OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IN A MULTI-CAMPUS AND VIRTUAL CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the reasons for which both traditional universities as well as Open universities could adopt Open Educational Resources (OER) to enhance their networked curricula in a typical regional multi-campus or virtual campus scenario. We will highlight the very different institutional goals that can be achieved by the implementation of OER, and show that OER are compatible with a variety of pedagogical approaches. On the other hand, we will stress that OER need to be understood in a more comprehensive way than the course content as such, and should include open communication about the educational concepts and curricular aims in which they operate, as well as being embedded in the regional stakeholder and expertise networks that sustain the knowledge domain covered.

The research is done in the context of the project Innovative Open Educational Resources in European higher education (OER-HE) lead by the European Association of Distance Universities (EADTU), and involves (for the work on multi-campus) K.U.Leuven, which is a traditional university, the Open Universiteit in The Nederlands (OUNL), and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC).

The three partners involved in this research look into OER from very different backgrounds and goals. Whereas for UOC multi-campus means a virtual campus, and ODL technologies are at the core of using OER, the OUNL is involved in a project to setup a Network Open Polytechnic (NOP), aiming to share innovative course content and blended learning pedagogical models to existing Higher Education institutions. For K.U.Leuven, OER technologies help to overcome logistical and synergy problems stemming from its University Association, involving 13 institutions in multiple campuses throughout the Flemish Region.

We will show that in these different contexts, OER indeed proves to be an enabling factor offering solutions to quite different problems, but that on the other hand from the different stakes follows an impact on how OER courses are conceived, and what kind of “products” they involve.

Keywords: OER, multi-campus, life-long learning.

1 CONTEXT

Open Education is “the simple and powerful idea that the world’s knowledge is a public good and that technology in general and the Worldwide Web in particular provide an extraordinary opportunity for everyone to share, use, and reuse knowledge” [1] [2]. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (Open University, India) explains it as follows: “The Open Courseware concept is based on the philosophical view of knowledge as a collective social product and so it is also desirable to make it a social property.” [3]. Open Education can be regarded as the basic philosophy behind initiatives such as Open Educational resources.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation defines OER as “the teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge” [4]. For OECD and UNESCO: “OER are digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students, and self-learners to use and...
reuse for teaching, learning, and research. OER includes learning content, software tools to develop, use, and distribute content, and implementation resources such as open licenses."[5]. As Erik Duval and David Wiley put it: "Open educational resources are learning content or tools that are offered free of charge under a copyright license granting permissions for users to engage in the “4R” activities: reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute. In essence, open educational resources are learning objects that use an open source license." [6] [7]

While the reasons for OER have been amply debated, little has been done to actually explore the possible business models behind it [8], and whether it can also be a practical means for universities, both Open and traditional, to achieve their goals [9]. In this paper, we want to study in particular how OER can play a role in the development of multi-campus or virtual campus education.

Besides the more theoretical reflection and literature study, the methodology of this research focuses on qualitative methods, involving interviews with key decision makers in the adoption of OER and open policies at institutions of different types, and stakeholder workshops to validate the chosen approaches. By having access to internal documents we can shed a light in the different arguments and motives that are taken into account when considering OER. The following possible motives for the use of OER are evaluated: widening participation and lifelong learning, internationalization, exposure, mainstreaming, reaching out to stakeholders, quality control, cost efficiency, supporting learning in the digital age, facilitating interdisciplinary research. These are ranked in function of the different institutional profiles. This first line of research should allow us to do more focused quantitative inquires in the future.

OER in these contexts are meant to help fill the local expertise gaps and are part of an effort to create an integrated learning environment that is both virtual and physical, mixing distant and blended learning. Each institution is trying to shape future learning environments out of starting conditions that are historically evolved. In each case, the relation between content, human resources and knowledge dissemination is explored and an argumentation is construed to strengthen OER policies at the strategic institutional level, by connecting it to the respective business models [10].

2 INNOVATIVE OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

This research on multi-campus education involving OER stems from a European funded project on OER in higher education, led by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU). EADTU has been working on Open Educational Resources (OER) strategies in lifelong open and flexible learning by means of the EADTU taskforce on Multilingual Open Resources for Independent Learning (MORIL). The MORIL taskforce convened most of the European Open and Distance Teaching Universities and promoted online learning in two modes – informal and formal – both based on OER, so as to provide new gateways to university education. In doing so, the US-based William and Flora Hewlett Foundation acted as a financial catalyst.

A concept with learning modules in three tracks was developed: (1) access to fully open courses, (2) access to additional services like competence assessments and access to learning communities, and (3) access to formal tutoring, examinations and certification. The Hewlett grants also enabled EADTU to organise a series of best practice seminars related to OER strategies, OER dissemination and OER capacity building. EADTU obtained organisational and financial support from both the European Commission and UNESCO.

The European project ‘Innovative OER in European higher education (OER-HE)’ [11] in the Erasmus lifelong learning programme (within the strand Virtual Campus) includes 11 European partners and envisions a continuation (and extension) of the activities. OER-HE is organised into five study work packages: (1) OER widening participation (i.e., best practices), (2) OER multi campus (associations and stakeholder), (3) OER internationalisation (development manuals), (4) Quality in OER (quality assurance of OER), and (5) a European OER portal (a repository). OER-HE consists of the following partners: European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, Universidade Aberta, Open Universiteit Nederland (OUNL), Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, FernUniversität in Hagen, Anadolu University, Università Telematica Internazionale UNINETTUNO, Open University, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (K.U.Leuven), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), and Hellenic Open University. For the work package on multi-campus, K.U.Leuven works together with OUNL and UOC.
3 MULTI-CAMPUS: WORKING DEFINITION

There are not really generally adopted definitions on what one should understand under multi-campus. For pragmatic reasons, we limited the scope of our project using a working definition: under multi-campus, we understand:

"Any higher education setting that involves delivering study curricula to campuses at different locations under one institutional umbrella, whether this is one individual institution or a network of institutions, and regardless whether the delivery method is physical, entirely virtual or blended." [12].

So, in our view a valid multi-campus approach could be an entirely virtual campus setup. For the European Commission, the latter is:

"Cooperation between higher education institutions in the field of e-learning, regarding: design of joint curricula development by several universities, including agreements for the evaluation, validation and recognition of acquired competences, subject to national procedures; large-scale experiments of virtual mobility in addition to physical mobility and development of innovative dual mode curricula, based on both traditional and on-line learning methods. This broad definition involves many issues from partnerships between traditional and/or distance universities and HEI with a view to offering joint certifications (for undergraduate and/or postgraduate levels) and cooperation with learning support services. This might also include collaborative activities in strategic areas of education or research through cooperation involving researchers, academics, students, management, administrative and technical personnel. 'Virtual campuses' should not be confused with e-learning platforms." [13].

In our project we will however compare three quite different settings, two blended (K.U.Leuven and NOP/OUNL and one virtual (UOC).

Today, with the economic need to merge organizations to obtain scale advantages in higher education, many institutions are faced with governmental demand to organize across hitherto independent and often competing institutions into larger associations. These efforts are supposed to provide enhanced possibilities in offering complete curricula with the available human resources, are meant to concentrate talent and combat duplicate efforts. Many European regions are in the process to integrate Higher education into University-led associations that can provide quality control and organize expensive curricula and the much needed logistics in a more efficient way.

Of course, the development of high quality, research based course content still stands out as an important cost factor, for which it is hoped that advances in ICT – both content related as well as focused on administration and delivery aspects – will allow to do more with less. In the knowledge economy, being able to capture the scarce expert knowledge and delivering it to larger audiences in an educational context is key to economic development. Providing regions with access to all relevant biomedical knowledge is as challenging as offering students the possibility to acquire the multi-language skills so essential to European trade, to cite just a few striking examples.

Europe's higher education future is paved along the road to larger institutions, professionally managed, with international reach yet strong regional embedding and with a healthy bond with local stakeholder communities. It is our strongest conviction that Open educational Resources play a decisive role in forging the right kind of educational apparatus, where transparency, quality and equal opportunities makes sure knowledge is there where it is needed and can contribute to growth.

4 MOTIVATIONS TO IMPLEMENT OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

4.1 The many good reasons

From the discussions about OER in the three participating institutions as well as the input from the stakeholder workshops it emerged that several quite distinct motivations can exist to implement OER. The starting point is not the same for Open Universities and traditional universities. As it is today in Europe, Open Universities are not in direct competition with each-other, since they are mostly nationally organized with a focus to reach out to target groups amongst their respective national citizens. This makes collaboration on course content an attractive proposition, since there is a huge cost involved in course development and Open Universities do not always have a sufficiently large research base to base their content on. However, mostly the business model evolves around charging
for high-quality course materials, which can be prohibitive to embrace OER. In the case of traditional universities, the fact that they usually do operate in a highly competitive context, collaboration on content has always been rather the exception than the norm. The cost of course content creation is also not a pressing issue, since this is done by professors that are anyway hired for research and teaching. So the motivation to adopt OER is situated elsewhere. Public funded universities tend to see it as their social duty to open up their research content for broader groups, whereas as private universities, who focus on research, often see it as a means for exposure and to add to their prestige.

4.1.1 Widening participation

Widening participation is the core goal of Open Educational Resources, and is as such mentioned in most of the Literature on this topic [14][15][16][17]. It also fits well the mission of Open Universities. The idea is simple: by putting high-quality course materials online, people can easily find them through search engines and might find in it a motivation to take a course on the topic. Open Educational Resources have brought a new dimension to the vocation of Open Universities. In the words of Patrick McAndrew:

“The Open University was built on open concepts that allow learners to avoid barriers to study and successfully enabled more than 2 million people to experience formal higher education. However the openness that applied to the Open University did not cover all aspects that might be commonly assumed - such as free access, choice of start times, global availability. Offering free access to some material online has shown the impact that openness can have on learners and identified a range of behaviours that cluster around content driven and social driven approaches to learning. A combined view that considers the original values of open attached to The Open University alongside the emerging view from OER gives us the opportunity and driver for revising our view of openness and developing a position that helps bridge between formal and informal learning.” [18]

Gurley and Lane stress the importance of OER for widening participation and the enabling role that new licensing models such as Creative Commons have played to make this possible [19].

4.1.2 Life-Long Learning

Life-Long learning is one of the natural contexts for widening participation. OER are yet another means to reach out to possibly interested people that might want to study outside the formal curricula. In today's society, it is important to stay up-to-date and be ready to take refresher courses on a regular basis. [20] Life-Long Learning is one of the stated goals of OUNL.

4.1.3 Exposure

OER offer a possibility to strengthen the profile of both the university and the individual researcher and teacher. For the institution, it is the ideal tool to foster the local embedding in a community. With its openly published materials and results, universities are present in broader layers of today’s information society, get picked up earlier in Google and make sure there is also higher quality content available for the users of web search engines. There is also a clear advantage to the individual researcher. There is a difference between the research published in top journals, which as such is aimed at a small, highly specialized audience and many other competencies of the researcher, stemming from his teaching or work in a lab. OER helps position the researcher in this broader field.

4.1.4 Internationalization

Research is international as such, yet part of the mission of the university is a service towards its “constituency”, its regional embedding. Internationalization is an effort to provide a link between the local communities and the international dimension. OER can be freely embedded in locale practices. They give internationalization a novel meaning, by enriching it with local perspectives. A lot of internet communities works on this principle: people share their views on open content online, while embedding it in very different practices and different contexts.

4.1.5 Quality control and cost control

Paradoxically, one of the reasons universities are hesitating to opt boldly for an open policy towards their learning materials, is that after review, many of the online courses on their e-learning platforms are not really ready for publication. First of all, these courses are often used in a blended context, supporting class teaching activities. Not all relevant information is on the web: there is a lot extra info communicated in the classroom situation. Second, a lot of third party materials on these closed e-learning systems are copyrighted. While it can be perfectly legal to use them in a closed e-learning
environment, the rights are often not cleared for publication. Third, in many ways online courses involve privacy data, in bio-medics even patient-related data. These data cannot be opened to the general public. Fourth, teaching is a dynamic thing: on the e-learning environment: one will find a lot of drafts, unfinished materials, debates, that are not meant to be published. We all know that there is also a fifth reason imaginable why people are reluctant to publish their e-learning materials in an open context: the quality might be not good enough. In his sense, promoting university teachers to work towards open publishable materials is a good instrument for quality control. The E-xcellence network provides a framework to implement a quality assurance program for Open Learning. [21]

4.1.6 Adapting to the millennial generation

Open Educational Resources fit seamlessly in the way the current generation of Digital Natives organize their information. An open course can easily be downloaded on a laptop or annotated on the web using one of the many social bookmarking or tagging tools available. Often students try to find on the internet alternative explanations for topics they do not clearly understand in their own course text. In many cases they end up using Open courses to complement their insight. More and more, the annotations themselves are an enrichment to the course content, in particular when student groups of other disciplines are also taking the course and annotate it from their own perspective.

5 MULTI-CAMPUS MOTIVES FOR OER

While motivations for OER have been discussed in literature, we will in this paper explore how the drive towards multi-campus education is a factor spurring adoption of OER in both Open and traditional universities [22].

5.1 Reaching out to stakeholder communities

The whole idea of having multiple campuses relates to the fact that one wants to organize education as close to the target groups as possible. In this way, one can reach out to the stakeholder communities that have a vested interest in the research field results. This is in particular the case in health education and research, often combined with regional health centers, but is also a reality in applied sciences it comes as no surprise that in Toulouse Paul Sabatier University a lot of research into aviation technologies is being performed.

Embedding knowledge as a community good is one way to ensure sustainability. OER materials can play a role in this, since these materials are easily found on the web and can be linked to community websites.

5.2 Mainstreaming

By distributing high quality learning materials in an open way, researchers help to mainstream new research insights. These materials can be used by teachers in higher education or at the secondary school level. In this way, more novel views on topics can be spread faster amongst the learning community. Mainstreaming understood this way amounts to shaping the research environment. By mainstreaming their insights, researchers can foster interest in their research topic, and make a wider audience the wider principles and issues at stake. This has been shown many times in environmental and health research.

This approach is also beneficial to the internet as a whole, through a positive effect on web searches. The more universities provide reference materials on the internet, the better the search results internet users will obtain, as is clearly demonstrated by how Wikipedia articles show up in Google searches.

5.3 Regional Impact

The UOC is a member of the Open CourseWare Consortium (OCWC) [22] and is member of the Universia OCW [23] project as well, a consortium of Spanish speaking universities. OCW is managed by the learning resources management department, directly under the Vice-Director of Academic Planning, but the responsible for the OCW is reporting to the Vice-Director of Technology. UOC has high hopes from a new policy about OER which promotes a use of modular, reusable OER. They anticipate that this policy will promote the use of open licenses for a great part of our learning resources.
The impact of the university on the society can be greatly increased thanks to the OCW project. The authors can share the learning resources using the OCW site and open licenses, and then use them in other educational institutions for teaching purposes.

5.4 Regional collaboration

One of the reasons both NOP and K.U.Leuven are looking into OER is that within their multi-campus setting, not all required competencies are regionally available in all campus locations. Specially the engineering field is highly specialized, in such a way it is quite impossible to have all the required experts in each institution. Sharing course-content within the regional network is then a logical choice. Some good examples of this “culture of sharing” can be found in Davis e.a. 2010 and other examples on cross-institutional collaboration in Luo e.a. (2010) [24] [25].

Of course, this does not automatically entail that one should opt for Open materials, since it is quite possible to share the course content within an association and a network without opening it up worldwide. It is however, the same principle that leads to the conclusion that it is more logical to take this next step. Even within the confines a one region, it is can be hard to have all experts required for a curriculum. It is quite understandable that one wants to reach out to international partners to fill the gap. A modus operandi that allows seamless integration from other course materials presupposes that those are conceived in an adapted, controllable way. And that is precisely what OER offers: the idea is not only that they are public, but that they are publicly vetted.

To cite one example: “Informatiekunde” is a discipline that one can find both in the Netherlands and in Belgium. The historical background of the introduction of these courses in the universities is however slightly different, so that the course content at the different institutions is not really the same. By putting such a course publicly online however under the label “Informatiekunde”, one is automatically compelled to look for a common ground. [26]

5.5 Interdisciplinary research and education

Another motive that played a role at K.U.Leuven is the use of OER to stimulate interdisciplinary insight exchange, both in research and education. A good example of this is the OER project called ‘LeCH-e’ [27]. LeCH-e or Lived experience of Climate Change offers a multi-disciplinary coverage of this complex problem, explaining to students of different backgrounds the key scientific concepts at stake in understanding climate change. The open nature of the course makes it possible for teachers from other disciplines to engage the material with their students from their perspective. A striking example is the fact that “Lifestyle and Climate Change” has been put on the master thesis list for the master in Cultural Studies in Leuven.

6 STRATEGIES

6.1 What is to be included?

An interesting discussion took place at the workshop in Leuven [28], where the question emerged what is in fact to be included in the Open Educational resources. First of all, we should focus the discussion on Open Courses rather than Open course materials, which of course can be of many different types. For the course, we could identify: a summary of the field, structure and outline, references and links, teaching and learning activities, formative and summative tests. The very difference between a course and a handbook is exactly in the learning path that is included. Ideally, a course contains a view on section learning duration, exercises to be made, selected literature to be reviewed. More and more, since reliable content can be gathered from the web, courses will point to existing materials rather than rephrasing or citing them.

This means the element of guidance and selection is quite important. OER conceived as Open Courses should then take into account these expectations and offer not only course content, but elaborate ways to guide the student through these materials. Of course, this touches upon the business model of both traditional universities and Open and Distance Learning Universities. When you put course content online for free – in the hope others do the same and there is a win-win situation – the business effort can go to the student support offered.

So, for a sustainable business model for Open Universities OER should be clearly defined as being the course materials involved, such as the course text and exercises and self-tests. Everything that
goes beyond that and pertains to the pedagogical support quality, such as tutoring, and the whole summative testing should be kept apart from it. In this way interested students can be offered course or exam contracts, which fits the way Open Universities do their business. But this model also attracts traditional universities. In the case of this project, e.g., it emerges that also K.U.Leuven is considering offering students access to course support under a separate fee apart from the exam contract, for those students that do not take the regular course credit contract.

But this does not mean that an OER course concept, certainly not an intended collection of OER courses for a University, should be limited to the course text. Quite on the contrary. When one wants to reach the goals stated above, such as reaching out to stakeholders, fostering life-long learning, having regional impact etc., it becomes clear that OER can only function as part of a well thought-through network that embeds the course in the knowledge and human activity domain it pertains to. A good OER course differs from a handbook in this sense that first off all, being a course, it structures the knowledge field, and initiates the student into it. This initiation is of course not only into the information involved, the content, but also to the human activities that give meaning to this content, and the network of people that give authority to this information so that it can become knowledge. An open course should be a gateway to a knowledge field, as is illustrated in the following diagram [29]:

![Fig. 1 OER in context](image)

The big strength of universities over other information providers is that it is strongly embedded in the research and industrial communities of the domain. This should transpire in the open courses that universities deliver to the public sphere. This is of particular importance since the industrial network in which the research is embedded can also disclose certain limitations to the knowledge claims involved. When you do research on nuclear power in close collaboration with the nuclear industry and your open course emanates from this, it is important that this is made clear to the reader, so that he can be the judge whether this implies possible bias.

Besides the network, it seems equally important, as it emerged from our workshop discussions, that the pedagogical model used by the university to bring knowledge about starting from the course should be made explicit.

“Open” should not only apply to the content, but also to the procedures, the knowledge transfer, the validation and accreditation. Only this way there can be genuinely transparent knowledge.
6.2 Business models for Open Educational Resources

“Increasing degrees of openness in society coupled with innovations in business strategy like dynamic specialization are enabling radical experiments in higher education and exerting increasing competitive pressure on conventional higher education institutions. No single response to the changes in the supersystem of higher education can successfully address every institution’s situation. However, every institution must begin addressing openness as a core organizational value if it desires to both remain relevant to its learners and to contribute to the positive advancement of the field of higher education.”[30]

The literature on business models and open educational resources is growing; See amongst others: Dhokalia, King & Baraniuk 2006 [31], Downes 2007, [3], Koohang & Harman 2007 [32]; Hylen 2007 [5], Guthrie, Griffiths & Maron 2008 [33] Lane 2008 [34], Helsdingen, Janssen & Schuwer 2010 [35] and Langen 2011 [36]. Many of these authors tend to concentrate on the question of how revenues of OER-projects are generated. And by doing so, other relevant aspects of the business model ranging from inputs and activities to customers are not taken into consideration or even ignored. A sustainable business model should take into account the internal organizational aspects of production and use of open educational resources, the technology involved, the distribution and market channels needed, the financial flows, all in relation to the needs and want of the users. A business model represents an organization, its processes and activities and how this organization creates, delivers and captures value.

From such a holistic perspective, Helsdingen, Janssen & Schuwer 2010 have looked at current OER initiatives and have analyzed them according to the business model framework of Osterwalder & Pigneur 2010 [37]. Central in their approach are the needs and wants of users or customers. Without this category, there can be no valid business model analysis of Open Educational Resources. Osterwalder & Pigneur have identified nine critical aspects of any business model, called building blocks. These blocks refer to customers, value proposition, distribution channels, customer relationships, revenue streams, key resources, key activities, key partnerships and cost structure.

Using this canvas model Helsdingen, Janssen & Schuwer 2010 have been able to identify distinguish two different groups of OER initiatives. The first group focuses mainly on publishing OER content on their websites as a service for students, self-learners and educational professionals. These organizations do not have OER at the core of their business plan, but rather offer OER as an addition to their regular businesses. They are mainly involved in repurposing their own educational materials and making them suitable for self-study and open access publication. Their focus is on enhancing their reputation and offer support to students and researchers. Because they have little interaction with their users and only few of these type of organizations offer social software tools, they do not seem to be interested to use the community for establishing collaborative learning environments, or for reviewing/revising published learning materials.

In their aim to share knowledge and enhance the quality of learning, they may not be as successful as they hope to be. First of all, they do not seem to adapt their proposition to specific customers. Many of the OER courses are adaptations from fee-based courses, thus giving the impression that the special needs of self-learners, or disadvantaged groups, have not been considered in the development of the OER. Maybe this is because they lack knowledge: Apart from some rough demographical data, many are not collecting details on the learning needs of their customers. Secondly, many of the OER are content oriented, instead of organized to create meaningful learning experiences for the learner. Thirdly, the open learning environment that these organizations have created provide little or no feedback to learners, other than worked out examples that they can use to verify their own solutions. With respect to their ambition to share knowledge, the lack of interaction with their customers in the creation and adaptation of OER suggest that these institutions are not so much sharing but rather giving away.

Revenues generated by these organizations usually are government or foundation funding and transfer to fee-based programs, although not many seem to actively promote this transfer. They usually offer the OER in a dedicated, separate website, and they do not have smart teasers or interactive webtools integrated in their OER presentation to seduce users to look at fee-based programs.

The second group of OER initiatives are organizations that are dedicated to creating and servicing a large community of contributors and users of OER. Their business models are built around OER. These organizations’ primary activity is to realize a web-environment and active community in which developing, sharing, adapting and finding OER is facilitated and encouraged. Their goals seem to be
to share knowledge and to enhance the quality of learning materials. However, they often lack a vast
knowledge base, do not employ course developers, teachers or researchers, and thus are dependent
on the contributions of independent individuals. The materials offered are very diverse: They range
from complete language courses to small learning objects such as pictures. They usually do not have
an official peer-review procedure although some form of quality control may emerge from the virtual
community using and adapting materials. The organizations are actively seeking input from their
visitors, offer tools for OER development, facilitate search for OER is facilitated and re-use of
materials is encouraged. Even training programs and workshops are organized to teach users how to
create OER. However, support in the didactical aspects of the OER is somewhat lacking: The OER
are often content-oriented, and only sporadically materials are found that present meaningful activities
to learners. In the latter case, feedback is usually provided by peers. Thus, although sharing and
interaction may result in large amounts of materials offered, frequent revisions and reviews, the quality
of materials and learning experiences cannot always be guaranteed.

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

By looking into OER from the perspective of three quite distinct institutions: the K.U.Leuven, a
traditional university with a large regional footprint, the OUNL, which engages in a Network Open
Polytechnics and the UOC, which radically chooses for a virtual campus concept, we found out that
the need to serve multiple campuses, whether they are real or virtual, brings very concrete and
specific arguments for OER, that strengthen the case for widening participation, life-long learning,
exposure and internationalization. We noted that besides regional impact, OER can help with
mainstreaming, regional collaboration and interdisciplinary research.

The Open courses can be a common reference point around which people and activities organise
themselves in a regional or interregional context, sharing the responsibility and workload for
knowledge by reaching out to local stakeholder communities and thus fostering knowledge
participation and growth.

The regional, recognisable embedding adds a trust relation to publicly available information on the
anonymous internet. While it makes sense, from a business model point of view, to clearly differentiate
between the strict course content and the learner support and accreditation services offered, one
cannot limit an OER project to the sheer content. The structuring force of a course should not be
underestimated, and besides the pedagogical support system (exercises, tutoring) that goes with it, its
embedding in the actual network of the knowledge domain, with links to the industries that thrive on it
is essential for OER to do what it does best: seeding knowledge so that it is used, re-used, re-
combined, and leads to new knowledge in yet unforeseen domains.

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