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THE GLOBAL OER GRADUATE NETWORK: AN EXAMPLE OF A COMMUNITY OF CARE

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Abstract

The Global OER (Open Educational Resources) Graduate Network (GO-GN) was founded in 2013 to support and connect doctoral researchers on OER worldwide and to promote open education research and its potential impact on society. In its ten-year history GO-GN has brought together doctoral students, experts, and educators from all five continents. GO-GN organises face-to-face events, online webinars and other activities that promote support and collaboration among its members. The pandemic impacted on GO-GN members and the network; this research shows how the network moved from a community of practice to a community of care.

Keywords:

Open education, OER, research, collaboration

Introduction

This research focuses on informal networks of support for higher education doctoral researchers and explores the extent to which these constitute communities of care due to open educational practices. The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged traditional models and structures in higher education, often removing the support structures that exist for the benefit of research students and doctoral candidates. In many contexts, higher education practices have adapted rapidly and in response to immediate needs. This paper examines the extent to which open values and practices can empower those who are potentially isolated or in need of community support. Our approach is effectively that of a 'community of care' which draws on open values to support and enable its members to achieve their immediate goals, move in the direction of open practices, and give and receive emotional support.

GO-GN

The Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN) is a network of PhD candidates around the world whose research projects include a focus on open education, Open Educational Resources (OER), Open Educational Practices (OEP) or Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). These doctoral researchers are at the core of the network; around them, over two hundred experts, supervisors, mentors and interested parties connect to form a community of practice. GO-GN started in 2013 as an initiative from Fred Mulder, in collaboration with Rory McGreal. GO-GN is currently administered by the Open Education Research Hub from the Institute of Educational Technology at The Open University, UK. GO-GN aims to raise the profile of research into open education, offer support for those conducting PhD research in this area, promote equity and inclusion in the field of open education research, and develop openness as a process of research.

GO-GN exists in parallel to formal educational systems rather than being integrated with them. In a typical year, GO-GN engagement takes place online through monthly webinars and other online events and activities (social media, newsletters, etc.) with the main interaction being a face-to-face workshop which is organised in collaboration with one of the major international conferences in open education. After a two-day intensive

workshop, doctoral candidates in the GO-GN network are supported in attending the conference and presenting their research.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the core feature of GO-GN activity - an annual face-to-face workshop to bring together members from around the world - became impossible. Aside from the disruption caused, it soon became apparent that doctoral students, who often feel isolated and in need of pastoral support at the best of times, were particularly vulnerable to the effects of institutional closures and the impact of lockdowns and other Covid measures. Consequently, GO-GN network activity shifted to a range of online interactions intended to provide a higher level of support.

There were several ways in which the GO-GN pandemic response was coordinated around the concept of developing an informal, yet supportive, community of care, based on open values and practices. This included:

1. In encouraging members to explore openness in their own context.
2. Co-production of community resources.
3. A continuing focus on Equity, Diversity & Inclusion.
4. Developing a Fellowship scheme.
5. Facilitating the participating in online conferences and co-chairing the OER22 conference.

The innovation exploring these activities has characterised GO-GN in its aspect of a 'community of care'.

Openness as a function of research and educational practice

GO-GN has a longstanding commitment to advocating for open values and open practices, many of which have an explicitly normative dimension. In encouraging members to explore openness in their own context, GO-GN has promoted moral values including autonomy, criticality, representation, equity, and commitment to sharing (Farrow, 2016; Jordan & Weller, 2017). The pandemic has affected GO-GN members, friends and experts, in several ways, and active support has been provided from the network including personalised support with 1:2:1 sessions and an interactive WhatsApp group.

Co-production of community resources

One focus for the GO-GN community was the co-production of resources through inclusive authoring and editorial practices. Outputs produced by the community during the pandemic included:

- The GO-GN Research Methods Handbook (Farrow et al., 2020) which was written through an open editorial process and has found an international audience, being downloaded more than 12,500 times, and being recognised with a prestigious award for excellence
- The GO-GN Conceptual Frameworks Guide (Farrow et al., 2021) which was again produced collectively and offered network members the chance to openly share insights into their work which would typically be concealed under 'closed' approaches
- A special issue of the Journal of Interactive Media in Education which shared a range of international perspectives on open education with a global audience (Weller et al., 2021)
- Participating in community events such as the GO-GN Gasta session at the ALT Summer Summit in 2020, or collectively training to be Wikipedia editors, and improve open education articles on Wikipedia, with Wiki Education
- Reviewing the state-of-the-art research relevant to open education published recently in the yearly published "Research review" (Farrow et al., 2021).

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have been a growing topic within the Open Education community, although some would argue that it has been underpinning the open education discourse since the beginning (Lapum et al., 2022). However, access to free and online resources alone cannot be considered equitable, diverse, and inclusive. For example, most open resources are only available in English, which limits access and reach for many learners around the world (Willems & Bossu, 2012).

EDI has been driving the GO-GN agenda since its foundation, but it was only in 2018 when GO-GN's first project directly related to DEI was developed. The nature of this work involved GO-GN members working with the team. The first phase of the GO-GN EDI project focused on EDI practices in Open Education in Africa. Findings at this first stage informed the initial GO-GN guidelines for EDI (Bossu et al., 2019). The findings of phase 1 have also been used as a foundation for phase 2, which focused on EDI in Latin America (Bossu & Vladimirschi, 2020).

Phase 2 was conducted during the pandemic, which has created some challenges, but also opportunities for participant engagement. GO-GN currently supports 125 doctoral candidates and alumni registered at universities in 35 countries, however, of these members, only 30% conduct their research in the Global South (Weller et al., 2021). The concern is that, even with all the efforts put into place to be open and a willingness to be diverse, the Global South is still under-represented within this community, which means that GO-GN is not reaching those who could potentially benefit the most from being part of the network (Rodés & Iniesto, 2021).

To address this gap and assist the fulfilment of its mission, GO-GN has embarked on a quest to push the EDI agenda by implementing some of the recommendations suggested by the participants of the above projects, which will encourage further equitable, diverse, and inclusive collaboration between Global South and North colleagues and in turn foster open higher education for good. For this purpose, an EDI handbook in open education is being created, and includes research findings and recommendations from both phases and input from experts in the area.

Fellowship Programme

The GO-GN Fellowship scheme has been designed for three years (2020-2022) to foster connections to other networks, to promote GO-GN at strategic events and to encourage applications from the Global South. The latter aimed at incorporating some of the recommendations of GO-GN Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) project. The motivation for this fellowship scheme is to provide formal recognition to members after they have formally finished their doctoral studies to become an alumnus of the network in the format of a post-doctoral scholarship. The Fellowship scheme provides visibility and recognition in return for specific contributions to the network. This presents a means by which alumni can stay involved and share their expertise with the wider GO-GN membership.

The first cohort included four alumni, the second cohort of GO-GN fellows comprised two alumni, while the ongoing third one includes three alumni. Fellowships exemplify the diversity of the scheme, with fellows further developing doctoral research (two of them), while another focused on network expansion in the Global South (one fellow). Fellowships also centred on the development of OERs (a book and a set of podcasts) through community co-creation (two fellows). Other fellowships have explored OER opportunities in their local and national communities (two fellows). Finally, fellowships also supported ongoing research in social justice and open textbooks (one fellow) or investigating the use of frameworks such as TPACK for teachers' use of OERs in their professional development (one fellow).

While the fellowship scheme was designed before the pandemic, Covid-19 impacted the first cohort, and required an agile response from fellows. For example, one fellow had to promote the network in the online environment instead of travelling to visit partners, and another fellow used the opportunity to research the Uruguayan context during the worst moment of the pandemic. In the case of a fellow who is currently researching in 2022, the experience of the pandemic is being used to inform and understand the impact of OER on teachers from public schools with low resources within the Brazilian context.

Dissemination and chairing conferences

During the pandemic support for members to submit and present their research at online conferences, such as UK OER, OE Global and OpenEd, was increased. This has enabled members to both network with, and receive feedback from, the wider open education community.

GO-GN were co-chairs for the last OER conference which took place face-to-face in London, UK and online 26-28 April 2022 (Pitt, 2022). The network had eight GO-GN members and alumni from around the world join for the first face-to-face workshop in over two years. The one-day workshop provided an opportunity for participants to share their current or doctoral research in a supportive space. GO-GN had presence across OER22 including a total of 29 sessions which featured GO-GN team and members, 25 non-team sessions including the conference plenary and GO-GN showcase, and 20 individual members listed as (co-)authors on presentations.

Member Feedback

Every year GO-GN invites members to participate in a survey. The GO-GN survey is an opportunity for members to share feedback and ideas on what we are doing as a network, how we could improve and how GO-GN can better serve the wider open education community. We had 27 respondents in 2021's survey (Weller et al., 2021). Members felt GO-GN has supported them during the pandemic very well (81%) with the features of GO-GN most important to members reported as: (1) community of peers, (2) research communications and (3) Research advice on open practices. Throughout the survey members shared a range of comments that highlight the different ways in which GO-GN is important and impactful. For example, GO-GN's open, collegiate community and support network, offering an alternative to their regular supervisory team:

"Hugely valuable emotional support and affirmation of our area of research was available from mentors throughout the journey. More so during my time as a graduate student but continued opportunities to connect and give back are welcomed, and strengths that provided psychosocial support during Covid tough times." (GO-GN alumni)

Presenting their work in front of the community:

"I love that you reached out to me about presenting at one of the webinars. I don't think that I would have volunteered at this point in my research, but it was a wonderful opportunity to talk about my interests and allowed me to network and hone my skills." (Current GO-GN member)

Fighting the loneliness in pandemic times:

"I suddenly do not feel alone in my doctoral journey. It has encouraged me to submit more academic writing for consideration and nudged me along in my studies" (GO-GN member)

Or, creating relationships among diverse international members:

"I believe that GO-GN has done an excellent job in creating strong human bonds among its diverse international members and that is the strongest asset it has. That is for me what makes it unique and incredibly powerful." (Current GO-GN member)

Conclusion

In summary, the GO-GN pandemic response was coordinated around the concept of developing an informal, yet supportive, community of care, based on open values and practices. Going forward GO-GN will continue to support members in a variety of different ways, both online and face-to-face, and offer an increased range of activities to support its membership in the future.

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