

The Current State of OER in Europe: Going Beyond Altruism

ENCORE+ OER Policy and Strategy Position Paper No. 1



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European Network for Catalysing
Open Resources in Education

Coordinator of this work:

Orna Farrell, Dublin City University, Ireland

Report Authors:

Orna Farrell, Dublin City University, Ireland
Stefania Aceto, Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain
Silvia Baldiris, Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain
Mark Brown, Dublin City University, Ireland
James Brunton, Dublin City University, Ireland



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Problem Statement

This paper comments on the current state of Open Educational Resources (OER) in Europe, in particular at the policy and strategy level. It challenges some of the altruistic, philanthropic and public good drivers underlying the OER movement by identifying the need to align new open solutions with the actual problems educators and learners face in today's challenging educational landscape. Moreover, the paper critically reflects on why despite the efforts of leading advocates so few governments, schools, universities and businesses, have failed to explicitly commit to adopting Open Educational Practices (OEPs) as a core policy agenda and distinctive feature of their practice.

Summary

In summary, this paper challenges the sector to go beyond altruism and endorses the view that "...policy will be the lever by which open practice can become sustainable and mainstream" ([Weller, 2014, p.201](#)). The ENCORE+ project seeks to give "voice" to more stakeholders to support the development of OER institutional strategies in both academia and business contexts in order to promote their mainstreaming and a strong European OER ecosystem.

Suggested Actions

- Join the policy and strategy circle community.
- Share your views about this position paper with the circle community.
- Share examples of successful and unsuccessful policies and strategies from your country, community or business.
- Share examples of OER based effective business models.

Background Context

Open Education is an umbrella term or movement with many dimensions that share a common viewpoint "everyone should have the freedom to use, customize, improve and redistribute educational resources without constraint" ([Cape Town Open Education Declaration](#), 2012). While Open Education has been a feature of educational research and practice for almost thirty years, its adoption has been fragmented and still remains on the margins ([Zawacki-Richter, et al., 2020](#)). International organisations such as UNESCO have played an important role in advancing policy on Open Education around the globe. For example, the [UNESCO \(2019\) recommendation on OER](#) was an important

step in providing a policy manifesto to support the mainstreaming of Open Educational Resources (OER). In the European context, the [OpenEdu Framework](#) (2017) published by the European Commission provides a policy framework to support higher education institutions to engage with Open Education. At the same time, the first-ever EU-wide study was published on Open Education policies in all the 28 Member States ([Dos Santos, et. al., 2017](#)). On a positive note, this study indicated that the majority of EU Member States were engaged in policy driven activities in the area of Open Education. On the other hand, it found there is still a long way to go and that a more systematic and strategically coordinated EU-wide approach is required to raise awareness and further support the development of open practices and policies at national level. While more recent evidence on OER adoption in Europe is scant, this paper argues that little has changed since this report and Europe continues to lack the strategic policy levels required to mainstream OERs.

Why is policy important?

The definition of policy is not a simple matter. However, [Dos Santos, et. al. \(2017\)](#) state that to mainstream OER and “... achieve our ambitious goals, effective open education policies are needed” (p. 8). In recognising that Open Education is a multifaceted movement, they propose four typologies of policies: (i) OER specific policies; (ii) general ICT policies; (iii) comprehensive strategic educational policies; and (iv) policies designed as national plans. Across these differences of scope and context, policy plays a valuable role in supporting effective policy making. They also organize stakeholder engagement to build shared ownership and understandings, and serve to legitimise and enact particular practices. The key point is that only so much can be achieved at a policy level without effective engagement. Importantly, the process of policy development is crucial to developing impactful policies and this process needs to be inclusive of all stakeholders to promote critical dialogue, especially if we want to go beyond nothing more than symbolic policies.

How can we engage all stakeholders?

It is essential that in order to support the mainstreaming of OERs, governments, educational institutions, community agencies, business and industry groups, and other major stakeholders are active partners in policy development. This point raises the question of whose voice has been missing in developing policies supportive of OER and how can we engage in more inclusive dialogue? In the past, arguably, policy for OER has often been siloed from wider macro-level policy developments, failed to fully engage institutional leaders and overlooked those stakeholders with commercial

interests. While there is some concern that commercial interests may infiltrate the OER movement and weaken its philosophical roots (Bali, et al., 2020), the importance of this group should not be ignored in raising greater awareness and achieving the goal of mainstreaming OERs across the education ecosystem. This observation shifts attention back to the process of policy development and the need for inclusive stakeholder dialogue at the macro (national), meso (institutional) and micro (programme) levels of the education ecosystem. Engaging stakeholders at each of these levels and across other sectors is crucial to developing a common goal that promotes more scalable and sustainable policies, which help to translate lofty and altruistic ambitions into impactful educational practices. ENCORE+ is seeking to achieve this end by intentionally connecting up different European stakeholders from a range of backgrounds to share experiences and debate the future of OERs.

Where next for OER policies?

Talk is cheap and the challenge for any educational policy is to go from the boardroom to the classroom. Lofty principles and policy statements only go so far in promoting real change in educational practice. A further challenge is to move away from promoting and developing OER solutions to giving more serious consideration to the problems facing educators in today's increasingly complex educational landscape. Put another way, if OER is the solution, then what is the problem? Such a subtle but important shift in focus might help to better demonstrate how OERs can help to address some of these problems--the increasing cost of education, the intensification of teacher's workload, concerns about quality, and so on--and engender a stronger call to action by senior educational leaders. The key point is that policy for OER needs to become mainstream and go beyond the passionate community of advocates to achieve the goal of being embedded in mainstream practice. A fundamental question for future policy development is what is the business model for OER-based implementation strategies? What is the role of the commercial sector? How can educational institutions and business interests work together to better leverage the potential of OER? [Darwish \(2019\)](#) proposes four OER-based business models which augment either content production and curation or support services related to OER. The ENCORE+ project aims to collect and analyse further examples of OER-based business models, with the aim of developing policy to support the wider proliferation of OER within and across academia and businesses. To advance this mission, we are launching a Policies and Practice Circle that invite all stakeholders to join the conversation.

About ENCORE+

ENCORE+ responds to the priorities of opening up and modernising the European education and training sector through a coordinated European OER ecosystem. OER (open educational resources) are “teaching, learning and research materials in any medium – digital or otherwise – that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions” (UNESCO).

ENCORE+ brings together meaningful and focused human networks; technological solutions for sharing and discovering OER; policy reviews; quality criteria; and generating business models which draw on the affordances of OER to support innovation. ENCORE+ supports uptake of OER through business and academia by formulating value propositions for OER usage for education, training and business.

ENCORE+ directly addresses several European and international policy priorities:

- **Stimulating innovation in businesses** through learning and training innovation
- **Reducing barriers to education** affording learners the opportunity to up-skill or re-skill at a lower or nearly no cost, and in a flexible way
- **Supporting the modernisation of higher education in Europe**, including digitalisation
- **Bridging non-formal & formal education** by advancing recognition of open learning

ENCORE+ Circles

ENCORE+ uses “Circles” to describe the key stakeholders who contribute to the European OER ecosystem of tomorrow. Our four Circles represent overlapping communities of practice: technology; policy/strategy; quality and innovation.

A total of 16 Circle events will be held over the lifetime of the project; these bring together stakeholders for consultation and networking. Events are free to attend! In 2023, a series of integration events will consolidate the Circles into one integrated and sustainable ENCORE+ community by integrating perspectives and best practice from across the Circles.

ENCORE+ is designed around five challenges which are addressed through the Circles.

Needs	ENCORE+ actions	Outcomes
Need 1: De-fragment the OER stakeholders community in Europe	Mapping the OER ecosystem and its stakeholders; modelling future scenarios; consultation exercises; whitepapers; integration events; guides for innovation; integration across education and training; entrepreneurialism; reporting.	ENCORE+ network, strengthening and connecting existing OER communities
Need 2: Strengthen collaboration and interoperability among European OER repositories	Providing a centralised hub for OER content; new paradigms for repository technologies (interfaces; implementations; protocols; content creation & re-use; networking) authenticated by the relevant communities to support best practice.	Integrated architecture of a European OER repositories infrastructure
Need 3: Support development of OER institutional strategies in European businesses and academia	Working with diverse stakeholder base to identify, synthesise and share strategies and business models across business and higher education.	European guidelines for developing effective OER strategies in business and academia
Need 4: Integrated European OER quality paradigm and assurance mechanisms	Identifying the key quality concerns for future OER repositories, communities and users; piloting a new quality framework focused on harnessing and enabling OER innovation.	European open & community-led Quality Review Framework for OER
Need 5: Entrepreneurial innovative approaches and business models based on OER	Supporting innovation through information exchange; appropriate software and services to enable pathways to innovation; understanding of the drivers of innovation; meaningful interactions between relevant stakeholders; providing a showcase for innovation.	European business and start-up community, empowered to innovate and improve operations by leveraging OER

Website

For further and updated information about this project please see:

www.encoreproject.eu

Contacts

Report coordinator

Orna Farrell, DCU

orna.farrell@dcu.ie

Project Coordinator

Juliane Granly, ICDE

granly@icde.org

Contact us

info@encoreproject.eu

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For further and updated information about this project please see:

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