

Engaging Employers, Professional Bodies and Open Educational Resources

Dr Mark Fowler, De Montfort University

mrfowler@dmu.ac.uk

Dr Vivien Rolfe, De Montfort University, Leicester

vrolfe@dmu.ac.uk

Abstract

Open educational resources (OER) have the capacity to deliver quality learning materials to meet the challenges presented by the current higher education landscape. In the UK, open education is allowing individuals to tailor their learning experience to their requirements, be they undergraduates or staff undergoing continual professional development.

To ensure the OER are fit-for-purpose, high-quality, and maintain currency, especially in rapidly developing professional areas, engaging partners outside of the education sector is a necessity. How best to engage with these partners is one aspect that is being investigated by the HALS (Health and Life Science) OER project at De Montfort University, part of the UKOER Phase 3 programme.

For HALS we have identified a number of potential partners for OER development outside the classical education sector, including both commercial and public sector organisations, and professional bodies. As part of HALS we are exploring the benefits and barriers of establishing these partnerships, and the level of contribution desired and provided.

Our results to date show that the level and type of engagement of partner organisations varies considerably and depends on variety of factors such as organisational attitude, perceived need and benefits to the partner, infrastructure support and crucially the nature of the contact and the willingness of individuals to engage and deliver. The work is on-going to evaluate more fully the nature of these partnerships and the benefits to educators and learners involved.

Keywords

Open educational resources; External partners;

Introduction

National public sector changes raise the need for organisations to work more closely (BIS 2011, DOH 2010). Also, with the publishing of the Brown Report (Brown 2010), employability skills and understanding for graduates have been placed high on the agenda, with many employment-related initiatives starting up in universities. As part of the HALS project, one of our aims is to explore these national needs by establishing partnerships with a range of external organisations.

At De Montfort, our Phase 2 UKOER Project “SCOOTER” (Sickle Cell Open – Online Topics and Educational Resources) forged informal relationships with external partners, including the

Sickle Cell Society and clinical biochemists within the NHS (Rolfe 2011). In this project we recognised the valuable contribution that partners could bring in terms of providing high quality assets and case-studies representing real-life scenarios. In HALS, part of UKOER Phase 3, our aim is to explore these relationships more systematically for the mutual benefit of all involved.

In this paper we present some interim findings of the benefits and barriers to these working relationships.

External partners

The external partners identified for HALS were both existing collaborators (e.g. Leicestershire Constabulary), organisations where there were links with one or two individuals (e.g. NHS), or entirely new collaborators (e.g. Oxford University Press). They were chosen to represent a range of end users and professional bodies relevant to our health and life science programmes including Biomedical Science, Medical Science and Forensic Science. Table 1 summaries the partners involved in the HALS project.

Table 1. External Partner Involvement in OER.

External Partner	Participation	Approval Decision
Leicestershire Constabulary	Producers, end-users	Organisational
National Health Service	Producers, end-users	Individual / teams
Oxford University Press	End-users	Organisational
Forensic Focus	Producers	Organisational
The Fingerprint Society	Quality control	Organisational

Level of participation

Public sector participation generally includes the provision of assets to be developed into OER including histology photographs, laboratory data, career planning, and professional and technical advice. These organisations are also end-users of the OER; the materials developed for our science undergraduates is also relevant to their own junior staff professional development, e.g. histology resources for final year Biomedical Science students is relevant for biomedical scientists in the NHS requiring Health Professions Council registration, and junior histopathologists seeking registration with the Royal College of Pathologists. The participation of the local Constabulary and the Fingerprint Society ensure the forensic science resources are of high quality and meet professional body requirements, and are specifically tailored to deliver the required competencies.

Approval for decisions

All discussions with external collaborators regarding the concept of open education have been entirely positively received. Staff at all levels are all supportive of the concept and even discussions that were anticipated to be more difficult for example agreeing copyright and licensing terms, the partners have always been happy to go with the level of Creative Commons license required by the project (BY SA).

The discussions are driven by a shared goal of both parties contributing to learning materials that will then be of mutual benefit. In addition, national strategy changes have validated and given approval to this dialogue. University strategy has changed and tasked institutions with putting the undergraduate experience at the heart of educational practices including emphasis on employability (BIS 2011), and similarly public sector organisations such as the NHS have been challenged to work more closely with education institutions to support professional development needs of staff (DOH 2010).

The level of decision making ranged from organisational i.e. board approval, senior management sign off, senior management approval of time and commitment, through to an individual basis where individuals or small teams were happy to collaborate. In these instances, licensing permissions to release materials using Creative Commons were gained at a departmental leadership level.

Motivations for involvement

As part of this project, further research will be conducted to understand partner motivations and perceived barriers, but the initial ideas in Table 2 are based on the discussions already held.

Table 2. External Partner Motivation for Involvement

External Partner	Business Model
Leicestershire Constabulary	Graduate employability
National Health Service	Graduate employability / staff continual professional development (CPD)
Oxford University Press	Business development / quality supplementary information
Forensic Focus	Business development
The Fingerprint Society	Maintaining quality of professional materials

In our experience to date, the motivations for, and outcomes from these discussions are not just about OER. Particularly with the NHS, discussions about OER has catalyzed wider collaborations in terms of research opportunities, and has led to new opportunities for final year science dissertation students and post-graduate opportunities for university students. Similar experiences have come to light with the forensic science professionals which have also yielded unexpected opportunities that have outweighed the pre-conceived objectives of the project.

In conclusion, the paradox is that the external partners are buying into the concept of sharing mutually beneficial resources, whereas in the university the benefits of such collaboration are often not as quickly recognized, and the justification and persuasion of colleagues is often a more detailed process. We conclude, that working with external partners for the production of OER is mutually beneficial, not just in terms of enhancing student educational experiences but by catalyzing dialogue around a whole range of collaborative opportunities.

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