Robin Goodfellow
The Open University, UK

These Research Training Resources are Digital, Open, and Global. Who Cares? (0113)

Programme number: E7
Research Domain: Digital University

This talk presents an evaluation of the take-up for a collection of open educational resources (OERs) for research training made freely available to international postgraduate students as part of an HEA-funded programme (HEA 2012).

The OER movement is founded on philanthropic principles (Peters 2010, Wiley & Green 2012) but in practice many open educational projects are dependent on subsidy from institutions and foundations who are also interested in extracting advantage in the form of sustainable business models or reputation gains (Daniel 2012). In the case of the project described here, the underlying aim was to promote the postgraduate research offerings of UK HEIs to an international market (Goodfellow 2013).

McKenna & Hughes' (2013) suggest that very little is known about 'the how and why' of reuse of educational resources and that this is of particular concern where openness is also seen as a mechanism for enhancing reputation. Much of the evaluation of OER initiatives that has been done to date has focused on the effectiveness of international collaborative projects in getting institutional 'buy-in' to the strategic use of open resources, rather than looking for evidence of individual users' take-up of particular materials (OER Evidence Hub 2012). This evaluation focused on assessing the scale and type of individual access to the resources in question, in conditions where there was little or no formal institutional involvement in their dissemination.

The materials were intended to facilitate the development of preparatory research skills, based upon the UK HEI model (Vitae 2003), together with

some support in academic writing in English, and an introduction to emerging digital ways of working in research. They were assembled in the form of a set of annotated links presented via a web portal which was given the name ReadyToResearch (www.readytoresearch.ac.uk). The design and building of this portal has been discussed in Goodfellow 2013 (op cit) and will be briefly demonstrated here. The materials, amounting to aproximately 140 hours of study time, were selected in the course of a collaborative project involving the Open University and the universities of Manchester, Nottingham, and Leicester, in which relevant open materials from all over the English-speaking world were evaluated for their suitability in terms of openness and accessibility, pedagogical quality, variety of media, and interactivity.

The ReadytoResearch site was launched in July 2012 with a target of twelve months in which to establish a level of take-up which might reasonably be expected to produce some benefit in terms of the promotion of the postgraduate research offerings of UK HEIs. An interim evaluation and dissemination project was carried out in November 2012 to January 2013 in which a focused effort was made to promote the site to Chinese-speaking and Spanish-speaking audiences (Goodfellow 2013).

The interim evaluation employed quantitative analysis using Google Analytics. It showed that the numbers of significant accesses to the resource by UK and international users was approximately equal, and had stabilised at about 500-600 unique visitors per month, about half of whom made return visits. The efforts made to promote the site in specific geographical areas had had an effect, in that the 2nd and 3rd largest user groups, after UK-based users, were those based in Mexico and China & Hong Kong. Interesting differences emerged, however, between these two user groups, in terms of how they accessed the site and which of its specific resources they went on to access. Mexican users, for example, whilst being more numerous than their Chinese-speaking equivalents, tended to use the site more superficially, often going no further than the homepage. Chinese-speaking

users had a greater tendency to explore the site, and also to access (and possibly download) some of its resources. The resources which were most-used were not the research training materials, as expected, but the materials on academic writing and writing in English which had been included in a more supplementary capacity.

Following the interim evaluation, another four months worth of access data has been collected and is in the process of being analysed. This analysis will be the main focus of the talk. The questions to be discussed will be: whether the visitor-levels and profiles have sustained; whether levels and types of access to the resources support the idea that there is a significant international student audience for open resources in research training out there; what can be inferred about cultural differences amongst users from the evidence of different ways of accessing the site and its resources; and whether reputational gain for UK HEIs is a feasible outcome of delivering these resources without the substantial involvement of educational institutions in the target areas.

References:

Daniel, J. (2012) 'Making Sense of MOOCs: Musings in a Maze of Myth, Paradox and Possibility'. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education, 18.* http://jime.open.ac.uk/2012/18 (Accessed 25 June 2013).
Goodfellow, R. (2013) 'Evaluating the SCORE Microsites'. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/oer/OER_int_002_OU (Accessed 25 June 2013).
Higher Education Academy (2012) 'Promoting UK OER Internationally'. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/oer-phase-3-4ai-international (Accessed 25 June 2013).
McKenna, C. and Hughes, J. (2013) 'Values, digital texts, and open practices – a changing scholarly landscape in higher education'. In R. Goodfellow and M.R. Lea (eds) *Literacy in the Digital University – critical perspectives on learning, scholarship, and technology,* London: Routledge:15-26

Michael Peters. (2010) 'The Idea of Openness: Open Education and Education for Openness'. In *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy of Education*, M. Peters, P. Ghiraldelli, B. Žarni
, A. Gibbons (eds.) http://www.ffst.hr/ENCYCLOPAEDIA/doku.php?id=open_education_and_education_for_openness (Accessed 25 June 2013).

OER Evidence Hub (2012) 'Evidence Hub for Open Education'. http://ci.olnet.org (Accessed 25 June 2013).

Vitae (2003) UK Grad Programme 2003. http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/UK_GRAD_03-07_final%20report.pdf (Accessed 25 June 2013).

Wiley, D. and Green, C. (2012) 'Why Open-ness in Education?' In D. Oblinger (Ed) *Game Changers. Education and Information Technologies*. Educause. http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/pub72036.pdf (Accessed 25 June 2013).