



## Editorial: Prizing Equity in Education and Research in the Field of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning

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### Abstract

Valuing more open and equitable approaches to practice and research in the field of flexible, open, and distance learning enables the editors of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (JOFDL)* to better describe the distinctive mission for the journal, which is uniquely situated in a bicultural nation where complementary approaches of indigenous cultures and western science are best braided. Three of the four research papers introduced for this issue provide answers to the DEANZ 2014 conference question of “Where is the ‘e’ in engagement?”, which referred to engagement of students from organisational and faculty perspectives. Bonk and Khoo’s (2014) recent text book on that conference topic is also celebrated in a book review. In contrast, the fourth paper identifies the possibilities for increased engagement between administrators and the staff that they lead in virtual charter schools. The editorial also describes the increasing visibility of *JOFDL* in collections worldwide.

**Keywords:** open learning; distance learning; open publishing; retention; student engagement; administration; leadership in distance education; vocational education and training; equity in e-learning text

### Introduction

In this editorial we explore and illustrate several ways of prizing open education. As editors and educators, we are, like many of our readers, leaders in open, flexible, and distance learning research and development because we wish to open education up to more people, and raise awareness of the rhetoric and realities of technology-enhanced learning, teaching, and professional development. We also explore increasing access to research in this field through open-access published papers and collections of data. The papers in this issue are situated within our field using this theme, and so we are able to explore more of what makes the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (JOFDL)* such a distinctive international refereed journal. It is also our pleasure to celebrate the achievements of the 2014 DEANZ Award winners and update readers on our progress to increase access to this journal.

## Papers in this issue

We are delighted to celebrate the theme of the DEANZ 2014 conference in this issue with three papers that have been further developed following presentation in the refereed strand. All three provide an answer to the question posed by the theme for the conference: “Open, Flexible and Distance Learning: Where is the ‘E’ in Engagement?”

The presentation by Smith, Erlam, Quirke, and Sylvester (2014) was highly engaging, and they have followed up with a valuable paper that carefully describes their research into ways to engage students for more effective distance learning. Although contextualised for theology students studying at a distance with a major provider in Australasia (Laidlaw College), their findings illustrate the value of “fostering connectedness amongst tutors, academic advisors and students by providing high-quality content and materials through appropriate technologies.” (p. 11) The care for students and collaboration amongst the staff was obvious at the conference presentation, and the detailed evidence, supported by literature, makes a persuasive case for other tertiary providers. This College clearly prizes its staff and students and has been rewarded with increased retention which, in New Zealand, can be easily linked to Tertiary Education Commission funding.

An institutional perspective on improving retention is also the focus of Yates, Brindley-Richards, and Thistoll (2014) in their research at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (OPNZ), which is a major provider of technical and vocational education and training in this region. Recent interventions at OPNZ have included improvements in distance learning support, culturally appropriate support designed specifically for Māori and Pasifika learners and their whānau (family), and teachers’ support of distance students. Improvements in organisational strategies (including what appears to be connectedness amongst tutors, academic advisors, and students) also emerged as an important factor. One aspect is similar to the findings of Smith et al. at Laidlaw College. This paper is complemented by another on developments by the leader of a first-year OPNZ Economics course. Nash (2014) describes her innovative development of a weekly newsletter emailed out to students via the learning management system to improve student engagement.

Our final paper is a contrast with the others in many ways. It opens a new line of enquiry for *JOFDL*; namely, the consideration of the potential to transform personnel practices in schools that adopt learning management systems, particularly those set up to provide virtual schooling. Given that the phenomenon of virtual schooling has spread rapidly in the United States, it is not surprising that the authors and evidence analysed are from that region. Beck and Maranto (2014) clarify that there are many novel opportunities for school leaders in such schools to unobtrusively view and evaluate teacher performance—using recordings and online opportunities and to (hopefully) support and improve their own and others’ performance as part of the process. Increased collaboration between school leaders and their staff has been recognised as good practice in recent years (Stoll, 2011). However, Beck and Maranto did not find that teachers in the virtual charter schools perceived transformation to have taken place. Although the teachers did “tend to rate the virtual charters more positively on empowering and respecting teachers, and on developing a student-centred school culture” (p. 68), there was no transformation of administrative practice. Given the legacy of correspondence schools (Twining & Davis, in press) in the Asia Pacific region, such transformation is also unlikely here. Maybe that is something to aim for in future. The recommendations to include aspects and experience of effective flexible and distance learning in leadership professional development are certainly relevant worldwide, and particularly in this region. There is a shortage of skills and knowledge about digital technologies in school leadership (Levin & Schrum, 2012), which indicates that administrative leaders have not prized open, flexible, and distance education.

Book reviews, led by our book review editor, Una Cunningham, are a regular feature in *JOFDL*. Our final conference-related item is a book review, by Maggie Hartnett, of a practical ‘how to’ guide for motivating learners in online and blended learning contexts. The book was launched at the DEANZ conference by New Zealand author, Elaine Khoo, with a video link to co-author, Curtis Bonk, in the United States, during which Bonk acknowledged Khoo’s leadership on theory to complement his more practical expertise. Drawing from a rich review of theory and research into motivation, the book “provides a framework and an extensive set of associated online instructional activities that anyone involved in teaching online, from primary through to tertiary education, can use to engage and motivate learners” (p. 83). Bonk and Khoo have generously provided open access to the book and individual chapters, in addition to the opportunity to purchase a printed copy. The book is therefore of value to all *JOFDL* readers, and its chapters provide more links to the theories and findings of the papers introduced above.

## Progress on recommendations from the 2013 review of *JOFDL*

In our last editorial we outlined aspects of the 2013 review of *JOFDL* conducted by Peter Albion. One of the recommendations made was: “To increase the visibility of the Journal” (Davis, Fields, & Hartnett, 2014, p. 6). We are pleased to report that over the past year much progress has been made in making *JOFDL* more visible in the field, and more action is planned for the coming term.

*JOFDL* has been available for access for some time via the DEANZ website, on the Ako Aotearoa website where it is hosted, and on the InformIT database. It is searchable via various authors’ institutional repositories and personal listings, which are often also searchable on Google and Google Scholar. Articles are also electronically archived on the National Digital Heritage Archive and so can be accessed via the National Library of New Zealand’s main catalogue.

New *JOFDL* visibility achieved in 2014:

- EditLib: *JOFDL* entered the EditLib Digital Library in July 2014, and is now available to the many organisations which subscribe to that library.
- Google Scholar: A technical difficulty in allowing access to Google Scholar search bots was overcome, and now all articles in *JOFDL* are listed in and searchable through Google Scholar.
- K–12 Online and Blended Learning Clearinghouse: In November 2014 *JOFDL*/DEANZ became a contributing member of Clearinghouse, which is hosted by the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute.

In progress:

- EbscoHost: *JOFDL* and Ebscohost have signed an agreement which will see *JOFDL* content available on the Ebscohost databases in the next few months.
- DOAJ: An application to have *JOFDL* listed on the Directory of Open Access Journals has been submitted. The processing of applications usually takes several months.

Planned:

- Sherpa/Romeo: The editorial team would like to list *JOFDL*’s Open Access Policy with Sherpa/Romeo in the near future. This listing will publicise the Open Access ethos of *JOFDL* more widely and publicly.

- Other journal databases: These are yet to be identified and approached for inclusion of *JOFDL* content, and decisions about approaching more database providers will be made in 2015.

Increasing the visibility of *JOFDL* brings a number of benefits. For authors, it means that there is a wider potential readership for their articles. Their content is more accessible to other researchers, students, and academics, and their academic endeavours are more visible. For readers, the increased visibility of the *Journal* means that articles are more likely to be encountered, references to other *JOFDL* articles may be followed, and search patterns resulting in useful articles are more likely to be repeated, drawing readers to subsequent *JOFDL* content. For the *Journal* itself, increased visibility increases its usefulness in terms of readership and citation of *JOFDL* articles (and therefore its rankings) which, in turn, further increases visibility to both authors and readers.

### **Prizing quality with *JOFDL*'s inaugural best paper award**

To bring the value of authors' contributions further to the fore, *JOFDL* made its inaugural best paper award in 2014. The winner of this first biennial award was selected from papers published in *JOFDL* in the preceding 2 years, encompassing volumes 16 and 17 (the three issues published since the 2012 DEANZ conference). The first award was presented at the 2014 DEANZ conference dinner in Christchurch, New Zealand, in May 2014. Papers were selected from those in the 2012 conference issue, general papers, and a special issue on primary and secondary distance education.

Choosing the best paper was an interesting and uncharted process, with a range of methods available. These methods encompassed:

- downloading statistics for each article from the *JOFDL* website
- tracking citation statistics for each article from Google Scholar
- recognition of the importance of the topic to the *JOFDL* readership, and its contribution to the wider open, flexible, and distance learning field
- considering the overall quality of topic, research, and writing.

A spreadsheet was created for all articles eligible for the award. Download and citation statistics were entered for all items, and a shortlist of items that scored highly on either or both of these factors was made. From this shortlist a team of four DEANZ members considered each article independently, taking into consideration the importance of the topic to *JOFDL* readership; its contribution to the wider open, flexible, and distance learning field; and the overall quality of the topic, research, and writing. Each of the deciding team had three votes for the best items, and cast their votes without consulting the others. When all votes had been cast, the results were compared to determine if there was a single winner from the shortlist.

On this occasion, one winner emerged from the group, but several rated very highly, and this, combined with the subjective nature of two of the selection criteria, led to the recognition of runners-up whose articles were worthy contributions to the *JOFDL* readership. It was not an easy process to select the best paper, as all of the top candidates were worthy in their own way.

## The results of the JOFDL Best Paper Award for 2014

Winner:

Anderson, B., & Simpson, M. (2012). History and heritage in distance education. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 16(2), 1–10.

Three highly commended papers:

Agnew, S., & Hickson, S. (2012). Using online assessment to replace invigilated assessment in times of natural disaster: Are some online assessment conditions better than others? *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 16(1), 1–13.

Bennett, C., & Barbour, M. (2012). The FarNet journey: Perceptions of Māori students engaged in secondary online learning. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 16(1), 83–98.

Falloon, G. (2012). Inside the virtual classroom: Student perspectives on affordances and limitations. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 16(1), 108–126.

## 2014 DEANZ awards

The conference of the New Zealand Association for Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (DEANZ) provides an opportunity every 2 years to prize and promote projects related to the conference theme. The website announcement clarifies its purpose as follows:

The DEANZ Award is designed to promote and reward excellence in e-learning, distance, open and flexible learning. Awards are given for projects that advance understanding of best practice in e-learning, distance, open and flexible learning in New Zealand; are original or innovative in concept or application; and are relevant to and whose outcomes are useful to the e-learning, distance, open and flexible-learning community.

[\(http://deanz.org.nz/deanz-award-2/deanz-award-2014/\)](http://deanz.org.nz/deanz-award-2/deanz-award-2014/)

Each application must show evidence of its value and, providing the field is of adequate quality, a panel of judges selects one or two for the award.

This year the main DEANZ Award recognised Michael Fenton, a tutor in the School of Science and Technology at OPNZ, for his leadership of professional development for primary school teachers to enhance science education and engage children's interest in science. When announcing the award at the conference dinner the chair of the panel of judges, Derek Wenmoth, noted that Michael Fenton and his team:

... provided a full, clear and pedagogically sound documentation of the on-line programme development, providing a clear demonstration of how to create a successful and innovative course that engages teachers and students with high levels of interaction. The programme design clearly encouraged engagement by participants in the widest sense, and is highly relevant to the very topical issue of the need for improving the teaching of Science in our schools. The evaluation (both internal and external) was integral to the programme.

[\(http://deanz.org.nz/deanz-award-2/deanz-award-2014/\)](http://deanz.org.nz/deanz-award-2/deanz-award-2014/)

A merit award was also made to Matthew Smart, University of Otago, for his leadership in the production of mobile resources for working students. The project aim was to more fully engage distance learners by providing multimedia-rich material which, after downloading to a smartphone or tablet, could be accessed whenever and as often as they wished. The use of mobile technologies matched the resources of learners with the capability of the institution, including scalable transfer. "The judging panel thought this was an excellent description of a very

innovative project that will be of real interest to many practitioners.” (<http://deanz.org.nz/deanz-award-2/deanz-award-2014/>)

The editors are pleased to acknowledge these awards and encourage all DEANZ award winners to follow up by submitting a paper to *JOFDL* with longer-term research on their innovative projects.

## Prizing equity in ICT in education and related research

On return from a UNESCO-sponsored event in 2001 to promote the book that Niki had collaborated on under Paul Resta’s leadership (UNESCO, 2002) while president of the Society of Information Technology and Teacher Education, the first author was inspired to create a new award for that society—the SITE award for Outstanding Service to Digital Equity in teacher education. Experience in leading the award led to greater understanding of the quality assurance and ethical issues involved in making such awards. In some ways they echo those of a refereed journal, in that they include a panel of referees and difficult decisions on who and what to make public. Notable SITE OSDE award winners include:

- Henrique Hinostroza (Hinostroza, Hepp, & Lavel, 2001), for his innovative leadership of the Enlaces initiative that began with consideration of the needs of indigenous people for digital technologies in remote schools in Chile and then spread across South America
- Bonny Bracy, who continues to advocate for equity as a Fellow of the George Lucas Foundation, and recently raised awareness that the digital divide is increasing
- Mano Talaiver, who continues to advocate for women and minorities in science and engineering, and has visited New Zealand to support this initiative with programming activities designed to engage girls in after-school clubs
- Paul Gorski who developed a somewhat idealistic agenda on “insisting on digital equity”. (Gorski, 2009)  
(For more details, see <http://site.aace.org/awards/award-osde.htm>)

In 2014, while Distinguished Professor Paul Resta was visiting New Zealand as Canterbury University Fellow, he talked to Niki Davis about his leadership of UNESCO’s only ICT in education award, and recorded the conversation on YouTube (see [http://youtu.be/NUR\\_jPpG-w0](http://youtu.be/NUR_jPpG-w0)). Paul and Niki agreed that awards that are carefully judged are a means to value and promote equitable development, and often include open, flexible, and distance learning. For example, one of the award winners of this prize for the Use of ICTs in Education was the Korean Home Cyber School initiative. This prize has been in existence for 7 years, and in November UNESCO agreed that it would continue to be offered, with these details:

This annual prize is placed under the patronage of King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain. The prize (a diploma and US\$50,000 divided between two laureates) aims to reward projects and activities of individuals, institutions, other entities or non-governmental organizations for excellent models, best practice, and creative use of ICTs to enhance learning, teaching and overall educational performance. (see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/themes/icts/e-learning/icts-in-education-prize/>).

The award of research contracts is another way to recognise quality of research design. Recently the importance of open access to research has brought a closer focus on valuing open access to such research and the underlying data. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has announced a policy in support of open research and open data that will operate from the beginning of 2015. Implementing this policy will be challenging:

1. **Publications Are Discoverable and Accessible Online.** Publications will be deposited in a specified repository(s) with proper tagging of metadata.

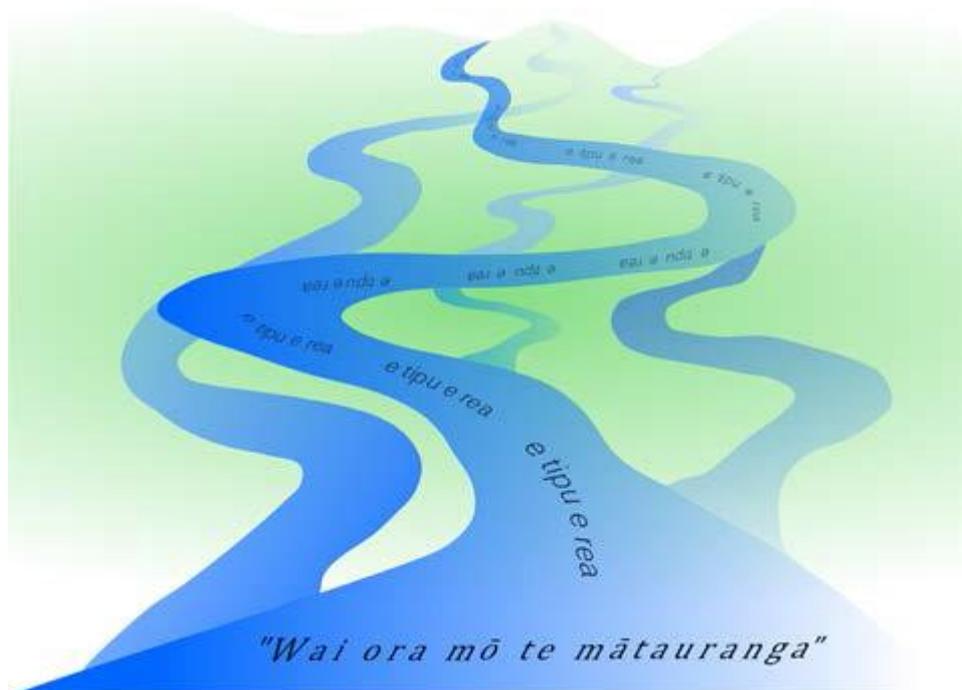
2. **Publication Will Be On “Open Access” Terms.** All publications shall be published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Generic License (CC BY 4.0) or an equivalent license. This will permit all users of the publication to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and transform and build upon the material, including for any purpose (including commercial) without further permission or fees being required.
3. **Foundation Will Pay Necessary Fees.** The foundation would pay reasonable fees required by a publisher to effect publication on these terms.
4. **Publications Will Be Accessible and Open Immediately.** All publications shall be available immediately upon their publication, without any embargo period. An embargo period is the period during which the publisher will require a subscription or the payment of a fee to gain access to the publication. We are, however, providing a transition period of up to two years from the effective date of the policy (or until January 1, 2017). During the transition period, the foundation will allow publications in journals that provide up to a 12-month embargo period.
5. **Data Underlying Published Research Results Will Be Accessible and Open Immediately.** The foundation will require that data underlying the published research results be immediately accessible and open. This too is subject to the transition period and a 12-month embargo may be applied.

(Retrieved from <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/how-we-work/general-information/open-access-policy>).

Researchers who design proposals for submission must pay careful attention to ethical issues in order to avoid conflicts of interest. It will be particularly interesting to see how the Human Ethics Committees treat the requirement “that data underlying the published research results be immediately accessible and open”, given that the most common approach to protect research participants is to avoid their identification and restrict access to the data collected.

The editors are pleased to note that this journal is well placed to publish such research, and is now particularly keen to publish articles about relevant research issues and methodologies. *JOFDL* is located in a bicultural nation that is committed to the equitable principles enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi between the indigenous Māori people as tangata te whenua (the first settlers) and the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century.

In New Zealand, the 2014 National Science Challenges are stimulating a more equitable bicultural approach to research that is informed by the Treaty. This challenge is expressed as a Vision Maturānga specified by the Ministry of Business and Innovation, the funding agency. National Science Challenge 2 is particularly relevant to *JOFDL* readers because it includes the theme of “Education: Growing up in a digital world”. The lead group for National Science Challenge 2 has developed a research approach (illustrated in Figure 1) that braids indigenous and western scientific views on research. One of the earlier versions of this “braided rivers” approach emerged from the foundational meeting of the New Zealand hub of Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN), which Niki Davis co-led with Bridget Somekh under the mentorship of Angus Macfarlane (Fletcher, McGrath, Morrow, Davis, & Somekh, 2009).



**Figure 1** A symbolic depiction of the Braided Rivers framework for the Better Start National Science Challenge: E tipu e rea. The challenge braids knowledge and perspectives from differing sources to advance the challenge aspirations. (Cutfield, Gillon, & Taylor, 2014, p. 2).

As described in the platform of research proposed for National Science Challenge 2 earlier this year, the Braided Rivers acknowledged that:

Durie [2] and Macfarlane [3] discussed the issues of Māori knowledge and scientific enquiry in the context of the resurgence of indigenous approaches to understanding children's health, education and well-being. They advocate for two knowledge bases, each with their own standing and integrity. They argue for a "braided rivers" approach which harnesses the energy from two systems of understanding in order to create new knowledge that can be used to advance understanding in two worlds.

A braided rivers framework within the context of this Challenge symbolises the integration of knowledge from differing sources. The braiding of Māori and non-Māori perspectives is central to the framework, as is the braiding of knowledge from differing academic disciplines, differing agencies that support our children and whānau and differing bodies of new research as the National Science Challenges advance. To give effect to a better start to life for children and whānau in our communities who are in particular need, we must harness our efforts in new and innovative ways. There is no simple answer or single line of research that will ensure a better start for our young tamariki (children). Rather, it is through the braiding of knowledge from multiple domains, meaningful collaborations between research and professional communities and successful engagement of family and whānau in their child's health, education and well-being that will help realise the Challenge aspirations. These are key elements that thread through the platform of research proposed in this Challenge. (Cutfield, Gillon, & Taylor, 2014, p. 2).

This challenge should be welcome to all educators and researchers in our field, and is one that *JOFDL* is happy to champion and promote. Indeed, the editors will prize such research and related methodology highly, and will work to promote its dissemination.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Our theme of valuing more open and equitable approaches to practice and research in this field has been stimulating, and has enabled the editors to better describe a distinctive mission for the journal, which is uniquely situated in a bicultural nation. *JOFDL* has continued to make progress in opening its access and promoting its papers worldwide through collections such as EdITLib. 2014 has been a year to celebrate, with *JOFDL*, the DEANZ awards, and the biennial DEANZ conference that took place in Christchurch, New Zealand. Most of the papers in this issue identify where the ‘E’ is in engagement, in line with the conference theme, while the outlying paper on leadership practices in virtual schools recommends more engagement between administrators and their staff. The editors also recommend that authors submit papers on research approaches and methodologies, particularly those that prize equity and recognise the challenges of opening access.

## Acknowledgement

Multiple meanings for ‘prizing open education’ was the theme that Niki Davis chose for her December 2014 Keynote for the Australasian Society of Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE), stimulated by the conference theme of “Critical perspectives on educational technology: Rhetoric or reality?” This article has drawn on one aspect of that keynote.

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