

Benchmarking Open Educational Practices in Higher Education

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Open Educational Resources are widely discussed in higher education circles and open education practices are being upheld as the second generation of OERs that have the potential to make education freely available to all students. The OERu is a collaborative initiative between 12 institutions globally that is intending to offer courses free of charge to students using only OERs and open practices. This poster presents preliminary results from a research study conducted with 110 representatives of higher education institutions around the world, of which 12 were official members of the OERu. The study was aimed at identifying the extent to which higher education institutions are currently implementing open policies and practices as well as explore the challenges faced by institutions when considering implementing open initiatives. Results from the study indicate that although higher education institutions are aware of and interested in open education resources and initiatives such as the OERu, there are a number of challenges that need to be overcome before these initiatives are sustainable and more widely adopted.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources, OERs, Open Educational Practices, Open Educational Resource University (Oeru)

Introduction

At first glance the Open Educational Resources (OERs) movement and increasingly open educational practices seem set to change the future landscape of higher education. The successful implementation of open education practices, which includes OERs, has the potential to make education opportunities freely available to all students, particularly those previously excluded from formal learning (Mackintosh, 2012). Interest in OERs has increased exponentially as a topic of research and debate since the term was first adopted in 2001 when MIT became the first institution committed to making all of its course materials freely available through its OpenCourseWare (OCW) program (Baker, 2008). Since then, over 270 organisations and educational institutions internationally have adopted the “opencourseware” concept and have incorporated the principles underlying openness into their policies and practices (<http://ocwconsortium.org>).

Increased emphasis on the development of OERs and avenues for open learning represent a growing critique of traditional, institutionalised systems of education. According to Taylor (2007), existing education platforms are unable to meet the growing demand for higher education within the limited increases in resources. While to this point in time most of the focus has been on the creation and development of OERs, there are now a number of initiatives to create formal credentialing of studies undertaken using OERs which will result in recognised qualifications. These initiatives and other open educational practices are emerging as the second phase of the OER movement (Ehlers, 2011), which will challenge institutions to consider new delivery models, curriculum development, pedagogy and sustainable business.

The OER university (OERu) (Taylor, 2007) is one of these initiatives that signifies a step towards developing a feasible framework for integrating available OERs into assessable online courses. The OERu is based on a conceptual framework that provides a structure for enabling free learning opportunities for students who lack the means to access traditional higher education. The ultimate outcome of the OER university collaboration is to ensure that OER learners can achieve credible qualifications from formally accredited participating institutions (Taylor, 2007).

A number of studies (e.g. Ehlers, 2011; Bossu, Bull, & Brown, 2012) have pointed out that the potential of the OER movement to transform education practices has not been realised, largely because of a lack of focus on the policies and practices required to promote the concept of openness within higher education institutions. Despite research conducted to date, however, there is still limited evidence on how to successfully integrate OERs and principles of open education into the policies of educational institutions and limited research has been conducted on the resulting impact of open educational projects on institutional policy and practice. The aim of this project is to identify the extent to which higher education institutions around the world are currently implementing open education policies and practices that support the successful implementation of formal assessment and

accreditation services for informal learning based solely on open educational resources.

Research Method

An OERu compatibility survey was developed as a collaborative initiative between the author, Gabi Witthaus from the Beyond Distance Research Alliance (University of Leicester) and Wayne Mackintosh from the OERu Foundation. Many of the questions were derived from a series of interviews carried out with individuals from institutions participating in the OER university (OERu) network as a component of the Toucans project (Witthaus, 2012) and input was provided into the survey questions by OERu network members. The survey was programmed and hosted using an online survey tool and a link to the survey was disseminated using social media such as Twitter and Facebook and through newsletters and discussion forums. On completion of the survey all respondents received a PDF of their responses which they will be able to use as a benchmarking tool to map the compatibility of their organisations with the OERu concept against the final results.

A total of 110 representatives of higher education institutions around the world completed the survey. Participants included 12 higher education institutions that are officially members of the OERu network (also known as the OERTen partner institutions) and 98 that are not partner institutions. The final outcome of the study will be a compatibility indicator for the OERu concept based a comparison of the findings from the two groups. Institutions from across the world participated in the study with the majority originating from the United Kingdom (40%), North (17%) and South America (15%), and Australia / New Zealand (9%).

Discussion of Results

The results of the study indicate that the majority of participants in the study (88%) were familiar with Open Educational Resources prior to participating in the study and 67% were familiar with the OERu (option 4 or 5 on a five point scale from not very knowledgeable to very knowledgeable). One of the most predominant themes was the high awareness of OERs and the OERu in comparison to the low involvement of institutions in open practices that support the development of OERs. Three in ten (29%) participants represented institutions that were published OERs, yet only 24% were using OERs developed by other institutions or organisations. Only 24% were involved in the collaborative development of OERs with people in other institutions and as few as 8% were presently providing courses based solely on OERs (option 4 or 5).

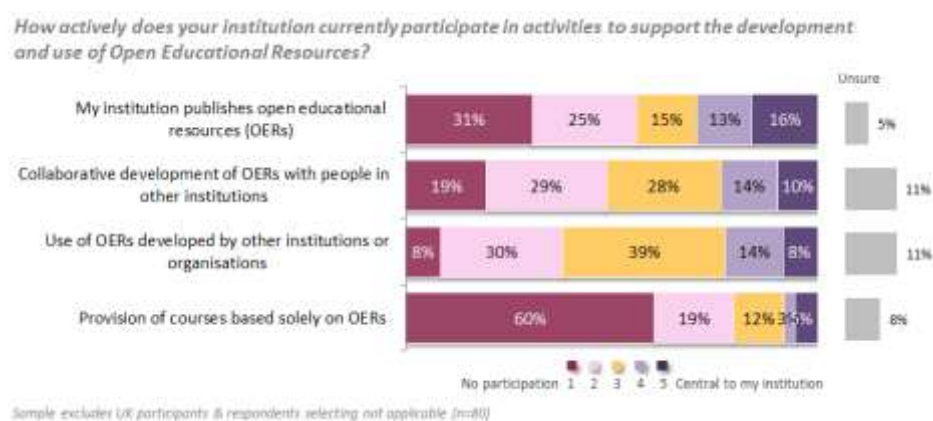


Figure 1: Institutional participation in OER development activities

Participants were requested to rate the factors that hinder the successful implementation of OER based courses on a five points scale from not at all (1) to a large extent (5). The greatest barriers to participation in the development of OER based courses (option 4 or 5) were leadership support, cost and time. Between over 60% participants considered the lack of availability of volunteers (66%), lack of support at the senior leadership level (61%), cost of redeveloping courses (66%), lack of availability of committed staff members (67%) and lack of integration with current workflows and obstacles (67%) to have a large impact on the successful implementation of open education courses and processes.

It appears that although the concept of courses conducted using only open educational resources is a topic of interest and discussion in higher education, it is a concept that is still in its infancy. There remain a number of challenges at an institutional level, particularly with regard to support from senior management that will need to be overcome before wider adoption is possible.

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