

OER17. The Politics of Open.

A SPARC Europe impression

Earlier this month, OER17 convened in London, drawing a diverse group of speakers and participants — OER thinkers and practitioners — to discuss the “politics of open”. SPARC Europe’s Director, Vanessa Proudman, was there for the two-day event that featured more than 100 workshops and presentations exploring a cascade of issues surrounding OER. Here, we share some highlights from the conference, focusing on policy development, advocacy and practices. (For a complete programme, and links to some of the presentations, see the [conference website](#).)

Maha Bali and Hiding in the Open

The conference opened with a keynote address, titled “[Hiding in the Open](#)”, by the charismatic Maha Bali of the American University in Cairo; Bali gave a global perspective on the potential of OER to empower local communities and developing nations. She believes OER, in the form of local, culturally modified open education resources, can help blunt the effect of dominant knowledge that’s propagated by some of the world’s search engines and systems like Google. OER, said Bali, can be used to promote diversity — and should be convertible to various contexts. Above all, she emphasized the importance of sensitivity to the real needs of local communities and developing nations; and for the western world to avoid imposing education support where it’s not yet needed.

Wikimedia’s Lucy Crompton-Reid

The second day’s keynote address was given by Wikimedia’s Lucy Crompton-Reid who presented on [Opening Up Wikimedia content and communities](#). Among Wikimedia’s current education related initiatives are the non-profit’s programmes Wikipedians in residence, digital literacy and WikiCamps. According to Crompton-Reid, Wikimedia’s strategic priority is to expand its scope, developing its educational content and services in the future for all levels of education; from Primary to Secondary to Higher Education and beyond.

OER POLICY DEVELOPMENT

As director of Poland’s Centrum Cyfrowe, Alek Tarkowski is a leading figure in the country’s OER policy development and implementation. Tarkowski also served as co-chair of OER17 and [spoke](#) on open education resource policy leadership activities in Central and Eastern Europe.

He pointed to the need for champions, networking and community efforts if OER policies are to multiply. He also emphasized sustainability as a concern that applies across open access, open data, open culture, open software and open education.

OER politics in the US

Nicole Allen from SPARC (US) spoke on policy with [OER politics in the US](#), also sharing stories of recent gains there. For instance, 18 states now have OER legislation and many have committed to giving funding to universities and/or schools to develop open education resources. On a local level, Allen mentioned several interesting projects, one being Rhode Island’s [RI Open Textbook Initiative](#) that stimulated OER development through a competition to help cut college textbook costs that have increased by 82% there over the past decade.

She also highlighted various forms of policy implementation and options for consideration by others from writing a coalition letter to the president to getting an open licensing requirement included the Dept. of Labor TAACCCT workforce training grant program to proposing the Affordable College Textbook Act (still to go through).

She named the international [Open Government Partnership](#), in which 75 countries now participate, as an important actor for policy development.

Open Learning in a Digital World - the example of OER info in Germany

Closer to home in Europe, changes in German OER policy were the topic of [a presentation](#) by Richard Heinen, of the University of Duisburg, and Ingo Blees, of the German Institute for International Education Research. Publisher challenges related to pricing were cited as the catalyst for development of a German OER policy. This in turn is leading to the discussion of new business models. Significant funding earmarked for OER for 2 years has already been released by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, which subsidizes more than 20 projects. A newly-established German central [OER Info](#) service centre also provides guidance and training to schools, higher education and adult education institutes, among others, using various media, including a [YouTube channel](#).

Giving a local, institutional policy perspective, Barbara Getto of the University of Duisburg, [shared](#) how her university is implementing a digital strategy for teaching and learning to help support diversity management and fair education.

Furthermore, Scotland is a hub of OER activity, due in part to the [Scottish Open Education Declaration](#) having been taken and proposed to the government there. For more on their work, consult the Programme.

OER ADVOCACY

In a second talk, on OER advocacy, Nicole Allen of SPARC (US) emphasised the importance of incorporating the 5 OER “Rs” -- retain, reuse, revise, remix and redistribute -- in messaging pertaining to open education resources in [Communicating Open](#). These 5 Rs were a recurring theme throughout the conference. She also underscored the fact that OER is very much a means to an end; a way to solve existing problems. And, Allen reminded everyone of the power of storytelling; the capacity of specific stories, told to targeted OER audience segments, to engage and influence.

Targeting Senior Management

The importance of engaging and understanding OER communities was addressed by Rajiv Jhangiani, University Teaching Fellow in Open Studies and a Psychology Professor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Vancouver, BC. One valuable piece of advice he gave was how to target senior management more effectively, recognizing the opportunity new administrators represent. Here, a certain potential is present when administrators are new to a position, with enthusiasm and ambition that can be channelled into support for OER.

Hedging the challenges that can arise when strong OER friendly administrators leave, Jhangiani stressed the importance of capacity building, and of being able to clearly illustrate good OER practices. He also emphasized one particularly strong OER selling point to keep in mind: it enables educators and administrators to do more with less.

Be Critical

Catherine Cronin, of the Center for Excellence and Learning & Teaching at the National University of Ireland, and Laura Czerniewicz, an associate professor at the University of Cape Town, [addressed](#) the importance of “critical pragmatism and critical advocacy” and the challenges “openness” poses. As is the case with Open Data and Open Access in general, both Cronin and Czerniewicz stressed the importance of critical understanding of OER user groups.

As another example of advocacy-related challenges, fighting openwashing was also brought up throughout the conference.

OER practice or OEP

When it comes to OER implementation, the general consensus is to not limit innovation. From MOOCs to open textbooks; lecture recordings to digital readers and handbooks; OER is taking many shapes. To see more of the examples shared during OER17, see the conference's [online programme](#).

Copyright Confusion

[Research](#) involving a faculty sample at the University of the West of England led by the university's Vivien Rolfe and shared at the conference showed a receptiveness to "open" ideas like Open Education. However, this support didn't necessarily translate to action due to concerns regarding a lack of clarity around a cluster of issues pertaining to licensing, copyright and infrastructure support. A clear tension between the Legal Commons and the Social Commons and a lack of knowledge on copyright and licensing issues in general were cited frequently as implementation sticking points by multiple presenters.

Copyright lawyer Robin Wright gave an example of how Australia is bridging this knowledge gap using a toolkit developed in a collaboration involving multiple Australian universities. The [OEL Toolkit](#) provides the country's teaching staff concrete guidance on proper license use.

Embedding and Stimulating OEP

In a specific OER context when talking about OER practice, Jane Secker of the London School of Economics discussed [Lecture recordings: what does it mean to be open?](#) She is also conducting interesting work on how to embed open practice in academic work processes at workshops at the University of Manchester.

Ideas for how to stimulate OER or OEP implementation on multiple levels were also presented by speakers, including Beck Pitt of [Open Educational Practices in Scotland](#). Pitt outlined a variety of common attributes and practices of those contributing to OERs and demonstrated a handful of good OEP practices in her talk, [Exploring International Open Educational Practices](#).

In a joint discussion addressing how to encourage the sharing of open education resources, The [Open Textbooks Network](#) (OTN) in the US was referenced. Here, academics are invited to review certain OER resources; those who do are paid for their work. The results have been positive.

Another factor that conference-goers felt influences how well open education resources fair is whether or not they are featured in the curriculum and appear in promotion and research assessment policies.

Open Learning Champions

Gill Ryan, a learning partnership officer at The Open University Scotland's OpenLearn Platform, described her experience with her university's [Open Learning Champions](#) program. She shared how she built partnerships; her understanding of them; she also told of how she monitored behavioural change. She further explained how she supported the program's champions, which now number more than 100, by keeping them up to date with news and by bringing them together at networking events.

Libraries and Open Education Pedagogues

Capping off the conference were talks on who is well positioned to develop OER; libraries were mentioned as important actors together with Open Education pedagogues — instructional designers in particular. Libraries are natural allies due to their work in open access.

Many of the challenges facing the growth of OER are consistent with those pertaining to Open Data and Open Access; these challenges require further exploration to make quicker headway in Open policy and implementation.