ARTICLE

Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS)

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OEPS is a cross-sector project led by the Open University in Scotland (OUiS) and funded by the Scottish Funding Council. The project began in late spring 2014 and runs until the end of July 2017. It has its origins in OER projects carried out by the OUiS over the preceding four years. In most cases these involved close partnership between the university and other organisations that would not normally be involved in the creation of educational materials. OEPS aims to build on these approaches, and on other valuable experience from across the Scottish sector, to increase the use of open licensed resources in Scotland, develop better understanding of good open educational practice and support widening participation and transitions. The project is multi-stranded, involving a wide range of partners in development work. Integral to the project methodology is a process of embedded research and evaluation aimed at understanding and evidencing good practice. In this paper we share the progress of the project to date and highlight some of the questions and issues that are emerging.

Keywords: OER; OEP; widening participation; transitions; partnership

Introduction

The potential for OER to transform higher education (HE) has been widely remarked (e.g. Welsh Government, 2014). Other authors (e.g. D'Antoni, 2013) have explored the contribution that OER can make to widening participation in HE, recasting the traditional boundaries between universities and the rest of society. However, the evidence suggests that this promised transformation is yet to happen. So, for example, a recent OECD report (Falconer et al., 2013) found limited impact on lifelong learning across Europe. The data on MOOC demographics is well known; currently most of those studying on massive open online courses are already in possession of higher education qualifications (Edinburgh University, 2013; Lane, 2013).

Scottish higher education has a distinctive ethos of education as a public good and a strong focus on cross-sector partnership and inter-institutional collaboration (Bryce et al., 2013). In June 2013 a meeting of the Open Scotland Network initiated the process, which led to the development of the Scottish Open Education Declaration[1]. While there was interest and engagement in OER in Scotland, this was often related to UK wide or international organisations and initiatives. The Open Scotland network drew together individuals from the university, college and school sectors across Scotland and from agencies such as JISC and the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA). The declaration was based on the UNESCO Paris OER declaration[2] and developed through an open process that engaged a wide layer of people and resulted in contributions from twenty-three individuals. The declaration remains open for comments and contributions. Around this time a number of important initiatives were informing discussion on OER and OEP and were in turn stimulated by the discussion that was engendered. These include the SQA's commitment to support the development of open badges[3], developments that led to the introduction of an institutional OER policy at Glasgow Caledonian University and innovative work at Dundee University engaging final year students in the production of OER[4]. At the same time some Scottish Health Boards were starting to use open badges to recognise professional development and some third sector and union learning organisers were beginning to develop an interest in the use of OER.

The OEPS project has its origins in a number of Scottish OER initiatives carried out by the OUiS in this context. While they drew directly on the capabilities of the OU UK, these projects were shaped and influenced by the open education developments in the Scottish sector; by the opportunities offered through the Open University's OpenLearn website and by a strategic orientation on widening participation. The first such OER initiative involved the creation of *Gaelic in Modern Scotland* (Cannell, 2013) in conjunction with cultural organisations and Gaelic scholars. Subsequent initiatives continued to utilise the knowledge and experience of partners. Typically they involved people and organisations with which the university had built up long-term relationships (Cannell, 2013; Macintyre, 2013) aimed at widening participation in higher education. These OER initiatives formed part of a broader strategic approach to widening participation

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through partnerships and supporting routes from informal to formal learning.

To varying degrees the development of new online content in each of these early projects involved a process of co-creation, combining the knowledge and lived experience of students and professionals with academic knowledge and skills in learning design (Macintyre, 2013). The projects were limited in scope, and originated as pragmatic responses to specific and contextual partnership objectives. However, they provided insights into how the transformative promise of OER might be realised. They reached significant numbers (not MOOC scale but typically in the range one to ten thousand) of non-traditional participants. This evidence of effective use and developing practice, together with the HE sector's collaborative approach to the development of the Scottish Open Education, contributed to the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) decision to fund the OEPS project.

Developing Opening Educational Practice

OEPS aims to build on the experience of the OUiS OER projects, and on other innovative practice in Scotland and internationally, to enable large-scale use of OER to support transitions from informal to formal learning, between different phases of the learner journey and between education and employment. It is worth noting that informal learning is a contested concept (Malcom et al., 2003). In developing OEPS it has been helpful to think of informal as a range of modes of engagement with learning situated outside the domain of educational institutions; such learning is typically non-accredited and may be individual or social – for example, group learning in the workplace. The project remit crosses boundaries between the world of educational technology, the open education movement and widening participation and lifelong learning.

The project has two principle aims[5]:

· To facilitate best practice in open education in Scotland through the development of a peer support network, an online hub and awareness raising activities.
· To enhance the Scottish tertiary education sector's capacity and reputation in developing publicly available online materials supported by high quality pedagogy and learning technology.

To develop a programme of work that covers the breadth of the project remit and the focus on widening participation required the project team to be proactive in identifying interest among individuals and organisations that might not normally identify as part of the OER movement. In this process OEPS has established active relationships with nearly fifty organisations. These include universities, colleges, trade unions, third sector and non-departmental public bodies with regional or national reach and a small number of employers (Cannell, 2014; 2015). In the first few months it was particularly important to engage in dialogue and listen very closely to what these organisations understood about open education and how it relates to their engagement with lifelong learning. What we found

was a complex landscape. Outside the university and college sectors we found considerable interest in open education, driven by awareness of the availability of resources, by concerns around costs and sometimes by concerns about the effectiveness of existing practices and an understanding that the digital world permeates the lived experience of learners and potential learners. In the formal/accredited sectors discussion of open education tended to be influenced by the impact of MOOCS and to be confined to particular groups of staff within institutions. In particular we found very little contact or engagement between the widening participation and open education communities in these institutions. Given the remit of the project this has presented OEPS with a challenge. In the rest of the paper we discuss some of the ways in which we have tackled the challenge.

OEPS methodology

Typically work with a partner begins with relatively informal discussions. These often focus on assessing the partner's level of engagement with open education and clarifying the nature of possible shared activity. In these discussions we ask participants to reflect on why they want to engage with OER, what it enables for them and crucially, what it enables for their learners. We find our focus on what OER does in the world a useful way to develop a shared understanding and maintain a focus on educational practice and the use of free and open resources. Taken together these conversations are invaluable in helping to scope a broad picture of the interest and engagement with OER and OEP across Scotland. As part of the project's remit to research and evidence the scope and direction of development of OEP in Scotland the project team has adopted a systematic approach to collecting evidence and a strong emphasis on developing reflective accounts of practice.

Working with partners is critical to the project methodology. Wherever possible project activity is collaborative. The OEPS team's role is to facilitate activity and also to monitor, evaluate and reflect. Sometimes partners are interested in what 'open' means in their context and we have developed workshop designs that allow facilitated exploration of this topic[6,7]. In other instances partners are able to share examples of good practice, which we can work up and share with the sector. Some are interested in the potential of using already existing OER to support their work. In this case we work with them to understand how processes that involve finding, choosing and curating existing resources can be combined with appropriate educational practice. Finally, a small number of partners are interested in developing new OER to meet specific, and currently unmet, needs **and** new practices to support the effective use of this OER. Typically we begin by delivering one or more Learning Design workshops to support the initial stages of development. Macintyre (2015a) describes the structure of these workshops, which aim to encourage reflection on experience, and reflection for action. Typically these OER developments involve co-creation between the OEPS team and the partner although as part of our focus on participatory approaches and mindful of

the sustaining changes to educational practice we aim to shift the locus of responsibility towards the partner. Across all of these areas of activity three specific themes emerge.

Barriers to engagement

The first theme concerns the promise of OER to bring high quality learning material to new audiences. The academic literature associated with widening participation includes a rich discussion of the barriers to engagement with education that impact on non-traditional students (for example McGivney, 1999; 2000). Authors concerned with the role of open education in widening participation have also noted the importance of these factors (Lane, 2008). Arguably, however, this practice and theoretically based knowledge has not informed discussions around OEP to the extent that it should and in practice we have detected very little transfer of knowledge between the open education and widening participation communities. OEPS workshops with union and third sector partners, interested in using open education in their context, have elicited valuable insights into how widening participation barriers are articulated in a digital world. For some potential students the basic skills that allow digital participation are a necessary prerequisite; many more are confident users of mobile devices, however, these skills are not understood as relevant to the world of learning and often require further development to achieve the kinds of digital literacy skills required for study. At the same time the affective, cultural and situational barriers noted in the widening participation literature and issues of self-perception and identity remain critical and interact with issues of digital literacy. Moreover in an online environment potential users are bewildered by the huge choice available and find established repositories intimidating. These complex and interrelated factors are recognised by union and third sector partners and there is a strong demand from them for the creation of support routes into OER resources that include the curation of suitable starting materials and clearly marked pathways.

Social practices

The second emergent theme concerns open education as a set of social practices. Much of what we have learnt about barriers to engaging with OER has derived from engagement with partners. As have many of the insights into ways in which barriers may be overcome. A particularly rich source of experience has emerged from working with Scottish Union Learning (SUL), the learning arm of the Scottish Trades Union Congress. SUL supports Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), located in workplaces across Scotland, who have a remit to assist their colleagues and workmates in accessing education opportunities. The OEPS partnership with SUL builds on a model for OER engagement developed in Wales (Pudner, 2015) and aims to develop the skills of ULRs so they can act as open learning champions in their workplace. In 2015 the project held a series of interactive workshops across all the regions of Scotland and involving nearly 100 ULRs (Macintyre, 2015b). Through this process it has been possible to generate ideas about how to socialise OER and through these social networks support uncertain learners. We will start piloting these approaches in a variety of workplaces in the next few months. However, it is our sense that this shift in focus from content and individuals using content to a more social space might help deliver on the promise of open education to broaden the socio-economic base of those accessing HE level learning. These elements of developing practice resonate with feedback from partners in a range of other contexts.

An important output of the OEPS project activity is a new hub for open educational practice which can be accessed at www.oeps.ac.uk. The aim of this site is to support the development of good open educational practice. It builds on the established academic literature and on the practice based insights of the OEPS project partners. At a generic level the site provides support and guidance of good practice and on the creation, use and affordances of OER. It also includes a course on OEP and a community blog. The site is designed with an open and flexible architecture that allows it to grow over time through contributions from users. In particular the site draws on advice and insights from OEPS partners in relation to barriers to engagement with OER and practices that can overcome these barriers. Users are encouraged to set up new communities of practice on the hub. Early examples of communities share context based guidance on effective practice; provide links to useful resources that can form appropriate entry points for study and models for encouraging social interaction and peer support in the use of these resources. The aim is to share existing good practice and, through the community engagement with the blog and the forum, to encourage the development and sharing of ideas, case studies and examples to develop and eventually embed new practice. Essentially the structure is built around supporting the evolution of communities of practice. The SUL network of ULRs is one such community.

Reversioning and remixing

In our early scoping of OER developments in the Scottish sector we found that overwhelmingly across all types of institution and organisations concerns were centred on accessing and using OER in effective ways rather than on the potential for remixing and reversioning content. The OER partnership developments carried forward by the OUiS were a rare exception to this. So, for example, *Caring Counts: a self-reflection and planning course for carers* derived from an earlier course developed in a different context. Part of what OEPS has offered to partners from the outset is support in creating, remixing and reversioning material on OpenLearnWorks (OLW)[8]. OLW is a sister site to OpenLearn. However, while OpenLearn is the site where the Open University hosts its own material OLW is a Moodle based community site that can be used by anyone and will host the exemplar resources that OEPS is developing in a small set of third sector and university partnerships. Despite the initial lack of interest in going beyond discussion of use and effective practice, as partnerships have matured we are beginning to see a shift of interest in the freedoms that open affords. This has resulted in a number of small pilots that are looking at ways of remix-

ing content in the OLW environment. In the second half of the project OEPS will be upgrading the functionality of OLW to support these developments.

The transition from a focus on use to an interest in remixing seems to stem from the process of engagement and discussion that characterises OEPS partnerships. This observation resonates with the idea of a ladder of OER engagement developed by Joanna Wild (2012), which has been recently developed further by Allison Littlejohn (2015).

Discussion

The project is working with universities and colleges. A small number of institutions in Scotland are developing policy on the use of OER (UCISA, 2014); a larger number have been influenced by the high public and media profile of MOOCS. Among these a small number of Scottish institutions are now part of FutureLearn and Edinburgh University also publishes MOOCS on Coursera. However, the evidence that OEPS has collected in dialogue with university partners suggests that there is little likelihood of the majority pursuing this approach. The Open Scotland network provides an active focus for educational technologists and has produced the Scottish Open Education Declaration[9]. The declaration provides a helpful framework for an important part of the OEPS objectives that aim at encouraging the development of institutional policy with respect to open education and to create links between educational technology experts vital to enabling openness and colleagues who have interests in widening participation or learning and teaching more generally.

With the exception of some very small-scale initiatives under the aegis of JISC and some work at Borders College there has not been significant activity in Scotland involving Open Badges until recently. The Borders College example is interesting in that there is now a well-established system for badging staff CPD that is mostly delivered in face-to-face mode. Borders is also using badges with employers for whom the college provides CPD. One strand of the OUiS OER development, now linked to OEPS, has been a rich source of experience in the iterative reversioning of OER in response to external demand. In addition it has generated a set of five open badges, centred around *The Reflection Toolkit*[10] and *Caring Counts*[11], two OERs aimed at supporting educational and employment transitions. The project is monitoring the take up of these new badged courses and gathering feedback on the impact of badges on learner motivation. Early reports from partners suggest that the idea of recognition through badges is popular among non-traditional learners. In the SUL example discussed earlier we asked the ULRs to undertake a badged course that develops skills in working with the OpenLearn site to help learners identify specific relevant topics on the site which support their learning needs. On completion a number of the ULRs commented on how the structured nature of a final assessment had encouraged them to reflect and had reinforced their learning.

In the early stages of the project we found almost no interest from university and college partners in remixing or reversioning OER courses that had been produced by other institutions. This underlines the strong cultural barriers that inhibit wider use of OER. In a wide-ranging set of studies of Asian universities Dhanajaran and Abeywardena (2013) found that only a small minority of staff take the opportunity to reuse, revise, remix and redistribute OER. The evidence from the meetings, workshops and seminars that we have held so far is that a similar situation prevails in Scotland. OEPS is carrying out separate but linked surveys across the Scottish university and college sectors to explore these findings more rigorously. Early data from the surveys suggests that the key priority in expanding the level of use of OER is the development of greater understanding of the open education agenda. Arguably there is currently a disjunction between the formal education sector and organisations outside the academy. In the latter there is a real demand for engagement with OER that is currently not being met. This is partly because most informal learning providers do not have a platform where they can host OER or experiment, develop and deliver free open online content. Indeed, aside from a few exceptions most formal learning providers in Scotland also lack these spaces. However, the issue is not simply about technical capacity, it is also about culture, pedagogy and models of engagement (Cannell, 2016).

The OERs produced in partnership by the OUiS, which formed the impetus for OEPS, have matured and developed since the project began. As we explore what openness enables they continue to provide positive evidence for the role that open education has to play in broadening opportunities for non-traditional learners. Effective practice requires a redrawing of boundaries so that practitioners and academics can work together in a process of co-creation and participatory design. Whether partners are interested in developing new material, or find that existing OER may be relevant for their purposes, they are often concerned that material should be bespoke. Conventionally 'bespokeness' is considered to be an attribute of the content of the OER, some of our evidence suggests that a greater concentration on the practices associated with use may be a more effective approach. Designing in a participative way with partners ensures that content production and its use are appropriately contextualised. And crucially the content and its use are embedded in the partner's established social networks. Co-creation can relate to new content but much more importantly it is an important component of OEP. We have argued elsewhere (Cannell and Macintyre, 2014) that it may be helpful to consider extending the definition of Open Educational Practices (OEP) to embrace the social and networks within which learners and the organisations that they are linked to are situated.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Notes

[1] http://declaration.openscot.net.

[2] http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/ HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/Paris%20OER%20Declaration_ 01.pdf.

[3] http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/67688.html.

⁴ http://www.oeps.ac.uk/create-your-own/setting-standard-students-co-creators-oer-dundee-university.

⁵ For the project objectives got to www.oepscotland.org.

⁶ https://oepscotland.org/events/workshop-for-union-learning-representatives/.

⁷ https://oepscotland.org/events/developing-open-practice-workshops/.

⁸ http://www.open.edu/openlearnworks/.

⁹ http://declaration.openscot.net.

¹⁰ http://www.open.edu/openlearnworks/course/view.php?id=843.

¹¹ http://www.open.edu/openlearnworks/course/view.php?id=1688.

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