



JOURNEYS TO OPEN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE: OER JOURNEYS

UKOER/SCORE Review Final Report

**A CUMULATIVE EVALUATION
AND SYNTHESIS OF THE
ENTIRE HEFCE FUNDED
INTERVENTION IN OER**



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2. OER JOURNEYS

2.1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The [JISC Good Intentions report](#)¹ in 2008 concluded that the landscape around learning materials had changed sufficiently to support a range of sustainable models for sharing. The report charted and acknowledged the long history of approaches to support sharing that had helped to shape the landscape.

Most of the models highlight a growing acknowledgement of the need to build and support open and sustainable communities to share practice and resources. Indeed such communities are often the key to sustaining the service, whichever model is adopted. This is the type of model most likely to encourage sharing between teachers as well as learners.

The growing OER community is taking collaborative approaches to tackling the ongoing challenges of raising awareness, licensing and trust issues, and standards and technologies. The challenge for the UK now is to ensure that our HE institutions are enabled to create policies, practices and support their staff to accelerate the transformations required to contribute and benefit from this global movement. It is also vital to ensure that we capture the real picture of use and re-use of such services and collections to inform future OER programmes.

Following this study, funding for the UK OER programme was initially released, with the principle aim to 'open up existing high-quality education resources from higher education institutions to the world' and so 'give further evidence of the high quality of UK education and make it more widely accessible'.² In retrospect the focus on resources was very much of its time. UK Higher Education (HE) students were making regular use of online resources for study, both formally and informally, and teachers were concerned at their reliance on resources that were not designed for educational use. Prospective students were researching HE courses 'online first' but without access to the materials that would tell them most about the learning on offer.

UK OER funding offered to address both concerns, and more generally to enhance the profile and reputation of UK HE. The UKOER programme and SCORE were launched in an open content environment dominated by US institutions offering integrated learning materials in the form of courseware (for example [MIT](#) and [Stanford](#)). Thanks to the funding, a number of UK universities have established themselves firmly in the open learning landscape (for example [Nottingham](#) and [Oxford](#)), and [OpenLearn at the OU](#) has been given added impetus.

However, both initiatives, and the collaborative ethos they engendered, have allowed other models of OER development to emerge. Peer-to-peer sharing in (subject teaching) communities [emerged in Phase One](#) of UKOER and remains distinctive to the UK and its collaborative approach to OER development. It is a model which provides more benefits to academic staff and to students already enrolled on traditional courses, since it focuses on sharing excellent educational practice rather than delivering courses to online students. And as the long-term success/completion rates for informal self-study remain uncertain, it may be that this approach – developing aspects of OER and OEP within blended learning contexts – will prove more beneficial to learners as well as more acceptable to teaching staff.

While OER release remains an aspect of inter-institutional competition, the UK approach has allowed a much broader range of universities and colleges to enter the game than would otherwise have been the case, so broadening the base of knowledge and expertise and allowing a more representative range of materials to be made available.

The years of UK OER funding have been a time of intense financial uncertainty in HE. Most immediately this has made it more challenging for institutions to develop and release OER, as resources of staff time and expertise have become constrained. At the same time the need to expand educational markets has become more pressing, so many institutions are focusing their OER activities on building a global brand. OER have proven benefits both for general institutional recognition and in attracting students to specific courses of study through 'tasters', so are becoming widely used as an aspect of marketing. However, the selection of 'brand leading' OER may not necessarily lead to a more mainstream engagement with the open agenda on the part of staff. More recently

the coalition government restriction on marketing spend affecting Jisc had a negative impact on dissemination of the programme at a crucial time. It is hoped that this report will help to counter this by offering synthesis of the activities and outcomes over the three years and to highlight key messages of value to the wider community.

OER release is also being used to support students on devolved and partner campuses – which may be on the other side of the globe – and in mixed settings where some students are campus-based and others are not. Increasingly academics are required to collaborate across national boundaries in their delivery of courses, and to engage students who may be enrolled in part-time, work-based or informal study, anywhere in the world. These shifts in institutional boundaries – sometimes described as the 'borderless institution' or open classroom – were not fully foreseen at the outset of the programme. The role of OER in facilitating them is explored in more detail in the section on [Motivations](#).

Some minority subject areas have been particularly put at risk by the new funding arrangements. Building a legacy of OER has emerged as a strategy for sustaining the knowledge that may otherwise be lost when departments merge or close.

Students have been struggling with their own financial pressures, and as a result have been attracted to informal and work-based learning as an alternative to full-time study on campus. OER have evolved to meet these needs, for example through dedicated work-based projects in the second phase of UK OER funding. For 'traditional' institutions, however, these developments have generated new forms of competition as well as new student markets. Organisations are emerging that offer accredited programmes – based largely on the study of OER – at a much lower cost than traditional forms of study. These include institutions that offer guidance and accreditation only, such as [OERu](#) and the [University of the People](#), and new US-led consortia offering 'open' (not necessarily free) online courses such as [Coursera](#), [EdX](#) and [Udacity](#).

In the UK, an exciting alternative development has been the involvement of students as collaborators and co-producers of OER. Peer production by staff across institutions, and the involvement of external partners such as employers, professional bodies and publishers, have also been features of the UK OER movement. This suggests that OER can help universities reframe their relationships with learners and other stakeholders without moving wholly online.

The open learning landscape has in this period moved definitively beyond content-based resources. Open online courses provide a context in which learning content is relatively less important than the interactions, reactions and emergent properties of the community itself. This has implications for the design, management and sharing of OER, as educational ideas may be deeply embedded in the context in which they emerged, and/or may be widely distributed around different sites with different licenses and means of access. The third phase of the UK OER programme focused on exploring these wider aspects of open learning practice, as did our paper on [Open Educational Practices](#).

There have been advances in technical developments (summarised in the [INTO THE WILD report from JISC CETIS](#)) and in legal aspects of OER. For example, the [Hargreaves Review of IP](#) established a potentially more supportive context for open licensing, and the proposal to establish a [Digital Copyright Exchange \(DCE\)](#) will make it easier to locate rights holders and seek permissions to use their works.

By the end of the funded period there was a general acknowledgement that OEP presented opportunities for academics to communicate their ideas more widely, and openness was coming to be seen as a definitive feature of digital scholarship. OER release, particularly of materials based on research, provides useful evidence of impact for the REF. An intriguing development that emerged in phase 2 was the suggestion that open release/sharing may challenge the distinction between research and teaching as outcomes of scholarship.

OER developments cannot be divorced from wider changes to disciplinary knowledge practices. Social sciences subjects, for example, are being changed in radical ways by the availability of public social and research data online as well as the rise of new social/digital practices. Openness to ideas, recognition of contextual differences, negotiation of meanings and co-creation of materials were important to subject community led projects just as they are to learning and teaching in those subject areas.

There's a... conviction about the open education enterprise and about feeling that it's a really positive activity and even philosophy with which to be involved and feeling that more broadly you're sharing that with likeminded people when you get together and talk about the issues associated with OERs and what people are doing and so forth. (Interviewee, July 2013)

Some unforeseen problems and contentions have arisen around the OER agenda. The [pilot phase](#) surfaced a real need to explore the global ethics of OER release, with concern over potentially negative impacts on developing education systems from the free availability of content generated in the West³. Two different models of international partnership were explored by UK OER projects: donation, and experience sharing. Neither were without difficulty, but in both cases the programme encouraged and provided a forum for ethical concerns to be debated.

Some teaching staff have reacted to the perception (rightly or wrongly) that OER undermine the teaching/learning relationship and the close connection between curriculum design and delivery that has existed historically in UK HE. Others have felt that the widespread availability of OER might make it easier for educational institutions to reduce staff numbers. However, the more devolved approach in the UK – working with enthusiasts in contexts where OER work could enhance their standing and reputation – has allowed the UK to avoid [protests from staff](#) about the impact of open courses on their workload and professional ethos. Questions have emerged, however, about whether open practices [undermine traditional university values](#) or positively reframe them for a digital age. Clearly, OER developments cannot be seen outside the wider political and cultural contexts of university life.

"If students are paying £9,000 and part of their £9,000 is receiving a set of lectures and yet that set of lectures are available completely free on the internet what does that mean?" (Senior Executive 2012). (HALSOER Final report, 2012)

There remain big question marks over how open access – whether to content or to learning opportunities in a broader sense – translates into educational success. Poor completion rates for online courses, and unequal online participation, are just two symptoms of that uncertainty. Equally unknown is what impact the proliferation of open content and open courses will have on existing

Higher Education institutions and their established business models. It does seem certain, though, that major disturbances to the system will affect vulnerable institutions and subject areas first, especially those representing minority languages and cultures.

These wider issues provide context for some of the trends this report identifies within the UK OER movement. The HEFCE funding for UKOER and SCORE initiatives has, in many ways, provided some of the scaffolding and support for a variety of individuals, communities and institutions to move forwards in their own journeys towards OEP, whether they started years before in other contexts or had just joined on the road to open sharing.

In this study we explore the journeys of individuals and organisations in their move towards open educational practices. We aimed to move beyond evidencing stages in the journey to examining reflexive interactions of professionals (academics and support staff), their structural contexts (colleges and universities), and social and technological change (openness). Therefore, we have looked at how the environment impacts on the individual and, at the same time, considered how people alter their environment. This allowed us to encompass the bottom-up impact of individuals on institutions and the top down effect of institutions on individuals, and the way each responds to changing practice in the other. When we talk of individuals we mean the whole range of individuals who have been involved in the OER initiatives (not just academic practitioners) and we also include students in this description, although we will talk about specific groups at appropriate points.

The questions we will address include: How have HEFCE-funded OER initiatives supported these journeys? What have we learned along the way?

1. [Motivations](#)
2. [Models and approaches](#)
3. [Impact](#)

and ultimately we consider: What are the [Critical-factors to support open practice](#)? and What [Tensions and challenges](#) surface from this work?

2.II.TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

This field is fraught with challenges around terminology which can result in miscommunication and unhelpful dialogue. In particular there are misconceptions and assumptions around the notions of sharing. The following excerpt is taken from the OER infoKit:

the word sharing usually implies an intent – where someone, or some organisation, chooses to share something of value with either a specific audience or more widely. This is different to 'exchanging' where both/all parties want, and agree to, share for some mutual benefit. Whilst often overlooked, the difference between these two actions is significant, particularly in relation to business models and benefits. It could be argued that sharing implies an open model (sharing with all) and exchange a community based model which relies on mutual benefits within a specific community.

Terms such as reuse and re-purposing may imply an underlying principle of sharing (sometimes enforced as a condition of funding), but people may not necessarily be consciously intending to share. Some take, some give and some do both, for a range of reasons. It can be useful to consider sharing and exchange as processes relating to OER Release (either conscious or not) but it is the intent behind the various initiatives, activities and services that is important to the resulting approaches that individuals, communities or institutions adopt. (OER infoKit - OER Myths)

During the three year period terminology has changed and new terms have emerged. A [guide to terminology](#) with definitions of key words and phrases has been produced and has been informed by the UKOER programme and the deeper understandings that have arisen over the last three years.

ON THE WIKI: SHORT URL: [BIT.LY/HEFCE-OER-REVIEW-OERJOURNEYS](http://bit.ly/HEFCE-OER-Review-OERJourneys)

BACK TO: [INTRODUCTION](#) SECTION

FORWARD TO [MOTIVATIONS](#) SECTION

The UKOER/SCORE Review report is available on the UKOER Evaluation and Synthesis wiki, supported by supplementary pages containing evidence and detailed analysis.

FOOTNOTES

1. MCGILL, L, CURRIER, S, DUNCAN, C AND DOUGLAS, P (2008) *GOOD INTENTIONS: IMPROVING THE EVIDENCE BASE IN SUPPORT OF SHARING LEARNING MATERIALS* ▲
2. JISC/HEFCE OCTOBER 2008 PRESS RELEASE
[HTTP://WWW.JISC.AC.UK/NEWS/STORIES/2008/10/OPENACCESS.ASPX](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/stories/2008/10/openaccess.aspx) ▲
3. OERS & INTERNATIONALISATION - POST ON JISC E-LEARNING BLOG SUMMARISING DISCUSSIONS HAD AT THE UKOER PROGRAMME MEETING. THE ISSUE WAS IDENTIFIED BY PROJECTS AS INTERESTING AND IMPORTANT. (OERS, INTERNATIONAL, IMPERIALISM, POLITICS)
[HTTP://ELEARNING.JISCINVOLVE.ORG/WP/2009/10/23/OERS-INTERNATIONALISATION/](http://elearning.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2009/10/23/oers-internationalisation/) ▲