OPENING-UP EDUCATION IN SOUTH-MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES AT THE MACRO, MESO AND MICRO LEVEL

Cristina Stefanelli, Mediterranean Universities Union, Italy, Katherine Wimpenny, Coventry University, United Kingdom, Fabio Nascimbeni, Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain

The importance of Open Education in the Mediterranean

Open Education has the potential to increase access and attractiveness of Higher Education (HE), fostering and democratising access to education and localising open educational services in line with the needs of local contexts (Butcher & Hoosen 2014). By using openly available teaching resources, teachers and students can collaborate on compiling course material and resources, opening up the classrooms to new forms of learning. For this to be realised, a change in attitudes towards what is meant by open education, teaching and learning is required, including new approaches towards collaboration and transparency for open education practices.

Widening participation to HE by means of adoption of Open Educational Resources (OER), is a strategic priority for the higher education sector in general and for the OER movement, and it is a matter of urgency in the South-Mediterranean. In the South-Mediterranean countries the demand of education often exceeds the capacity of the existing HE system, and therefore the use and integration of OER and Open Educational Practices (OEP) are possible ways to facilitate learners' access to the university, promoting equity, inclusion and democratisation of Higher Education. This should be done by stimulating academics to network and collaborate on course development and on ways to help students to use OER (Mossley, 2013; Hu et al., 2015).

The OpenMed project is exploring the adoption of strategies and channels that embrace the principles of openness and reusability within the context of South-Mediterranean universities. The overarching goal of OpenMed is to raise awareness and facilitate the adoption of OER in the Arab Mediterranean countries, with a particular focus on higher education in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine. OpenMed fosters the role of universities as knowledge providers not only to their on-campus students but also beyond the walls of institutions, especially towards disadvantaged groups (e.g. low income peoples, disabled students, people living in rural areas, learners at risk of low achievement, refugees). The vision of OpenMed is that opening up education can truly change Higher Education and make it more accessible and more relevant, and that sharing information about OER initiatives can inspire others to reflect, develop their own initiatives, make connections, celebrate diversity, and work together to promote education as a public good and a basic human right.

Understanding the state of the art of Open Education in the Mediterranean region

The first phase of OpenMed has involved a review of good practices in Open Education globally and in particular the South-Mediterranean region which have been brought together into a Compendium of case studies complemented by interviews with international experts in the field. A baseline survey is included in the Compendium, outlining the level of participation in Open Education within the partner institutions, to capture current practice at the time of completion (early 2016), and to identify the future goals for the participating institutions. The Compendium is openly available at http://openmedproject.eu/results/compendium/ together with the Executive Summary in English, French, and Arabic.

International experts provided important insight into the individual case studies, and helped to shape the 22 recommendations made for the continued improvement of open education practices and resources in the South Mediterranean region. These recommendations were categorised under the following five themes: (a) Top-down and bottom-up implementation; (b) Supporting staff in using and integrating open practices and open resources; (c) Collaborative creation in communities of practice; (d) Enhancing the quality of student learning; (e) Licensing of OER content.

Starting from these recommendations, and the understanding of the long-term challenges and priorities which are necessary for opening up Higher Education in the South Mediterranean region, OpenMed has been working at three different but connected levels:

- the *macro* level, addressing policy development through multi-country dialogue with a range of stakeholders and through setting strategic actions on the basis of such dialogue, aimed at maximising the benefits of Open Education to increase the access, the quality and the equity of Higher Education in the region;
- the *meso* level, targeting university leaders through facilitating the process of development of institutional roadmaps and action plans for the implementation of open education at local and institutional levels;
- the *micro* level, working with university educators to strengthen their capacity to incorporate open educational practices into their daily teaching in order to bring learning processes and their outcomes closer to learners' needs.

Macro level: fostering a regional debate on Open Education

Based on the findings and recommendations of the Compendium on Open Education in the region, OpenMed fostered a multi-stakeholder regional debate about what are the best strategies to embed openness in universities in the South Mediterranean, taking into account the specific needs and insights of the academic communities of these countries. Four OER Policy Forums have been organised in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine, during the period November 2016 – April 2017 (OpenMed, 2016), gathering higher education managers, decision-makers, educators and other members of staff (e.g. university librarians, technical IT staff) from universities in the region as well as policy makers. The debate revolved around the

OpenMed OER Regional Agenda for the South-Mediterranean, a set of strategic actions aimed at maximising the benefits of OER and OEP to increase the access, the quality and the equity of Higher Education in the region.

The OER Regional Agenda aims to: (a) Suggest mechanisms for enhancing students access to Higher Education (HE); (b) Suggest mechanisms to promote improvement of quality of teaching and learning practices; (c) Support participant universities to widen participation in Open Education; (d) Create awareness on the benefits of OER use, reuse and remix for university course development; (e) Support the collaboration among universities on issues related to Open Education.

The overarching vision behind the OER Regional Agenda, which is shared by all OpenMed project partners, is that "Opening up education and sharing academic content may lead to improved networking, collaboration and integration of HE systems, through comprehensive development and creation of a relevant interrelated platforms of content within and outside HE Institutions. Further, the adoption of OER and OEP aims to guarantee a higher accessibility to HE and to diversify the channels and means to learn and update the knowledge of learners. In summary, Open Education can truly change HE and make it better, more accessible and relevant - all features befitting a global knowledge-sharing society."

In order to reach this vision, a number of areas of action have been identified, and for each of these a set of recommendations for action are proposed, as follows: Open Content & Licenses, Open Pedagogy & Practice, Technology, Governance & business models, Collaborative models between institutions.

At this level, the project has contributed to the setup of a multi-stakeholder platform in Morocco, which culminated with the "Open Education for Morocco declaration" (OpenMed, 2017), a rather unique initiative to foster OER and Open Education adoption at a system level in the country, that will hopefully ensure that the learning experience of the project can be transferred in a sustainable perspective to the Moroccan Educational Authorities at governmental level, and other dignitaries such as rectors and deans. The declaration has been published as a petition, requesting international endorsement from the Open Education global community.

Meso level: institutional responsibilities towards setting Open Education universities' roadmaps

Higher Education institutions willing to start or strengthen their OER provision are indeed faced with the need to lead profound changes in organisational frameworks, models and procedures, and a framework such as the Regional Agenda is most valuable in facilitating and driving forward the process. The OER Regional Agenda served in fact as a blueprint for universities in the South-Mediterranean to build-up their own Open Education strategies: through a process where universities selected the areas of the Agenda where they intend to focus, both adaptation to the context and general coherence have been guaranteed. This is because understanding and adapting to the cultural context of educational institutions within a

country is important to consider in the successful mainstreaming of OEP (Mishra, 2017; Leidner & Kayworth, 2006).

Implementing an Open Education roadmap is a long-term exercise that will go beyond the OpenMed project, but will most probably represent the strongest legacy of the project within its partner institutions. To facilitate the implementation of the institutional roadmaps, the project has equipped physical centres, called "Innovation Centers for Open Education", at the premises of each of the eight partner universities in Egypt, Morocco, Palestine and Jordan. These centres are intended to be open and collaborative physical spaces, where computer, video cameras and other tools and technologies are available for experimentation. The centres support learning innovation, blended teaching practices, and faculty members who are in search of better ways to design and deliver their teaching.

As the changes brought forward by the roadmaps take effect and transform the culture of the involved universities, it is anticipated that the longstanding effects will also be perceived by staff members, department services (ICT department, quality assurance services, student services, etc.), students and the wider community.

Micro level: building educators' capacity on Open Education

In order to tackle the micro level (the educators), OpenMed has designed and delivered a 'training of trainers' course targeted to educators from across the universities in the region, in order to support them in implementing their institutional roadmaps and in opening up their teaching practices. The course, entitled "Open Education: fundamentals and approaches: A learning journey opening up teaching in higher education", aims to build capacity in OER and Open Education approaches across universities from the South Mediterranean. The course is running its pilot phase from September 2017 to March 2018, targeting 70 academics from HE Institutions in the South Mediterranean. The course modules have been created by the OpenMed partner institutions, and revised through an open platform launched to gather feedback from the wider open education community.

The OpenMed course takes a very practical approach towards Open Education, with the idea that, after having taken the course, learners shall be able to use OER and implement open teaching practices in their daily teaching work. Further, the course takes a strong contextualisation approach, starting from the perspective that a lot of resources and courseware of good quality exist – mostly in English – that could be tailored and adapted to the needs of the learning communities of the Mediterranean region, increasing the effectiveness of content production through economies of scale of content contextualisation. In addition, OER produced by the South Mediterranean partners, to share local scholarship more globally, and in Arabic, is also part of this practical action.

In terms of learning outcomes, on successful completion of the course, learners will be able to: (a) Understand the potential advantages of adopting OER and open education approaches in different contexts, (b) Understand how content released under different kinds of open licences can be reused and apply open licenses to their content, (c) Search for, reuse and remix OER, (d)

Understand what MOOCs are and how to produce MOOCs, (e) Adapt OER and MOOCs to their specific context and (f) Incorporate open educational practices into their daily teaching.

The course takes an active learning approach, composed of three phases, whereby online learning is complemented through a number of activities and by an intense hands-on project work.

Phase 1

The course started with an intense face-to-face moment, gathering the learners participating in the course and aiming at creating a learning community and at starting up the learning activities. The face to face training took place at Politecnico di Torino (Italy) on September 25-29, 2017. The face-to-face moment represented the first phase of the OpenMed course, and gathered all the learners participating in the pilot phase of the course

Phase 2

Learners go through an online learning phase, during which they are expected to take the course modules and to complete the activities proposed. This phase is run through Local Learning Circles, meaning groups of learners who meet face to face to collaboratively run the online course and activities. Each Learning Circle is coordinated by a team of Local Facilitators, who are in charge of organising meetings, supporting learners, assessing activities, and reporting back to the community. In terms of content, the training programme covers the following themes: Introducing Openness in Education, Open Licensing and Copyright, Creating and reusing OER, Localising OER and MOOCs and Open Educational Practices.

Phase 3

Following the online learning experience, learners are expected to apply the skills they have acquired to develop a *project work* aiming at opening up their teaching. The project work is fully integrated with the online phase and builds upon the steps that are taken at the end of each module.

The capacity building course has been running as a pilot from September 2017 to February 2018, involving +70 university teachers from across the partner universities. Following this pilot phase, which is being formally researched, the course will be revised, based on the feedback received by learners and facilitators. Further, the data gathered through the pilot, will be made openly available, both in the present structure (where universities will have to activate the course by setting up a learning circle and enrolling a number of professors) and in a self-learning mode, to allow independent learning by interested educators.

Conclusions

Open Education offers the potential to increase transparency, equity, democracy and participation. Widening participation and building capacity in Open Education in the South-Mediterranean can lead to a stronger integration of HE systems through interrelated platforms

offering OER content within or outside the institution, diversifying the channels and means to learn.

As discussed in this paper, for this to happen, change must be envisaged at three levels. First, at the macro or political level, where opening up education should be situated as an important priority and should be implemented with measures that involve as many stakeholders as possible. The Open Education Declaration in Morocco is a good example of this dynamic, as well as an important achievement of OpenMed. Second, at the *meso*, or institutional level, where incentives should be put in place, and barriers removed, for educators to be able to implement Open Educational Practices for the benefits of their actual and prospective students. And third, at the micro level of the individual educator, since they are the ones that have the power to drive the change by adapting the way they teach, and at the same time by advocating for open education initiatives to be launched or maintained. If universities really want to increase opportunities for access to education, it is essential that the three levels all interact in a virtuous circle, where policy should provide the vision, universities should adapt policy to their local context, and where educators should make it happen at the grassroots level. For this to happen, knowledge must be shared and spread, teachers should be encouraged to network and collaborate on course development, and institutions should be discouraged from fragmentation.

Favouring a bottom-up as well as top-down approach and by including the level of university governance, OpenMed has proved that it is possible to better integrate Mediterranean university systems into global academic and scientific cooperation network, which is an essential factor in the integration of Mediterranean communities and economies.

References

1. Butcher, N., & Hoosen, S (2014). *A guide to quality in post-traditional online higher education.* J. Daniel & S. Uvalić-Trumbić (Eds.). Dallas: Academic Partnership

2. Hu, E., Li, Y., Li, J., & Huang, W-H. (2015). Open educational resources (OER) usage and barriers: a study from Zhejiang University, China. *Education Technology Research Development, 63*, 957–974. doi 10.1007/s11423-015-9398-1

3. Leidner, D. E., & Kayworth, T. (2006). Review: a review of culture in information systems research: Toward a theory of information technology culture conflict. *MIS Quarterly, 30*(2), 357-399.

4. Mishra, S. (2017). Open educational resources: removing barriers from within. *Distance Education, 38*(3), 369-380. doi: 10.1080/01587919.2017.1369350

5. Mossley, D. (2013). *Open Education Resources and Open Education*, The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/oer_toolkit_0.pdf

6. OpenMed (2016). National OER Strategy Forums. Retrieved from http://openmedproject.eu/results/national-oer-strategy-forums/

7. OpenMed (2017). Petition to support Morocco in achieving the vision of Open Education: the OER Morocco Declaration. Retrieved from http://openmedproject.eu/oer-morocco-declaration/

8. P2P University (2015). *Learning Circles Facilitators Handbook*. Retrieved from https://www.p2pu.org/assets/uploads/learning_circle_downloads/facilitator_handbook.pdf

9. Wimpenny, K., Merry, S. K., Tombs, G., & Villar–Onrubia, D. (Eds.) (2016). *Opening Up Education in South Mediterranean Countries: A Compendium of Case Studies and Interviews with Experts about Open Educational Practices and Resources.* OpenMed, ISBN 978-1-84600-0

Acknowledgments