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THE OPEN EDUCATION MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA: THE NEED FOR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

This paper starts by exploring some of the most important OER initiatives in Australia, and then describes a centrally funded research project that investigates the state of play of OER in Australia. After that, the authors report on some of the preliminary findings of this research in progress, which surveyed the higher education sector and interviewed key stakeholders. The research findings revealed that there should be greater strategic leadership from government bodies and institutions to regulate the adoption of OER in Australia. According to participants, there is an urgent need for public policies to promote access and availability of OER in the higher education sector, and that these policies could encourage the growth, development and institutional adoption of open educational resources and practices across the sector in Australia.

Keywords: OER in Australia, OER policies, OER project, policy research

Introduction

As more and more countries and governments join the open education movement, the Australian government has to date shown limited interest in embracing the key tenets and aspirations of the movement. One reason for this reluctance to embrace free and open access to education may be linked to the provision of international education in Australia. The industry generates billions of dollars in annual export income. It is this economic reality that may represent one of the powerful barriers to concepts surrounding “free”; whether access, sharing or repurposing. Despite such barriers, there have been some initiatives and policy developments at the governmental level in Australia.

This paper starts by exploring some of the most important OER initiatives in Australia, and then describes a centrally funded research project that investigates the state of play of OER in Australia. After that, the authors report on some of the preliminary findings of this research in progress, which surveyed the higher education sector and interviewed key stakeholders. The research findings revealed that there should be greater strategic leadership from government bodies and institutions to regulate the adoption of OER in Australia. According to participants, there is an urgent need for public policies to promote access and availability of OER in the higher education sector, and that these policies could encourage the growth,

development and institutional adoption of open educational resources and practices across the sector in Australia.

OER Movement in Australia

OER represent an emergent movement that is re-shaping learning and teaching in higher education worldwide. Identified by the last Horizon Report as one technology to be closely consider by higher education institutions, OER are likely to influence the way institutions worldwide deliver education in one year or less (Johnson, Levine, Smith, & Stone, 2010). According to that report, the growth of the open educational trend “is a response to the rising costs of education, the desire for accessing learning in areas where such access is difficult, and an expression of student choice about when and how to learn” (Johnson, et al., 2010, p. 6). In addition, it also argued that OER has the potential to meet the growing demand for higher education worldwide, and to close the gap between formal, non-formal and informal education (Kanwar, Kodhandaraman, & Umar, 2010; Pereira, 2007). In fact, research conducted by UNESCO has identified that the higher education sector is the lead stakeholder for the dissemination and development of OER (D'Antoni, 2008). However, not every country has taken advantage of the full potential of OER. Australia, for instance, has a limited number of OER initiatives and programs at higher education levels compared with the US, UK and some other European countries. One possible reason could be the lack of a national framework and research to support educational institutions (Fitzgerald 2009). Another reason could be the lack of institutional guidelines and support, as well limited understanding of the issues surrounding OER, including copyright and intellectual property issues (Bossu, Brown, & Bull, 2011).

Some of the most popular OER initiatives at institutional level are:

- Macquarie University with its Macquarie E-Learning Centre of Excellence (MELCOE), which specialises in developing open source software tools and open standards for e-learning (OECD, 2007);
- The University of Southern Queensland (USQ), which remains the only Australian member of the OpenCourseWare Consortium (OCWC) (Bull, Bossu, & Brown, 2011);
- USQ, and more recently the University of Wollongong, are the only two Australian universities members of the OER university initiative (Thompson, 2011);
- The College of Fine Arts (COFA), with the University of New South Wales (UNSW), developed quality video and text resources to assist educators to teach online (COFA, 2011); and
- The University of Canberra RecentChangesCamp2012; an annual meeting of interested Open Space. This free gathering has been taken place for the third time in Australia and it is focused on wikis and online collaborative practices. “The aims of these events are to draw together people interested in worldwide iterative knowledge involvement or wikis, to discuss and share knowledge, and eat and socialise in a friendly face to face setting” (RCC2012, 2012, para. 1).

Also, some Australian universities have released some of their teaching materials through iTunesU. Others have created repositories of learning objects. Unfortunately, some of these repositories can only be accessed by the universities' staff and students. Even though some these repositories support the Creative

Commons license, very few allow for redesigning and repurposing of the content, which therefore limits the value of these resources. In addition, OER have also been adopted by the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sectors in Australia.

In addition to the institutional initiatives mentioned above, there have been some programs and policy developments at the governmental level in Australia. Some of them are:

- The Australian Government's Open Access and Licensing Framework (AusGOAL), which provides a set of guidelines "to government and related sectors to facilitate open access to publicly funded information" (AusGOAL, 2011, para. 1);
- The Australian National Data Service (ANDS), which is a database containing research resources from research institutions in Australia (ANDS, 2011);
- The Guide to Open Source Software for Australian Government Agencies, which is a policy that requires that government agencies first consider open source software options when requesting tenders (Gray, 2011); and
- Government 2.0, which is an Australian government initiative focused on the "use of technology to encourage a more open and transparent form of government, where the public has a greater role in forming policy and has improved access to government information" (Australian Government, 2012, para. 1).

Even though the above Australian government developments are on par with a number of developments in the UK, the US and also in some European countries (Helsper, 2011), they are mostly concentrated on government bodies. The opposite can be said in relation to policies and developments with an educational focus, as Australia seems to be behind the mentioned countries (Bossu, et al., 2011). If the Australian government wishes to take advantage of the benefits of open educational resources and practices, it will need to adopt strategies that take this movement out of the shadows and place it in a more prominent position within the educational mainstream. Such strategies could assist the government to effectively achieve some of its current agenda, such as to increase participation and access to education to a more diverse student cohort, particularly working adults and those residing in rural and remote locations of Australia (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). The lack of government leadership on the adoption of OER has encouraged a group of academics and researchers to develop a project proposal to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), a national funding body. The proposal was successfully funded and is presently in its second year. The remainder of this paper will describe this research project titled "Adoption, use and management of Open Educational Resources to enhance teaching and learning in Australia" and present some of preliminary findings.

The Research Project

The overarching purpose of this project is to develop a "Feasibility Protocol" to enable and facilitate the adoption, use and management of Open Educational Resources (OER) for learning and teaching within higher education (HE) institutions in Australia. The Feasibility Protocol will prompt questions and raise issues that need to be considered by institutions wishing to enter the OER movement. With narratives and discussions from the data analysis, examples of practices and literature review,

this protocol aims to assist senior executive managers and others to make informed decisions within their institutions regarding how to approach the adoption of OER.

The Feasibility Protocol (see Figure 1) will contain a set of guiding principles with information on:

- Policy recommendations for higher education institutions in Australia regarding adoption, use and management of OER, including copyright, intellectual property, licensing and other legal issues (policy analysis);
- The opportunities involved with the adopting of OER and OEP;
- The challenges related to the use and adoption of OER and OEP; and
- Strategic directions for institutions interested in adopting OER.



Figure 1: The structure of the Feasibility Protocol

This is the second year of a two-year research project. The first year involved a comprehensive analysis of the relevant literature surrounding OER internationally and nationally, the collection of institutional and national educational policies and frameworks that enable OER practices and development. Also, an online survey and subsequent interviews were conducted targeting a whole range of higher education stakeholders across Australia. We are currently conducting a preliminary analysis of the data, which will provide the basis of a one-day Symposium, with higher education stakeholders to be invited to attend and provide further feedback on the Feasibility Protocol. The Symposium is also a key dissemination point for this project (Brown & Bossu, 2011; Bull, et al., 2011). Additional feedback gathered during the Symposium will be included in the final analysis, and a comprehensive research report will be then produced and distributed throughout the sector and to interested bodies.

Some Preliminary Findings

The online survey was the major instrument of data collection. There were 101 valid survey responses and 24 participants offered to be interviewed. These numbers are considered acceptable by the research team, as the Australian higher education sector is relatively small, and the sample compares favourably with similar European research surveys. The survey sample included participants from 32 universities in Australia, out of the existing 39, while four other tertiary institutions also responded to the survey. As for the interviews, 24 interviews were conducted with participants from 18 institutions. There was also a balanced gender distribution amongst the respondents: 48 percent male and 51 percent female. The samples also have a good representation of university stakeholder groups (Bossu, et al., 2011).

The majority of respondents have been aware of the OER movement from two to five years and rated their knowledge of OER as intermediate. As for those who have adopted OER, learning objects have been the most preferred type of resources applied in teaching and learning. In a similar fashion, most participants declared that they are not involved in collaborative OER initiatives either in Australia or internationally. However, they indicated that they would like to be involved in OER activities in the future if the opportunity arises. The lack of adoption and participants' involvement in such activities could be due to the fact that OER practices and initiatives are not included in the current strategic plans of most participating institutions, as declared by the participants. One possible reason for this could be that there have been some small and isolated initiatives occurring within individual institutions (Bossu, et al., 2011). Another possibility could be that the lack of government incentives for the adoption of OER might be already impacting the growth of the movement in Australia by stopping institutions and their academic staff from participating in open educational practices. In fact, the above situation was revealed in the data, as participants believed that government policies are necessary to regulate the adoption of OER in Australia. They also believed that dedicated OER public policies could encourage the growth, development and institutional adoption of open educational resources and practices across the sector in Australia. Even though the efforts of some individual OER initiatives have succeeded at the institutional level in Australia, the movement has expanded faster and more effectively in countries where support was provided at the national level. Particularly in Australia, this support could come in the form of more flexible policies. According to participants, the Australian government should also support higher educational institutions through grants or financial awards to encourage the development of OER, together with a culture of open practices.

As for institutional policies, they were considered an important factor to promote the effective use and adoption of OER. According to the participants, educational institutions should develop policies and activities to promote OER awareness and to clarify issues related to intellectual property and quality assurance. Institutions should also promote and recognise OER initiatives, and this could also occur through financial initiatives. This was also true in studies undertaken in Europe and other parts of the world (OECD, 2007; OPAL, 2011). In fact, many have alerted institutional policy-makers of the existing institutional strategies to the adoption of OER, and that these strategies could be implemented through appropriate internal

regulations and guidelines (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007; Downes, 2007; Kanwar, et al., 2010).

Conclusion

This paper discussed some recent OER developments within higher education institutions in Australia, as well as some attempts to make available publicly funded research, resources and government information through federal open access policies. Unfortunately, the adoption of OER within mainstream education in Australia appears to be limited due to the lack of educationally focused policies and initiatives, as demonstrated by the research described here. It appears that the Australian government is aware of the open education movement, but has been slow to recognise the global altruistic benefits of the OER movement. According to participants in this research, the movement must be more fully supported by government policies, which support and encourage institutions to share their resources for the public good. Delay in the introduction of open educational resources, as mainstream policy in the provision of education in Australia, could hamper the drive to widen participation in higher education and slow educational collaboration and innovation.

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