



EUCIS-LLL POSITION AND COMPENDIUM OF GOOD PRACTICES “Opening up education for new learning environments”

January 2014

“Disruptive innovation”, “tsunami”, “first genuine revolution since Gutenberg”... a lot of hopes and fears have emerged in the past years on Open Educational Resources (OERs), making more vivid than ever the debate on harnessing the potential of ICT for education and training. While the 2013 Commission’s Communication on “[Opening Up Education](#)” strives for a new learning ecosystem enriched with digital environments and contents, we see that in reality not everyone benefits from these new possibilities. In 2010 only 39% of Europeans used the Internet for any training and education related activity with huge disparities across countries. We know that the main barriers to access to ICT are technological but also linked to attitudes, interests and abilities. In this context there is a huge potential for progress, and there are more open questions than solid answers and reliable solutions in the field; therefore a critical and responsible approach is recommended. While the European Council recently discussed the digital economy, innovation and services, it is timely for European decision-makers to reflect on what digital learning can really do to modernise our education and training systems, unveiling its expected impact in terms of both growth and social cohesion. EUCIS-LLL thus supports the plea made by the European Commission for an integrated and collective approach to the digital agenda seen both as a challenge and a great opportunity especially to support a cultural shift in the way we teach and learn in Europe.

Quality and accessible learning: two sides of the same coin

Open Educational Resources are defined in the new Commission’s Communication as “*learning resources that are usable, adaptable to specific learning needs, and shareable freely*”¹. The document comprehensively tackles the challenge of technological innovation for learning. **Education and training pathways have never been so flexible** than today and ICT benefits are exhilarating: they make us picture a world where every European from its youngest age would be soon **digitally skilled but also skilled through the digital**. Commission Vice-President Neelie Kroes herself wishes to see all schools and classrooms connected by 2020². We warmly welcome the impulse to develop access to Open Education Resources and insist on the fact that digital **access should be mainstreamed at all levels and in all sectors** of education and training with **earmarked financial resources and strategies**. Digital solutions are a great tool for innovation but are not an end in itself; they shall support a global strategy that aims to widen access to learning and to equip citizens with digital skills and related transversal competences such as critical thinking. They shall also support pedagogic innovation and reinforce the quality of education.

EUCIS-LLL supports the Commission’s will to make learning more equitable and **accessible** to the greatest number of people through Open Educational Resources, which development should be accompanied by continuing attention for **high quality and safety issues**. The use of open educational resources should not be limited to one sector but be mainstreamed and prioritised at all levels of education and training and aimed at developing access and the quality of learning.

¹ Better known and acknowledged is the Hewlett Foundation one: “*teaching, learning, and research materials in any medium that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others.*”

² Commission Vice-President Neelie Kroes and Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou’s speech, “[Opening Up Education – Making the 21st century classroom a reality](#)”, 25 September 2013

Small steps first: IT skills and literacy, a key to foster digital inclusion

This is especially true if we want to use OERs to better target **disadvantaged learners**. It was the initial goal of Stanford Professor Sebastian Thrun, creator of Udacity, US MOOC leader, to launch a totally free online course to reach other audiences than his privileged students. Yet today there is still hardly any evidence that digital learning fosters social inclusion³. It seems appropriate to remember that learners need to be **digitally skilled** before they can actually benefit from ICT potential to engage into further education. **Digital literacy** belongs to the eight ones listed under the 2006 European Framework for Key Competences, and yet **1 adult out of 4 lacks the digital skills** to effectively use ICT⁴ while the “Opening Up Education” Communication says that 90% jobs require IT skills today. One of the pillars of the [Digital Agenda for Europe](#) is enhancing digital literacy, skills and inclusion and the Communication rightly highlights the need to reinforce Europeans’ digital skills, especially among disadvantaged groups, and notably through non-formal and informal learning. Indeed there is no possible **democratisation** of education through OERs if a fourth of Europeans are partially or fully digitally illiterates.

EUCIS-LLL believes that **digital literacy** is a crucial prerequisite to unlock further online education opportunities and to understand, analyse and act upon the world we live in. This challenge should be addressed as a **priority** in formal and non-formal education and training.

Preserve tailored opportunities even through mass digital resources

The challenge of quality OERs lies in the fact that on one side, they enrich the education ecosystem⁵ through thousands of blended learning opportunities and materials; but on the other side, their massive outreach and their intrinsically decontextualised digital format can hinder a **tailored learning experience**. A perfect illustration is the common use of the English **language** for OERs to make them understandable for extensive target groups, but the reality is that many people do not master English; promoting OERs in all EU languages would be better adapted to learners’ needs in most cases. Some good practices in the field of OERs have already proven that equivalences can be found between the social interaction taking place during the learning process in brick-and-mortar educational institutions and **innovative ways of exchange** in digital courses (i.e. Coursera peer assessment of exercises⁶) or **collaborative development of open contents**. If those tools are to complement physical learning settings, they should be aimed primarily at preserving the human interaction that makes quality tailored-made for each learner (for instance they should never be a substitute to learning mobility as it is an irreplaceable tool to develop transversal competences, foster language learning and gain new competences). These solutions should also be implemented within traditional settings. The Communication gives the example of learning analytics, enabling teachers to better monitor the evolution of their learners.

Progress in education is seen today in Europe as the successful shift towards a **learner-centred approach** through highly individualised learning processes and peer learning via a strong cooperation between stakeholders. The development of OERs is an opportunity to shift in that direction, but avoiding massification and respecting diversity should be a strong priority.

³ [“An academic perspective on emerging technological and social trend”](#), Journal of Online learning and teaching, George Siemens, Associate Director, Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute, Athabasca University, Canada

⁴ [PIAAC survey key findings](#), OECD, October 2013

⁵ See also the concept of “learning ecology” by John Seely Brown (2005) in [“Open Learning Cultures”](#) by Ulf-Daniel Ehlers (2013)

⁶ [“Massive Open Online Courses”](#), Michael Gaebel, EUA Occasional Papers, January 2013

Unleashing the potential of OERs: the central role of the educator

Digital literacy should also be enhanced among teachers, trainers and other educators. A recent ETUCE research project⁷ found that the introduction of ICT solutions in educational institutions depends a lot on teachers' interest and enthusiasm (and most of them have those) but that they need **further initial and continuous training** to make an in-depth change in curricula. The Communication confirms this when it states that 60% of European teachers have not received any training on how to use ICT in the classroom while 70% wish to do so, and we support its call for **"digitally confident and supportive teachers"**. Teachers should be able to make use of OERs but also guide their learners through the digital area. Indeed the multiplication of digital learning contents in an environment where anything and everything is accessible can be confusing and **learning to learn** and **critical thinking** are more than ever an essential transversal competences to acquire. The learning process has to be carefully supported to match the **expected learning outcome**. The same applies to the **final evaluation of the learners**; neither of these aspects can be done automatically and require properly trained educators. EUCIS-LLL believes that educators' training should be a top priority at national level; at EU level it welcomes peer-learning activities and the setting up of the [Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs](#) in the framework of the Digital Agenda that identifies this issue as a main goal.

Educators have a crucial part to play in developing quality, individualised open educational resources. Their needs should be assessed and they have to be trained (initial and continuing) about how to use these resources to support a more innovative **pedagogy** based on a learner-centred approach. **Guidance and counselling** are also crucial to make a wise use of OERs.

Valuing and recognising new learning pathways

The fact that learners are now able to better adapt their learning processes and materials to their needs, goals and lifestyles thanks to the digital era is undeniable. However 75% of students enrolled in a MOOC will never complete it⁸. In order to motivate learners into completion it is important to embed their digital experience coherently in their learning pathway and value it for their personal and professional purposes⁹. In that sense, **recognition and validation** of learning outcomes acquired through OERs is a crucial matter for learners' personal and professional fulfilment. It would also be a big step towards better quality digital learning. The Communication rightly mentions the 2012 Council Recommendation on Validation of non-formal and informal learning to explore validation tools that could adapt to current changes and include recognition of digitally-acquired skills.

EUCIS-LLL calls Member-States to acknowledge the development of OERs while setting up **validation arrangements** by 2018, and has set up a dedicated task force to follow up on the national implementation of the 2012 Council Recommendation.

⁷ ELFE, "European eLearning Forum for education", European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE)

⁸ « [Pour un système d'éducation à la page](#) », H. Syed (Confrontations Europe, la revue, item 103, Oct-Dec 2013)

⁹ See also digital learning and new dimensions of assessment in "[Open Learning Cultures](#)", U.-D. Ehlers (2013)

Broader partnerships to advance access to education as a fundamental right

The Communication rightly points out that opening up education is not the sole responsibility of educational actors but of various stakeholders such as learning material developers, ICT professionals such as broadband providers or interoperability experts, legal departments through license and copyrights issues, etc. One of the most important legal and technical challenges in terms of interoperability probably lies in a **free access to broad databases of contents and useful information** (such as the Open Education Europa platform) and the Commission has already rightly committed to such a project with all future Erasmus+ project resources. Yet, as much as it is right to adopt a comprehensive approach for such a transversal topic, it is also important to state that **technological barriers are only the tip of the iceberg** as they only contribute to solving problems of accessibility. As quality is the other side of the coin, **communities of practices** gathering various stakeholders are essential to improve OER provision. As for EU funding schemes, the new funding programme for education, training, youth and sport, Erasmus+, as well as the next European Social Fund 2014-2020, can contribute to foster those communities by enabling multi-stakeholders partnerships between very different sectors. The opportunities offered by EU funds should be coordinated and optimized so that the Communication's policy objectives are delivered.

In order to tackle the digital challenge in a comprehensive way, an open **partnership approach** is needed catering for valuable contributions from civil society grassroots experts and other key stakeholders that have reflected on ICT potentialities for an ever better learning experience.

A digital-friendly environment and financial support to innovation

Educational leaders and institutions also clearly have to operate a change of mind-sets to ride the trend of OERs. The Communication is notably in line with EU strategies on higher education internationalisation; MOOCs for instance are a big challenge for universities that have to make costly investments and build new business and organisational models and questioning ancestral principles, i.e. *numerus clausus*. Yet higher education institutions are not (and should not be) the only knowledge centres for digital contents and an extensive conception of those models have to be acknowledged (i.e. including SMEs, etc.). Faced with the unpredictable and fast growth of the digital economy that leads to new inequalities, public authorities must monitor and supervise the elaboration and exploitation of OERs to extend **European principles of social justice** (i.e. explore new taxation systems) in the field of digital learning in accordance with OERs' original features of open license and public domain, as described in the Paris OER Declaration. The development of MOOCs should remain an educational endeavour, not an economic one in order to benefit all learners.

EUCIS-LLL believes it is of utter importance that OERs remain what they are initially aimed to be, meaning **advancing education as a fundamental right for all**.

Contact

EUCIS-LLL Secretariat

www.eucis-lll.eu

info@eucis-lll.eu