OportUnidad - Open educational practices: a bottom-up approach in Latin America and Europe to develop a common Higher Education Area

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Abstract

This paper draws on the OportUnidad project co-funded with support by the European Commission under the EuropeAidALFA III Programme. OportUnidad multi-actors include twelve Universities from Europe and Latin America (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, Uruguay). European partners involved are: Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi (coordinator, Italy), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain), University of Lisbon (Portugal), University of Oxford (UK).

The OportUnidad project explores the adoption of strategies and channels that embrace the principles of openness and reusability within the context of educational institutions. The project intends to foster the adoption and pilot of open educational practices (OEP), OpenCourseWare (OCW) and OER in Latin America as a bottom-up approach to develop a common Higher Education Area. The initiative also opens the possibility to provide free educational resources for self-learners, in terms of informal and lifelong learning.

Based on the analysis of best practices worldwide, the project defines the OEP Agenda which outlines policies and actions to maximise the benefit of the use and re-use of OER for university course development in Latin America, as mean of the equal and democratic access to knowledge.

The Agenda includes items related to pedagogical approaches for OER (including teaching and learning aspects and links to social learning, constructive learning with peers), technological solutions for OER (including key technologies, standards, specifications. i.e. metadata, publishing, querying and infrastructure), organisational frameworks and procedures (roles of different actors in institutions to build OER, to re-use and remix OER and cost-effective procedures for OER), institutional business models (how do OER affect the institutional business models), cooperative models for OER between institutions.

Based on the OEP Agenda, LA universities define an institutional roadmap, i.e. a declination of the Agenda to the local, cultural and institutional framework. It is a local-contextualised plan in a global strategic plan.

Local teachers and educators will be trained to the use (and reuse) of OER and OCW through an on-line training course organized in a logical sequence going from the presentation and framing of the OER and OCW movement, until the integration of open practices into mainstreaming activities.

The on-line training course will include the understanding of the OER movement, the definition of OER, OEP and the main related initiatives OpenCourseWare and Universia, the aligning of OER to course requirements and pedagogical pathways, the OER search in repositories and on the Web (identification) and OER reuse, remix, rework, localizing (repurposing), the creation of OER from scratch, the OER plan for action, incentive and inhibitors of these open practices and the OER sharing to the community.

This paper details the rationale behind the OportUnidad action, highlights the challenges and notes the successes and culminates with conclusions on how openness of resources can bring new possibilities of learning to on-campus students and also beyond the walls of the institutions.

Keywords: open educational resources, open educational practices, higher education

1. OportUnidad in the context of Latin American Higher Education

Learning resources are often considered as key intellectual property in a competitive Higher Education (HE) world, nevertheless many institutions, faculty and individuals worldwide are sharing their own over the Internet openly and for free. OER can be considered a relatively new phenomenon which may be seen as a part of a larger trend towards openness in HE and democratization of access to education. The two most important aspects of openness are refer to free availability of resources over the Internet and low restrictions on the use of them. There should be no technical barriers (undisclosed source code), no price barriers (subscriptions, licensing fees, pay-per-view fees) and as few legal permission barriers as possible (copyright and licensing restrictions) for the end-user. A significant amount of OER is already available online but because of unawareness of their existence or the lack of specific knowledge on how to integrate them into actual practices of learning, this rich worldwide repository rests underused.

Above the surface is a small amount of highly visible licensed OER that officially bears the name of the institution and below the surface, often invisible beyond a specific course, is a much greater volume of reuse of other 'non-OER' digital resources by staff and students (White, D. Manton, M.; 5)

As a consequence of the high, although still to be developed potentialities of OER, OportUnidad project aims to foster the adoption of open educational practices (OEP) and resources in Latin America, as well as to support HEIs and other relevant actors to progress towards the creation of a Common Higher Education Area in Latin America and Europe (ALCUE).

Open educational practices (OEP) are defined as practices which support the production, use and reuse of high quality OER through institutional policies, which promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path. OEP address the whole OER governance community: policy makers, managers and administrators of organizations, educational professionals and learners (cfr. ICDE – International Council for Open and Distance Education).

There is general consensus that international cooperation between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the EU and LA is mutually beneficial not only in terms of improving education results, but also in terms of exchanging multidisciplinary knowledge, research and new teaching and learning opportunities. Essential features to contribute to strengthening the process of regional integration in the area of Higher Education in LA and promoting its synergies with the EU system.

Indeed, there is an established understanding that easy and open access to educational resources favours the integration of those institutions that are not formal educations entities but can be benefited for these initiatives of vulnerable and and/or social excluded groups into society. It also contributes to improve the skills of the workforce as well as facilitate the re-skilling of those who are outside of the world of work. In the middle-long term it could even

improve the living standards and decreased the existing poverty levels in the region, thanks to the access and exposure to validated knowledge.

The OECD adds that "upgrade training could help counter skill obsolescence while re-training for a different occupation could be the best solution for workers displaced from declining sectors." (OECD, 2011; 221).

The availability of accessible retraining options would also allow the workforce to re- or up-skill. More flexible features, such as the ones suggested below (OECD, 2011; 220), could make the return to learning easier for adults:

- A modular structure allowing learners to take only the parts of a course they need to re-qualify;
- High-quality training systems to provide learning credits for skills that are transferable between fields/occupations; and
- Part-time learning opportunities for those who want to continue working.

Also the role of such open access in reducing social inequalities, fostering cultural understanding and supporting education worldwide, is often acknowledged.

Beyond the mere availability of resources, it seems to be evident that teachers and students need to develop skills and knowledge to make a proficient use the resources availability. They can't "Google" their knowledge, but what counts more is the capacity to learn lifelong, to think, research and find information.

OportUnidad strengthens the principle of openness in education as a key driver for innovation in HEI. It is a matter of when and how – and not if – open practices including free access to validated knowledge becomes the dominant paradigm in the modern HEIs.

There is heightening evidence that universities need to open up their campuses, breaking down the barriers that have traditionally kept out those not directly involved in the programs, inviting students coming from not traditional routes and adult learners to share the academic richness of the modern-day universities. The ways in which universities may open their campuses are manifold and diverse: releasing the resources for free and for all is one increasingly popular and bottom-up approach of ensuring access to a wider community beyond the HE community.

OportUnidad understands the necessity to embrace integral and also inclusive actions that will be meaningful and relevant for the local beneficiaries. That is why this initiative envisions a multilevel and bottom-up intervention which articulates three key dimensions: contents, platforms and the cultural aspects, which are briefly described as follows:

- Contents: understood as educational resources or practices which are openly and freely shared, promoting its continuing remixation (re-usability), updating and sharing;
- Platforms: hardware and software designed to simplify the interoperability of their resources, facilitating semantic structures (improving its findability) and the use of open standards and open source software that decreased its costs and trigger its adoption;
- Cultural Aspects: promoting the awareness; explaining the value of the openness; describing the educational and also the inter-institutional benefits; not only identifying best practices but implementing the needed incentives to foster these practices in a variety of teaching-learning environments.

2. OportUnidad objectives and expected results

Openness in HE seems to be the baseline for the equal and democratic access to knowledge. If universities really want to be competitive and to invest in better teaching and research, it is essential that the open sharing of resources is encouraged. Knowledge must be shared and

spread, teachers encouraged to network and collaborate on course development and institutions discouraged from replicating the same educational materials.

Using freely available resources teachers and students can collaborate on compiling course material and resources. The learning experience will be significantly enhanced due to greater involvement. Before this can be realised, a change of awareness is needed related to what we mean by education, teaching and learning. We need new attitudes towards collaboration and new literacy. That is the challenge facing education today.

From an operational point of view, the specific objectives of the OportUnidad project are to:
- Raise awareness and widen HEI participation in open educational practices and resources;
- Define the OER Agenda for the re-use of OER at HE institutional level;
- Define a mid-term strategic roadmap for the implementation of the OER Agenda at local-institutional level according to the local, cultural and institutional needs and strategies;
- Teach faculty on how to use and reuse OER in a pedagogically-rich context;
- Promote faculty peer-to-peer learning for ensuring the local sustainability of the initiative
- Pilot start-up open educational practices that provide to learners up to date open contents and flexible learning paths;
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To reach the specific objectives the project provides the following outputs:
- Create a compendium of EU-LA OER practices based on EU and LA experiences;
- Build an agenda of OER re-use for university courses development;
- Trace roadmap(s) of open educational practices, as a declination of the Agenda to the local, cultural and institutional framework;
- Offer a 80 hours on-line training course in "Open Educational Practices and Resources" for university teachers
- Provide a 40 hours of assisted start-up of open educational practices in university courses as part of the implementation of the roadmap;
- Report on the pilot lessons learned as a result of the experimentation of the on-line training course and start-ups including tips and tricks for an efficient re-design of the Agenda, roadmap(s) and on-line course.

3. OER awareness raising: towards an Open Educational Practices Agenda
Based on the analysis of best practices worldwide, the project defines the "Open Educational Practices Agenda" which outlines policies and actions to maximise the benefit of the use and re-use of OER for university course development in Latin America, as mean of the equal and democratic access to knowledge.

The Agenda includes items related to:
- Pedagogical approaches for OER, including teaching and learning aspects and links to social learning, constructive learning with peers;
- Identification of technological solutions for OER, including key technologies, standards, specifications (i.e. metadata, publishing, querying) and infrastructure;
- Definition of the organisational frameworks and procedures: roles of different actors in institutions to build OER, to re-use OER and cost-effective procedures for OER;
- Definition of the institutional business models and OER: how do OER affect the institutional business models;
- Definition of cooperative models for OER between institutions;

- Collection of feedbacks on the Agenda from non-partner universities selected by partners;
- Definition of a model of OER re-use for university course development.

Based on the general framework of the OER Agenda, each University, including fellow universities, will define an institutional roadmap for the implementation of open educational practices at local/institutional level. It is a declination of the Agenda to the local, cultural and institutional framework. It is a local-contextualised plan in a global strategic plan.

It is expected to gain many roadmapping applications, from setting scientific research agendas to technology plans. Partners will also guide the construction of the institutional roadmap(s), making sure that it sets a clear future objective and answers the critical "why-what-how-when" questions that define and explain a clear action plan for reaching the objective.

4. Training of trainers to openness in education

Local teachers and educators will participate in an on-line training course designed to provide conceptual and operational tools for the use (and reuse) of OER , and organized in a logical sequence going from the presentation and framing of the OER and OCW movement, until the integration of open practices into mainstreaming activities.

The OER Training course is of approximately 80 hours and it targets faculty use of OER into their teaching and learning practices. It is intended also to foster the adoption of open educational practices.

The units are organized in a logical sequence going from the presentation and framing of the OER movement, until the integration of OER into the faculty course proposals (fig 1).
The course syllabus includes:
- Understanding: OER movement, initiatives, purposes, history, and challenges;
- Defining: OER, OEP (open educational practices), OCW (Open courseware), Universia;
- Aligning: OER to course requirements and pedagogical pathways;
- Identifying: OER search in repositories and on the Web;
- Repurposing: OER reuse, remix, rework, localizing;
- Creating: OER from scratch;
- Implementing: OER plan for action;
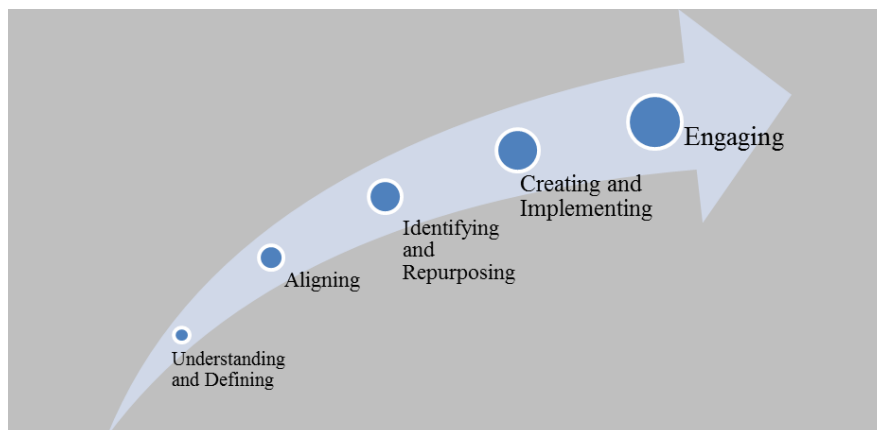- Engaging: OER sharing to the community.

Fig.1: Stages of the on-line training course in "Open Educational Practices and Resources"

The course resources will be integrated mostly by available OER. Emphasis is given to the start-up of OEP, through the elaboration of learning activities that gradually assist the

professors in the integration of OER into their own courses and practices. Additionally, the course aims at motivating the faculty to get involved in the OER community and actively participate in the creation and diffusion of OER.

Teachers and educators will pilot the on-line OER course and will be assisted for the start-up of initiatives that integrate OERs into their own courses and practices according to their institutional roadmap. The Course is expected to run in the second half of 2013. Ongoing webinars will be organised by external experts in the field of OEP and opened to an interested general audience. Towards the assessment of pilots and the lesson learnt during the pilots, the general Agenda and the local roadmaps will be re-designed and validated for implementation after the end of the action.

5. Conclusions

As long term results, the OportUnidad initiative will engage with the existing OER initiatives in the region and it expects to foster the role of universities in providing knowledge not only to their on-campus students but also beyond the walls of institutions to disadvantages groups (i.e. low income peoples, disables, indigenous), adult learners, and students coming from non traditional routes.

Additionally, an increasing level of quality of contents is expected as a long term result of the initiative. Actually, users will reuse OER because they know (recognition) and trust (reputation) the author. As a first consequence, if original, thoughtful and helpful work contents are delivered, authors will build a reputation. OER creators have to bring real value to the table and this means increasing the quality of contents.

Once authors that share contents as OER have followers (colleagues' educators, students, users) who respect their work and who watch out for what they will publish next, they need to maximize recognition. Effects of the quality of contents and on the creation of long-lasting networks are anticipated as a long term result of the project.

Acknowledgments

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