



# Open Educational Practices in a Lesser-Taught Language Community

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This article investigates how Open Educational Resources (OER) and Practices (OEP) can support a 'strategically important and vulnerable subject' (SIVS) in the UK, in this case a less-widely taught modern foreign language, namely Dutch Studies. It details the experiences of *VirtualDutch*, an inter-institutional subject community involving all four Dutch departments or sections of Schools of Modern Languages in the UK, that aims to create and share Open Educational Resources and to develop and engage in web-supported forms of inter-institutional collaboration in teaching and learning. After an overview of the *VirtualDutch* experiences, in particular those in the pilot project in phase 1 of the Joint Information System Committee's Open Educational Resources Programme (2009/10), the importance of forming communities of both practice and learning around OER for language teaching is highlighted, something particularly, but not exclusively, relevant for less-widely taught subjects like Dutch.

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## 1 Introduction

In the UK and the Anglophone world in general, Dutch is undoubtedly a minority subject, although it is the language of two neighbouring countries that also belong to the largest trading partners of Britain. In fact it ranks fifth in the list of most frequently requested languages in UK job adverts (after French, German, Spanish and Italian but ahead of Russian or Chinese, for example), a demand that cannot be filled by UK graduates of Dutch, as a recent labour market report by the University Council of Modern Languages points out (Mulkerne and Graham, 2011: 15)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, even if it sounds quite different, Dutch is the modern language most closely related to English, thus making it easy to learn for native speakers of English<sup>2</sup>. All these facts should make it an attractive subject to study but student numbers in the UK traditionally have been modest and, if anything, they have fallen in recent years, as part of a decline in interest in modern languages (Worton, 2009) that is affecting all modern languages in the UK in general and the less-widely taught languages like Dutch in particular.

While Dutch is implicitly recognised by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as a ‘strategically important and vulnerable subject’ (as part of Modern Foreign Languages)<sup>3</sup>, Dutch is only taught to degree level at four UK Higher Education institutions: University College London (UCL) and the universities of Sheffield, Cambridge, and Nottingham.

## 2 Background

Confronted with diminishing resources and threats of discontinuing language programmes caused by this trend, the four departments decided to cooperate and bundle their resources and expertise to overcome the crisis, by capitalising on the developments of modern information and communication technologies.

In 2001 they formed the *VirtualDutch* consortium, with UCL Dutch acting as the lead institution<sup>4</sup>. The main aims of this inter-institutional collaborative teaching programme were to create shared electronic resources for teaching and learning, and to develop ICT-supported forms of inter-institutional collaboration in teaching and learning. Initial funding was provided by the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML), which drew on HEFCE funding to support collaborative learning and teaching initiatives (2001–2004) (LLAS,

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<sup>1</sup> What is more, the report states that the Dutch case ‘is particularly interesting, as it emphasises the need to speak the language of your trading partners, even if they already have a good working knowledge of English’ (49).

<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that Frisian, spoken in the Dutch province of Friesland, is even closer to English.

<sup>3</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/kes/sis](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/kes/sis)

<sup>4</sup> [www.dutch.ac.uk](http://www.dutch.ac.uk)

2004). Ongoing project-based funds are provided by the Nederlandse Taalunie ('Dutch Language Union', the joint Flemish-Dutch equivalent of the British Council); the University of London's Centre for Distance Education; the joint SOAS/UCL Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning 'Languages of Wider World'; the Royal Netherlands Embassy in London; and additional internal funding from the involved universities.

But strategic considerations were only *one* factor behind the development of *VirtualDutch*. The pedagogical rationale was to use information and communication technology to enable sharing of resources and expertise amongst participating institutions, in order to bring more breadth and depth to the curriculum. The programme is a "determined attempt to exploit these new possibilities and provide our students with a forward-looking and vigorous learning environment in the process." (Hermans, 2002). The benefits to students are having access to a wide range of learning environments, from classroom contact to multimedia language instruction in a Virtual Learning Environment and web-based autonomous learning with self-study packs, and also feeling part of a larger Dutch Studies community in the UK, especially when collaborating in joint teaching projects (Hermans, 2002; Verbaan, 2008).

A comprehensive range of teaching and learning resources has been developed since the start of the programme in 2001, including self-access reading skills courses, learner's grammars, online reference works and some thirty multimedia study packs for autonomous learning, covering various aspects of Dutch and Flemish language, literature, history and society, catering for various levels of linguistic competence, and ranging from individual Dutch or Flemish authors like Multatuli or Louis Couperus, Dutch linguistics, and the Flemish movement in Belgium, to the sociolinguistic situation of Brussels and the multicultural society in the Netherlands today.

All resources are openly available on the *VirtualDutch* teaching and learning portal that was launched in 2002 and re-developed in 2007 to provide better access for end-users (i.e. learners and teachers of Dutch) to the various individual learning resources and to integrate them within a seamless environment. The portal also provides access to external resources like the relevant quality-controlled web resources of the Intute Arts and Humanities Subject Gateway<sup>5</sup> and a directory of RSS feeds, audio and video podcasts from Dutch and Belgian newspapers, broadcasting stations and educational institutions. All resources are accessible by an advanced meta-search engine, also including two bibliographical databases on Dutch literature in English translation and on Studies in English on Dutch history and literature. The domain name of the portal site ([dutch.ac.uk](http://dutch.ac.uk)) has been chosen in analogy to the Institute for

<sup>5</sup> Although Intute ([www.intute.ac.uk](http://www.intute.ac.uk)) was regrettably frozen in July 2011, the resource is still accessible. Another redevelopment of the *VirtualDutch* portal site is under way at the time of writing (Oct. 2012).

Historical Research's address [history.ac.uk](http://history.ac.uk), with a view to becoming *the* portal for Dutch Studies as an academic subject in the UK.

There is growing evidence of excellence for *VirtualDutch*. All individual subprojects have been tested and evaluated. The *VirtualDutch* programme as a whole has been monitored by two external evaluators, one appointed by UCML, the other by the Dutch Language Union. Student response is fully documented and has been overwhelmingly positive. A pedagogic evaluation of the electronic study packs was carried out in 2003 with the support of UCL's *Executive Sub-Committee for Innovation in Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (Rossum, 2004) and *VirtualDutch* was cited as an innovative collaborative teaching project in the HEFCE's annual review *Realising a Vision of Higher Education* (HEFCE, 2003).

Thus, in a way, *VirtualDutch* has been sharing resources on the open web and developing forms of collaboratively creating OERs as far back as 2001 without using the term and being aware of the larger worldwide Open Educational Resources movement that started at around the same time<sup>6</sup>.

### 3 The UKOER programme and *VirtualDutch*

The term *Open Educational Resources* (OER) was first introduced at a UNESCO conference in 2000 and promoted in the context of providing free access to educational resources on a global scale. At the heart of the OER movement lies 'the simple and powerful idea that the world's knowledge is a public good and that technology in general and the World Wide Web in particular provide an extraordinary opportunity for everyone to share, use, and reuse that knowledge.' (Smith & Casserly, 2008: 10). While, on first sight, it may seem a counter-intuitive for academics or institutions to make their teaching resources available openly, there is plenty of evidence for the reputational and economic benefits to be gained from this step. By allowing students to pre-view high-quality learning and teaching resources via OpenLearn, the Open University for example gained 'at least 4,400 people by April 2008 (growing to over 7,000 by November 2008)' in the first two years of the programme's existence, proven by their simultaneous enrolment in the free OpenLearn and the OU's regular courses, and continuing at an accelerating rate (McAndrew *et al.*, 2009: 9).

The potential of OER is also realised by governments all over the world, even in times of public scarcity. In January 2011, the US government announced a new federal education fund, making available \$2 billion to create OER resources, with a view to achieving the goal of having the highest proportion of

<sup>6</sup> To quote just a few milestones: 2000 UNESCO conference, 2001 Wikipedia, 2002 MIT Open Courseware etc.

college graduates in the world by 2020<sup>7</sup>. It also looks as though the benefits of Openness in Higher Education could go beyond teaching and research. In October 2011, JISC published a report that showed that the private sector also benefits from open access in Higher Education. The report, commissioned by the UK Open Access Implementation Group, suggests that ‘for at least two-thirds of these businesses, OA has the great benefit of saving organisations time in searching for published material through non-OA sources’ (Parsons *et al.*, 2011).

But beyond all economic arguments, the true rationale for openness is one of reclaiming original academic practice and collaboration. Rather than reinventing the wheel, lecturers can potentially take a ‘pick and mix’ approach to the resources – reusing or remoulding course reading lists, essay questions, lecture notes, slides or seminar discussion topics for their own purposes, and focus on providing a great learning experience to their students. Students can use OER to study autonomously or to complement their learning in class. Consequently, the move towards openness extends beyond resources and includes increasingly also Open Educational Practices, or just Open Education.

In the UK, HEFCE is funding a large and internationally regarded UKOER programme, led by JISC and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2009–2012) and now in its third phase, that involves more than 90 UK higher and further education institutions as well as publishers, companies, charities, and other stakeholders outside of academia<sup>8</sup>.

As against the backdrop of the rapid development of community-oriented Web 2.0 services, some of the earlier resources of *VirtualDutch* had technologically become somewhat outdated, the UKOER pilot programme in 2009/10 offered the opportunity to re-release a cluster of resources around a specific topic in a case study, openly licensed, and drawing on the support and expertise of the JISC and HEA communities. As the writer of these lines is a historian and a cluster of *VirtualDutch* OERs on early modern history (16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century) existed, the choice of topic was an obvious one and the individual strand of the UKOER call for projects seemed to be the most appropriate.

Also, while *VirtualDutch* is well known and respected within the international Dutch Studies community (*e.g.* Hammond *et al.*, 2009), it was not necessarily very visible and discoverable beyond this specialist subject community. Part of the rationale for applying to the UKOER programme was to embed the initiative in the wider OER community and to create resources that would appeal to a wider audience, including but not limited to, prospective students with a

<sup>7</sup> [creativecommons.org/weblog/entry/26100](http://creativecommons.org/weblog/entry/26100)

<sup>8</sup> [www.jisc.ac.uk/oer](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/oer); [www.heacademy.ac.uk/oer](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/oer)

general interest in languages who may not yet have made a choice and may not be aware of the possibility of studying Dutch to degree level at a UK university, be it on its own or in conjunctions with other languages or subjects.

The project further benefited from a manuscript on Anglo-Dutch exchanges from ancient times to the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Jaap Harskamp, former curator of the Dutch and Flemish collections at the British Library, in which he had compiled and annotated a comprehensive list of over 800 events relating to Anglo-Dutch relations throughout the centuries, drawing on a huge variety of sources. Dr Harskamp very generously made the manuscript available to the project to be turned into an interactive multimedia Web 2.0 timeline using MIT's *Simile* technology<sup>9</sup>. The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Dutch revolt and the subsequent Golden Age of the Netherlands are also traditionally the area of Dutch Studies that attracts most interest in the Anglophone world. Consequently, a special focus of the project was on relations between the Low Countries and the Anglophone world, making it relevant for all learners with an interest in this European neighbouring region of the UK, whose early modern history was closely intertwined with that of Britain (e.g. for students of British or European history and the historically interested public).

The original project plan envisaged creating one large Open Educational Resource, integrating the learning and teaching materials from the writer's undergraduate course in early Low Countries history, which he has taught for five years as a web-enhanced face-to-face course to undergraduate students at UCL, and a series of multimedia learning objects which have been created in the context of *VirtualDutch*, within a seamless open learning environment. This approach was influenced by the examples of MIT's *OpenCourseware*<sup>10</sup> and the Open University's *OpenLearn*<sup>11</sup> programmes that release complete courses, or at least considerable parts of integral courses, openly, as opposed to smaller learning objects that are more readily (or even instantly) repurposable. As the project developed and the focus of the UKOER programme shifted to smaller learning objects and units, with a view to increasing reusability and repurposability, squaring this with the originally envisaged *integrated* Open Learning Environment became an issue. Breaking down larger resources into meaningful individual OERs, in a way that they could easily be redistributed and repurposed via channels like *Jorum* and the likewise JISC- and HEA-funded disciplinary repositories *Humbox*, *Languagebox* and *Language Open Resources Online* (LORO)<sup>12</sup>, became necessary and the process of finding the

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<sup>9</sup> [simile-widgets.org](http://simile-widgets.org)

<sup>10</sup> [ocw.mit.edu](http://ocw.mit.edu)

<sup>11</sup> [openlearn.open.ac.uk](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk)

<sup>12</sup> [www.jorum.ac.uk](http://www.jorum.ac.uk); [www.humbox.ac.uk](http://www.humbox.ac.uk); [www.languagebox.ac.uk](http://www.languagebox.ac.uk); <http://loro.open.ac.uk>

optimal granularity and striking the balance between granularity and integrity has been the main challenge encountered in the project. The tension that was implicit in the original project plan's formulation 'resource-rich but directed learning environment' became visible and was solved largely in favour of the resource-richness which to a certain extent went to the expense of its 'directedness'. To give a practical example, instead of integrating and interlinking all elements of the environment with the Simile timeline on Anglo-Dutch relations, we opted in favour of creating tours, quests, tasks and quizzes, using the timeline as a resource to be explored by learners.

Another aspect that we had in mind while developing the project was its suitability for the growing distance and continuing education sectors. Parallel to the UKOER project, the *VirtualDutch* consortium has started trialling purely distance-based degree programmes, using or re-using the substantial amount of *VirtualDutch* OERs released since 2001 but fully tutor-supported and accredited. The first step in this strategy was a Postgraduate Certificate in Dutch Cultural Studies (by Distance Learning) that UCL started offering from 2009/10 onwards, with teaching input from colleagues at Sheffield. It had an initial intake of twelve students, which is a significant number for a new programme in a lesser-taught subject in the first year it is running. The postgraduate certificate was the first step to offering a complete modular distance-MA and the first two students are about to complete their MAs in autumn 2012. In any event, the teaching and learning resources created as part of the UKOER project remain openly available on the *VirtualDutch* portal site and via *Jorum*, *Humbox* and other repositories and channels as appropriate.

By allowing students to preview teaching and learning resources prior to applying for a degree programme it was hoped that the project would benefit not only UCL Dutch, particularly its distance programme in terms of recruitment and academic reputation, but the Dutch departments of the *VirtualDutch* partner universities and indirectly other larger Less-Widely Taught Language communities in the UK as a whole. Using the project's existence to promote the idea of OER and to suggest expanding the scope of the project's home institution's Open Access policy for research outputs to Open Educational Resources became a further objective of the project<sup>13</sup>.

Within the UKOER community the *VirtualDutch* resources have received much attention and public comment, for example:

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<sup>13</sup> UCL in June 2009 adopted a far-reaching and progressive Open Access policy, mandating the deposit of all research outputs into its institutional OA repository. It did so as one of the first and most prestigious universities in the UK and, according to the Times Higher, 35th university in the world (THE 2011).

*“One of the reasons I love the OER Programme is that it turns up stuff like this. The VirtualDutch timeline of Anglo-Dutch relations. It’s built using MITs Simile software and it’s packed full of utterly fascinating detail. Amongst more familiar historical events it includes such gems as the following: (...). Brilliant! Of course this has completely derailed any ‘real’ work I was going to do this afternoon”* (Campbell, 2010);

*“Inspired by the VirtualDutch timeline, I wondered how easy it would be to create something similar with all JISC e-learning projects that I could get linked data for. It worked, and I learned some home truths about scalability and the web architecture in the process. As Lorna pointed out, UCL’s VirtualDutch timeline is a wonderful example of using time to explore a dataset (...)”* (Kraan, 2010).

Despite the seemingly obvious benefits of OERs, producing resources and releasing them as OERs in itself may not be enough. Rather it will be necessary to develop communities of both practice and learning around them. In less-widely taught subject communities this need is particularly obvious as the Australian practice shows, where a large range of languages in Higher Education are sustained and provided by several HE institutions collaborating closely, pooling resources, and providing motivation to share (Winter, 2009).

What is also needed is to embed Open Educational Practices in the programmes that probationary lecturers are required to attend in UK HE institutions as this is where the creation, release, use and re-use of teaching materials can be instilled in up and coming educators (Mahony *et al.*, 2012).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a substantial amount of Open Educational Resources in the ‘strategically important and vulnerable’ subject area of Dutch Studies have been released by the UKOER project, directly benefitting staff and students of Dutch at UCL and the *VirtualDutch* partner institutions. At the same time these learning resources are open for re-use and re-purposing in other contexts like courses on British or European history, both in the UK and abroad, or by the historically interested public with an interest in Dutch history or Anglo-Dutch relations, which is especially high in the East of the country, in East Anglia and Kent<sup>14</sup>. There is also substantial interest in relations between the Dutch- and English-speaking worlds in the United States, especially on the East coast where the large New Netherland project traces the Dutch colonial history of the area<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. <http://www.heritagecity.org/research-centre/social-innovation/the-strangers.htm> or [www.literarynorfolk.co.uk/norwich.htm](http://www.literarynorfolk.co.uk/norwich.htm).

<sup>15</sup> [www.nnp.org](http://www.nnp.org)



As outlined previously the project also had an exploratory character and the main challenge encountered was the granularity versus integrity question, triggered especially by rethinking learning resources from the perspective of their reusability. Another challenge was transforming teaching materials that were adopted from the author's face-to-face course towards a learner-centred concept of learning in an online context, in the absence of a course tutor, and combining these with the study pack material that had been originally written for self-study, never assuming a tutor to be present.

A cultural change that we witnessed in ourselves regards readiness to reuse other people's OERs. While many projects and individuals are happy with and good at creating and releasing resources, there is still a reluctance to reuse and repurpose other people's OERs, and the project team at the beginning of the OER programme was no exception. While this was partly due to the small size of the subject area and the limited provision of resources in Dutch studies, the cultural change is well under way and has resulted in an increased openness to reuse and repurpose OERs. An analogy that I particularly liked was made by a colleague from engineering in the discussions on the TILT2010 conference. While discussing reuse of OERs and the widespread assumption that course teachers would have to create all their teaching material themselves he drew a comparison with the world of engineering. Engineering companies no longer have to create everything from scratch but are able to rely on normed standard elements to construct something new. Or put differently, a chef does not need to grow all his ingredients himself but he can get them from the market.

By depositing resources in Jorum, Humbox and Languagebox, and in due course LORO, *VirtualDutch* and Dutch as a subject that can be studied in UK Higher Education have become much more visible than they could ever have been using the institutional websites alone. Prospective students who were determined to study Dutch would sooner or later have found one of the four *VirtualDutch* institutions anyhow, but by employing OERs and Web 2.0 established distribution channels like the named repositories and cloud services, we can address a much broader audience, including prospective students with a general interest in languages. An indicator for the success of this approach is the 'Try Dutch!' language taster. In the 12 months after it was uploaded to *Languagebox* this OER alone had more than 1600 visitors<sup>16</sup>. It also attracted comments like "your 'Taster of Dutch' material on Language Box was singled out by colleagues at a recent meeting as the perfect example of an 'open resource' both in content and concept... so we look forward to getting more!"

Collaboration as a way of supporting and sustaining SIVS in times of shrinking resources is definitely the way forward. While this is a wider trend relevant for all humanities disciplines, as also reflected by shifting funding regimes (Ma-

<sup>16</sup> [languagebox.ac.uk/991](http://languagebox.ac.uk/991)

hony *et al.*, 2012), it is almost indispensable for less-widely taught languages like Dutch, both for pedagogical and for strategic reasons. The emerging Open Educational Practices provide much-needed ‘critical mass’ as well as efficiency savings, both aspects the respective subject communities have to demonstrate if UK Higher Education is to sustain the teaching of vulnerable less-widely taught languages, even if they have been recognised as strategically important. Fortunately the technologies for doing so are readily available.

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