

## EDITORIAL

# Open Education, Open Educational Practice and the Concept of Openness: Issues and Challenges

*Anne Gaskell*

Many claims have been made about the potential of Open Education in its many forms to transform current barriers to education; for example:

What is certain is that we are living in the midst of a vastly transformative time that is extremely difficult to describe and explain because it is so unusual, so enticing, and so filled with hope and brimming with potential (Bonk, Lee, Reeves & Reynolds, 2015, p. 338).

However, how far is this potential being realised? How far is the rhetoric supported by the reality? Lane (2016) argues that:

Many claims have been made as to the potential freedoms offered through open education and how these freedoms may change or democratize higher education... (p. 31).

While, in principle, open education in its various guises can help people benefit from learning who may not have otherwise had the opportunity, in practice it may not be doing much more to emancipate people than closed education is doing. This is because prevailing social, cultural and economic norms still place greater value on education arising through the existing physical, political and legal infrastructures... in my view the rhetoric is way ahead of the reality and the reality will be less profound than the rhetoric suggests (p. 46).

All the articles in this issue contribute to the debates surrounding Open Education, including Open Universities, Open Educational Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

Our first two papers continue our occasional series on “Learning for Development in Context” (L4D). Previously, Emma Kruse-Vaai (2016) has written about L4D in the context of the use of OER in Samoa and Dame Carol Kidu (2018) has written about informal learning for development in Papua New Guinea.

In this issue, Professor Narend Baijnath, Chief Executive Officer of the Council on Higher Education, South Africa and representing South Africa on the Commonwealth of Learning’s (COL’s) Board of Governors, analyses the potential of Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Education Practice (OEP) for meeting the challenges faced by Higher Education in South Africa today. These include low participation and high attrition rates, in particular among rural black youth as one of the legacies of apartheid; this is recognised by the centrality of education in South Africa’s National Development Plan 2030. Baijnath draws on international examples of OER initiatives to demonstrate how OER can address development challenges in South Africa through, for example, improving the preparedness of



students, widening access and improving success and retention through reduced costs. A conducive environment is also needed for their sustainable adoption, which includes supportive policies, sufficient connectivity and access to suitable and context-relevant OER.

A different perspective on learning for development is taken by Professor Alan Tait, Editor Emeritus of this Journal, and Professor Emeritus of Distance Education and Development, The Open University, UK (OU UK). He sets L4D, the concept of “openness” and the role of technologies, in a historical context. He traces the origins of technologies for learning from the use of clay tablets in the then Babylon in c. 2500 B.C.E, through the introduction of printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, to the role of Open Distance and E-learning (ODEL) today. The use of technology, therefore, is not new, even if it has transformed learning and teaching dramatically in the last three decades. Case studies from the University of London and the OU UK illustrate the ways in which these institutions reduced the previous barriers of distance, social class, gender and disability in Higher Education (HE) in the UK. Yet there are still major challenges relating to inclusion, attrition and retention. The OU UK allows anyone without qualifications to enter at the undergraduate level and this can be challenged on two grounds. Firstly, whether it is fair to the student who may not have the background, time and cultural capital to succeed; and to address this Tait proposes an eight-point Framework for student success. Secondly, whether it is reasonable to expect the taxpayer to support such students. The latter argument has changed dramatically since the UK government increased student tuition fees for all HEIs fees, and which has led to a decline in OU UK enrolments. The underlying debate here is how far educational opportunity should be the individual’s responsibility, or how far it is socially constructed and should be the responsibility of the government. Tait also examines the role of OERs, MOOCs, YouTube and other open-access resources in challenging the dominant commercial models of education.

Open Educational initiatives and their challenges also form a major thread in our invited article by Professor Melinda dela Peña Bandalaria, Chancellor of the University of the Philippines Open University. In a wide-ranging discussion, Professor Bandalaria covers the many open, distance and e-learning initiatives taking place across Asia and, in particular, among the member institutions of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU). Higher education across Asia faces many challenges, not least the ongoing population growth, increasing demand, and shortages in skills relevant to development. In Asia, more than 70 institutions offer distance learning programmes and have developed an admirable model of collaboration and cooperation to, for example, provide curricular programmes of interest to all. In addition, many institutions provide MOOCs, some of which, for example in the University of Philippines Open University deliver certificate programmes. However, despite the potential of ODeL and Open education to transform Higher Education in Asia, challenges remain: certification across countries, the quality of MOOCs, sustainability and digital inclusion – as of December 2017, only 48.7% of the Asian population in general had Internet access.

Our research articles continue the focus on the potential and challenges of Open Education and eLearning for Learning for Development. From the University of the West Indies (UWI) in the Caribbean, Thurab-Nkhosi discusses the key role of change management and communication in the implementation of the University’s blended and online learning policy in the face-to-face UWI St Augustine Campus (UWISTA). UWI has developed a policy to support blended learning but through an investigation of the perceptions of deans and administrators, it was clear that many of these key

personnel were either not aware of the policy, or not aware of their role in change management. Challenges included a general lack of communication with key staff so that they did not understand the vision or their role, ignoring internal expertise and, more generally, a lack of clarity regarding aspects of institutional responsibility. Some of the recommendations include the need to involve and support staff and provide them with appropriate development.

Challenges also faced the implementation in Kenya of The Commonwealth of Learning's (COL) Open Resources for English Language Teaching (ORELT), as illustrated in a discussion by Orwenjo and Erastus. The ORELT materials are particularly important because they are provided online, by CD-ROM and in book format so making them especially flexible in countries like Kenya, for example, where even recently as many as 30% of public primary schools were not connected to electricity. COL provided support and training for the ORELT materials for 50 key English teachers, and in general the materials were very much welcomed. Issues were related to the incompatibility of some of the learning activities, syllabus and curriculum within the Kenyan context: their adaptation took extra preparation time which was sometimes difficult for teachers. Other issues related to a lack of awareness, as was observed in UWISTA and more basic infrastructural issues such as lack of electricity, computers or support.

Our final research article again concerns eLearning and in this case explores research trends in terms of eLearning implementation, and the barriers to its use, in Tanzania. Mtebe and Raphael use a bibliometric and content analysis method to review 74 articles on the subject, and discover that there is increasing interest in research about E-learning but that this is largely restricted to particular sectors, for example, Higher Education, is undertaken by only a few universities, is limited in terms of media used, and the samples studied (primarily students). The most important barrier to E-learning implementation was Internet access; in Tanzania only 20% of secondary schools have Internet access.

Developments and research into the impact of OER is also the focus of our book review by Perris of Hodgkinson-Williams & Arinto (Ed.) (2017) *Adoption and impact of OER in the Global South* which provides a fitting conclusion to this issue. Chapters from Sub-Saharan Africa, South America and South and South-East Asia offer a comprehensive coverage of many current initiatives in these areas.

Education for development through Open Educational resources and practices thus has huge potential, though not all the authors in this issue are perhaps quite as optimistic as Bonk et al (2015). Several papers discuss important initiatives, such as South Africa's National Development Plan (Bajjnath), the use of COL's multi-media resources in Kenya (Orwenjo and Erastus), and the collaboration and co-operation across Asian countries (Bandalaria). However, many challenges remain. Perhaps one of the most critical in developing countries is the lack of adequate computer provision and Internet access. Bajjnath argues that to address challenges for students in HE, attention needs to be paid to basic education. Yet in Kenya, 30% of public primary schools were not connected to electricity (Orwenjo & Erastus); in Tanzania, only 20% of secondary schools have Internet access (Mtebe & Raphael); and in Pakistan, only 22% of the whole population are accessing the Internet.

Further challenges are also identified in our articles. These include sustainability; the need for rigorous quality assurance mechanisms (Bajjnath; Tait; Bandalaria); the essential requirement for staff support and development (Thurab-Nkosi; Orwenjo & Erastus); and the importance of appropriate

contextualisation of any OER (Baijnath; Orwenjo & Erastus). Underpinning all these developments is the need for targeted and appropriate research (Mtebe & Raphael; Perris).

On the basis of these articles, the Open Education movement has both the potential to increase access while reducing costs (at least for the student), but also faces many challenges. Perhaps one of the most difficult questions here is how far Open Education can challenge the ways in which educational opportunities are socially and politically constructed: whether as a legacy of apartheid in South Africa, where the quality of education is still skewed against black people (Baijnath), or as the result of the long-standing assumption in the UK that educational privilege is the prerogative of social elites (Tait).

Anne Gaskell

*Chief Editor, JL4D*

## References

- Bonk, C.J., Lee, M.M., Reeves, T.C, & Reynolds, T.H. (Eds.). (2015). *MOOCs and Open Education around the world*. Routledge, New York & London.
- Kidu, C. (2018). Informal Lifelong Learning for Development in Papua New Guinea: A Case Study from the Margins into The Mainstream. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 5(1), 13-22. Retrieved from <http://jl4d.org/index.php/ejl4d/article/view/275/299>
- Lane, A. (2016). Emancipation through Open Education: Rhetoric or Reality? In P. Blessinger & T. J. Bliss (2016). *Open education: Perspectives in higher education*. Cambridge UK: Open Book Publishers. Retrieved from <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/531/open-education--international-perspectives-in-higher-education>
- Vaai, E.K. (2016). Learning for Development from Within and Beyond the Reef: Early implementations of Open Distance Learning and Use of Open Educational Resources (OER) for the Teaching of English in a Small Island State. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 3(3), 22-27. Retrieved from <http://jl4d.org/index.php/ejl4d/article/view/171/174>

Cite this paper as: Gaskell, A. (2018). Editorial–Open Education, Open Educational Practices and the Concept of Openness: Issues and Challenges. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 5(2), 83-86.