OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INNOVATIONS AND LESSONS FROM OPEN UNIVERSITIES

A. Lane[1], K.J. Van-Dorp[2]

[1] The Open University (UNITED KINGDOM)
[2] European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (NETHERLANDS)
a.b.lane@open.ac.uk, kees-jan.vandorp@eadtu.eu

This paper, which references a European Lifelong Learning project under the Erasmus Virtual Campus programme, briefly reviews the role of open educational resources, open and distance learning and widening participation within European higher education. It also examines and analyses policies and practices from various European open universities, practices undertaken to widen the audience for higher education knowledge, increase engagement with higher education materials and improve participation in formal access higher education courses and programmes. It presents a framework for understanding the role of open educational resources and open and distance learning in widening participation based on their availability, accessibility, and acceptability. The paper concludes that open educational resources are beginning to influence educational opportunities in Europe, but that new policies and practices are required at all levels in the higher education system to address issues of openness and open educational resources in higher education study and the role that they can play in increasing and widening engagement and participation. There needs to be better collaboration between the various stakeholders if OER are not to be seen as a way of simply widening the audience for higher education knowledge rather than widening participation in formal studies.

Keywords: Open educational resources, widening participation, innovation, policy, open and distance learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) has been working with renowned open and distance teaching universities in Europe on developing strategies for Open Educational Resources (OER) by means of the EADTU taskforce on Multilingual Open Resources for Independent Learning (MORIL). The US-based William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has been acting as a financial catalyst to this taskforce and affiliated projects. Through two successful bids to the Foundation, namely the MORIL grant and the MORIL Supplementary grant, OER momentum has been created at participating universities and associated strategies developed. More recently, the receipt of a new grant from the European Commission under the Erasmus Lifelong Learning Programme, within the strand of Virtual Campus, EADTU has been able to continue and sustain its work with universities on OER. The new European project is called "Innovative OER in European Higher Education (OER-HE)" and includes 11 European university partners. It consolidates and extends the activities which began under the previous grants.

This paper focuses on the main findings from one work package of the OER-HE project dealing with best practices for widening participation in higher education (HE) through the use of OER. It draws upon the knowledge and experiences of the European partners in the study in their use of OER, most of whom have long track records in widening participation in higher education in Europe through open and distance learning (ODL) and some of whom are leaders in the emerging field of open educational resources. The OER-HE project includes the following partners: European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, Universidade Aberta, Open Universiteit Nederland, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, FernUniversität in Hagen, Anadolu University, Università Telematica Internazionale UNINETTUNO, Open University, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Hellenic Open University, Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics, and Swiss UniDistance.

2. THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the past 10 years there has been significant development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) following the Bologna Declaration in June 1999. Now involving 46 countries within Europe, the first 10 years of the Bologna process have seen much progress in achieving greater compatibility and comparability in their collective systems of higher education. A major aim has been to increase student and scholar mobility within Europe and to attract students and scholars from outside Europe to study and work there. The three main strands of activity in the past decade have been: (1) Establishing a common framework for higher education qualifications based on a three cycle structure (bachelor/master/doctorate) across the EHEA, (2) Establishing national qualifications frameworks linked to the overarching EHEA framework and based on learning outcomes and workload alongside, and (3) Adopting a common set of Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance processes including the creation of a European register of quality assurance agencies.

Work on all these strands are still ongoing although it was hoped they would be fully implemented by 2010. However, as well as reaffirming their commitment to completing these strands, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the 46 countries of the Bologna Process have also looked at further developments for the next 10 years up to 2020 (EU, 2009). The first of their named priorities is about equitable access and completion: *The student body within higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations. We therefore emphasize the social characteristics of higher education and aim to provide equal opportunities to quality education. Access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies. This involves improving the learning environment, removing all barriers to study, and creating the appropriate economic conditions for students to be able to benefit from the study opportunities at all levels. Each participating country will set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade. Efforts to achieve equity in higher education should be complemented by actions in other parts of the educational system.* (EU, 2009 p2)

They go on to note that widening participation shall also be achieved through lifelong learning and that intermediate qualifications within the first cycle at the national level can be a means of widening access to higher education. Widening participation to higher education in Europe is therefore seen as an important social aim to be enacted both within countries and across the countries belonging to the EHEA. This aim is reflected in the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning (EUA, 2008) which asks Universities to commit to, amongst other things, embedding concepts of widening access and lifelong learning in their institutional strategies, providing education and learning to a diversified student population and adapting study programmes to ensure that they are designed to widen participation and attract returning adult learners and asks Governments to commit to recognizing the university contribution to lifelong learning as a major benefit to both individuals and society and promoting social equity and an inclusive learning society. Individual countries have responded and are responding to these challenges in different ways. Before looking at the key messages from the case studies through the partner Case Studies we first consider what we mean by widening participation in higher education.

3. DEFINITIONS OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION

Widening participation is a relatively new term used within higher education and one most debated and developed within the UK through National policies (and reported on through a dedicated journal). It may be considered as a process, an outcome or a type of student (Shaw et al, 2007) but inevitably these aspects become entangled as you examine the motivations of higher education institutions (HEIs) and learners alike. Accordingly, there is no settled definition of widening participation but the Higher Education Funding Council for England stated on their website: *Widening participation addresses the large discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups. Under-representation is closely connected with broader issues of equity and social inclusion, so we are concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women and men, and all ethnic groups* (Hefce, 2011).

This definition identifies that certain societal groups or communities may be excluded from current educational provision (the type of student) and that a number of factors may be involved (that involve

the processes used to administer HE) and assumes equality of outcomes. While it may be simple to use socio economic class as a major measure of potential exclusion it is another matter to disentangle the wide variety of reasons that effectively lead to this exclusion. Starting with the type of student, within the literature related to widening participation in higher education, some or all of the following have been identified as potential barriers to particular groups and communities engaging with available provision (David et al. 2008; Lane, 2009):

1. Geographical remoteness, even in rural areas of small countries, where there are few or no campus based opportunities for higher education study, and therefore involves moving away from home (Bowl, Cooke and Hockings, 2008);
2. Cultural norms, with some ethnic cultures not supporting the education of women in particular circumstances, for instance, or cultural assumptions in courses being off-putting to some citizens (Brennan and Naidoo, 2008; Richardson, 2010);
3. Social norms, whereby some family groups or communities do not apparently value education as highly as others, so discouraging engagement, or the attitudes of some groups being antithetical to others' participation (Preece, 1999; Greenbank, 2006);
4. Prior achievements, such as prior qualifications being used as a filter access to a scarce resource (higher education) or as a filter to maintain an individual institution's social and cultural status;
5. Absolute individual or household income or in relation to their community, where the relative cost of accessing higher education by certain groups is very high, particularly if it means giving up paid employment to study (Lindstrom, 2006; Diamond, 2008);
6. Digital divide. Computers and the web offer many freedoms but they still cost money to access and confidence to use effectively. People with less money may not easily afford such technology and even find that the absolute cost to them is higher than other groups because they are seen as a greater financial risk to a technology provider (EC, 2005). Equally some people may believe that computers and the web would be useful to their lives;
7. Physical circumstances. There may not be any easy places to undertake the learning due to lack of a home, space in a home or having a particular type of home such as a prison. Similarly, people with certain disabilities may need specialist equipment or support to enable them to participate effectively;
8. Institutional attitudes and behaviours. The way HEIs describe themselves and the ways they engage with (prospective) students can be supportive or not of certain categories of people (Johnston and Simpson, 2006);
9. Individual norms, where a person is constrained by social and cultural norms – attitudes and beliefs – that they are not capable or not good enough to study at this level or others think this of them.

This is a formidable set of barriers to participation in higher education with possibly the last one being most crucial as, without the intent to learn at this level, the other barriers may be perceived rather than real barriers, until tested out for real (Fuller et al, 2008). There is another personal barrier, however, which relates to the preferred learning mode of the individual. Some people find it harder to learn from reading texts or listening to lectures or doing practical experiments without specialist support or more flexible and/or varied teaching strategies. The converse to this student or learner view, and thinking about how such potential students adapt to the prevailing HE provision, is how HEIs adapt their processes to make them more suitable for people facing such barriers. Equally there are the issues of what constitutes appropriate levels of attainment even when participation happens. Do students have to complete their degree, do they even have to pass any examinations if their experience of HE gives them new confidence or skills to be able to, for instance, start up a small business?

Many ODL institutions have devised means of overcoming some or all of these barriers through their formal programmes of study and sometimes through informal programmes of study. So how does open education in general and OER, in particular, help widen participation by lowering these barriers?

4. OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: A NEW PARADIGM FOR HIGHER EDUCATION?

The word paradigm can invoke many meanings but the one we wish to use in this paper is that of a dominant worldview – a set of experiences, beliefs and values – by which individuals, institutions and societies understand and act. If open educational resources are to create a paradigm shift and be a new paradigm we need to examine first what the current paradigm appears to be. Much of higher

education is based upon the primacy of a teacher as an expert teacher, if not subject specialist, who normally engages with a relatively small cohort of students, with the size of cohort largely determined by the size of the classrooms or lecture theatres which can accommodate the cohort but also by the amount of time and effort that the teacher can apply to the assessment and support of that cohort. Whereas performing to a large audience can be stimulating and uplifting, marking hundreds of essays in a short space of time can be very demanding and dispiriting.

Consider also how universities make educational resources available to learners. In a traditional, campus-based, or 'closed' university, the educational resources are only available to registered students within the perceived walls of the University, and yet most learners are outside these walls, and only available to a few of these learners in the university's hinterland served by extra mural activities. Universities also limit the number of students they enrol, and determine the students' entry through selection methods such as previous educational achievement. Students are largely registered in whole programmes and not individual modules. Further, most universities serve full-time students. Part-time students must structure their time around the institution's schedule, which can be difficult for those who work or have family and other commitments. The students must come to the campus to participate in the educational experience. The methods of teaching used are also very limited (and limiting): Students attend professors' lectures, along with some seminars, workshops, and laboratory, or other practical activities. Educational resources are housed in a physical library or bookstore. Moreover, learning is assessed primarily through examinations and similar means.

This picture may be extreme for effect, but in short, the experience of a traditional university is of an individualised process where individual lecturers and professors devise, specify, and deliver the courses studied by individual students even though present as groups in a classroom. The students are therefore largely guided by the views of a single source even though they may read the views of others in assigned texts. In contrast open universities have sought to open up HE to greater numbers and teach and support students in a greater diversity of ways. What is clear is that learning in classrooms with a teacher at the front is now a small part of the complete picture and that individuals will be undertaking a wider range of learning opportunities, both formal and informal, throughout their lives, by themselves, in groups, at home and at work, to name but a few modes. Nevertheless, the physical nature of much educational provision – tied to a particular place, bound up in a particular medium – text or audiovisual assets – and available only at pre-defined times – meant that the locus of control was much more with the providers of learning opportunities than the users – the learners.

The advent of digital technologies and the internet in particular is changing this dynamic because it helps remove some of these barriers, making digital content much more accessible, available and affordable and enabling new forms of instantaneous communication between people in different places and times. Even more significant than these hard or commercial technologies, however, has been the emergence of soft or social technologies in new forms of licensing for (largely) digital content. This 'some rights reserved open licensing', for example the Creative Commons licences , placed on new and previously 'all rights reserved' copyrighted content enables the free copying, sharing, reuse and remixing of that content within pre-defined guidelines. This development has been central to the emergence of OER which go well beyond just the issue of open access where someone can still try to control all uses of the material. The philosophy of OER is that you want people to take it away and do things with it. In principle this gives learners (and teachers) even more freedoms as they can decide when to access it, whether they want to alter it, how they learn from it because of the potentially non-destructive, replicable and recorded nature of the original material and all versions they make of it.

As noted earlier much current provision in HE is still based upon a teacher-centred model. New technologies can give greater freedoms to make the learning more learner-centred. The experience of ODL institutions is that self-organised learning opportunities are fine for individuals but that most group based opportunities need to be mediated or facilitated by key individuals or organisations. The corollary to a good mediator is good content. The proliferation of material accessible on the web means that there need to be new quality assurance mechanisms for educational resources based on a mix of professional, peer and user reviews. Such learner-centred quality frameworks for formal educational materials are emerging and need to be built on for materials to be used in informal and formal settings. Our initial experience with OER also indicates a large and often unfulfilled desire for adult learners to be able to convert or trade-in their informal studies for more formal or readily recognised credits, certificates or qualifications given by organisations or their peer. Collectively we are exploring the possibilities that new technologies open up for the recognition of achievements gained through individual, group based or long term participatory learners but there is a lot more work to be done to create cost effective and credible systems and processes. There is no doubt that OER

are making us re-examine our business models and our own degree of openness as is evident through the project members' policies and practices.

Up to now we have focussed on what OER might mean for individual universities. We now want to consider the collective marketplace for HE. Most HE students today have a relationship with just one university in their life. At that university they have any number of individual relationships with individual professors and fairly small groups of fellow learners. As our opening remarks suggest, many other potential students are denied access to this because of scarcities in prime resources—lecture rooms and professors. There are now more people than ever wishing to participate in HE, and increasing numbers of them want that participation to be more flexible to meet their needs. They want to be able to combine modules from different universities. They want to gain credit for other types of study and experiences. They want to be full-time at some points in their life and part-time at others. They want to stop and start up again when they can. They may still want to study when they are retired. They may want to be teachers, as well as be taught. Publicly supported and funded open universities have been in the vanguard of opening up education for more people and giving them more flexibility in their studies. Some private online universities such as the University of Phoenix in the USA and corporate universities attached to multinational corporations are extending this social economy into a market-based economy. OER are working in the other direction, opening up previously closed resources. Closed resources, whether privately or publicly funded, have to be paid for either at, or close to, the point of need. Open resources will probably need to be funded by public or philanthropic monies and effort, but are then free thereafter to all who can reasonably access them. Nevertheless the dominant market relationship is still that of few producers serving up resources to many consumers.

The most significant development for open education has been the advent of Internet-based social networking and collaborative technologies. This enables far more people to be producers of resources and providers of particular services – such as tutoring a specific course for anyone, anywhere. The marketplace is global, not just local or even regional. In principle, all can become producers and consumers. Such relationships, however, can still be largely meeting market needs rather than social needs. The Internet and OER do not spell the end for traditional universities any more than open universities have done so, or any more than radio has replaced printed texts or television has replaced radio. They both expand the overall market and differentiate it into a greater number of sectors, including the social element of the economy. It may be that the Internet and open education, now the smallest sector in the market, will become the largest sector in the education market. Although the shape of this market may be decided by the future users of OER, rather than the current producers of closed educational resources, these current producers have the opportunity to influence what happens and decide what role they wish to play in the new market. To that end, we note the following observations on how OER can aid widening participation based on the project members' collective experience:

• Making educational content freely available for people to use is easy to do, technically.
• Making educational resources available for re-use under a Creative Commons-style license is more difficult, because it works against the current culture and traditions of copyright and intellectual property rights that permeate the modern knowledge society.
• While making OER accessible to the most disadvantaged groups in the world is also challenging, it is readily achievable as the digital technologies of all types being developed and refined by multinational companies offer different and more affordable routes to such content and resources. The difficulty comes in ensuring that people can make any significant use or re-use out of the content and resources that may be available to them.
• In terms of OER, the question is who benefits and how do they benefit? What conditions are needed to convert the vast number of browsing consumers of a wealth of variable information to serve functional needs, into many communities of learners seeking to transform themselves though education? It is to this question that we turn in the following sections.

5. AVAILABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY and ACCEPTIBILITY OF OER

AVAILABILITY

The infrastructure of the Internet and its reliance on digital technologies has vastly increased the amount of available educational resources (of all types and qualities), even those under copyright, that can be accessed, or changed and shared around by anyone who has the means to access it. The

mobility of content has never been faster or greater. The adoption of 'some rights reserved' licensing regimes such as Creative Commons and the decisions by many universities (for example through the OpenCourseWare Consortium) to make some or all of their educational resources available under such licences in digital form on Web sites, as well as open access publishing of research papers and reports is significantly widening the availability of OER and so overcoming one of the barriers to use by learners and educators alike. We mention educators here because although widening participation is primarily about increasing the numbers of students in HE, such increases can only be served if there are concomitant increases in the numbers of HE teachers participating in systems of HE provision (this may not always be full time HE teachers but also those in other occupations who provide teaching or teaching support to vocational and/or professional programmes such as medicine, engineering or agriculture). In other words and as noted earlier, widening participation needs to be addressed through both the supply and demand sides of the relationship.

ACCESSIBILITY

Wider availability of open educational resoyurces is, however, of no benefit to those who have few or no means of accessing it (this gap often being referred to as the digital divide). The challenge here is providing a public-wide infrastructure (whether publicly or privately funded) of information and communication networks that everyone can access and derive services from – if, of course, they can privately afford the computer or mobile phone that can link to those networks. Although this is a significant barrier for disadvantaged groups or those suffering multiple deprivations within developed countries, and an even bigger barrier for the many more disadvantaged groups in developing countries, it can be partly surmounted by ever more affordable and accessible devices and investment in new infrastructure. Such a technological solution does not help with the greater issue of wider access to formal education programmes, since at the basis of that issue are the social norms surrounding the value placed upon formal education as being superior to non-formal education, and the ways in which systems of education are organised. People may be able to access and engage with OER on their own, outside of the constraints of a university, but what recognition and benefits do they gain from doing so if universities still require high prior achievement for gaining entry to formal study, and employers recognise only those achievements made when participating at universities? Further, if they are inexperienced and unconfident learners, without the types of support that university staff can provide for registered students they may not gain much learning benefit from engaging with OER. Again, some indication of the routes forward for bridging non-formal and formal study are found in the policies and practices from member universities.

ACCEPTABILITY

Having an open door through wide availability and high accessibility of higher education does not mean that new learners will pass through it or that they stay "inside" the system for very long. There are a number of differing social and cultural reasons that inhibit certain members of society from even thinking they could participate in higher education, let alone feel confident to start any form of formal programme on offer. The social and cultural norms of their family, friends, or work colleagues can instil and reinforce personal views and attitudes that keep them from accessing what might be available: for example, that they are not smart enough or suited to study at a higher education level (and often not even at lower education levels). To be able to engage in higher education programmes and to find success of some form in that engagement usually requires active support and encouragement from someone in the family or peer groups, or active support and encouragement from teaching professionals or para-professionals (support staff rather than teachers). As noted previously, the advent of digital technologies and their use within e-learning or blended learning schemes has opened up further possibilities for open learning by both increasing the scope for much more non face-to-face two-way interaction and forms of collaboration between groups of learners and their teachers. At the same time the availability (physical access), accessibility (usability) and acceptability (social empowerment) of this mode of teaching and learning is extremely variable, with socially excluded groups or communities being those who do not have much access to such technologies, may find few opportunities available to them in their circumstances and are worried that they cannot cope with these new technologies and ways of learning (Kirkwood, 2006a; 2006b). To reiterate, they do not feel included even when people are trying to reach out to them because they lack confidence in their competence to succeed.

This disempowerment can be viewed as excluded communities having few, if any, degrees of freedom to engage with open learning. The contrast here is between the discourse and practice of making educational materials, activities and opportunities as open as possible by certain groups in societies and with the freedoms that are embodied within the different types of openness. One example is the practice of open access to undergraduate courses where no prior qualifications are needed to register – that is students have freedom from discrimination on the basis of prior achievement. However open access does not mean that the course is free of cost or that there are constraints to the freedom of when the course can be studied and assignments submitted. Another example is open educational resources where there is much greater freedom around cost (they are free to access although there may be costs to being online) and time of study (they can be studied at any time as long as they are available and accessible by the user – that is they can go online). These freedoms are made more possible with digital resources as they can be accessed simultaneously by many people and infinitely replicated. As noted earlier both the relative abundance of and non-destructive through consumption attributes of a digital resource means that issues of physical scarcity no longer apply.

Formal education is a structured set of activities where a key element is the interactions between teachers and learners and between fellow learners; interactions that are supported by educational content (e.g. text books, course notes, assignments, etc.) and learning resources (e.g. whiteboards, laboratory equipment, Virtual Learning Environments, etc.). In this triangular relationship between teachers, learners and content/resources it is mainly teachers that select and/or develop the set of resources and activities that learners are expected to engage with. As argued by Lane (2008b), teachers attempt to mediate the interactions between the students and the resources (or 'inter-mediate'), acting as an expert and/or a guide to the learning process. Of course this simple model ignores the wider and variable social and cultural settings for these activities, while other people can be part of this strictly educational relationship such as librarians, mentors in work based settings and technical support staff. Nevertheless, such inter-mediation in structured settings is dominated by a largely closed, face-to-face presence model rather than an open and distance model; but it is still a feature of ODL systems. Openness rarely extends to offering completely unfettered choices to the learners on what to study, when, how and where, as, in principle is being offered by OER and some emerging community based operations on the web such as Wikiversity and the Peer-to-Peer University (Thierstein, Schmidt and Håklev, 2009). Under this view of education, if learners are to effectively engage with formal educational opportunities then that process is normally mediated by the structuring of the educational resource by teachers, the learners own capabilities, the inputs of fellow learners and the interventions of professional teachers/support workers (Lane, McAndrew and Santos, 2009; McAndrew et al, 2009).

Openness, in the form of OER, may impact on not only this formal education but also much informal education. Firstly, digital resources and digital environments can substitute for physical resources and physical environments but inevitably they are different and the need to learn and understand how to create, navigate and use such resources must not be underestimated. The digital educational divide can mean that some learners are much more sophisticated users of digital technology for learning than their (subject focussed) teachers, while such fluency (or not) with the technology can exacerbate the educational divide as modes of communication, collaboration and computation multiply or become more sophisticated. Secondly, the very openness of an OER means that learners have much more access to structured content without the other structuring provided by intermediaries such as teachers. While such wider and free access may be good in principle, in practice it may be harder for less sophisticated learners to make good use of them without more direct support from intermediaries.

So, while openness within education and the use of open educational resources have the potential to reduce inequalities in the educational divide it can be argued that it may actually exacerbate the already existing digital divide. In particular the availability, accessibility and acceptability of this mode of teaching and learning is extremely variable, with socially excluded groups or communities being those who do not have much access to such technologies, may find few opportunities available to them and are worried that they cannot cope with these new technologies and ways of learning. In other words it is the social and cultural factors that may be much more important than the economic ones. In such cases of disempowerment there need to be appropriate social and cultural support for the prospective learner to help reduce or remove these disempowering conditions. As Wilson (2008), Selwyn and Facer (2007) and McAndrew et al (2009) argue, interventions need to recognise and draw upon existing networks within communities, using local champions to develop skills and confidence and allow people to make an informed choice about their learning and their use of digital technologies for that learning.

7. HOW OER MIGHT SUPPORT HIGHER EDUCATION STUDY

Openness, when looked at in terms of OER, is centrally concerned with freedoms as expressed in the open licences applied to them:

- Freedom from paying any money to access and use the content for specified purposes;
- Freedom to copy and make many more copies;
- Freedom to take away and re-use without asking prior permission;
- Freedom to make derivative works;
- But not necessarily freedom to make profits from them.

So, openness can be equated with freedoms, but the degrees of freedom available within a particular openness can vary (as seen in the spectrum of Creative Commons licences themselves) and can be influenced by many other factors beyond the licence and particularly how potential users perceive their openness. For example, the UK Open University's work with the BBC has meant that (free to view at first then free to record when technology allowed) educational radio and TV programmes associated initially with courses have been openly available through terrestrial public service broadcasting in the UK ever since the Open University began teaching in 1971. So, people have had the freedom to access and to copy this particular copyrighted content using video recorders for personal use but not the freedom to use what they record for educational or public performance purposes without a licence or prior permission. In attempting to cover both principles and implications for practicalities Schaffert and Geser (2007) have set out four dimensions of openness for OER which are heavily influenced by digital technologies and where they feel that all dimensions need to be present for maximum openness. For example, a document written with MicroSoft Word™ can easily be shared, copied and altered if it has an open licence but it does mean that you as the author, and others re-using it, have to have purchased proprietary software to do so. It is still early days in the OER movement, but the evidence to date points to a change in the dynamics of adult learning, between teachers and learners and between formal higher education and informal adult learning, as this new range of openness becomes more widespread (McAndrew et al, 2009), although some question the motives behind OER developments by Universities (Huijser, Bedford and Bull, 2008). What is almost certain is that there are now more educational resources potentially available to many more people than has ever been the case through public libraries, in the sense already noted that online digital copies can have infinite users whereas hard copies (books) are only available to a few people at any one time.

8. KEY MESSAGES FROM THE PARTNERS' ACTIVITIES

Case studies have been provided by partners in OER-HE. They each either describe educational policy in general for higher education in their country before looking at widening participation and open educational resources activities at their institution in particular or some other aspect of OER activity in their country. The case studies vary in length and depth and reflect the varying state of development of the use of OER in widening participation in higher education across Europe. Full details of all these case studies will be presented in the 80 page final project report to be published later in 2011 but we can outline the key messages that arise from a synthesis of these case studies.

OER have been around for over 10 years but much of that time has involved institutions in gradually assessing and beginning to publish OER as part of a wider movement to unlock knowledge. Even now only a very small proportion of HEIs around the world, or just in Europe, are involved with publishing OER although the momentum is increasing greatly as OER are adopted into national and/or institutional policies. It is only in the past 4 years that there has been any significant examination and testing of the proposition that OER can widen engagement participation in HE study as opposed to just making educational materials more available and more accessible to more people, and distance teaching universities have been in the vanguard in this area because their very existence and missions have been driven by widening opportunities for HE study. Nevertheless, even amongst the countries and partners examined in this study there is wide variation in how far OER are being published and used and also how far those countries and institutions are addressing the requirement to widen participation through formal study programmes (achieved mostly through open and distance learning in this review) let alone through OER.

There are a number of innovative and far sighted initiatives to widen participation in HE study amongst the partners as well as innovative and successful OER initiatives that help contribute to widening participation. A key finding so far is that many people are valuing the experience of being able to freely access and learn from self study OER taken from distance teaching universities. Some use this informal learning to act as a bridge to formal learning but others see it as an end in itself, often as part of a wider set of life long learning activities. This latter point raises questions over how we should define and record participation in higher education study as opposed to the more standard definition of participating in higher education by being registered on and successfully completing a formal programme at an accredited HEI (there is a related issue of how much formal or informal study constitutes engagement or participation).

OER provide some freedoms that can address the barriers to HE for people and communities who may otherwise be excluded from meaningful opportunities. It is still very early in the development and use of OER to fully understand how big an impact they may make. The initial experiences of the partners do, however, highlight the significance of targeted interventions made by key individuals or organisations at a local or contextual level. In other words, OER are fine for confident and experienced learners (auto-didacts) but most people who are targeted as part of widening participation schemes are unlikely to be so confident and will require other support mechanisms to achieve participation.

The issue of localisation or contextualisation (for example changing the language of instruction or changing case studies and examples to be more culturally and socially familiar ones) is often aired around the issue of reworking or remixing OER for a specific purpose and yet much can probably be done by contextualising the support needed to study or reuse the content as is. In other words it is the peer and professional support that is changed, not the pedagogical support in the content itself. This is not to argue against reworking or remixing, merely to point out that reuse may be the better starting option where resources are scarce and the needs of different small, excluded communities so large.

Next, there is emerging evidence that the form and nature of OER, particularly if used in an e-learning setting, may be unfamiliar or technically inaccessible to inexperienced learners and that considerable effort is needed to encourage and enable learners to develop personal support strategies. This is well known for formal learning, the lesson of good quality OER in a good learning environment is that they can empower the informal or non-formal learner because they are the ones in control and not having to perform for someone else's benefit.

Lastly, the emerging evidence from the literature and the case studies is that more effort may be needed on the part of educators and institutions to design and present OER (and associated ODL programmes) in ways that are suited to the learners as much as the educators and the institution. This is, in part, to reflect the practical requirements for meeting the differing needs of diverse life long learners throughout their ever changing lives and in part to reflect how openness in all its forms is changing systems of educational provision. Openness as a philosophy is important but something being freely available (as open access or open educational resources) is insufficient to enable many people to successfully engage with a more open educational provision. This paper has also argued that it is how that openness is instantiated or structured to meet the particular needs of excluded groups that makes the difference, with mediation between the various actors in the teachers' and learners' contexts (that is third parties who support either or both) being a necessary element.

REFERENCES

[1]   Bowl, M., Cooke, S. and Hockings, C. (2008) Home or away? Issues of 'choice', living arrangements and what it means to be a student, Widening Participation and Life Long Learning, 10(1): 4-13.

[2]   Brennan, J. and Naidoo, R. (2008) Higher education and the achievement (and/or prevention) of equity and social justice, Higher Education, 56: 287-302

[3]   Carson, S. (2009) The unwalled garden: growth of the OpenCourseWare Consortium, 2001-2009,

[4]   David, M., Parry, G., Vignoles, A., Hayward, G., Williams, J, Crozier, G., Hockings, C. and Fuller, A. (2008) Widening participation in higher education: a commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, 28 pp

[5]   Diamond, J. (2008) Access, widening participation and neighbourhood renewal: you can't have one without the other, Widening Participation and Life Long Learning, 10(3): 6-13.

[6]   EC (2005) The relation between major determinants of gaps and the digital divide, 3pp, available at www.elearningeuropa.info/directory

[7]   EU (2009) Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009, IP/09/675, accessed 16 May 2011   from http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/09/675&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en

[8]   EUA (2008) European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning, 12pp

[9]   Greenbank, P. (2006) Institutional widening participation policy in higher education: dealing with the 'issue of social class', Widening Participation and life Long Learning, 8(1): 1-10.

[10]   Hefce (2011) Widening participation, accessed from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen on 16 May 2011

[11]   Huijser, H., Bedford, T. and Bull, D (2008) OpenCourseWare, Global Access and the Right to Education: Real access or marketing ploy The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, Vol. 9, No. 1, 13pp, available from http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl.

[12]   Johnston, V. and Simpson, O. (2006) 'Retentioneering' higher education in the UK: attitudinal barriers to addressing student retention in universities, Widening Participation and Life Long Learning 8(3): 2836

[13]   Kirkwood, A. (2006a). Getting networked learning in context: are on-line students' technical and information literacy skills adequate and appropriate? Learning, Media and Technology 31(2): 117-131.

[14]   Kirkwood, A. (2006b) Going outside the box: Skills development, cultural change and the use of on-line resources, Computers & Education 47: 316-331.

[15]   Lane, A.B. (2008c) Widening Participation in Education through Open Educational Resources. In Eds Ilyoshi, T. and Vijay Kumar, M.S., Opening Up Education: The Collective Advancement of Education through Open Technology, Open Content, and Open Knowledge, pp 149-163, MIT Press. ISBN 0-262-03371-2

[16]   Lane. A.B. (2009) The impact of openness on bridging educational digital divides, The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 10(5): 12 pp, ISSN 1492-3831, available at http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/637

[17]   Lane A.B., McAndrew, P., and Santos, A. (2009) The networking effects of OER. In online proceedings of ICDE 2009 Conference, Maastricht, Netherlands, 7-10 June 2009, available at http://www.ou.nl/Docs/Campagnes/ICDE2009/Papers/Final_Paper_279Lane.pdf

[18]   Lindström, J. (2006) Can only rich people study? Youth, segregated suburbs and higher education: experience from Sweden, Widening Participations and Life Long Learning, 8(2): 6-13.

[19]   McAndrew, P. (2006) Motivations for OpenLearn: the Open University's Open Content Initiative, paper prepared for the OECD experts meeting on Open Educational Resources 26-27 October 2006, in Barcelona, accessed 16th May 2011 from http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/document.cfm?docid=8816

[20]   Preece, J. (1999) Difference and the discourse of inclusion, Widening Participation and Life Long Learning, 1(2): 16-23

[21]   Richardson, J.T.E. (2010) The attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education, Studies in Higher Education, 33: 33-48

[22]   Schaffert, S and Geser, G. (2008) Open Educational Resources and Practices. eLearning Papers, No 7, ISSN 1887-1542.

[23]   Selwyn, N. and Facer, K. (2007) Beyond the Digital Divide - Rethinking digital inclusion for the 21st century, Opening Education. Bristol, Futurelab: 36

[24]   Shaw, J., Brain, K., Bridger, K., Foreman, J. and Reid, I. (2007) Embedding Widening Participation and Promoting Student Diversity, York: Higher Education Academy, available from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/publications/wp_business_case_approach_july07

[25]   Thierstein, J., Schmidt, P. and Håklev, S. (2009) P2P University: Beginning the journey, paper presented at OpenEd 2009 Conference, Vancouver, Canada, August 12-14 2009, accessed 7 September 2009 from http://openedconference.org/2009/archives/414

[26]   Wilson, T, (2008) New Ways of Mediating Learning: Investigating the implications of adopting open educational resources for tertiary education at an institution in the United Kingdom as compared to one in South Africa, The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, Vol. 9, No. 1, 18p.