

OEPS briefing

Origins of the OEPS project

## Introduction

The Scottish Funding Council commissioned the Opening Educational Practices in Scotland project in 2014 in response to an initial proposal by the Open University in Scotland (OUiS). The proposal drew on a range of existing experience and initiatives, which were subsequently influential in shaping the project outputs and the initial project activity. In the remainder of this briefing we provide a brief over view of the project antecedents, look at the ways in which these influenced the project and provide some links to further reading.

## Widening Participation and Partnerships

Since the late 1990’s, the OUiS had developed an extensive range of partnerships with third sector organisations, trade unions and colleges aimed at supporting routes from informal to formal learning. Cannell and Hewitt explore the challenges and opportunities that these present in detail in a paper published in 2010. At the beginning of this period most partners considered digital technology to be a barrier to participation in view of the costs involved. However, as mobile digital devices and the use of the internet became commonplace this position began to change and organisations started to view digital participation and digital literacies as essential to educational transitions.

## OpenLearn and free open courses

The availability of good quality free online courses was of real interest to OUiS partners. Initially interest was driven by cost, which constitutes a major barrier to participation in part-time education. However, as sites like the Open University’s [OpenLearn](http://www.open.edu/openlearn) grew and matured the range of available material also became an attraction. As a result of this interest a small number of individuals did start to use the resources. Typically they were relatively well qualified, working for the organisations involved. There was little evidence of systematic take up by organisations and the non-traditional participants they worked with or for. With hindsight it’s clear that this lack of engagement was a consequence of putting technology and content first without developing appropriate pedagogy and models of support.

## Developing New Courses

From 2010, OUiS engagement with partners and interest in supporting transitions, together with the availability of [OpenLearn](http://www.open.edu/openlearn) and its sister platform OpenLearn Works (now [OpenLearn Create](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate)) sparked a small number of collaborative projects to develop new open courses. The first such course, [Gaelic in Modern Scotland](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/more-languages/gaelic-modern-scotland/) was produced in partnership with academic experts from a number of other universities and from key cultural bodies like BBC Alba (the Gaelic Language arm of BBC Scotland). Subsequently members of the OUiS widening participation team worked with Bridges Programmes in Glasgow to produce a series of short reflective courses: [The Reflection Toolkit, Reflecting on Transitions and Caring Counts.](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/index.php?categoryid=339)  These developments provided a valuable evidence base that highlighted the value of co-creating resources in a process that combined the practice-based knowledge of the partner with the pedagogical and technical skills of the university staff. Another free open course, [Foundations for Self-Directed Support](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/foundations-self-directed-support-scotland/content-section-overview), was commissioned by the Scottish Government and rapidly achieved a high take up. An in-depth evaluation revealed the importance of peer support networks and the ways in which knowledge can be shared in the workplace and community settings in which many of the participants were situated. Finally the OUiS also remixed an existing OER to create a resource to support [rural entrepreneurship](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/moneymanagement/rural-entrepreneurship-scotland/content-section-0).

## The Scottish Open Education Context

The new course development carried out by the OUiS was driven by an interest in widening participation and in response to its public mission in Scotland. Initially each course was seen as a discrete project. However, the success of the courses gave rise to a need to reflect and contextualise. Overall the experience suggested that there were significant opportunities and benefits in co-creating free openly licensed courses. Take up and student feedback also suggested that the barriers to engagement could be overcome. This period of reflection coincided with heightened interest in online education as Massive Open Online Courses hit the headlines and with specific Scottish initiatives such as the [Open Scotland network](http://www.openscotland.net) and the Open Badges in Scottish Education Group. The OUiS initiatives provided evidence of the value of collaborative approaches to open course development and indications that a focus on pedagogy might overcome some of the barriers to participation in open online learning that were apparent in the low participation of students without previous higher educational credentials. These concerns formed the basis of the OUiS proposal submitted to the Scottish Funding Council.

## Building on the existing courses

In its early stages the project drew on national and international experience and dialogue with partners in the formal and informal learning sectors. The OUiS courses formed part of base on which the project developed practice based initiatives. Their influence was particularly strong in the development of the OEPS approach to partnership.

The OUiS courses made use of a course team approach to course development that involved both partners as active members. OEPS adopted this approach from the start while taking a critical view of the strengths and weaknesses of the process. Over time this led to developments in participatory design and insights into the challenges, opportunities and benefits for both partners.

The project also used a collaborative and participatory approach to explore the development of new open practice. One example of this used the existing OUiS course on Rural Entrepreneurship as a resource to support practice based workshops. The project held discussions with the Crichton Institute and Highlands and Islands Enterprise and ran workshops with the Lomond and Trossachs National Park and with the [Scottish Crofting Federation](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/mod/page/view.php?id=130974).

None of the OUiS courses had made use of the Open Badges. However, OEPS was keen to develop evidence of the use of badges in widening participation. The project supported the OUiS widening participation team in developing badges for the Reflection Toolkit and for the two variants of the Caring Counts course. This led to further exploration of the use of open badges in a variety of learning contexts in the exemplar open courses which the project went on to create.

## Additional reading

Cannell, P. and Hewitt, L. (2010) Reflecting on the evolution of Openings initiatives in Scotland. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, Volume *12*(1), pp.130-137.

Cannell, Pete; Macintyre, Ronald; Hewitt, Lindsay (2015) Widening access and OER: developing new practice, [Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning](http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/openu/jwpll;jsessionid=8sirip45mmb40.x-ic-live-03), Volume 17, Number 1, pp. 64-72(9)

Cannell, P., Page, A. & Macintyre, R. (2016) Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS). Journal of Interactive Media in Education. 2016(1), p.12. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/jime.412>

Cannell, P. and Macintyre, R. (2017) Free open online resources in workplace and community settings–a case study on overcoming barriers, [Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning](http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/openu/jwpll), Volume 19, Number 1, pp. 111-122(12)

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