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Lane, Andrew (2012). Case Studies on Institutional Open Approaches: The Open University. JISC.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/topics/opentechnologies/openeducation/open-university-summary.aspx>

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Case Studies on Institutional Open Approaches: The Open University

Summary

Interpreting openness has been part of The Open University's mission since its foundation in 1969. As a distance teaching university it has always developed extensive educational resources for its students and occasionally for a wider audience but the emergence of open educational resources (OER) has challenged the ways in which it both develops and uses such teaching materials, in particular an over-reliance on in-house authoring and embedded third party materials and income from sales and licensing of such content. As educational resources are integral to the university's teaching and business model a large scale, institution-wide, action research project aligned to University strategic objectives was established to examine the potential impact of OER in those models (with funding support from a US Foundation). Extensive research and evaluation activities plus widespread staff acceptance and experience in the use of OER in various parts of their work has enabled a gradual bottom-up adoption and planned top-down embedding of OER and other aspects of openness into most facets of University work after five years, including a defined open media policy.

Introduction – The clue is in the name

The Open University¹ (OU) is the UK's only dedicated distance teaching university. Its teaching model is based around supported open learning whereby the bulk of the teaching is embodied in multiple media teaching materials delivered through appropriate technologies and study of which is facilitated by tutors². The University was given the mission to be "open as to people, places, methods and ideas" by its founding Chancellor in his inaugural address (Crowther, 1969) and to also "promote the educational well-being of the community generally" in its Royal Charter (Anon, 1969, p 4). The OU has therefore always been interpreting and acting upon the different aspects of openness as appropriate to the changing technologies at its disposal and in the varying contexts in which it works (Gourley and Lane, 2009; McAndrew, 2010). This openness largely began with open entry to its undergraduate courses (no selection on the basis of prior qualifications) and to the planned or serendipitous provision of audiovisual teaching materials to the UK public, both through free-to-air educational broadcasting with the BBC³; and through low-cost teaching texts co-published with academic publishers and available at no cost in public libraries.

The high up-front investment costs of developing the multiple media teaching materials means that modules need to enrol an order of magnitude: more students for each presentation or cohort than is the case in campus-based face-to-face teaching models. The same core teaching materials are often used for up to eight years before the course is significantly revised or replaced. The use of co-publication agreements, the direct selling of the teaching materials, and the licensing of modules internationally to other distance teaching providers are all ways in which the high investment costs derived from teaching grants and students' fees are defrayed. Furthermore, the development of ever more sophisticated digital technologies has often added to the investment costs needed to develop and deliver pedagogically and technically effective teaching materials, particularly many types of rich media (Lane and Law, 2011). Thus the OU's teaching model and hence main business model has been predicated on utilising economies of scale, economies made

¹ www.open.ac.uk

² <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/main/the-ou-explained>

³ www.bbc.co.uk

possible by not being restricted in the numbers it could teach by the physical space on campus.

Open licensing

The longstanding relationship with the BBC has been a mutually beneficial collaboration that has led to many innovations in the use of new visual and digital technologies for educational use (Lane and Law, 2011). This has also been a good example of open innovation whereby there was two way sharing of ideas and expertise (Lane, 2011). Developments in information and communication technologies have also altered the way that some of the OU's teaching materials have been used. The original open availability of free-to-view television broadcasts moved to free-to-record for public use through VCRs. Later on some programmes were enriched by free-to-acquire (on request) educational materials. The launch of a jointly managed website in 1999 called Open2.net⁴ supplemented this enrichment by providing free-to-access online educational resources alongside free-to-contribute opportunities, both online and offline, through various organised public engagement activities.

All these educational materials, both for student and/or public use were fully copyrighted. The emergence of open licences for both content and for software in the last 20 years has created new challenges and opportunities for the OU. Initially certain free or open source software offered new ways of teaching some topics or provided cheaper alternatives to the creation of such software in-house. Later on the University was looking for a new product to form the basis of its third generation VLE, previous versions being developed from a mix of in-house and proprietary elements. After a detailed review of the options the OU chose to adopt and develop the open source learning management system Moodle⁵ in 2005. The main reasons for doing so were set out in the executive summary of an internal document *The Rationale for Selection of Moodle*:

“This project will enable the OU to:

- meet its aggressive VLE development timeline with the resources available. By adopting Moodle, the OU can utilise the functionality already produced and tested by a global community of developers;
- leverage continuing development work by a global community of programmers for base functionality;
- focus on adding value to the platform with advanced learning and teaching tools, and accelerate the development of particular areas of functionality;
- deliver significant functionality, e.g. Learning Design earlier than anticipated by the currently defined VLE release stages”

Around the time of the launch of MIT's OpenCourseWare initiative in 2001⁶ the OU had begun both a few bottom-up and top-down activities to explore this new form of openness so resonant with its mission. Such activities included an Open Source Teaching Project⁷ in 2000-01 and the release of some openly licensed audiovisual materials through the Creative Archive⁸, a collaborative venture with the BBC, the British Film Institute and Channel 4 from 2005 to 2006 (and involving a bespoke Creative Archive Licence). As with most OU activities these projects involved much evaluation and discussion of any findings but none were deemed sufficient to test out or challenge the OU's prevailing teaching and business model and its existing

⁴ www.open2.net

⁵ www.moodle.org

⁶ <http://ocw.mit.edu/about/next-decade/>

⁷ <http://ict.open.ac.uk/reports/7.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/creativearchive/>

embodiment of openness because they were at small scale and were largely restricted to an OU audience.

The Open Content Initiative (aka OpenLearn)

The place of open educational resources (OER) continued to exercise the OU's senior management and particularly its then Vice Chancellor Brenda Gourley who thought that the internet and open content created enormous opportunities for social justice and achieving the ambitions of education for all as set out in the Millennium Development Goals. This interest was further stimulated by approaches from officers of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation on the recommendation of the previous Vice Chancellor Sir John Daniel (the Hewlett Foundation being one of the prime sponsors of MIT OpenCourseWare and a major funder of OER initiatives worldwide⁹). This mix of internal and external activity led to a strategic review and report on what the University should do about the issue of open content. The report recommended that the University present a bid to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for funding to carry out a substantial Open Content pilot which would test out the impact on the University of making materials freely available on the internet.

The Open Content Initiative (OCI), as it was then titled, was approved by the Vice Chancellor's Executive and also by the Board of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in early 2006 and the two year pilot formally started on the 1 April 2006 with the creation of a new, larger project team to do the implementation.

As an institution-wide, action research initiative (renamed OpenLearn on launch of the platform, the current entry website being shown in Figure 1¹⁰) the Director reported directly to the PVC (Strategy, Planning and External Affairs) and had to provide regular written or oral reports and take further papers for approval for different activities to various University committees. There was also a Steering Group which included four members of the Vice Chancellor's Executive plus other senior staff. In addition a number of presentations were given to University staff since although there was fairly widespread support for the OCI there were still a number of people who questioned its overall value or the specific direction being taken.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the latest version of the OpenLearn home page

⁹ <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education-program/open-educational-resources>

¹⁰ www.open.ac.uk/openlearn



At the end of the two year pilot period a major internal review outlined the value to the University provided by the initiative up to that point as summarised in Lane (2008a):

“In brief, internally it has:

- Demonstrated that the University can successfully deliver a large scale cross institutional project in a short time scale (useful in itself in understanding how we can cope with rapid and large scale changes);
- Shown that it can implement the Web 2.0 philosophy of perpetual beta, release changes often and release early;
- Significantly tested and enhanced its new e-Production and publication technologies such as Moodle, Documentum™ and Structured Content and provided a robust platform for wider exposure and use of technologies devised by our Knowledge Media Institute;
- Supported significant institutional R&D activities such as Learning Design for course development and helped win substantial new research grants;
- Enabled regional and enquiry staff to undertake new and successful forms of information, advice and guidance, outreach and widening participation;
- Been shown to have played some role in the recruitment and choice of fee paying courses by over 6,000 registered students;
- Enabled significant testing and evaluation of Search Engine Optimisation and Social Media Marketing (e.g. linking content to the SkyLearning™ website, placing audiovisual content on YouTube™), enhancing our external web presence and e-visibility in mass market Web 2.0 sites.

While externally it has:

- Generated substantial international attention for the University amongst individuals and institutions, with 69% of the visitors from outside the UK;

- Placed the University at the forefront of open education and web based learning through gaining several awards, positive media coverage, many institutional visits and approaches, book chapters and commissioned reports, refereed journal articles and conference papers, and active inclusion in related work instigated by major worldwide consortia;
- Enhanced relationships with major strategic partners in the UK (e.g. National Institute for Adult Continuing Education, Unionlearn, U3A) and stimulated existing or new partnerships with international organisations (e.g. Commonwealth of Learning) or organisations in other countries (e.g. UNISUL in Brazil)."

The internal review also recommended further internal investment, initially for another year, to begin implementation of stage 3 around embedding OER in systems and processes as noted above. This was agreed but at a much lower budget than for the high cost start-up phase with further reviews to be undertaken in subsequent years. (it is worth noting that the £5.6 million expenditure of stage 2 only released less than 3% of the total educational catalogue of the University). At the same time elements of OER activity were built into the University's strategic plan in several places, including within its international social justice work such as the Teacher Education in Sub Saharan Africa programme¹¹ which involved OER as an enabler of the work of that consortium (Van Dorp and Lane, 2011).

Open research and evaluation

A key feature of the original OCI proposal was to undertake significant action research and to openly publish our findings as soon as practicable. This was done through creating a workspace within the University's Knowledge Network where documents and papers of different types were published as open access materials as the initiative progressed¹². Many of the staff involved in the initiative contributed to this workspace and to more formal journal articles and book chapters (often in open access journals). We also ran a conference in our second year with published proceedings¹³ and produced an overall OpenLearn Research Report (McAndrew et al, 2009) covering this pilot period and part of the third year of operation. Such research and evaluation has continued and is now a major strand of broader research activity into open educational practices and has been supported by a large number of people working on a large number of grant funded projects (some JISC-funded such as POCKET¹⁴, LORO¹⁵ and Atelier-D¹⁶) at both institutional and subject level (McAndrew and Lane, 2010).

As noted above there was also evaluation internally of the impact of OER on various OU activities. Two examples of positive impact were the way (a) that one third of our Advisory staff, without training and without OpenLearn being designed for this purpose, took to using it as another source of Information, Advice and Guidance for continuing and prospective students, resulting in a decision to train all such staff to use it effectively in this way and (b) some of our regional staff used OpenLearn to support outreach and other public engagement activities in their localities (Lane, 2008b) which then supported widening access and participation targets.

Externally, we also publicised what we were doing to as wide an audience as possible, often through conferences, meetings and presentations to senior officials and policy makers.

¹¹ www.tessafrica.net

¹² <http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/workspace.cfm?wpid=6087>

¹³ <http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/document.cfm?documentid=10482>

¹⁴ <http://www.derby.ac.uk/pocket>

¹⁵ <http://loro.open.ac.uk/>

¹⁶ <http://design.open.ac.uk/atelier-d/>

"I applaud the OU for being the first in the UK to make their teaching material available in this way. I hope that this encourages other institutions to do the same, ensuring our country is firmly on the cutting edge of these new developments in learning," Sarah Teather MP, as Liberal Democrat Shadow Education Secretary in 2006 and currently Minister of State for the Department for Education

We also shared or were consulted on what we were doing by funding bodies such as HEFCE and JISC (which influenced development of the UKOER programme¹⁷) and by the Online Learning Task Force¹⁸; and entered for, and won or were highly commended in, several national and international awards, including the 2010 Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Award for the JISC sponsored ICT Initiative of the Year¹⁹.

Open collaboration

While OpenLearn itself was mainly about The Open University publishing its own content, it was recognised from the outset that OER represents a reciprocal contract of sharing within a 'gift economy'. Collaboration with other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other organisations was therefore an important aspect to be tested out in this new open world. This was done partly through:

- the community-facing LabSpace²⁰ where others could modify our content or publish their own content as part of our 'open learning environment';
- international consortia promoting OER such as the OpenCourseWare Consortium²¹;
- OER related projects within existing consortia such as the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities²²; and
- bespoke partnerships for specific purposes such as TESSA, HEAT²³ and SCORE²⁴.

The Support Centre for Open Resources in Education is part of a wider initiative funded by HEFCE to utilise some of the special characteristics of the OU to help other HEIs in England support the teaching of students, and specifically to work alongside the JISC and Higher Education Academy managed UKOER programme around both content and technologies. SCORE is a good example of open innovation where the knowledge creation and sharing activities provide benefits to all concerned, benefits that would not happen if they did not collaborate.

Open Media

As well as releasing content through OpenLearn the OU was also able to take advantage of the developments in proprietary channels for educational content, namely YouTubeEDU and iTunesU²⁵. This was possible because we already had experience of releasing audiovisual content through the Creative Archive project and had developed relevant podcasting expertise through R&D projects such as the JISC funded Steeple project²⁶. Having established separate ways of developing and

¹⁷ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/oer.aspx>

¹⁸ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/enhance/taskforce/>

¹⁹ http://www.nxtbook.com/nxteu/tsl/THEwinners_2010/#/28

²⁰ <http://labspace.open.ac.uk/>

²¹ www.ocwconsortium.org

²² www.eadtu.eu

²³ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/africa/heat>

²⁴ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/score/>

²⁵ <http://www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/about-openlearn/about-openlearn>

²⁶ http://www.steeple.org.uk/wiki/Main_Page

publishing open content through different channels it was agreed that all these activities needed to be consolidated and embedded into formal university systems and processes. In the past two years the OU has re-cast OpenLearn as the brand for its own open channels, transferring material and processes used for Open2.net into OpenLearn (Figure 1) to sit alongside the content in OpenLearn's LearningSpace²⁷ and also aggregating information on content put out through the iTunesU and YouTubeEDU channels. It has also consolidated its use of technologies such as Moodle as a platform and its internal e-production systems and technologies for all forms of content. This means that from August 2011, the OU has largely stopped openly publishing legacy content already developed for student use and moved to the open publishing of newly developed or updated content from student facing modules and programmes. These developments include a recently approved Open Media Policy and greater integration between open activities around the web²⁸ and its website policies²⁹. Lastly, as well as integrating OER publishing within the University there are now Library support services (see Figure 2) and training programmes aimed at supporting the use and reuse of OER from other sources within new and adapted modules.

Figure 2: A screenshot of the OU Library intranet site supporting module development including discovery and use of open educational resources



Conclusions

The Open University has been involved with open educational resources for ten years, always assessing how it adds value to its 'open' mission and to its various

²⁷ <http://openlearn.open.ac.uk>

²⁸ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/community/main/>

²⁹ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/main/admin-and-governance/policies-and-statements>

teaching, research, scholarship and public engagement activities. It took five years to decide that it needed to undertake a more substantive assessment helped by the injection of external funding. It has taken a further five years for this more substantive assessment to lead to OER becoming an everyday feature of University activity being both supported by and supporting aspects of open source software, open data, open innovation, open access publishing and open scholarship. Even so, and with total expenditure on OER exceeding £10 million over 5 years, OER comprise a relatively small part of overall University activity as total annual expenditure is closer to £450 million. So, while OER have not yet substantially changed its teaching and business models this position will continue to be closely monitored as more evidence comes to light of both the tangible and intangible benefits. In effect it is the consequences of openness in all its forms that does more to help guide the University's strategic and operational goals than just OER. This is evident in the current Vice Chancellor Martin Bean's foreword to his 2009/10 Annual Report³⁰ where he notes that "*Our enduring mission – to be open to people, places, methods and ideas – forms the bedrock of our strategy*".

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³⁰ <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/annual-report/forewords/martin-bean/>

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