

Openness in higher education

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This special issue devoted to openness in higher education is the first one in a new stage in the history of *Open Praxis*. This ICDE publication has been relaunched as a scientific peer-reviewed journal in 2012, and the decision of dedicating the first issue to this topic is not casual.

“Open” is part of the journal title and, thus, a main focus of the publication. *Open Praxis* is willing to provide an open forum for global collaboration and discussion of issues in the practice of distance and e-learning, focusing on research and innovation on open education and learning. It provides immediate open access to content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

Besides this intrinsic motivation within the journal, openness is a key concern in recent times in higher education; experiences such as open access, open educational resources, massive open online courses, etc. are “hot topics”. The purpose of this *Open Praxis* issue is to contribute to the reflection and analysis on the concept of openness and its growth and use in higher education.

In this frame, the call formulated the following questions:

- What is the meaning of “open” in education? Which aspects of education does openness refer to?
- How does openness lead to major changes in higher education?
- Which are the main challenges regarding openness in higher education?
- Which successful and relevant experiences of use can we identify?

The call has been welcomed by a variety of academics, and the issue presents eleven papers covering different aspects regarding openness in higher education from different views: historical, theoretical, conceptual, contextual, political, among others. Three aspects have been the most addressed by the authors: access to higher education and the role of openness to increase it; assessment challenges in open education, and Open Educational Resources (OERs). The more recent phenomenon of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is also acknowledged.

In the first paper, Sandra Peter and Markus Deimann (*On the role of openness in education: A historical reconstruction*) share the need (present in the call for contributions) to not take openness for granted and to reflect on the concept itself and its meaning in higher education. They provide an historical perspective to build the debate upon historical roots and experiences of the concept, and claim for a deeper analysis of both technological and social-cultural aspects as drivers of the growth of openness. To look back on to the past remains a useful step to rescue lessons learned.

The following three papers relate, in a sense, to “access” as a key issue to reflect on when referring to openness.

Don Olcott Jr. (*Access under siege: Are the gains of open education keeping pace with the growing barriers to University access?*), as an advocator of open education, focuses on contrasting different myths around it and places the analysis in the political arena. He highlights contradictions and paradoxes that open higher education faces, especially regarding access, economic and quality issues. Despite the expansion of the open education movement, the author alerts about aspects to be considered in order to increase educational access.

Jeremy Knox (*The Limitations of Access Alone: moving towards open processes in education technology*) deepens also in the relation between technological and social aspects. Beyond “access” to education and to educational resources, he proposes to understand openness as open “processes” in a non-reductionist approach to the topic. From a critical perspective, he provides an analysis of common philosophical assumptions about technologies in education and their influence on the learning process and alerts about the insufficient consideration of context in the production of OERs, among other aspects.

Felix Kayode Olakulehin and Gurmit Singh (*Widening access through openness in higher education in the developing world: A Bourdieusian field analysis of experiences from the National Open University of Nigeria*), with the goal of widening access to higher education in the horizon, depart from the philosophical frame of Bourdieu to reflect on this topic, considering the specific case of the National Open University of Nigeria. They highlight the tension between the ideal of openness and a real equitable access, and the reproduction of marginalization in higher education. A request for structural mechanisms is envisaged to address this situation.

The next three papers focus on another increasingly present aspect in higher education, prior learning assessment and recognition (RPL or PLAR), as a means to credentialing for lifelong learning.

Dianne Conrad (*Assessment challenges in open learning: Way-finding, fork in the road, or end of the line?*) provides a reflective analysis of open learning, its assessment potential and the concept of RPL as a rigorous tool for this purpose. She describes the characteristics of academically-focused RPL processes and, acknowledging both benefits and difficulties of these models, she proposes RPL as a powerful tool for assessment.

Norm Friesen and Christine Wihak (*From OER to PLAR: Credentialing for Open Education*) deepen in the benefits and challenges of this approach to credentialing in open education; they provide a detailed description of the context where PLAR could be used (OERs, MOOCs, badges, . . .) and of PLAR itself. They present different methods and techniques for implementing PLAR in relation to open education, as a bridge between open learning experiences and institutional accreditation.

Shuangxu Yin and Paul Kawachi (*Improving Open Access through Prior Learning Assessment*) base on a specific experience of use of PLAR in the Open University of China, developed with enrolled students who could get the recognition of some credits if they had appropriate prior experiential learning. The process and the results are shown; the costs and difficulties of the process lead the authors to propose another type of PLAR, based on self-evaluation.

The following four papers deal with other common aspects related to openness: MOOCs and OERs.

Oswaldo Rodriguez (*The concept of openness behind c and x-MOOCs [Massive Open Online Courses]*) presents a descriptive panorama of c-MOOCs and x-MOOCs, specially addressing their underpinning theoretical frames about openness. The comparative analysis between these two types of MOOCs highlights important differences in aspects such as the pedagogical foundations, the social interactions developed in each kind of courses or the concept of openness behind them.

Alexander Gonzalez Flor (*Exploring the downside of open knowledge resources: The case of indigenous knowledge systems and practices in the Philippines*) examines the challenges encountered in relation to open access and open learning resources’ mainstream assumptions, while conducting a research with indigenous communities in the Philippines. He introduces the importance of considering cultural elements when referring to openness: while open philosophies might be good for widening access to education and knowledge in traditionally marginalised communities, he has

identified a set of barriers and inhibiting factors to the production of OERs by these communities that should be acknowledged.

Also regarding OERs, Nadia Paola Mireles Torres (*Embracing openness: the challenges of OER in Latin American education*) presents an overview of the situation and challenges in Latin America. Positioning in favour of openness, she acknowledges that this broad region is not very active in relation to OERs, and she lists the main challenges faced in order to increase involvement in the culture of openness. An ongoing project which addresses these challenges in Europe and Latin America, *OportUnidad*, is mentioned.

In the last paper, Belinda Tynan and Rosalind James (*Distance Education Regulatory Frameworks: Readiness for openness in Southwest Pacific/South East Asia region nations*), based on a research report published by ICDE, also focus on a broad geographical specific context, Southwest Pacific/South East Asia, to reflect upon the readiness for openness based on the analysis of regulatory frameworks. The comparative study refers mainly to OERs and underlines the importance of considering cultural aspects in the use and adaption of these resources.

This general overview of the special issue contents allows us to appreciate the appropriateness of addressing “openness” as a topic to reflect upon, given the amount of critical contributions, which alert about the importance of dealing with pedagogical, social, ethical, cultural, political, and technological aspects of open practices. Contributors provide insight to keep on reflecting on and debating about drivers and barriers, opportunities and challenges related to openness in higher education.

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