

OpenMed: aprire l'accesso e la partecipazione universitaria nell'area Euro-Mediterranea

OpenMed: opening up Higher Education through Europe-Mediterranean cooperation.

Fabio Nascimbeni ^{A*} and Cristina Stefanelli ^B

(A) UNIR - Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain, fabio.nascimbeni@unir.net

(B) UNIMED - Unione delle Università del Mediterraneo, Roma, Italy, stefanelli@uni-med.net

* corresponding author

HOW TO CITE Nascimbeni, F., & Stefanelli, C. (2017). OpenMed: opening up Higher Education through Europe-Mediterranean cooperation. *Italian Journal of Educational Technology*, 25(1), 101-105. doi: 10.17471/2499-4324/859

1. INTRODUCTION: HOW EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD RESPOND TO THE REFUGEE CRISIS

The integration of students at risk of social exclusion as well as the provision of equal opportunities for access to education and equity in treatment are acknowledged not only as core conditions for the success of the 2011 EU Modernisation Agenda and the broader Lisbon Strategy, but as a wider leverage for Europe's knowledge-based society to foster social inclusion and social cohesion (European Commission 2013). In recent years, the social dimension of Europe's higher education has been further stressed by increased migration flows, with over one million refugees and migrants entering Europe in 2015. The EU is now concerned with providing opportunities for refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons to participate in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Many refugees who have entered Europe are in fact students or, given their age and education, prospective students¹. However, refugees face many barriers to accessing higher education, such as the lack of information, advice and guidance sensitive to their specific needs, inadequate provision of intensive language courses for academic purposes, and restricted access to governmental financial support.

The integration of refugees is indeed a task for society as a whole and universities should play their part by allowing refugees to achieve the best possible education, strengthening their employability and also equipping them for a more stable and secure future, whether this be in the host country or in their country of origin. The EHEA should support durable solutions and respond to these and other kinds of barriers by offering holistic support to widen and facilitate refugee access to higher education, based on the key principle of rapid response and possibly using a community based approach.

2. THE ROLE OF OPEN AND FLEXIBLE EDUCATION

Openness in higher education is a key leverage for equal and democratic access to knowledge: if univer-

¹ In the first half of 2015 alone, more than 100,000 children have claimed asylum in Europe (EU – European Platform for Investing in Children, newsletter 2012-1, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15967&langId=en>)

sities want to provide equal opportunities for access to education, it is essential that the open sharing of resources is encouraged; knowledge must be shared and spread, teachers should be encouraged to network and collaborate on course development, and institutions should be discouraged from fragmentation and from producing their own slight variations on the same course.

Open Education has the potential to increase access and attractiveness of higher education by fostering and democratising access to education and localising open educational services in line with the needs of local contexts (Butcher & Hoosen 2014). Using openly available teaching resources, teachers and students can collaborate on compiling course material and resources, opening up classrooms to new forms of learning. For this to be realised, we need a change in attitudes towards what we mean by education, teaching and learning, including new approaches towards collaboration and transparency as well as an improved “openness literacy”. Although learning resources are often considered as key intellectual property in a competitive HE world, many institutions and individuals worldwide are sharing their digital learning resources over the Internet openly and for free as Open Educational Resources (OER). OER is a relatively new phenomenon which can be seen as part of a larger trend towards openness in HE, democratization of access, and as a means to open up the curriculum to knowledge, materials and teaching methods from all over the world. The two most important aspects of openness regard free availability over the Internet and as few restrictions as possible on the use of the resource. In an open higher education ecosystem, there should be no technical barriers (undisclosed source code), no price barriers (subscriptions, licensing fees, pay-per-view fees) and as few legal permission barriers as possible (copyright and licensing restrictions) for the end user.

As recognised by the European Association of Distance Training Universities, open and online education is particularly important for refugees: “Perhaps, it is the only immediate and sustainable solution for these students, who have no time available to study and have to be prepared to contribute to our societies or to rebuild their societies of origin” (EADTU 2016). The main advantages of interventions based on open and online education with respect to traditional approaches concern the pervasiveness of mobile learning (mobile devices are very common among the refugee population) and the flexibility of online approaches, which allow people in *forced mobility* situations to access online learning at their preferred time and pace. Furthermore, these methods are highly scalable, an especially important consideration if we think that migration towards Europe is not at all over, and they bear the potential to reach a high number of students among refugee populations at low cost, for example with language courses that can be rather easily standardized.

3. THE OPENMED PROJECT: OPENING-UP EDUCATION IN SOUTH MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES

The OpenMed project², co-funded by the EU’s Erasmus+ programme for the period 2015-2018, is working to strengthen the adoption of open strategies and approaches within the context of Southern Mediterranean universities. The goal of the project is to raise awareness and facilitate the adoption of Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP) in the Arabic Mediterranean countries, with a particular focus on Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine³. OpenMed facilitates the role of universities as

² www.openmedproject.eu.

³ The OpenMed project partners are UNIMED, Mediterranean Universities Union, Italy (coordinator), Politecnico di Torino, Italy; the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain; the University of Seville, Spain; Coventry University, UK; Cairo University, Egypt; Alexandria University, Egypt; Cadi Ayyad University, Morocco; Université Ibn Zohr, Morocco; Birzeit University, Palestine; ANNU, An-Najah National University, Palestine; the Association of Arab Universities, Jordan; the German Jordanian University, Jordan; Princess Sumaya University for Technology, Jordan and EDEN, the European Distance and E-Learning Network (associated partner).

knowledge providers not only to their on-campus students but also beyond institutional walls, especially towards the disadvantaged like low-income groups, disabled students, people living in rural areas, learners at risk of low achievement, and refugees.

The specific objectives of the project are to:

- raise awareness among Southern Mediterranean universities in Open Educational Practices and Resources;
- support the definition of OER agendas within Southern Mediterranean universities, defining mid-term roadmaps according to local, cultural and institutional needs and strategies;
- build capacity among university teachers on how to use and repurpose OER in a pedagogically-rich context;
- pilot start-up Open Educational Practices and offer students flexible and up-to-date open contents and learning paths, with a linkage to the international community and the needs of the job market.

OpenMed envisions a multilevel and organic intervention embracing three key dimensions. The first is content, understood as educational resources or pedagogic practices that are openly and freely shared, with promotion of continuing re-usability, updating and sharing. Second, platforms: hardware and software designed to simplify the interoperability of resources, facilitating semantic findability and the use of open standards and open source software to lower costs and foster adoption. Third, cultural aspects: promoting awareness, explaining the value of openness, describing the educational and inter-institutional benefits, not only identifying best practices but implementing the incentives needed to foster these practices in a variety of teaching-learning environments.

OpenMed is structured in three main phases: review of good practices, widening participation in OER and training of trainers.



Figure 1. The road ahead in the OpenMed project.

Activities started with a collective effort of gathering and analysing good open education practices that may inspire universities from the South Mediterranean to open up their work and their educational offer, to be complemented by interviews with experts in the field. The project has produced a compendium of rele-

vant initiatives that will help it achieve its objectives by generating a reliable and evidence-based body of knowledge. Starting from this analysis, the Southern Mediterranean Regional Agenda on Open Education has been kicked off with four events in Winter 2016. It will then be deployed during 2017 and 2018 both in terms of national and regional development strategy and within the universities, within and beyond the project partnership, which will launch an institutional roadmap for Open Education.

4. EQUITY AND INCLUSION WITHIN OPENMED

The social dimension of higher education is at the core of OpenMed. The project deals with fostering cooperation between a region suffering strong Europe-bound migration and Europe itself. What's more, it focuses on a theme – Open Education – that as we have seen bears the potential to close the access gap for disadvantaged groups of students, including migrants and refugees.

The project is paying attention to social inclusion dynamics, especially as far as refugees are concerned, in all its activities. In the review of Open Education good practices, which is focusing on building and promoting an evidence-based body of knowledge on OER in the South Mediterranean region, the project team is working to spot initiatives such as the Refugees Welcome Map produced by the European Association of Universities (EUA 2016), which may inspire universities from both Europe and the South Mediterranean region to reflect on social inclusion, develop initiatives, make connections, and deal with cultural diversity. The project also includes a capacity building component targeted at HE staff within Southern Mediterranean universities. Through an OER-based training course, university teachers and educators will learn how to make use of OER and start up open educational practices relevant to their contexts, therefore increasing the access potential of HE ecosystems. This will be particularly important since teachers' capacities and attitudes are one of the biggest barriers to actual uptake of OER and open approaches: *«OERs have failed to significantly affect the day-to-day teaching of the vast majority of higher education institutions. Traditional textbooks and readings still dominate most teaching venues even though essentially all students are online: course management systems are used only for the dissemination of syllabi, class notes, general communications, and as a grade book»*⁴ (Kortemeyer, 2013).

Having said this, the most important contribution that OpenMed will make to improve migrant and refugee access to higher education will be in the long-term, in the shape of a South Mediterranean Regional Agenda on Open Education. The project will in fact activate relevant stakeholders in the participating South Mediterranean countries, holding events in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine to discuss the main barriers and solutions to the urgent problems facing the region's students, and to define a long-term Regional Agenda for opening up education in South Mediterranean countries. The Regional Agenda will then serve as a guideline for the definition of institutional roadmaps, i.e. short-term action plans for the implementation of Open Educational Practices at institutional level. Supporting these conversations among stakeholders – including students, university leaders and policy makers – will hopefully ensure that Open Education is taken into account as a solution to the problems presented above in a long term and strategic perspective. If successful, this will help to strengthen online, flexible and open education in the strategies of a number of South Mediterranean universities, as well as of a number of governments in the region. The exercise will be based on two pillars. First, it will start from the needs of the students, taking into account both traditional and online students, including therefore students and potential students in *forced mobility* such as refugees and migrants. Second, it will avoid imposing solutions from Europe, but will instead foster community

⁴ <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2013/2/ten-years-later-why-open-educational-resources-have-not-noticeably-affected-higher-education-and-why-we-should-care>

building in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine, and cooperation with European counterparts, as the only feasible way to apply Open Education solutions to the urgent problems – among others - of migration flows and refugee emergencies.

5. REFERENCES

Butcher, N., & Hoosen, S. (2014). *How openness impacts on higher education*. Moscow, Russia: UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education.

EADTU (2016). Overview of EADTU Member actions for refugees, EADTU GA meeting, 15 April 2016. Retrieved from <https://eadtu.eu/47-general/312-member-area>

European Commission (2013). *Communication on 'Opening up Education: Innovative teaching and learning for all through new Technologies and Open Educational Resources*. Luxembourg: European Commission.

European Universities Association (2016). Refugees Welcome Map. Retrieved from <http://www.eua.be/activities-services/eua-campaigns/refugees-welcome-map>

Kortemeyer, G. (2013). Ten Years Later: Why Open Educational Resources Have Not Noticeably Affected Higher Education, and Why We Should Care. *EDUCAUSE Review*. Retrieved from <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2013/2/ten-years-later-why-open-educational-resources-have-not-noticeably-affected-higher-education-and-why-we-should-care>