucky that Andras Szucs has served as our devoted Secretary-General since the very start. Please give them, and all the other EDEN veterans here tonight, a round of applause!

There are many other great EDEN supporters that I could mention, but let Alan and Andras stand as examples of the longevity of commitment that has been such an important element in securing the remarkable impact that EDEN has achieved.

So much for the history! Both EDEN and EADTU helped to advance distance education across Europe and I saw no conflict in being a member of the Executive Committees of both organisations during my time as vice-chancellor of the UKOU. And by a nice coincidence I am speaking at both the EDEN and EADTU conferences this year.

Times have changed greatly since 1991 so I should say something about that before I sit down and let you get on with your conversations.

I start with the easy part: distance education has been transformed. The 1980s were the heyday of multi-media open and distance learning, but with the 1990s came the

Internet revolution. When I joined the UKOU in 1990 only a handful of our students were online, in courses that included what we called 'computer conferencing'. By the time I left the UKOU in 2001 we had over 150,000 students online.

The 2000s saw the emergence of Open Educational Resources and in this decade we are seeing the explosion of social media. I'm just completing my 12th MOOC as a student with the FutureLearn consortium. This one was from Australia, about *Mindfulness*, and my earlier MOOCs came from four other countries. FutureLearn courses combine open access, excellent materials and social media in a highly engaging way.

FutureLearn would have been unimaginable when we created EDEN back in 1991. But I'm sure that EDEN has greatly helped teachers and professionals across Europe both to adapt to the technological revolution in ODL and also to seize the opportunities that it presents for exciting new approaches.

I said that the evolution of distance education was the easy part. Europe has changed too and that also invites comment. We are now a long way from the idealism and enthusiasm that accompanied the reunification of Europe after the Berlin Wall was knocked down.

Hindsight gives us 20/20 vision. More recent developments have shown that, despite all the good intentions, the structures of the uniting Europe hid serious weaknesses. I mention only two.

First, creating a common currency without greater harmonisation of financial and fiscal policy was a mistake - and the Euro has suffered from it. Second, implementing the Schengen Treaty without adequate attention to securing the external borders of the Treaty area has made the current influx of migrants more difficult to cope with. But let's remember that the migrant crisis would have been a huge challenge no matter what border controls had been in place.

EDEN and ODL cannot do much about the Euro and border security, but I do believe that ODL must be part of Europe's response to the needs of the migrants themselves. The ideals that inspired the expansion and modernisation of ODL nearly fifty years ago, to be open to people, open to places, open to methods, and open to ideas, are as important as they ever were.

I live in Canada, which is now almost the only country in the Western World where 'immigrant' is still a good word. That's because all Canadian citizens were once immigrants. Of the 12 members of my immediate family in Canada only four were born there. The other eight were born in six countries.

So you may discount what I shall say as being out of touch with the European reality. But let me say it anyway by making three points.

First, world history is the account of human migration around the planet, sometimes resisted, but usually successfully absorbed in due course. It is particularly sad and ironic that Hungary is taking a hard-line stance in the migrant crisis. Hungarians must

have short memories. After the Soviets put down the Hungarian uprising in 1956 nearly 200,000 Hungarian refugees were resettled in other western nations in quite a short time.

Similarly, I grieve that the UK, the country of my birth, is tearing itself apart in a referendum debate that has acquired some nasty xenophobic and anti-immigrant overtones. I voted in this referendum before leaving Canada and I shall watch the results next week at my brother's home in England. It was only after I had invited myself to stay with him that I learned that he and his wife, like many UK couples, are on opposite sides of the Brexit issue. I shall keep my mouth shut and pray that Britain votes to remain in the EU. I cannot imagine that a country with such a remarkable international history will decide to turn its back on the world.

Let's also hope that the results are not the cliffhanger that we experienced in the second referendum on Quebec sovereignty in 1995. I was staying with friends in Montreal that day and we put a bottle of scotch in the middle of the kitchen table vowing not to open it until the 'No' vote won. It was a long evening and only after midnight did we celebrate a victory for Canadian unity by a margin of only 0.5%. Nevertheless, that narrow result has buried the issue for a generation and I trust that the same will be true if the UK decides to remain in the EU.

My second point is that the best predictors of how quickly migrants will integrate into their new societies are their levels of education and how fast they learn the local language. It was not by remaining in unilingual ghettos that Britain's 10,000 Muslim millionaires rose to success. Moreover, Arthur Koestler, who was born in Budapest in 1905, went on to become one of the most stylish writers of the English language in his books such as *The Act of Creation* and *The Ghost in the Machine*. He migrated to England in 1941 and began his life there in prison.

Third, ODL and technology-based teaching can play a vital role in furthering the education of migrants and improving their language skills. Here let me pay tribute to another distinguished Hungarian, Peter Gonda, who helped to launch UNESCO's work in educational technology several decades ago with Herbert Marchl. Educational technology and ODL can be powerful tools in bringing our migrants into the mainstream of the societies they have joined. Through EDEN's pan-European network and its strong relationships with distance learning institutions and networks in other continents it can bring very powerful resources and techniques to bear on the challenges ahead.

Please take up those challenges. After 25 years EDEN's work to build a better Europe is needed more than ever. I wish you well.

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