2nd World Open Educational Resources (OER) Congress
18-20 September, 2017-08-30
Ljubljana, Slovenia

Panel Discussion
"What Actions for Greatest Impact?"
Moderated by Ms. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

Notes for remarks by Sir John Daniel
Former ADG/ED, UNESCO (2001-04)

Introduction

It's a pleasure to speak in this session with Cathy and Abdul, with whom I have worked on OER for many years. And it's a treat to have Stamenka as our moderator. During her time leading the Higher Education section at UNESCO she had a remarkable talent for choosing projects that had staying power, from the Lisbon Recognition Convention, through the Quality Guidelines for Cross-Border Higher Education, to Open Educational Resources. Working with her to draft the Paris Declaration for the 2012 OER Congress was a highlight of my association with UNESCO.

I don't often get speaker's block but I find OER a particularly difficult topic to talk about. It's a bit like driving slowly down a country road at night in shifting fog. You're not sure where you are, nor how long it was since you passed the last milestone. And you don't know how far it is to the destination – or even what the destination is.

Our session title is '*What Actions for Greatest Impact'?* Colleagues from UNESCO and COL have been addressing this question implicitly all day, and I wanted to hear their views, and especially the results of the regional consultations, before finalising my own remarks. As I just said, I was deeply involved, alongside Stamenka, in the consultations that preceded the 2012 UNESCO OER conference. When I read the advance documents for this conference I had the impression of re-reading the documents for that earlier conference. Their style is still largely aspirational and normative with little data on how the use and impact of OER is increasing.

What we have heard during the day makes me nuance that judgement a little, but it is clear that we have not yet reached the tipping point where OER are flowing down the mainstream of the river of teaching and learning and we can sit back and relax. We need to keep our feet on the accelerator.

I shall identify three actions that are needed now, leaving the most important until last.

A mechanism for getting data on OER use

First, I recall the cliché that 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it'. This is a tiresome little adage, because there are many important things in life that are difficult to measure quantitatively; but it does apply to the growth in the development and use of OER.

We all believe that OER are a good thing. This is an article of faith and it does seem obvious that if learners all over the world have access to free educational materials of high quality

they will learn better and faster. This article of faith has now made its way into the official strategy for implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goal Number 4. As you have heard during the day, the Incheon Declaration, which addresses the implementation of SDG goal four notes that: 'a well-established properly regulated tertiary education system, supported by technology, *open educational resources* and distance education can increase access, equity, quality and relevance.'

This means that it is time for UNESCO to get behind the OER movement in a more operational manner. The signs are promising. A recent UNESCO Executive Board meeting noted that: 'a standard-setting instrument in the area of OER would be an important means for facilitating the articulation of effective OER practices and policies', adding that, 'there remains a need to expand and consolidate commitments to actions, strategies and legislation.'

Stripping out the jargon, this means that the next-but-one General Conference could pass a Recommendation – which is one of UNESCO's standard-setting instruments – on OER. This might include a mechanism for reporting the progress of OER in each country which, although it would be non-binding, might palliate the lamentable lack of data about what is really happening in OER use.

Business models: the economy of free

The second route to greater impact is business models that work. This issue is picked up as one of the five obstacles to expanding the use of OER in the conference background document, which refers to 'changing business models'. OER are part of the burgeoning 'economy of free'. Facebook promises its users, who visit it for an average of 50 minutes a day, that 'it's free and always will be'. In reality there are costs, but aside from the cost of the internet connection these are hard to measure. What is the cost to you when you give your data to Google or Facebook in return for their services? It's trivial for an individual but brings in billions to such firms when they aggregate all that data and pass it on to advertisers and other firms that would like to get your attention.

What are the incentives for governments to encourage the development of OER? At the K-12 level it can save them money on textbooks and in higher education, as I will note in a minute for the case of Canada, OER are popular with students because they save them money. Individuals who develop OER presumably do it because they would rather be famous for their good materials than rich from textbook royalties.

All that is fine, but people who give things away free usually seek some form of recompense sooner or later.

I simply enter the caveat here that in what some call today's 'post-truth' society we need to be aware of the danger of people using OER as a vehicle for tendentious views, propaganda and misleading learning materials. Such people get their reward by converting people to their idiosyncratic views under the guise of education. I do not say that this is a problem yet, but it might become so as OER use expands. We talk a lot about the quality assurance of OER, which seems to me a complex concept because the whole point of OER is to adapt and change them. Answering the question 'who is doing what to whom?' through an OER might be easier.

Upward pressure from students

Thirdly, the most important action we can take is to encourage students to use OER and demand more. We cannot claim that this will always give them higher quality materials but we can assert that OER will save them money. To give some figures from Canada, where I live:
British Columbia introduced an open textbook programme five years ago. It has saved the 34,000 students who have used open textbooks between $3.3 million to $3.9 million.
Our neighbouring province of Alberta started investing in open textbooks in 2014 and savings to students and institutions in Alberta are also in the million-dollar range.
Going further east, the University of Saskatchewan says its use of open textbooks saved nearly 3,000 students a collective $275,000 in the 2016-17 academic year.

It is not only students who benefit. Institutions want to hang on to their students and cost has a big impact on attrition and retention. One in five higher education students have skipped or dropped out of a course because of cost.

Pressure from students seems much the best way of increasing the awareness of OER among teachers, which is still pretty dismal: last year it was 25% in the US but at least that is up from 20% the previous year. Those teachers and staff who do use OER are optimistic about their future. In one survey, they estimated that OER could make up 12 percent of the market for textbooks and other course materials and 19 percent of supplemental materials within five years. That may not sound like much but those shares are triple and quadruple, respectively, what they are today. Furthermore, a majority of faculty members who do not use OER in their courses said they might be using OER within three years. Supplemental materials are a good place to start because they do not activate the 'not-invented-here' syndrome as strongly as mainline course materials.

Alerting students to the benefits of OER should be part of their general induction to higher education and should be linked to a wider campaign to encourage them to show academic integrity. Last year I was privileged to co-chair a task group on academic corruption convened by UNESCO and the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation and to edit its report. This advisory statement was titled, *Combatting Corruption and Enhancing Integrity: A Contemporary Challenge for the Quality and Credibility of Higher Education.* It features a matrix detailing what various stakeholders can do to fight this serious problem.

Educating students about plagiarism and copyright should be combined with promotion of the use of OER. I confess that I am a MOOCs 'junkie' and have taken some 20 MOOCs from the FutureLearn consortium. One of the more recent ones, developed by Jason Stephens at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, was a course on academic integrity aimed at students. It challenged students with plenty of real examples of the choices they have to make between integrity and corruption. I found it excellent. Such courses are excellent vehicles for teaching students about OER and encouraging them to request their teachers to reference OER. Most of the changes in pedagogy so far in this century have been student driven and the drive to OER should come next.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we must aim to make OER such an obvious destination for learners that we no longer need to wave our arms promoting them so eagerly. After all, governments don't have to encourage people to use Facebook or Twitter. Over time governments should focus on a monitoring role for OER development and use.