

The OER-project at the Open University of the Netherlands

Towards open content for self-learners¹

Robert Schuwer, Open University of the Netherlands²

Introduction

As part of the Lisbon agenda the government of the Netherlands has formulated ambitious objectives concerning increased participation in higher education. The OpenER project of the Open University of the Netherlands (OUNL) will test the use of OERs as a means of increasing participation in higher education. OpenER, through offering courses derived from existing distance learning courses and suitable for independent study, aims at letting learners get acquainted with higher education and helping them to gain experiences that boost their self-confidence and motivation to cross the threshold to formal higher education. OpenER is, thus, the 'appetizer', the enticement for further learning at the higher educational level. To enhance the effects OpenER will also offer opportunities for formal testing. The project can be characterized as a large-scale experiment (in terms of the number of targeted learners) taking place in 'reality' (i.e. in a fully operational setting). Concurrent to evaluation and effect measurement, research will be carried out into the forming of learning communities.

Motivation

In 2000 in Lisbon, the EU agreement was formulated that set down the aim for the European Union of growing into the strongest knowledge-based economy in the world within the next ten years. One of the directions in the Netherlands to contribute to this agreement is to) bring more non-traditional groups (i.e. employed and unemployed people) to higher education by extending opportunities for lifelong learning based, amongst others, on an e-learning approach. OpenER fits within this direction.

OpenER is compatible with observations indicating that, to achieve higher participation in higher education, existing thresholds must be lowered and the willingness of individuals to invest in educational activities must be stimulated. Easy access and transfer is required at all educational levels. In the report '*De helft van Nederland hoog opgeleid*' [Higher education for half of the Dutch population], the Netherlands Education Council identifies the OUNL initiative to make educational material available online as a good example of the measures that could contribute to this endeavor.

OpenER is an extension of the current wide-spread OER approach. It offers high-quality self-study materials that are centered on the learner and make independent study possible, comparable to the UKOU's OpenLearn initiative and the EADTU's MORIL project. A further special characteristic of OpenER is the involvement of the Dutch Government (i.e., the Minister of Education), as a co-funder of the project. The OpenER project is also co-funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

A project like OpenER fits within the OUNL strategy to become the Lifelong Learners University of the Netherlands. It helps the OUNL's goal to contribute substantially to widening the participation in higher education and to provide learning opportunities for those who are not able to use offerings that are more traditional or are not part of the traditional groups of higher education entrants. For the OUNL it means going back to its basics, its roots: creating open access to higher education for large numbers of students on a non-commercial basis. It helps the OUNL to prove its added-value for society in its contribution to the knowledge-based economy en the competitiveness of Europe and in its contribution to raising the employability of individuals. In the execution of the project OUNL can draw from its large body of high quality course materials developed for self-learning and from over 20 years of experience in developing and delivering distance education.

¹ This background note is largely based upon the paper Van Dorp, Lane, Varwijk and Kirschner (2006): *Open Educational Resources in Europe: A triptych of actions to support participation in higher education*. Presented at the OpenED conference in Utah, September 2006.

² Robert Schuwer is the project leader for the OpenER project at the Open University of the Netherlands. He can be contacted at robert.schuwer@ou.nl.

Characteristics

The characteristics OpenER will have underline the feasibility of using Open Educational Resources in an experiment to raise participation in higher education:

1. OpenER is flexible, open, time-independent and easy accessible. This is important whereas in the Netherlands the high workload makes it hard to find a place for learning activity in daily life (Netherlands Education Council 2003: *Werk maken van een leven lang leren* [Making lifelong learning work]).
2. OpenER requires an individual to invest time and effort but does not incur any out-of-pocket expenses. The content is self-contained. No materials have to be bought.
3. Due to the technology used, OpenER is simple and inexpensive for the end user to use. He or she is not required to make any investments in software or specific supplies. A standard PC with internet access and a web browser are sufficient. More than 85% of the households in the Netherlands at the level of Pre-vocational Secondary Education has Internet Access. More than 70% of these households has High Speed Internet Access (source: Report The Digital Economy 2005, Dutch Government Bureau for Statistics).

This means that for the groups especially targeted in this project, the Pre-vocational Secondary Education and the Vocational and Secondary Education levels, the availability of high speed internet access is well above the national average. In the last three years the availability of high speed internet access has sharply risen to the present level and the expectation is that there will be a significant further increase due to a combination of competition between reliable providers (cable and ADSL) and the already visible sharp drop in prices.

OpenER gives the individual (e.g. an intermediate vocational student) the opportunity to become familiar with the higher educational level without having to make an immediate financial investment. Additionally, there is no 'stress' because it involves online learning. Furthermore, testing in a person's own environment enables barriers to be broken down. The learner is the one who takes the step to formal recognition of delivered performance by means of the services provided for assessment and certification.

OpenER offer learners the opportunity to seek out, establish and maintain contact with other learners and to form learning communities (Netherlands Education Council: *Kennisgemeenschappen en innovatie in het onderwijs* [Knowledge communities and innovation in education]). The chosen approach gives insight into the ways in which such community formation among learners occurs and how they can improve learning effects without any or only minimal interventions by learning institutions.

Outcomes

The tangible results of the OpenER project will be:

- 16 courses of 25 study hours each, suitable for self learning with high quality content on an entry academic level, based on the existing high quality OUNL material, launched in two batches in the fall of 2006 and early in 2007;
- a user friendly on-line delivery system;
- user friendly on-line facilities for self-testing and assessment: and
- a substantial amount of marketing and communication and resulting awareness with the Dutch population about OpenER.

The OpenER offering will continue to be available after the formal completion of the experiment, and thus further effects are expected. Outcomes of OpenER will thus be:

- freely available academic level educational materials without commitment by users;
- opportunities to test their capacity for learning among learners;
- opportunities for those with limited experience and confidence to become better prepared for formal education;
- opportunities for formal testing and certification as a starting point for higher education study;

- extra enrolments in Dutch Higher Education;
- knowledge about the effectiveness of open content delivery as a means of stimulating participation in higher education;
- knowledge concerning the effectiveness of open content delivery, particularly in relation to the use of distance education materials;
- papers and reports available to the OER community;
- research and evaluation results on open content delivery and community forming among users.

Results so far

At this moment (October 6), the project is on its way to deliver its first published courses in December. All 7 faculties have each been asked for 2 ECTS of course material. All courses will be offered under a Creative Commons license by-nd-sa.

Each course will have the didactics as part of the content. In most cases this will be regular feedback on the learning content and several self assessments with feedback at the end of each course.

Most regular courses are still delivered on paper, although more and more webbased material forms part of the course. Guidelines for converting course material to be webbased are ready in its first version now. In the forthcoming two months, we will use the guidelines to convert the first courses offered and complete the set based on the experiences we will have.

We will use the eduCommons platform to deliver the courses to our target group. The Centre of Sustainable Learning (COSL) of the Utah State University will kindly support us in using this system.

The workflow that leads to a published course, based on the workflow eduCommons supports, will be:

- A faculty delivers the material for a course (maximum 1 ECTS for a course) and its metadata. All rights for the material should be at the OUNL. We expect that most of the material will be a self-contained part of a regular course at the OUNL. In most cases, the regular course will comprise 4 ECTS.
- The project team converts the course using templates and the guidelines.
- The project team adds metadata to the converted course
- The team checks for the right conversion (this will be done by a member of the faculty the course originated) and for the clearance of the rights.
- When OK, the course will be published

For communication purposes, both internal OUNL and external, a communication expert is part of the team. At this moment, a website with information about the project is prepared. At the intranet, I plan to start a weblog. The main goal for this weblog is to give OUNL colleagues a more insight view on the project and thereby gain even more acceptance for the project.