

Theme III – Learning, research and innovation

Track 1

Session III.8. Building Knowledge Societies: Open Educational Resources

Chair: Susan D'Antoni

Rapporteur: Sally Johnstone

Additional notes: Catriona Savage

Summary of major points

Susan D'Antoni opened the session by reminding participants of the conference aims, and the aims of this session: to explore OER as an example of a new dynamic in HE that will contribute to building knowledge societies. The growing OER movement has the objective of increasing access to quality educational content worldwide. It is a public good that can be widely shared. She then presented UNESCO's work in the area.

Brenda Gourley, Vice Chancellor of the UK Open University spoke of the factors that have transformed scholarship. The most crucial factor to building knowledge societies must be access to the great stores of knowledge. She also evoked the ease of communication that has led to more participation in knowledge production, and collaboration in learning and research. In this new world there is a need for new skills, instructional design and pedagogies. It is clear that there are very profound consequences for HE. Institutions must become more flexible about education delivery and more innovative about how we teach our students in order to reach many more people – and that is our major challenge.

Barney Pityana, Vice Chancellor of UNISA, South Africa, urged participants to ask hard questions of the OER movement. He noted that OER is only accessible to those with Internet and effective broadband. How do we encourage meaningful participation in knowledge generation and sharing across boundaries so that OER does not become a “neo-colonial” movement? He was encouraged, however, that UNESCO has taken up the issue of OER and urged the organisation to use the mechanisms at its disposal (particularly its role in producing guidelines and standard setting).

Gary Matkin, Dean of Continuing Education, University of California, Irvine and Stavros Xanthopoulos, Fundação Getulio Vargas, Brazil presented some benefits and innovations from the sharing of OpenCourseWare content between their institutions. Benefits of the partnership have included the creation of new programmes and the sharing of students, not just content, and an innovative new certification model for OCW. It has also generated fee-paying audiences on both sides which have meant that they can cover OCW costs. Stavros Xanthopoulos concluded by noting that OCW speaks to the FGV mission to democratise quality content to Brazilians at home and abroad.

Fred Mulder, Rector of the Open Universiteit Nederland presented several Dutch OER initiatives. These included his institution's own OpenER, which aims to lower threshold to access to formal higher education in the Netherlands. At the national level, open content has been adopted by all stakeholders in a new national network for lifelong learning. National research prizewinners are making courses available, acting as role models for other researchers. Finally, wikiwijs – an ambitious national OER initiative at all levels of education – is the vision of the Dutch Minister of Education. Through these initiatives – and others – we can see an emerging national OER strategy in the Netherlands. He finished by reading out the M-2009 World Conference Statement on OER.

Discussion

In the discussion that followed, David Vincent of the UKOU responded to Barney Pityana's criticisms. He made several recommendations to improve the transparency, accessibility and inclusiveness of OER sites. To mitigate the digital divide he argued for the importance of broadening modes of delivery, particularly the use of handheld devices, and of appropriate – often low-tech – media.

It was observed that it seems self-evident that open learning is a route to equity. But is there evidence that this is actually true? Fred Barasa, Executive Director of the ACDE took this up further, observing the need to focus on infrastructure and bandwidth to enable the poorest to access OER, and the need for adaptation of African materials by academics in developed countries. His remarks also covered measures for success and the need for sustainable funding models.

Finally there was a question about the adaptation of materials for use in a new – perhaps very different – educational content, and a remark about the need for open access to research materials, which had not been addressed in the session.

Conclusion

Susan D'Antoni thanked the panel for the diversity of information and their positions. She underlined the importance of debate. UNESCO will listen to what has been said and will continue to work in this area. Finally, she encouraged all those that wish to continue the debate, to join the UNESCO OER community.