

Title: Open Education P's at the OU in Scotland: Partnership, Practices and the Development of Open Educational Policies

140 Characters

Clear OER policies are key to OEP, the paper explores policies role in enabling partnership, then reflects on policy as a potential barrier

Extended Abstract:

Abstract:

This paper explores the role of partnership and practice in the development of open educational policies within an Scotland wide project managed by the Open University (OU) in Scotland. It begins by exploring the open educational practices (OEP) of the OU in Scotland, in particular how partnerships have informed our approach. This is placed in the context of the OU UK, and looks at the role of having central and coherent policy as a platform for practice, while also considering the destabilising effect on innovations. This review of our present approach leads onto an exploration of the broader Scottish educational policy context. It introduces a new three year HE wide project led by the OU in Scotland, and the paper will review narratives emerging from the initial phase focusing on practice, partnership and policy at an organisational, with a view to understanding the development of these at a national level.

Keywords: Open Educational Practices, Openness, Policy, Partnership, Innovation

1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of partnership and practice in the development of open educational policies. It is based on the development of a particular approach to Open Educational Practices (OEP) that has evolved at the Open University in Scotland that emphasises the critical role of partnership working in OEP. Using examples from our own work on openness in partnership it explores the practices involved and how that has informed our emerging policy. The paper then takes a “step back”, placing the work we have done in Scotland in relation to the Open University UK Open Educational Resource (OER) policies. In doing so it highlights the strength that comes from have a long term OER/OEP engagement and clear policies, including, consistent approach, strong platform, being a “trusted source”, and also looks at the ways that policies (if now sufficiently flexible) might constrain innovation. These internal loops of policy and practice are explored as a way to understand what it means to contextualise OEP policies in different jurisdictions.

The paper then goes on to look at how this approach and these questions have led us to being the host institution for a Scotland wide project that aims to develop Scotland's capacity, and inform national policy on OEP. The paper will explore and report on the early developments within the project as we look to negotiate and develop our partnership with the “core group” of HEI's, draw in stakeholders within the HE/education sectors, while also maintaining and developing our own distinctive approach to partnership with those not in the formal education sector. In particular we plan to explore what the relative certainty, our stable but evolving approach to OEP means where national and institutional policies are uncertain, and the landscape is unstable.

2. Open Education, Partnership and Practice

The OU in Scotland's approach to OEP is conditioned by our understanding of openness in general, and our experience of being an open and distance learning provider. Our approach to OEP is about widening participation (WP), it is based on our institutional culture (Gourley and Lane 2009). We also have a clear mandate from the Scottish Government to focus on this area. Alongside this we have an understanding of OER/OEP that has developed from being part of the OU UK, and this includes a robust platform and clear policies in how to design OER to promote OEP (discussed in more detail below).

These factors have led us to take a partnership approach, partly because we have found that partnership with those outside the formal learning sector is one of the most effective ways we can engage potential learners. For example, in partnership with Trade Unions (TU) we used existing OER to develop bespoke face to face sessions around the role of technology in work and wider society for shop floor workers in the food and drink industry (Cannell 2013). It also includes working in partnership with third sector organisations who support socially excluded people. For example, our work with a charity that supports refugees and asylum seekers has led to the development of specific OER to support that group (Hewitt 2013). Likewise our work in community renewables have also called into question where expertise sits, and take an approach to OEP that looks to go beyond releasing HE materials, to working with end users as learning designers (Macintyre in press).

3. Open Educational, Policy for and from Partnership and Practice

We work in partnership because it is effective. However, we must also consider to what degree our understanding of effectiveness is conditioned by the organisational policies, structures, norms and practices around us. At the start we noted how the OU understanding of its social justice mission informed our understanding of practice in OEP. Our partnership approach is built on our standard OU production model of investment in carefully designed high quality materials, an approach identified as being well suited to OER development (Lane 2012). However, even our supported Open and distance learning model (ODL) is not without its problems, in particular around retention and progression. When thinking about OER and OEP we need to be mindful of these, and we can see that questions are already being asked about the retention rates of a particular flavours and approaches of open or “freely available” online materials¹. Our work on student retention and progression within our supported ODL model has found that working in partnership mitigates some of these issues, as it allows us to move beyond the solitary self directed learner to the peer learner, and a deeper understanding of learners needs (Macintyre and Heil 2013). This “local” approach is bolted onto the standard model, and (as detailed above) our approach to OEP is built on similar partnership model. While the first telling of OEP above emphasises OER in partnership, a closer examination of the practices within our standard approach to adapting our ODL model finds that our approach is very much about working within established norms.

Like our ODL model our OEP model is depends on the OU's strong global reputation for creating and hosting OER and for OER/OEP scholarship. A reputation is based on early engagement with emerging area that over time has moved to be central within OU policy. An area that with the “March of the MOOCs” has become a politically important area

¹ Here we refer to recent debates about the retention rates and socio-economic profile of students on Massive Open Online Courses, some of which fall under the general banner OER, see this recent article in the Wall Street Journal <http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2013/11/20/survey-mooc-students-are-elite-young-and-male-2/>

within education. Our “strong brand” in OER is based on an academic reputation, a clear licensing policy, a robust and visible platform, and a model of producing materials that is well suited to online learning and working in partnership. This is a positive thing, and there is a large body of policy related and academic research that focuses on the requirements for clear OER policies within organisations to enable growth and development (McGill *et al* 2011). It has enabled, it means we have a clear offer, and people want to work in partnership with us. However, this paper also considers the role of policies and norms in shaping practice. Here we draw on our experience of partnerships, in particular with those in the Third Sector, where we have begun to find this clarity may come at a price. Clear policies and robust production structures provide a solid foundation, and a necessary one in an area as ambiguous as OEP, but they also condition the range of responses, and could potentially stifle innovation. Thus, this paper moved beyond the early work around establishing policies and norms that was fundamental in the emergence of OER/OEP at an institutional and sectoral level, to consider the implications of those policies in and for practice, in doing so it touches on the tension identified by many authors around OER as organisational self interest and individual altruism (Macintyre 2013), between creating and protecting a consistent brand, and early messy spaces where new ideas and new approaches emerge.

For the OU in Scotland our partnership model is about being flexible and responsive to the needs of our partners. This can cut across policies and established practices, here we provide two examples from very recent OEP work. Work we have been doing with social housing tenants as content writers, learning designers, and users of information advice and guidance it became clear that our platform and our approach did not meet their needs. While the license was important, the platform was not suitable, principally due to the limitations it placed on learning design, and the fact that it was not a likely destination for end users. This meant creating OER that is not hosted by us, a practice that breaks institutional norms. Similarly, work we have been doing around OEP for rural enterprises our partners were looking for an online portal that was designed in a way that would support face to face activities, through careful adaptations to our approach we found the platform does provide and appropriate structure for that kind of content. However, our partners indicated that for people in rural areas we needed to create a parallel systems to support people who could not access face to face. We ended up creating shadow support systems on Facebook. Something OU policy does not presently support. Our approach has been to see what we do as innovations and contextualisation of policies in and through our OEP, as part of the continual testing and refining of policy in through and for practice. These are not major paradigm or policy shifting initiatives, and the tensions between policy and practice may seem somewhat banal. However, in being open about these internal tensions we hope to uncover the hidden everyday practices of being open.

4. From the Future

Uncovering these hidden practices is not merely an academic exercise, the purpose of surfacing these issues around the loops of policy and practice is to understand how we negotiate policy and practice ourselves as we enter a period where our engagement moves from being about the OU in Scotland to one that is about OEP in Scotland. The paper will report on the outcomes of the initial phase our work, in particular it will explore the relationship between policy practice and openness at a number of levels. In doing so it aims to open up questions about the form and function of open educational policies more generally.

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