Open educational resources in distance education: Adopting a model of open learning in academic practice

Project team:
Dr Stylianos Hatzipanagos, King’s College London
Charles Kasule, King’s College London
Patricia McKellar, University of London
Undergraduate Laws Programme
Professor Steven Warburton, University of Surrey
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ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Project summary

The project addressed the problem of identifying educational resources on academic practice from which tutors can benefit from in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) environments. We repurposed a collection of digital learning resources to support programme learning outcomes. These were audio (mp3 files), or videos, PPTs with audio commentaries, and readings that offered a critical approach to understanding learning and teaching in higher education, to be used for self-study by ODL tutors. The resources addressed key topics in academic practice such as assessment, teaching in small groups, tutoring online, etc. and included activities for independent study and self-assessment. We engaged a targeted group of tutors in the use of OERs in their practice. Digital content and technologies offered these practitioners new opportunities for learning, primarily through sharing and reusing of OERs and promoting a concrete pathway for developing competencies in ODL teaching.

What were the major achievements of the project? In what way(s) was the project innovative?

The objectives of the project were to:

- Explore OER development in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context;
- Investigate drivers and barriers in the adoption of OERs and produce recommendations on how these barriers can be overcome in the context of ODL;
- Develop and evaluate a set of Open Educational Resources (OERs) in academic practice to be used by Open and Distance Learning Tutors in HE including global institutional providers;
- Investigate appropriate format and environment for sharing the developed OERs.
- Engage users/tutors with the concept of OERs by exposing them to the concept of open learning;
- Evaluate the quality and uptake of these OERs by practitioners/tutors.

In Open and Distance Learning (ODL), tutors often have relatively little teaching experience, and do not have access to a teacher programme or resources in academic practice to help them develop teaching skills and aptitudes. Internal scrutiny of the University of London International Programmes in research such as the ‘Tutor Accreditation’ project for the Undergraduate Laws Programme (Brown, Baume, Gosling, Luckham & MacMillan, 2006) has identified the lack of a teacher-programme and professional development pathway that will facilitate the development of teaching skills and competences. This lack has been echoed in feedback from Law UG LLB Providers Conferences.
In addition, in the context of technology enhanced learning, programmes and disciplines operate in institutional ‘silos’ (i.e. institutional VLEs) and do not benefit from sharing learning resources. Universities are often resistant to embracing new learning technologies, including OERs, as there are prior assumptions about the benefits of sharing and adopting a model of open learning to enhance the student experience. There are challenges as well in the production and provision of OERs that institutions and practitioners need to address. Integrating OER in teaching can be problematic on an individual level as teaching practitioners do not have the required digital literacies, knowledge and skills to find/evaluate or create OERs that are suitable for teaching in higher education. Frequently, they are not aware of any OER initiatives in the UK and internationally.

The project addressed the problem of identifying educational resources on teaching from which tutors could benefit in ODL environments. At King’s College and at the International programmes, we had access to a collection of digital learning resources, which were developed to support existing programmes and their learning outcomes. They were a combination of text-based resources, audio (predominantly mp3 files), or videos, PPTs with narrated commentaries, and readings that offered a critical approach to understanding learning and teaching in higher education, to be used for self-study by tutors. The resources initially had been ‘locked’ either in institutional VLEs or in central authenticated repositories. They addressed topics such as assessment, teaching in small groups, tutoring online, etc., and included activities for independent study and self-assessment.

The project engaged a targeted group of tutors who were encouraged to use OERs in their practice. Digital content and related technologies offered new opportunities for learning, primarily through sharing and reusing of OERs and promoted a pathway for developing tutor competencies in ODL teaching. The project focused on supporting learning and teaching and design for learning and built on elements of previous work identified in Brown et al’s (2006) ‘Tutor Accreditation in Law’ project that provided a set of valuable recommendations for tutor accreditation but lacked a concrete set of practical resources upon which to meet the project’s goals.

**What are OERs?**

OERs are "digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research" (OECD, 2007). The term ‘OER’ refers to educational resources (lesson plans, quizzes, syllabi, instructional modules, simulations, etc.) that are freely available for use, reuse, adaptation, and sharing (OER Handbook, 2008). There are challenges and opportunities that OERs present to practitioners who want to produce and use them in the context of their discipline.
OERs offer flexibility for mobile and independent learners who need ready access to resources that fit their needs and context. There is a pressure on educators to get a clearer idea of the attributes of pedagogically effective OERs and to develop abilities in creating OERs from existing content using rich media and also gaining an appreciation of how licences and rights work and related quality assurance issues. However, an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings that shaped the OER movement and the opportunities that OERs present opportunities to teaching practitioners to acquire a theoretical and practical knowledge of designing and using OER.

Debates and developments in this area are also pertinent for tutor academic/professional development, as through their engagement with OERs they acquire abilities to design and evaluate learning resources. Designing collections of ‘closed’ educational resources (content and technologies) for use by specific student cohorts and collections of OERs for use by any ‘learner’ require different design approaches (Lane, 2010; McAndrew, Scanlon & Clow, 2010). This has direct implications on tutors’ perception of e-leaning, as it puts forward an advanced model of engagement with underpinning theories on learning and teaching, learning design issues and focus on interaction that replaces any prior perceptions of using e-learning resources just to populate institutional repositories.

In higher education institutions, educational resources are structured to address the needs of the participants of a particular programme. However, there is also a need to establish shared resources between programmes and with other institutions and also a thematic rather than programme based development (e.g. resources on assessment, evaluation, how students learn, linking teaching and research) from which academic staff will benefit.

**Project Methodology: What we did**

**Exploration of resources to be repurposed**

1. An initial review by the project team identified existing King’s College and International Programme institutional teaching resources in academic practice that could be repurposed into OERs and considered their suitability in terms of the target stakeholder groups. The resources covered key areas in academic practice including: Preparing to teach, Teaching small groups, Marking and giving feedback, Presentation skills, Intro to e-learning, Evaluating Practice, etc.

**Resources development**

2. The project team repurposed the identified teaching resources and developed them as OERs. It selected Jorum with a share alike, non-commercial, attributable CC license, as the appropriate open
space from a range of alternatives, including OpenLearn, OER Commons, etc., where the resources were placed with established appropriate licences for repurposing and reuse. We chose the combination of an Open Access space on Moodle and in addition we placed these resources in Jorum. We collected permissions from the authors of the resources in order to repurpose them as Open Educational Resources.

Examining policy frameworks

(3) The project team examined policies, guidelines and documentation that currently exist in relation to the provision of OERs. We used this information in workshops we ran with practitioners who wanted to explore or use OERs. We finalised the framework within which the OERs would be evaluated through tutor workshops.

Evaluation framework

(4) The developed OERs were evaluated with tutors and other teaching practitioners. Timings did not allow the project team to also evaluate the resources within the context of an institutional visit abroad but the OERs were subjected to scrutiny within the International programme. Important attributes of quality OERs that were evaluated included: Accuracy, Reputation of author/institution, Standard of technical production, Accessibility, Fitness for purpose, Clear rights declarations e.g. Creative Commons (JISC Open Educational Resources infoKit quality considerations). In addition, the evaluation’s intention was to assess uptake and collected significant evidence of perceptions of teaching practitioners on OERs. Focus groups and surveys were conducted with tutors to assess user experience and identify good practice in the use of OERs.

Dissemination

(5) The critical review of OERs addressed issues such as adapting generic resources to own discipline and ability to evaluate OERs. This served as a ‘scaffolding’ device for ODL practitioners who want to use OERs. A set of materials were produced to be used in workshops to engage practitioners in the outcomes of the project.

Evaluation: users’ perspectives on OERs

The results of the evaluation indicated mixed tutor approaches towards uptake and adoption of OERs.

In the workshops and focus groups most participants (80%) did not have prior knowledge of OER; therefore there was a strong academic development aspect in these workshops, as lack of digital literacy skills often
impeded adoption and uptake: (1) educating practitioners about the OER movement, opportunities and challenges in uptake, (2) offering evaluation frameworks to use when practitioners search and assess OER quality in repositories.

We also explored attitudes towards reusability/repurposing of OERs as this was a key focus in the workshops. Our findings indicated practitioner preference for ‘useful, specific and practical OERs’.

In two surveys, we explored further attitudes towards and expectations from OERs. Responders showed a strong preference for reusable (ready to use without any further adaptation), rather than repurposable (needing adaptation to the context and discipline of the practitioner) OERs. A common perceived challenge was that in OERs they explored “context (was) often missing”, i.e. contextual information about how the OER could be used. The main perceived potential benefit of OERs, was ‘improved learning’ and less ‘saving on academic time to develop appropriate material/content’.

**Further work and responses to reviewers’ comments**

We have taken very seriously the project reviewers’ feedback that ‘the project raises many interesting questions by challenging existing paradigms of proprietary and closed learning content’. Their recommendation that further research and longitudinal studies could try to identify possible trends in OERs and compare them to traditional learning materials, possible defining also correlations between the two is a valid one; however it was outside the scope and the time constraints of this project.

We also addressed the lack of focus on users’ perspective on OERs issue, by adding a section on evaluating users’ perspectives on OERs to this report.

Finally, we took into account the reviewers’ recommendation about either disseminating any outputs that have been derived from this project regarding the barriers and challenges to the uptake of OER or further exploring these issues. Our dissemination strategy included CDE workshops and conferences, where we shared our experiences and engaged in debates on challenges and opportunities in the OER movement.
Project outputs

KEATS (King’s e-learning and teaching service):
  •  http://keats.kcl.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=61

King’s Higher Education Research Network – reviewing your learning and teaching practice:
  •  http://www.hern.org.uk/index-reviewing.html

DISSEMINATION

The project team undertook the following activities:

Workshops, seminars and published outputs


A paper was presented by Steven Warburton and Patricia McKellar at the ICDE World Conference 2011 in Indonesia. Slides can be viewed at:  http://www.slideshare.net/stevenw/warburton-icde2011-ps1-031011

Hatzipanagos, S. (2012). Open Educational Resources in Distance Education: Exploring Open Learning in Academic Practice. ICEL 2012, Hong Kong, China.


Hatzipanagos, S. (2013). The quest for “useful, specific and practical OERs”: but do they support learning? OER2013, Nottingham, UK.
References


CENTRE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION:
Promoting collaboration and knowledge-sharing in distance education, the Centre for Distance Education (CDE) is a University of London International Programmes initiative to support the development of expertise in this field at University of London College level. The CDE supports a community of practice and provides a focus for the development of high quality teaching and research in distance education throughout the federal University.

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