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Engaging with open educational practices: Mapping the landscape in Australian higher education

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For more than a decade, Australian higher education has engaged with open educational practice (OEP). This paper presents findings from a study investigating the institutional approaches to OEP in Australian universities. Interviews were conducted with representatives from 10 Australian universities. The findings of a thematic analysis reveal organisational context, business processes and educational design as key themes through which OEP is enacted within Australian universities. Together, these themes document Australian universities experiences of and with OEP and contribute to addressing the need for translational research in Australian higher education. This research contributes to a growing evidence basis to construct an understanding of the dimensions of OEP for practical action.

Implications for practice or policy:

- University policymakers should enact institutional open education policy to signal support and provide clarity.
- Learning designers and academic staff can leverage OEP to catalyse student-centred, authentic pedagogical transformation.
- OEP advocates need to address the root problem of sector-wide lack of awareness.
- Australian institutions should recognise existing pockets of good OEP engagement and more strategically codify or connect these practices to realise the benefits of OEP.

Keywords: open educational practice (OEP), open educational resources (OER), open education, higher education, qualitative research

Introduction

Open educational practice (OEP) is "a broad descriptor of practices that include the creation, use, and reuse of open educational resources (OER) as well as open pedagogies and open sharing of teaching practices" (Cronin, 2017, p. 2). Over the last 15 years, there has been emerging focus internationally on open education as shown by the annual Open Education Conference established in 2004 (OpenEd19, n.d.), the Cape Town Open Education Declaration in 2007 (Cape Town Open Education Declaration, 2023b) and the subsequent ratification and extension in 2018 (Cape Town Open Education Declaration, 2023a); UNESCO's (2012) release of the Paris Declaration on Open Educational Resources and the growing body of literature discussing and critiquing the concept (Clinton & Khan, 2019; Otto, 2019; Otto et al., 2021). Grounded in this emerging focus, a growing body of work has demonstrated the transformational potential of OEP to lower student costs (Conole & Ehlers, 2010), reduce course development costs

(McGreal et al., 2014), improve teacher collaboration (D'Antoni, 2009), reduce inequalities of student learning experiences and outcomes (Glennie et al., 2012) and act as a catalyst for learner-centred pedagogy (Bossu et al., 2012). Although OEP is being embraced within the international higher education sector, it is still an emerging practice in Australia (Stagg et al., 2018). Over the last decade a growing number of studies have started to explore open education in Australia; however, many of these studies are limited by their focus on either a specific institutional context (Hannon et al., 2013; Stagg & Partridge, 2019) and/or on resources rather than practice (Bossu et al., 2014; Lambert & Fadell, 2022; Wright et al., 2021). Failing to keep up with OEP developments may limit the Australian higher education sector from pursuing avenues to better support current students, attract new ones and remain internationally competitive (Bossu & Stagg, 2018).

This paper reports on a study that investigated the status of OEP in Australian higher education. It builds upon previous work (Stagg et al., 2018), which involved a structured desktop audit grounded in the literature (i.e., university websites and other publicly available content) of all 40 Australian universities. This audit revealed that OEP is still an emerging practice in Australian higher education. Australian universities are beginning to engage with and adopt OEP, but further maturation and cultivation are needed for OEP to be sustainable and to have the desired impacts. The audit findings reveal that more empirical research is needed to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of OEP in Australian higher education (Stagg et al., 2018). This paper therefore presents a follow-up phase to this initial audit by undertaking qualitative study to further investigate institutional approaches to OEP in Australian universities.

Literature review

Empirical studies exploring OEP within Australian higher education have emerged only in the last decade. Given the unique context of Australian higher education (such as government policy and funding levels, prevalence of public institutions, Federal performance targets and student financial support) , this literature review focused on investigating this emerging national empirical base. While insights into OEP can be obtained from studies undertaken internationally, especially OEP-active countries such as the United States of America and Canada, we must be mindful of different educational systems, funding, government awareness and advocacy. However, these international studies offer insights into effective practice and advocacy that can be adapted to the Australian environment or strategically positioned to demonstrate the impact of government- and institutionally supported programmes on the maturation of open practices. For example, the efficacy of zero-cost degrees (Zed-Cred or Zee-Degrees) for student retention and achievement (Barker et al., 2018; Hilton et al., 2016), the effectiveness of library publishing consortia for sustainable open educational resources (OER) (Evans, 2018) and the passing of legislation to recognise and explicitly support OER (Green, 2012; Palmedo, 2012) have all provided opportunities for flourishing practice, and research provides both an evidence base and credible legitimacy for the movement..

Funding from the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching provided a solid foundation to the nation's emerging OEP empirical base with support of three national projects. Bossu et al. (2014) investigated the adoption and use of OEP and OER in Australian higher education. Through their work, 100 higher education staff including senior executives, managers, educators, curriculum designers, librarians and copyright officers completed an online survey, with 24 also participating in one-on-one interviews. The findings of this project revealed that although there was limited use of OER in current practice, there was good awareness of and interest in using and adopting OER. Several barriers to embracing OER were identified, including insufficient institutional support to encourage and promote the adoption of OER and OEP. Copyright and intellectual property policy issues were also identified as a primary barrier that needed to be addressed. The project developed a feasibility protocol to be used by senior executives to make decisions regarding the adoption of OER and OEP (Bossu et al., 2014).

Building on this initial work, Wright et al. (2016) reviewed the copyright and legal issues affecting OEP. Over 150 staff within Australia's higher education sector completed an online survey, and seven individuals were selected for follow-up one-on-one interviews. Findings revealed there was significant activity in the areas of OEP and OER in Australia although policies and procedures were still under development. However, the findings also indicated that there was a need for information to address concerns about how to deal with the complexity of copyright and licencing, intellectual property ownership and the wider issues around incorporating open practices into institutional strategies. The open education licensing toolkit was developed to address this need.

The OpenEdOz project was the third national study funded by the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching. This project investigated the student voice in the adoption and use of OEP in Australian higher education, with a particular focus on how learning outcomes could be enhanced through this emerging practice (Wills et al., 2016). The project sourced 22 case studies of OEP in Australia and organised four interactive events to workshop understandings of a national strategy for OEP. Grounded in this data, the project developed a national roadmap to advance OEP in Australia across 10 key areas or signposts including advocacy, standards, collaboration and sustainability. The project recommended that a national body be funded to drive the roadmap with engagement from relevant organisations such as national university leadership organisations, content providers, technology providers, intellectual property leaders and professional associations.

Complementing the national level research funded by the Australian Government are several studies reporting on localised open textbook programmes or initiatives (Julien et al., 2018; Ponte et al., 2021; Stagg & Partridge, 2019). A doctoral thesis by Lambert (2019) investigated how the recent digital innovations in open education can better address the need to widen access and participation in higher educational knowledge and skills. Lambert's work both argued for, and provides evidence of, the role of open textbooks and OEP as a vehicle for social justice. Another doctoral thesis (Funk, 2019) conducted a developmental evaluation of how a series of public education resources in Indigenous North Australian policy sectors presented a critical and cultural lens on openness and knowledge authority in intercultural workforce development learning dynamics. Funk's doctoral thesis (2019) and recent work (2021) critiqued, promoted and evidenced OEP as a vehicle for critical pedagogical reform and job readiness in a range of open and online educational settings, including Australian higher education.

A decade has passed since the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching funding catalysed OEP research (Bossu et al., 2012), and recent evidence points to localised momentum for open education (notably open textbook) projects rather than connected, national approaches. This research contributes to addressing a middle ground gap of translational research in openness in Australian higher education (Bossu & Stagg, 2018). The research approach privileges a connection between practitioner experience and policy-makers (who are often removed from authentic engagement with practice), to produce evidence-based outcomes that benefit a wider community. By qualitatively engaging with a sample of representatives, we aim to construct an understanding of the dimensions of openness as evidence for practical action.

Research context

This study builds upon initial work undertaken to investigate the status of OEP in Australian higher education (Stagg et al., 2018). This initial work involved a desktop audit grounded in the literature of all forty Australian universities. This audit revealed that Australian universities are beginning to engage with and adopt OEP. This paper presents a follow-up phase by undertaking qualitative study to further investigate institutional approaches to OEP in Australian universities. As the lead institution, human ethics approval was obtained by the Human Ethical Research Committee of Charles Darwin University (H17059).

Conceptualising OEP

There are several ways OEP can be conceptualised or understood (Mayrberger, 2020). It can be understood to encompass aspects such as technical infrastructure and product or resource development as well as pedagogical, philosophical, and cultural considerations. Each interview participant was invited to describe their understanding of OEP and/or how it was understood within the context of their university. Not surprisingly every participant mentioned OER as being a core element of their understanding of OEP and/or how OEP was enacted in the context of their university: “the use of OER within the learning experiences for the students” (Participant 2, p. 2).

However, participants also viewed OEP in other more nuanced ways, recognising that it is “an umbrella term that includes a number of things” (Participant, 5, p. 2). For example, OEP was understood from a technical infrastructure perspective, with a participant noting: “it’s a platform ... it’s the institution having the means, particularly the electronic means to allow this content to become available” (Participant 9, p. 2). OEP from a social justice lens was also highlighted, with participants focused not only on making OER available through appropriate technology, but more importantly “without costs to people around the world” (Participant 3, p. 2). The central tenet of removing barriers was also extended to “opening up the content and skills of our academic teachers to be more accessible and more discoverable beyond the traditional university setting” (Participant 3, p. 2).

Grounded in this view of OEP as a vehicle to improve learning globally, one participant described OEP as “altruistic education contributing to global learning” (Participant 9, p. 2). Similarly, another participant reflected on their university’s intentional decision to embrace OER as both a vehicle for collaboration and an opportunity to have an impact beyond their university and in society: “(it) will contribute to both better educational practices in other institutions through the use of those resources, but also so that the wider community will have access to those resources as part of their lifelong learning journey” (Participant 2, p. 2).

Participants

Of the 40 universities investigated in the original study (Stagg et al., 2018), 15 were identified as representing the broad variety of experiences in Australian higher education (i.e., embryonic through to more sophisticated engagement with OEP) and invited to participate in this follow-on study. A senior point of contact (i.e., deputy vice-chancellor or pro vice-chancellor) for each university was identified via the websites. An email was sent to the contact inviting them or their nominee to take part in the study. Of the 15 universities, 10 agreed to participate in the study. The nominees were 80% female and 20% male, with 30% of respondents in senior leadership positions (such as a university librarian, pro vice-chancellor or equivalent). The remainder were positioned as associate directors, directors, managers or senior roles within organisational units. The sample of participants in this study is unique and provides an insight into the perceptions of OEP from senior management levels, while other Australian studies had a mix of stakeholders or only practitioners.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection occurred via recorded transcribed online semi-structured in-depth interviews. Kvale (2007, p. 7) described interviews as “a conversation that has structure and a purpose determined by one party – the interviewer”. Through this conversation the interviewer has a “unique opportunity to uncover rich and complex information” (Cavana et al., 2001, p. 138), and the participants can express their story using their own words. In-depth interviews were identified as the most appropriate approach for the study because of their suitability in obtaining data about people’s views, opinions, ideas and experiences, and where you want to “ask open-ended questions that elicit depth of information from relatively few people” (Guion et al., 2011, np).

One research team member undertook all interviews to minimise variation of the interview process. The interview questions were designed to elicit the participants' experience, understanding and perceptions of their university's approach to supporting and enabling OEP. Follow-up and probing questions were used to explore the participant's responses and experiences.

Thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clark, 2006). The data analysis process was an iterative one, constantly grounded in the interview data. The analysis process began with a phase of familiarisation which involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Data was then analysed through initial coding. This included labelling segments of the data set (i.e., transcripts) that reflected diverse ways of experiencing OEP. Next in the analysis process was a recursive search for similar meaning among codes. This was implemented within each interview and across all the interviews. Codes were constantly compared and contrasted. Similar codes in meaning were identified and collated to make more focused codes, and through a similar process potential themes. Throughout this process, codes were continually regrouped while the relationships between codes and emerging themes were developed (Saldana, 2013). A codebook was developed and maintained during data analysis. A total of three themes were identified that depict the participants' experiences of OEP.

Findings

The study's findings revealed three key themes that depicted Australian universities' experiences with OEP: organisational context, business processes and educational design. A description of each of the three themes follows, together with illustrative quotes from interviews.

Organisational context

The theme of organisational context refers to the internal socio-cultural and structural conditions that participants identified as being significant to the universities' experiences of open practice. Participants described how learning and teaching practices, such as OEP, operate within an internal university context, including institutional policies, reward and recognition processes and financial investment. Together, these conditions can constrain or enable the understandings, choices and opportunities available to individuals and groups within the university to engage with OEP.

Institutional policies set the structural context for the university, indicating what is valued. Policies influence discourse and behaviours as well as setting the priorities for a university's teaching and research agenda. Participants described their institutional approaches to using policy to inform and progress their openness agenda as largely nascent. As one participant observed "as an institution (we) support the idea of open access but we don't have a mandate of policy" (Participant 3, p. 8). Many participants recognised the importance of institutional policy for setting strategic direction, guiding business investment and influencing staff practice and behaviour. This is illustrated by the following quotation provided by a senior executive:

We don't have a lot of policies right now ... our strategy is something that we're currently developing, and it is important to have a strategy, obviously, so that you can map where you're going to go and where you need to spend your resources. (Participant 2, p. 6)

Evidence of the perceived need for policy could also be linked to the institutional understanding of OEP; in one instance, open education was perceived as primarily the use of free and open resources. From this standpoint, OER were positioned as no different to other educational materials; thus, the institution relied exclusively on existing external legislative frameworks: "no policies, no strategies around the use of OER's (sic), other than the general creative commons and copyright legislation" (Participant 6, p. 6).

As a further example, the following participant's comments show how the institution's focus on massive open online courses (MOOCs), as a vehicle for embracing openness, shaped the type and nature of guidelines or policies needed and developed:

I don't think we do (have an OEP policy). We've got guidelines that relate to our MOOC development, and we certainly have guidelines around the use of analytics that are generated through our open educational activities ... We certainly have a policy on the use of analytics, but other than that, nothing else. (Participant 10, p. 10)

One participant noted embryonic but growing interest and acknowledged that policy development would require greater integration between openness and the existing institutional policy ecosystem:

We've got an open access policy ... which is mostly focused on research publication. The university is revising its intellectual property policy, where you talk about who and what ... we're looking at research and data management policies, which are looking at fair principles. And we're also working on guidelines on open educational resources that are on hold because of course it will be impacted by the IP Policy. We could publish draft guidelines for comment, but it seems we really should wait for the intellectual property policy first. (Participant 7, p. 14)

Several participants described how the institution's open access policy was the primary institutionally recognised governance directive for openness. For many, this policy enabled research but not teaching, as illustrated by the following quotation: "currently there does not seem to be wide open educational practice ... The university does have an open access policy, although this is predominantly focused on research output" (Participant 7, p. 3).

However, one participant noted their institution was committed to "research-led teaching practices", which required valuing teaching and research as equal drivers within the university. The following comment illustrates how this commitment shaped their approach to policy development: "We have an open access policy and there are two procedures that sit under that, one for education, and one for research resources" (Participant 2, p.4).

The already existing tensions between research and teaching recognition within universities are also reflected in OEP, particularly regarding promotion. For example, one participant who identified as being in a "research-intensive university" noted that promotion criteria favoured research, and this inevitably discouraged time-poor academics engaging in teaching-related activities, including OEP:

You were doing research, rather than creating open educational resources ... research is a major focus for all universities. So, a lot of academics who are active in the learning and education spheres are concerned that the time they put into everything ... not even just open education area, but generally, it is being acknowledged? Is it being recognised and is it receiving credit? (Participant 7, p. 9)

Related to this is the university's approach to intellectual property that varies significantly in research (in most instances owned by the academic) as compared to teaching (in most instances owned by the university). This variation can lead to confusion for university staff in their understanding of open education and what is allowed within the context of their teaching practice. One participant observed: "it very much inhibits and makes staff very fearful of using (open education) material" (Participant 5, p. 6); they are unsure if they have the right to openly licence learning resources they have created. This point is further illustrated in the following quotation:

As much as Creative Commons have tried to simplify the licences, whenever there is that legal relationship there, staff are very fearful to tread and to engage with it. I would say creative commons licensing and open content licensing have liberated the use of educational material and the re-use of educational material but at the same time ... people are still very fearful, especially in combining the material they create as creators, with third party material (i.e., material created by other people). (Participant 5, p. 6)

Although the participant noted that their university's intention was to not inhibit the creation of the openly licensed teaching material, the lack of an intentionally articulated position by the university was a barrier:

Our Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research signs off on all licensing decisions and there's no granularity in that, there's no way to delegate that power ... within our entrenched policies and governance, the delegation isn't there to allow our staff to make those decisions and to feel confident about them. (Participant 5, p. 7)

Funding strategies for OER and OEP development, especially to stimulate institution-level action, was identified as a challenge, although those institutions experiencing initial success indicated that OEP funding has been integrated with existing learning and teaching grant schemes. This point is illustrated by the following quotation:

We have a set of learning and teaching grants. They are small grants usually and they are not tied specifically to open educational practices. They are tied to learning and teaching and of course you have just as much opportunity to put your open educational initiative forwards as well as any other imitative forward. We quite often see that there this is a strategic change, or where this is something ... such as blended learning for example, has been something that the university here has been trying to engage in, and is engaging in fairly successfully now ... We see grants going to blended learning initiatives, and before that peer led learning. (Participant 5, p. 14)

The advantages of this approach could be two-fold; firstly, using existing funds is an opportunity to reposition internal grants, and secondly, folding OEP into learning and teaching grants demonstrates that it can be a viable, supported practice positioned with, or value-adding to, other pedagogical approaches. The following participant quotation illustrates how an intentional funding strategy provided access to up to \$10,000 to fund the development of an open textbook that could directly impact multiple university priorities:

We have an explicit strategy to continue to publish and increase the number of titles that are open e-textbooks ... One of the things that has been really quite significant is the huge international reach that we have achieved with our open e-textbooks. One of our open e-textbooks is ... we've had over 1.0 million downloads ... not only is the open access textbook achieving an educational goal, it's actually achieving an impact and engagement goal. So that's a very strong sign of the success of that publishing venture. (Participant 2, p. 5)

Business processes

The theme of business processes refers to the activities, initiatives and resources that participants identified as being significant to the universities' experiences of open education. Participants described their institutions as being in the "initial stages" of OEP adoption. In many cases, the participants could identify either individual practitioners, or smaller groups (usually associated by discipline), but no codified, larger-scale practices. Participant 8 elaborated, "there are small pockets of innovation around the university, and I expect it's more than possible that some of them include fairly high-level engagement in OEP. It's just there isn't a formal (university) project or infrastructure around OEP ... yet."

Participants also described awareness and engagement with openness emerging unintentionally or indirectly through other institutional activities or initiatives. For example, Participant 1 observed that their institution was actively moving away from a textbook-driven approach to curriculum design and teaching practice, and that OEP was one of several alternative options: "OER's (sic) might be a part of what we use as an alternative, but the focus (is) getting away from using fixed, published, textbooks. This will be OER's (sic) but there will be other alternatives as well."

In addition, participants spoke of the role of MOOCs as an avenue for engaging in open education. The institutional engagement with MOOCs was not necessarily focused on advancing openness, as one participant noted: “we wanted to use them to develop our capability in digital education and to understand better what strategic and business benefits we could gain” (Participant, 10, p. 6). The appropriateness of using MOOCs as a platform for embracing an OEP agenda was also questioned: “It really depends on your definition of open educational resources, I guess” (Participant 4, p. 5).

Regardless of the initial drivers for engagement, MOOCs helped lessen academics reluctance to use other people’s resources and to share their own. The following participant’s quotation illustrates how MOOCs facilitated a shift in academics’ perceptions of their teaching practice and built a readiness for change:

I think that’s changing. I think that probably is changing and I think that’s partly perhaps changing through initiatives like the MOOC initiative, where people are getting more familiar with creating resources than sharing more widely amongst peers. And also, more used to practicing educational activity in a very open space. So, I think perhaps that is changing. (Participant 10 p. 7)

Furthermore, challenges in encouraging staff to share arose, although one participant noted a phenomenon of sharing at a departmental level, but not more broadly, and considered how to leverage the sharing already happening: “I think in essence, any sharing and open educational practice would probably be within the course level, maybe department and faculty level, within the university level, before it became open” (Participant 7, p. 3).

Many participants noted that “awareness is the root problem” (Participant 1, p. 7). In short, academics do not know about OEP. For many universities, workshops were a recognisable method to address this gap. Workshops can be used to engage academic and professional staff and build the necessary foundational skills and baseline awareness levels to produce OER. Commonality in workshop curriculum was found through the inclusion of Creative Commons licencing and copyright, and redesigning course and/or unit offerings to include more OER.

Most participants noted the importance of integrating OEP concepts in existing workshops as a method to introduce OEP and demonstrate alignment with business-as-usual tasks, especially those related to learning and teaching. For example, one participant noted that embedding openness within workshops helped raise awareness without adopting “an evangelistic approach” (Participant 5, p. 10):

I will run workshops on copyright, for example, which contains information about creative commons licensing. Our educational developer runs workshops and consultations in curriculum development and learning design development, which also has information and support around open learning design and open curriculum ... We don’t have specific workshops on open education, but it is interspersed through our teaching and learning framework and support framework, if that makes sense. (Participant 5, p. 9)

Open education requires the support of many and varied parts of the University. Most institutions did not have a dedicated OEP-related role; instead, participants described multi-disciplinary collaborations as essential for driving an open education agenda. The following participant’s quotation illustrates the mix of professional expertise necessary for a university to support open educational practice: “there are the library staff available for research or consultation with open educational resources. The university has employed learning technologists to support video creation and other technologies for them to use, for teaching and learning” (Participant 7, p. 3).

The participants’ discussions on open education focused on the development and/or use of OER. Open education as a broader conceptual framework, encompassing not just OER but pedagogy, practice and scholarship, received limited attention during the discussions with participants. Consequently, most of the participants tended to focus on the role of the library in supporting academics in finding OER and/or

understanding and applying copyright. The following quotation from a librarian (Participant 6, p. 4) illustrates this: “we might direct our academics to go find some (OER) or tell them ... some of the other places to find OERs (sic). But other than that, we might help them implement or embed it into their curriculum or their learning management systems”.

The implications of the universities not officially or formally incorporating open education as part of the core business processes was discussed by several participants. The following participant’s quotation illustrates how the lack of a codified, larger-scale project has an impact on providing an intentionally designed support model with committed resources, such as allocation of staff time not being able to be prioritised or maintained:

You can never give people enough time to help them and engage them in the development of open educational practices. We run workshops, and those workshops elicit a little excitement, but there really needs to be more follow-up ... and so being able to engage and get it recognised as a key part of support here has been a challenge. (Participant, 5, p. 8)

This raises the issue of appropriate staffing levels to ensure business-as-usual engagement with OEP. One participant noted that an increase in copyright staff was a “key achievement” (towards realising greater use of OER):

I think there has been a move to make some of the content more open, that’s been generated by our teaching staff. Having this copyright librarian position is a really good step forward in helping our academics understand how or what they need to do, to make that content open. So, I think that’s been a really, really good step forward for the university because there wasn’t really support in that space for our academics. (Participant 3, p. 4)

Participants also spoke of open education as an enabler for their universities to re-conceptualise business models and the design of educational products and pathways. The following comments illustrate how openness was supporting the engagement of new cohorts of students while also cultivating new revenue streams:

One key purpose was around creating new ways for articulation and pathway development, and we see OER and open education practice as a method to develop those new articulations and pathways and to engage in new markets for student and new revenue streams as well. (Participant 5, p. 8)

When reflecting on openness as a driver for transforming educational design, participants discussed the presence of a person within the university who had strong ideas about what must change. For example, participants noted the role and influence of a senior leader within the institution advocating for a new educational model or approach. One in particular (Participant 5, p. 4) described this advocacy and its effects: “About five years ago we ha(d) a change of Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor ... very supportive of the integration of OER. And this is probably one of the reasons why it has been integrated to the extent that it has.”

However, educational change driven by the passion or vision of one advocate also has its risks:

The person who got the funding in the first place ... then moved to (another) university. So, ... when they left, the theory and the practice was not embedded here. So, there isn’t a really strong sense of engaging in open educational practice, in an institutional wide sense. (Participant 8, p. 6)

Specifically, this quote provides direction for institutions to distribute open education leadership as a mechanism for sustainable practice.

Educational design

Open educational practices have also informed an emerging form of educational design. Contemporary good practice in learning design embraces student-centredness, authentic assessment practices and alignment between the curriculum and industry. In a post-COVID environment, inequalities of access and participation have been exacerbated with many institutions rapidly shifting to online learning modes (O'Shea et al., 2021). Concurrently, Australian practices incorporating OER (especially open textbooks) have emerged, whether at the institutional level – or nationally through the Council of Australian University Librarians Enabling a modern curriculum projects (Davis, 2022). These projects have individually and nationally concentrated on the transformative power of OEP to support student and staff critical engagement, digital literacies, collaboration, sharing and participation during a time of increasing pressure on the Australian higher education sector.

Participants described how educational design practices at the individual and institutional level were evolving due to greater engagement with open education. The following participant's (Participant 10, p. 8) quotation illustrates how open education is fostering collaboration and partnerships in educational practice: "And it makes the design of teaching, learning design ... more of a collaborative and collective partnership process, rather than a very individualised process. So, I think it implies quite a significant amount of change to traditional academic practice".

Building on this point, the following participant's comments highlight how open education helps to break down boundaries by fostering transformative collaborations between universities, and across nations:

Open educational practice is extremely collaborative and it's very much cutting across or moving across institutional boundaries. So, a lot of our work has also been done in collaboration with colleagues in other universities, not just in Australia but overseas. (Participant 9, p. 3)

In addition, participants spoke of open education as enabling a move towards an educational design that backgrounds the provision of facts and content, while foregrounding supporting and empowering active learning experiences. This emerging approach to educational design brings a shift in roles and responsibilities, as the academic becomes more the informed guide and less the holder of knowledge and/or the provider of approved content. Students are provided the opportunity to exercise choice and pursue topics of personal interest. This point is illustrated by the following participant quotation:

The open ... course that I'm responsible for ... is based around discovery pedagogy. So, it is like a framework with very clear guidance, with directions, with a clear sense of where students can direct their enquiries, but it does not contain things like a book or readings or a set of modules or anything like that. It contains a structure, it contains e-tivities or electronic activities ... with direction for students to focus on areas of interest to them. (Participant 9, p. 5)

As a further example, this next participant's comment shows how open education can facilitate an approach to support educational design that enables greater student success through more active learning and sharing power between the academic and the students to create a more collaborative space:

It was a complete transformation of the course. And it included peer led teaching, the open access textbook, a range of different interactive opportunities within the class ... and shown a significant increase in the marks achieved by the students, an increase in the number of students who've done the course who've gone into honours and an increased retention of students. (Participant 2, p. 6)

Although one participant noted their university does not formally promote open education, they observed that open technologies were nonetheless being used by some academics as part of their educational design and delivery to provide innovative learning experiences to help students develop literacies for working more openly. The following participant quotation illustrates this point:

Units are ... accessible only to enrolled students. So, for the most part, those units are not promoting open educational practices. They might have little glimmers of open educational practice through the use of resources that are open ... through encouraging the students themselves to create materials that may have value for future students, that can be openly licenced. And obviously that has the advantage of making clear (to) the university how that material can be used, but also serves to introduce the student to the idea of becoming creators of content, and openly sharing them into the open environment. (Participant 8, p. 5)

Discussion

This paper has presented findings from the second stage of a larger project aimed at investigating the current status quo of OEP in Australian higher education. The first stage involved a desktop audit of all 40 Australian universities, while this study included in-depth interviews with representatives from ten universities. Together, the two stages reveal that Australian universities are beginning to engage with and adopt OEP, which represents progress compared with findings from previous Australian studies, for example, Bossu et al. (2014). There seems to be a greater understanding about OEP, OER, open licenses and MOOCs than before. MOOCs in particular seem to have been a catalyst for change by playing an important role in raising awareness of open content in general. They seem to have also provided opportunities for innovative learning design practices, which in turn have led to an increase in OEP engagement and helped practitioners to become more comfortable in sharing their content beyond their classroom.

The findings of this study further reveal that some institutions have adopted and funded strategies to increase OEP uptake and engagement, including small internal funding grants for learning and teaching projects and for the development of open textbooks. Others have taken the opportunity to include OEP into some of their teaching practices while undertaking major curriculum reviews, while others have included OEP within general learning and teaching capacity-building workshops. These strategies are important steps to embed open practices slowly into the day-to-day learning and teaching activities, so transition to full adoption of OEP is transformative but also seamless. These strategies were certainly not in place in previous Australian studies.

These institutional strategies seem to have been well received by their staff, as participants noted the impact gained of embedding open practice within other 'business as usual' training or workshops, as a vehicle to foster learning without adopting "an evangelistic approach". Staff capacity-building was also achieved by providing access to support. In the current study, this support was the remit of librarians, learning designers and copyright officers, echoing findings internationally (Colson et al., 2017), which have shown an alignment of OEP with content creation, educational design and legislative compliance respectively. These sections – library, copyright support, and learning and teaching design – need to invest in mediating artefacts (Conole & Ehlers, 2010) – for example, library guides, tutorials, help guides and personal networks – to effectively demonstrate that OEP will be supported and (as previously stated) "permitted" within the institution.

However, the lack of OEP-related policies remains an issue, based on participants' responses. The existence of such policies could validate practitioner activity and decrease hesitation and fear of (mis)using OER and open licences. Most institutions reported a policy for commitment to open access research outputs, without a counterpart for learning and teaching content. The disconnect and tension between research and learning and teaching is exacerbated by policy environments that support open access publishing as an extension of traditional research processes (without a need to rely on approval for publication), yet educational content necessitates an approval process in some Australian universities. In many institutions, education and research are separate branches with different processes, funding schemes and stakeholders (Schuwer & Janssen, 2018), and the ownership of the intellectual property policy has implications for learning and teaching practices. This points to a need for a wider discussion to position both core activities of the institution, and whether delineated processes are required.

OEP awareness raising has been a key recommendation in almost all previous Australian projects. Wills et al. (2016) concluded that the “OEP movement may have not succeeded yet in positioning the institutional and national benefits of open education in the minds of teachers, management or government” (p. 12). In this study, participants flagged “awareness raising” as a continuing fundamental challenge for obtaining traction for open practice in their institution. Participants also reported that OEP is still perceived as the purview of staff who are “innovative” and is perceptually linked to high levels of technological confidence, paradoxically positioning openness as an exclusive practice. Visible endorsement from senior leadership was perceived as effective, pointing to the need for advocates to communicate OEP as an approach to meet institutional objectives and secure commitment from key leadership in the institution. The accompanying warning regarding sustainability and diffusion of practice from participants arose from circumstances wherein “champions” had left the institution and OEP activity had effectively ceased. Australian universities would do well to establish communities that advocate and promote OEP as a shared responsibility to avoid similar outcomes, pointing to the importance of support mechanisms.

In contrast with American university tuition costs, Australian university tuition and related student loans create less financial pressure to incentivise academic staff’s uptake and awareness around OEP. Whilst the financial pressure on Australian higher education students is increasing (Universities Australia, 2018), a commitment through policy and strategy remains absent at most institutions. Likewise, many institutions have embraced diversity and inclusion, committed to reconciliation actions plans and advocate working in partnership with First Nations communities, and the government’s widening participation agendas, but the connection between OEP and these commitments has yet to be made broadly. Educational design influenced by openness shares power and responsibility with students (Woodward et al., 2017), enables greater representation and localisation of knowledge (Hays & Mallon, 2021), can improve access to higher education (Jenkins et al., 2020) and offers opportunities for socially just community engagement that align with existing institutional aims and strategies. The potential of OEP to meet these targets in an authentic way that empowers students has yet to be comprehensively realised by the sector.

Conclusion

This study is a point-in-time description of Australian universities experiences with OEP. Overall, Australian universities need to improve awareness and understanding of OEP, especially as it relates to achieving current strategic objectives related to student participation, whilst ensuring that support mechanisms (including staffing, recognition and policy) are purposefully financed. Participants indicated individual experiences with OEP, with some institutional initiatives and processes to accompany and even legitimise practice (such as policy clarity or enactment of new policy). The benefits of OEP, especially related to student learning, and opportunities for collaboration between academic staff have been realised and evaluated, though usually at a single unit or course offering level. The common theme throughout all facets of this research has been a lack of connectedness, both within the institution, and sector wide. Underpinning any attempt to connect and encourage OEP is the need for robust data collection and shared evidence-based practices that would make open education a viable, credible and sustainable practice in Australian higher education.

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