INTERVIEW

THE ROLE and FUNCTION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION WORLD FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

An interview with Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI for WOJDE
Maria FRAGKAKI who is from Education Academy of UK (FHEA) and have a State Scholarship from Greece in Digital Technologies in Education. As Senior Research fellow in Higher Education for the Al-Quds Open University, Palestine

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Distance education -DE- has an increasingly powerful impact on the education systems around the world and plays an especially vital role in the education of developing countries. It enables a large number of populations to access educational opportunities which would not be otherwise possible through conventional systems of education. This semi-structured interview aims to benefit from her experiences, feelings, and perceptions about distance learning/education by eliciting her deep insights on the issue. As being a member int.WOJDE team, Harun SERPIL has interviewed with Maria FRAGKAKI who is from Education Academy of UK (FHEA) and have a State Scholarship from Greece in Digital Technologies in Education. My specialization links Learning and Teaching with Technology Enhanced Learning in higher education.

int.WOJDE: Hi your welcome, who is Dr. Maria FRAGAKI?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: I have been a teacher most of my professional life. After completing a PhD in "ICT in Education" and two Masters in the Education Studies, "Informatics in Education" and "Education Studies in Primary Education," I was a Special Needs Educator.

Currently, I hold a Fellowship in Higher Education Academy of UK (FHEA) and have a State Scholarship from Greece in Digital Technologies in Education. My specialization links Learning and Teaching with Technology Enhanced Learning in higher education.

My principal research interests lie in the field of Distance and Blended Learning with the use of contemporary pedagogies that enhance HEI's quality, academic research methodologies, and emerging technologies and with the use of Open Education Resources that create a flexible, open and effective learning environments.

I have extensive teaching experience in four countries (UK, Greece, Cyprus, Middle East) and 25 years in total teaching experience, as an Academic Teacher and a Special Needs Educator. I have taught several Undergraduate programs and MA programs relating to Learning Theories, Teaching Methodologies, Educational Research and Education Technologies.

My managerial experience concerns the coordination of many innovative research projects and Continuous Professional Development Programs. I have extensive

collaboration with EU and Global Universities and Institutes, UK and EU professional bodies.

int.WOJDE: What are your ==views== about distance education? How does distance education support the education system of your country?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: Permit me to consider Palestine as my second country and talk from this perspective. In Palestine we are facing challenges. Political and economic instability and uncertainty; lack in the allocated budgets for scientific research; instability of foreign aids and funding inflow; lack of communication and networking with the rest of the Arab world and various limitations on the development of the communication networks in Palestine and their expansion per the new trends, are some of these challenges. We meet these challenges by building on our strengths. Important learning and innovation centres of Excellence exist with strong research competencies on state of the art learning and teaching theories and new research methodologies; experienced gained knowledge on 21st C. skills and how to develop them through a teaching excellence framework, TEL experience through research projects and applications a high quality provided management and Human Resources centre offering flexible administrative procedures and successful collaborations with EU and international HEIs and institutions.
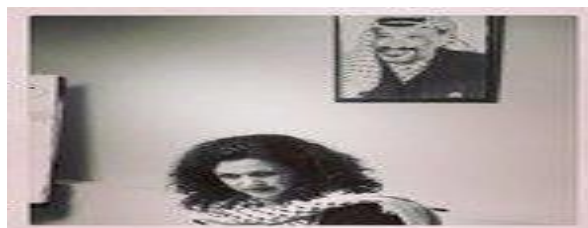
Palestinian academics see Distance Education as an important way to communicate ideas, theories, and practices with the rest of the world. Palestinian learners see Distance Education as a vehicle that can travel them wherever they want, to learn what they want, with them that they want. I share this belief that Distance Education can transcend boundaries to build learning framework. Greece faced similar economical and ethical challenges where Distance Education plays a similar role. Our borders have been affected by economic constraints and the domino effects of a political war which is another form of occupation. I am proud of my country as well as Greek educators and learners who continue to build hope and learning through Distance Learning pathways. We will succeed over time. In regards to the UK, outcomes have not proved sufficient for the development of the HE pedagogies and strategies in relation with Distance Education despite substantial investment

Fortunately, failure in specific IT initiatives has not caused major setbacks because the use of technology is increasing in both administration and teaching. UK has in our days to deal with Brexit. Maybe Distance learning will play a similar role like this in Greece and Palestine. Distance learning has the potential to open doors that are closing to learners all over the world.

int.WOJDE: What has been your ==experience at your current workplace== for distance education/learning?

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Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: I participated in 4 initiatives and networks relating to e-learning emerging technologies and state of the art theories and methodologies- I am full Member of the European Distance and e-Learning Network (EDEN), Member of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) Academy; full member of the Hellenic Information and Communication Technologies in Education Scientific Union; and full member of the Hellenic Network for Open and Distance Education. The close relation among these initiatives and networks keeps me updated on practices in the Technology Enhance Learning field in HE and, more specifically, in e-learning.

Currently I work as Senior Research fellow in Higher Education at the Al-Quds Open University of Palestine, which is my main affiliation, where I manage EU funding projects exploring e-learning educational policies and state-of-the-art theories and practices in Higher Education. I also am a Senior Researcher in the King's College University of London and Program Leader and lecturer in the Open University of Cyprus. My collaboration with the Open University of Greece relates to tutoring for an MA Professional Development Program in Special Education.

As Senior Research fellow in Higher Education for the Al-Quds Open University, Palestine. I am leading the University's research activities enriching my institution's e-portfolio with new research methodologies that handle big data and bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. I am acting as <u>Scientific Consultant for the University,</u> on Learning and Teaching Excellence and Continuous Professional Development in Higher Education in relation with e-learning

I am developing consultancy funding with the collaboration of my institution colleagues for the Erasmus+ Programme, for several calls relating with e-learning. For example" Capacity building for Higher Education"; "Developing Learning Languages for Non-Native Speakers"; "Joint master in Knowledge Management"; "Joint Master Program in Data Science" & "Data Science Research Centre"; "Develop Educational Technology M.A. Program in Palestinian Higher Education Institutions and Strategic Partnership for Higher Education" are some of the research proposal we are preparing to submit.

In paralel, I develop my research skills in Distance Education collaborating with King's College University of London as Senior Research Fellow.

Research design, review and analysis of the current UK and EU e-learning Educational Policies in Higher Education and exploration of TEL a key component in UK and EU institutional Policies and the impact of TEL Central Policies to Local/Institutional level and vice versa are main tasks for the literature review that is carried out under a broader collaborative research initiative between the University of Hyderabad in India and King's College London in UK. I am also leading the "Learning & Teaching in Open and Distance Higher Education" e-learning MA Programme as Programme Leader and Lecturer at the Open University of Cyprus, specifically developing the Curriculum of Studies, the learning activities, the assignments, and the assessment criteria; designing and constructing the University's Learning and Teaching Platform; Mentoring the Academic Tutors of the Course and lecturing in one of the course's module and supervising MA dissertations;

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Moreover, as Lecturer at the Hellenic Open University I am lecturing the e-learning MA Module "Special Education for students with verbal and writing difficulties" of the "Education Studies" Course and supervising PG Dissertations.

My collaboration on Distance Education and within Distance Education in all these countries enhances my experience in the subject domain, providing me the opportunity to share it with my Palestinian colleagues.

My main target is, by providing Al- Quds Open University, to gain experience in Distance Education and technical competencies, networking collaboration and openness through Distance Learning, Teaching and Distance Professional Development, to "open the boarders" and use Distance Education as Palestinians' learners bridge to all the world.

int.WOJDE: What are the <mark>advantages of distance education</mark> model of learning over traditional model of learning?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: To quote the OECD (OECD 2003a: 115).
"*The explosion of knowledge about the brain and the nature of learning, combined with the growing power of technology, created the potential to transform even the most fundamental unit of education - the interaction of the teacher and the learner; as a result, the characteristics which defined the successful education systems of, say, 1975, are unlikely to be those which will define success in the future*".

The advantages for Distance Education can be new ways of learning (e.g. blended learning, flipped classroom); new cycles of collaboration inside institutions, like "e-learning cycles"; and broadband connectivity to bridge the 'digital divide' for individuals and disadvantaged groups. Other advantages include support for senior managers, supervisors and (in larger businesses) the IT department which can produce 'e-learning cycles' which align business strategy, examination of competencies and measurement of performance gaps by setting learning objectives, capturing tacit knowledge within the organization, and developing e-learning content, delivery and evaluation where necessary. "Less assistance", "less effort" and "less time" are the objectives for academic lecturers and university students. There are other objectives but these are the crucial ones for me.

int.WOJDE: Why do you think people prefer attending distance education instead of traditional education?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: Distance Education opens the door to learners to a more flexible and efficient Higher Education Institutions that would not be accessible otherwise. They have multiple ways to learn, particularly, when 'blended' learning is combined with traditional classroom-based learning. The MOOC phenomenon," offers so many advantages for large-scale courses to learners to enrich their professional development while learning from almost anywhere- from their sofa, their bed or where they are most comfortable.

People attend Distance Education Courses because they offer students flexible options to study... from distance and" support them for lifetime learning, including flexible and part-time study, as part of promoting, retraining and preparing people for the future labour market. Distance Education for me is a kind of statement setting out a HE Institutions commitment to widening participation and fair access. They reflect democratic values.

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int.WOJDE: What are your <mark>suggestions for distance learners</mark>?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: Try to use alternative distance methodologies. Escape from your learning norms. Live the magic to work with unknowns inside virtual rooms, to share a smile- even within a graphic- to raise your hand explain your opinion or debate with respect, even without knowing the learner with whom you are debating. This is the way to teach him. Solve problems by distance, collaborate with other learners for all the world, co- create roadmaps, propose new ideas, and share your cultures. Don't use Distance Education as the poor relative of education because of a need or because technology offer this affordance to you. Use Distance Education as a dynamic vehicle to travel the world, to deepen your knowledge, to cultivate 21s Century skills, to understand the world and change it. Be human. You are not an avatar in a virtual world. You are Maria, you are Mahmoud, you are Ugur. You are a team with a warm soul and common problems that all adults are facing. Share. Respect.

int.WOJDE: What are your <mark>suggestions for distance education instructors</mark>?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI:
✓   Create interesting learning environments. Don't just transfer or stimulate a traditional course to a distance one.
✓   Investigate your learners needs in the beginning of your course.
✓   Make necessary changes. Don't be afraid to test new ideas.
✓   Empower lecturers to use their potential and their learners needs;
✓   Give direct access to the teaching to the policy makers.
✓   Enable learners' communities of practice networking.
✓   Create dialogue among educational stakeholders and learners through learning activities, with questions and responses not only requirements.
✓   Develop a structure dialogue among lecturers to design TEL activities and use OER and technology tools- technology offer them the feedback on their initiatives.
✓   Integrate virtual field trips to the teaching process to bring STEM subject closer with technology.
✓   Organize well the learning material- that is what navigate your learners.
✓   Use challenging learning activities and assignments. SWOT analysis, diagnostic assessment, co-authoring, enrichment of the existence activities with their ideas.
✓   Use technological free and flexible tools. Share boards, shared docs, presentations, communication environments, social networking, discussion boards.
✓   In concluding, don't design and instruct a distance framework only with whatever you already know but with an open mind to accept new ideas and a creative hand to meet new challenges. Innovate.

int.WOJDE: What are your <mark>suggestions for distance education administrators?</mark>

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: Seven policy consequences are proposed from several researchers as necessary to be considered for e-learning programs in H.E. These I will propose to Distance Education administrators;
✓   access,
✓   quality,
✓   affordability,
✓   productivity,
✓   completion,
✓   costs per student and
✓   skills shortage.

These considered being indicators of attainment and success, for e-learning to facilitate learning. e-learning should be a support mechanism and not just a system. Strategic e-learning policy discourse and e-learning policy should be a top priority for government and university leaders as Oake argues (2010)

int.WOJDE: Which areas of distance education have you been involved so far, and what are some of the lessons you have learned from them?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: I am an e-Lecturer. I am an academic developer. I have been students from distance. I am student from distance. I am lecturer in Distance Education. I teach "Distance Education". I teach "Special Education" through Distance Education. I am Distance Education Programme Leader in a MA Course. I have learned that Distance Education is a magical field full of adventures, affordances, ideas, and common dreams. I have also learned that Distance Education it is not only a need to overcome economic crisis but a bridge to connect those that could never be connected. I have learned that Distance Education make me to learn equal
with others, to collaborate easily with others and to produce new knowledge with others cultivating new skills.

int.WOJDE: Did you have supportive practices/programs for the education of women and girls through your work at University?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: Unfortunately, I hadn't this chance until know. This was because I didn't feel the need working for countries that didn't had an obvious discrimination between women and men. But this is my next research task. I want to empower girls and woman role inside schools and universities.

As I commented to one of my MA student dissertation, that is about women's' role in relation with digital skills, she should explore and break the stereotypes that women are not good enough with technology and are not capable to have STEM positions.

My experience in UK is that most of the TEL roles in UK Universities are held by women. And, yes, they are so knowledgeable and capable, as myself ☺.

int.WOJDE: As a woman, what do you think should be done for a more effective distance education of women?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: Follow the same routes that we follow for men. No difference. No difference at all. We are all learners. Distance Education provide specific environments and tools. So we both women and mean have double click the "start" button and dive in the magic world of distance education. With scarfs, without scarfs, with dresses, trousers or pizzamans. Just go for it!

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int.WOJDE: You must have had <mark>interesting experiences</mark> during your work in distance education. Could you please tell us about some of those?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: I will share one moments that I will not ever forget. A moment that last a year. It was in Palestine. I was working for the E-PAL project in Palestine, two years ago, as scientific expert in Distance Education for the Open University of Cyprus. The name of the project we run was "eLearning Curriculum in Palestinian Primary and Secondary Education" Project. My core target was to integrate education technological environments in Palestinian Education towards 21st c skills and also consulting to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Palestine on new education strategies and e-learning policies.

As EU citizen and woman, it was the first time that I felt on the one hand how cultural differences, political problems, geographical and political isolation could

affect Education learning outcome and disturb equal Education for all and on the other hand how Distance Education could play the alternative role of bridging these social-political-cultural gups, open roads and create roadmaps.

It was one of the happiest moments of my life when we run teleconferences from distance, shared education material, communicate, developing resources and be educated.

int.WOJDE: Have you ever faced <mark>gender discrimination at your institution</mark>?

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: This is a difficult question to answer- not because I do not have an answer but rather because gender discrimination in EU countries is usually expressed in a subtle context related to decisions about not being included in a team, not being appointed to a position or not having your opinion count as being as reliable and valuable as those of a male colleague.

int.WOJDE: Our thanks go to Dr Maria Fragkaki for sharing her invaluable distance education/learning experience as a female professional with the int.WOJDE readers.

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI: Thanks to intWOJDE that gave my the chanche to share my views and experience on Distance Education. Open dialogues and free sharing of personal oppinions are the center of a democratic environment. Distance Education, Open

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Education Resources and Learning Communities have the role of the Online Democratisation.

BIODATA of MARIA FRAGKAKI

Dr. Maria FRAGKAKI holds a Bachelor in Education Studies (Pedagogical Academy of Piraeus, 1986), a Postgraduate Diploma in General Education (Univ. of Athens, 2000), a Postgraduate Degree in Information Technology in Education (Univ. of Athens, 2004) and a Ph.D. in ICT in Education (Univversity of Athens, 2008). She how managerial in the public and private educational sectors.

She has an extensive teaching experience, 23 years in total, as a Primary School Teacher (1991-2014); has taught an undergraduate program at the University of Athens on the subject of ICT in Education (2001-2003); taught a class on Disabled Access Education (2008-2010); worked as an Adjunct lecturer at the University of Patras in the Postgraduate Program "ICT in Education" (2009-2011); she was a Tutor at the Hellenic Open University on the subject "Distance Learning" using ICTs, from 2008 to 2013.

She have an ongoing collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Organisation for the Further Training of Teachers and the Pedagogical Institute on the same subjects.

She is an evaluator on ICT teaching material at the Computer Technology Institute and Press-Diophantus. Her managerial experience concerns the coordination of several innovative research and training programmes.

She has broad international experience as a pedagogical expert in Technology Enhanced Learning in Education and Special Education and I have been a guest speaker at international meetings on ICT in Education.

Her research is focused in the areas of e-Learning, online learning communities, ICT socio-political learning theories, Action Research, ICT in Special Education, Emancipatory TEL, innovative research and problem solving methodologies, reflective-critical models for the educational field, Global, Sustainable and Critical Education.She has contributed to: design of emancipatory implementations of social-political TEL solutions; eLearning and Blended Educational Environments; Critical MOOCs, creation of authentic TEL educational scenarios for children with special needs; design of educational models for exchange of transformative knowledge among stakeholders; educational software development (design and implementation) for Professional Development.She has managed and successfully completed several EU, Middle East and National e-learning and foresight research projects.

She has coordinated and co-authored several innovative studies on the future of professional training through Emancipatory TEL and MOOCs.

Furthermore, she haw served as a Principal of a Primary School in Athens that belongs to the 100 ICT e-mature schools in Europe, in the framework of the ODS EU project. She currently serves as an educator-researcher at the Research Academic Computer Technology Institute & Press- Diophantus

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