Education and learning - is the future digital?

Digital technology continues to impact new areas of our lives, transforming the most routine of tasks from shopping to socialising. Yet, while the internet has transformed our access to information and knowledge, the potential offered by digital technology to rethink how we develop and engage with learning has yet to be fully realised.

Opening Educational Practices in Scotland

Against this backdrop, Scotland is unique in establishing a collaborative, three-year project to explore the use of open, online educational resources from a social justice perspective. The Opening Educational Practices in Scotland project (OEPS) is reviewing how such resources could be used more effectively to bring high quality learning materials to new audiences and encourage greater take up of learning.

The benefits of open educational resources

For those working in education and training, whether in a formal educational establishment or in a community setting, open educational resources can offer significant benefits:

1. No cost, fewer restrictions, less duplication

Like much material online, open educational resources are freely available on the internet. More significantly, open educational resources are 'openly licensed', that is, they allow for the reuse and free distribution of an otherwise copyrighted work. In effect, there are fewer restrictions on any part of a course being 'lifted' and amended, before being redistributed to different learners whether they are learning in a formal or community setting.

Developing and sharing high quality open courses reduces duplication of effort and has the potential to lower the cost of producing and updating educational resources.

2. Blurring the boundaries between academics, experts and 'ordinary' people

Wikipedia has demonstrated how 'ordinary people' can contribute their knowledge on any given subject for the benefit of all. Similarly, open

educational resources offer the potential to draw on and incorporate the knowledge and practical experience of ordinary 'experts'. The collaborative nature of open course design allows learners, for example carers working with people with Parkinson's disease or practising pharmacists, to directly contribute to the development of a course for the benefit of all participants.

This shared practical knowledge and lived experience can also be 'harvested' by academics and teachers to update their teaching materials or to contribute to research.

3. Geographical reach and mass participation

Digital technology has already demonstrated the potential to deliver mass education and training to a widely distributed group. However, many online courses are limited to paying participants or a closed group. In contrast, open resources are both freely available and can be contextualised for different settings, thus significantly extending the educational reach of the internet. These benefits offer particular advantages in a country like Scotland with a dispersed rural population.

4. Engaging and interactive educational material

Digital technology offers the potential for a much more engaging learning experience. Online content can incorporate and make full use of audio, video and animations to bring content alive.

In addition, open online courses can include interactivity that encourages greater engagement. Despite courses being delivered online, peer support can still take place in community and workplace settings as well as through social media, allowing participants to learn from each others' course work and experiences.

5. Innovative means to disseminate research and promote minority subjects

Funders of research projects often require key findings to be widely disseminated, recognising that new insights should be shared with policy makers and the general public, as well as with academics. Open educational resources offer an alternative medium for reaching and engaging a wider audience, through embedding the results of research projects within an interactive, online course.

Similarly, the interactive potential of open educational resources offer a distinct way to promote less well-known subjects to new audiences or to generate a greater understanding of a particular topic.

Understanding Parkinson's

Parkinson's UK has developed a free, online module for health and social care professionals who wish to increase their understanding of Parkinson's and improve their practice.

Understanding Parkinson's was developed with the OEPS project team after Parkinson's UK recognised the potential of open educational resources to reach a wider audience. This interactive course uses videos, animations, quizzes and online group discussions to engender a greater understanding of Parkinson's. Participants are awarded a downloadable 'badge' on completion of the course.

Following their engagement with the OEPs project, Parkinson's UK has decided to make open educational resources a key part of their education and training strategy.

UK PARKINSON'S Excellence Network

What's 'open' about open educational resources?

- Open to all - the resources are free and available online.
- Openly licensed - fewer restrictions on material being copied, revised or redistributed.
- Open any time - courses available to be studied at any time, at a pace that suits the learner.

Practical support to develop open educational resources

To date, the Opening Educational Practices in Scotland project (OEPS) has worked in partnership with over 60 organisations across the country to explore how open educational resources could be used to improve the delivery of education and training. Demand for engagement has come from unions, third-sector organisations and companies as well as universities and colleges.

Through working with such a wide range of organisations, OEPS has found the barriers to engaging with open educational resources are often cultural rather than technical. As a result, the project has provided, and continues to develop, a range of activities to enable more people to use open educational resources to meet their education and training needs and those of their organisation.

Introductory workshops and networking opportunities

To date, OEPS has delivered over 70 workshops to organisations looking to explore the use of open educational resources, in addition to holding four national forums which have been attended by people from a diverse range of organisations and educational institutions.

Training courses on creating and using open educational resources

Two interactive courses have been developed by the OEPS project team to support individuals and organisations that wish to learn more about open educational resources. *Becoming an Open Educator* offers an introduction to the use and potential of open educational materials while, *How to make an open online course,* drafted in collaboration with the OU Free Learning team, illustrates how to create a new course from scratch or through using existing teaching material. A further course for individuals who act as facilitators for learning in work or community settings is in production.

New software to make OER as easy as PowerPoint

Creating open educational resources can be labour intensive. However, from mid-2017, a new software package **OpenCreate** (being developed by The Open University), will make the authoring and editing of such resources as easy as editing a PowerPoint presentation or Word document. The software will be freely available for anyone who wishes to make use of it and will allow users to upload their own content to create

interactive new courses or to adapt existing material and courses for new audiences.

A platform to host open educational resources

An increasing number of educational institutions are developing sites to showcase their open educational resources. However, there is also a strong demand for sites that can host collaborative courses and offer the support needed to create new courses or edit existing material. The OpenLearn Works site, which OEPS has used to host collaborative courses, has recently been upgraded to incorporate guidance and some user friendly improvements, and relaunched as OpenLearn Create. Further improvements will follow during 2017.

'Badging' - recognition for online learning

Digital 'badges' recognise the skills and achievements acquired through online courses. The growing number of students being awarded badges for courses developed by OEPS in partnership with other organisations is providing valuable evidence of the ways in which this form of recognition motivates learners and could be used to support widening participation

The project is also exploring the role badges could play in Continuing Professional Development, given the growing awareness of their potential by organisations like the Scottish Social Services Council.

Opening up opportunities for people distanced from education

With people of all ages and backgrounds regularly accessing the internet to acquire new information and learn new skills, the Opening Educational Practices in Scotland project (OEPS) has a particular focus on exploring how open educational resources could encourage a wider group of learners to take up learning opportunities.

Do open educational resources have the potential to break down barriers to education?

Open educational resources offer obvious benefits to reducing the traditional barriers to education through offering:

- Free online courses and learning materials
- Significant reach beyond colleges and universities

- Fewer restrictions on amending and updating content

- Courses (including access courses) that can be contextualised and delivered by local partners

- Flexible study for learners in employment or with caring responsibilities

What's stopping the wider use of open educational resources?

Despite their potential, there is limited evidence of open educational resources being used to support widening participation. Research by the OEPS project suggests the two main barriers to their wider use:

1. An assumption that online learning is a solitary activity that requires a confident and motivated individual.
2. The sheer volume of online material.

How could OER be used more effectively to engage new learners?

Through working extensively with organisations outside the formal education sector, OEPS has identified the key features of open educational resources that make participation more likely:

- Designed and created with a partner organisation

- The importance of those who can encourage initial engagement is recognised

- The context and anxieties of the learner are acknowledged

- Peer support is encouraged and opportunities are created for collective participation

- Material is located in a dedicated space

- Student-centred, rather than technology-focused approach

- Clearly identified starting points, stepping stones and pathways

The OEPS project is committed to encouraging greater use of open educational resources (OER) to achieve mass participation in learning but through a community-based approach. Further information about the project's work in this area, with examples of educators, community groups and third sector organisations who are currently engaged in developing OER, can be found on the OEPS website.

Opening up learning with Scottish Union Learning

Fifteen trade unions from a wide range of private and public sector workplaces across the country have engaged with the OEPS project through Scottish Union Learning. A series of workshops, attended by 90 Union Learning Representatives, explored the barriers to online learning which might prevent workers, particularly those who have had a bad experience of education, from accessing learning.

Following the success of the workshops, an online community for Union Learning Representatives has now been established and OEPS is designing a short online course for those who facilitate learning in workplace or community settings.

What about MOOCs?

Massive Open Online Courses, otherwise known as MOOCs, are free, online courses offered by universities typically lasting 6-10 weeks.

Like open educational resources, MOOCs are open to everyone and are usually free to study. However, in most cases, the educational material used in MOOCs is not openly licensed and therefore cannot be adapted or reused. In addition, MOOCs have a short 'shelf-life' in that they run for a particular period before being withdrawn.

While some MOOCs have been highly successful in attracting tens of thousands of participants, the majority of participants already have an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. As such, MOOCs have had limited impact on contributing to narrowing the educational divide.

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Courses developed by the project

The following courses have been developed (or are currently being developed) in partnership with a range of organisations. The courses have been jointly designed through combining the knowledge within of the partner organisations with the expertise of the OEPS project team.

'Understanding Parkinson's' (with Parkinson's UK)

'My Seaweed Looks Weird' (with Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS), University of the Highlands and Islands)

'Becoming an Open Educator'

'How to make an open online course' (with the OU Free Learning Team)

'Parkinson's End of Life Care'(with Parkinson's UK)

'Parkinson's Bone Health'(with Parkinson's UK)

'Global Trends in Death and Dying' (with the University of Glasgow)

'STEM and Gender Equality' (with the Equalities Challenge Unit)

'Scots Language' (with The Open University in Scotland)

'Poverty and Stigma' (with the Poverty Alliance)

'Facilitating group learning in the workplace' (with Unite)

'Introduction to dyslexia and inclusive practice' (with Dyslexia Scotland in partnership with the Addressing Dyslexia Toolkit). A further two courses are in production.

My seaweed looks weird

Seaweed is a multi-million pound global business, and developing the industry is a priority for the Scottish Government. My Seaweed looks weird is a free online module developed by the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS), University of the Highlands and Islands in partnership with OEPS to help participants, in Scotland and beyond, identify seaweed parasites.
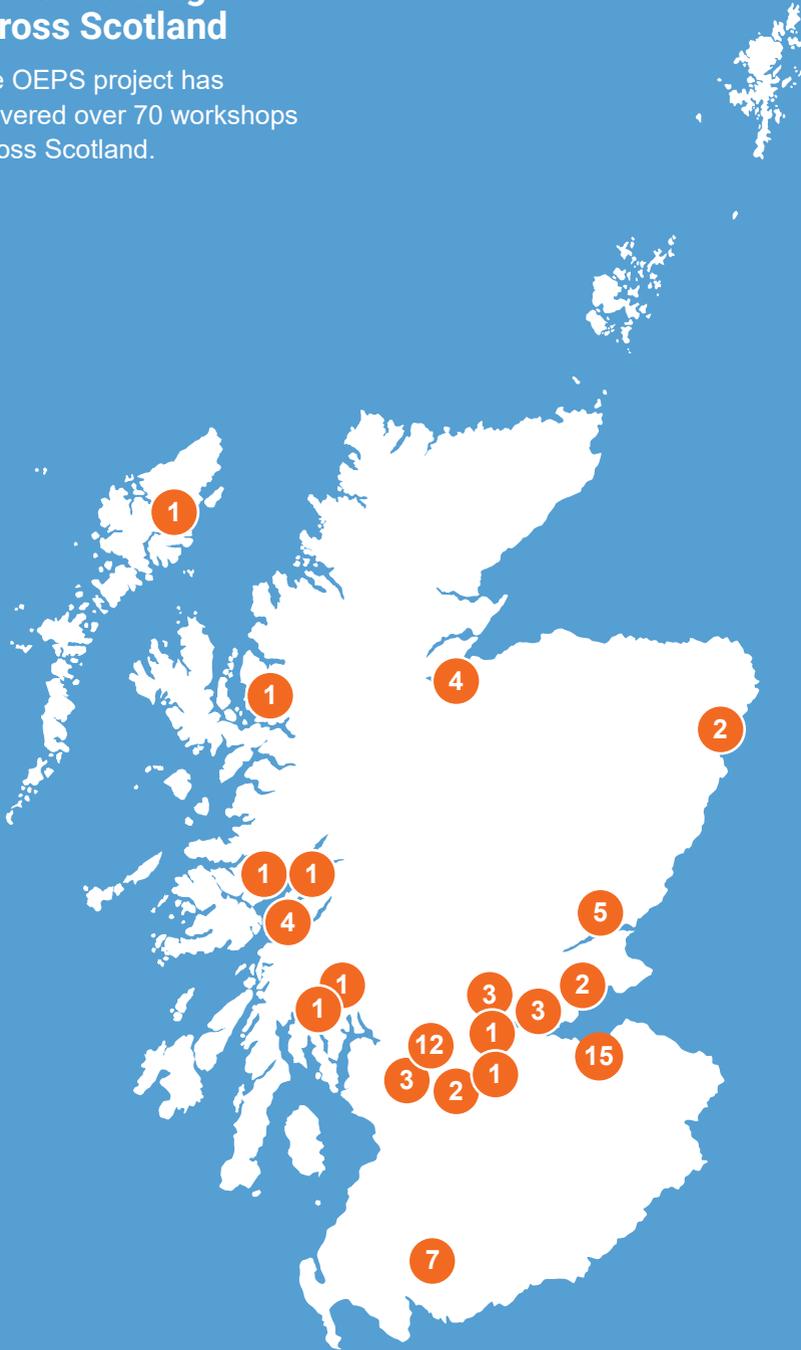
OEPS has worked with a wide range of organisations to explore the use of open educational resources including:

OEPS: working across Scotland

The OEPS project has delivered over 70 workshops across Scotland.

OEPS | Opening Educational Practices in Scotland

January 2017

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The OEPS project is led by The Open University in Scotland and has a remit to work across the whole of Scottish education to increase the effective use of free, online educational resources in lifelong learning. The project has been funded for three years by the Scottish Funding Council.

Scottish Funding Council
Promoting further and higher education