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Can OER availability lead to open education practices?

Issue at-hand

A driving concern for OER stakeholders is that there is a gap between the concept of giving away knowledge for free and the actual use of free and open resources for teaching and learning. Studies (Ehlers 2011; Camilleri, Ehlers & Pawlowski 2014) suggest that while OER are high on the agenda of many stakeholders, their use in higher education has yet to reach a critical threshold. Ehlers (2011) attributes the findings of low OER usage to an undue and disproportionate focus on building more access to digital content, with too little consideration of whether access alone will support educational practices and promote quality and innovation in teaching and learning. He argues that while the first phase of the OER movement has been successful in promoting the idea that knowledge is a public good, and in motivating organizations and individuals to publish OER, the potential of OER to transform practice is yet to be realized. This can be realized through open educational practices (OEP).

What is Open Educational Practices (OEP)?

OEP have been defined as practices that support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path (Camilleri, Ehlers, & Pawlowski 2014). Sixteen dimensions have been identified as central to supporting an institution's growth in OEP. These include (a) using and repurposing OER, (b) creating OER, (c) sharing OER and OEP, (d) working with open learning architectures, (e) organizational vision for OEP, (f) strategies and policies for OEP, (g) business models related to OEP, (h) partnerships related to OEP, (i) perceived relevance of OEP, (j) intellectual property and copyright regulations, (k) motivational framework for OEP, (l) tools to support sharing and exchange of OEP (m) quality concepts for OEP, (n) level of knowledge and skills, (o) digital literacy, (p) support mechanisms for OEP (OPAL

2012). The example in this brief draws from a study to assess the emergence AVU experience in the development of their OER. A study was conducted to assess whether the availability AVU OER led to the emergence of OEP at select partner universities. The focus was on four dimensions - using OER, repurposing OER, creating OER and sharing OER.

Policy recommendations *(i) institutional context and policies need to support use of OER and open education practices (ii) involving all faculty in the development of appropriate knowledge and skills and ensuring reliable ICT facilities are central to supporting OEP.*

The study found that availability of OER did lead to the emergence of OEP to some extent. Using the AVU OER did have an impact on knowledge and skills such as finding and using OER, repurposing of OER to contextualize them to suit the institutional context. The OER were used in developing distance learning materials, for lesson preparation and to support student learning. Some faculty also indicated having created OER or digital content. These practices however, tended to be more at the level of the individual faculty than at the level of the institution. The AVU OER modules were used more as a supplementary resource than a primary resource. This is despite the fact that they were developed to be used as the primary curricula resource for the degree program in Math and Science.

Without a concerted effort, availability of OER will not necessarily translate into the emergence of OEP. There is need for institutional policies to support the development of appropriate knowledge and skills for finding, using, repurposing, creating and sharing OER. Recommendations cite the need to involve all faculty, to foster collaboration, to organize training workshops, to promote awareness, and to facilitate the exchange of ideas and practices. This includes ensuring reliable access to the internet and support for faculty in owning laptops. Policies developed should help institutionalize the practices so that they are not something being done on the side by a few motivated faculty. This will also address concerns raised around issues of linking these activities to promotion, allocation of workload, resources and time.

Conclusion

Institutional support is key across all dimensions of OEP. To move further along the OEP trajectory, there needs to be integration of use of OER at a much higher level in the curriculum and institution, such as requiring primary use of OER for example in a degree program as opposed to supplementary use. This would also ensure that the OER stay current as they are created, adapted and updated as needed to fit institutional as well as industry requirements. It would also build institutional capacity in OEP.

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