

Forum Insights

REPORT OF RESEARCH PROJECT 1

Learning resources and open access in higher education institutions in Ireland

This *Forum Insight* summarises the key aspects of a project which examined learning resources and open access in higher education institutions in Ireland. It will be of relevance to teachers, managers and students.

Introduction

As part of Forum's commitment to leading and facilitating evidence-based enhancement, it has funded a series of *Focused Research Projects* which were conducted over a six month period by higher education researchers in partnership with the National Forum. The projects were designed to provide a quick snapshot of the key issues and findings on a number of nationally important themes. Eight successful projects were awarded funding by the Forum following competitive selection, based on international peer review in December 2014. Ethics approval for the projects was granted through the higher education institutions involved and the National Forum's Research Ethics Committee.

Overall this work has started to create a body of targeted knowledge that can be used quickly to guide future practices in teaching and learning. It also shows institutions working together and in partnership with the Forum to use research to improve approaches to the learning experience.

Learning Resources and Open Access

This project, a national analysis, set out to examine strategies for sharing open educational resources (OERs) to enhance teaching and learning in Irish higher education. Drawing on the collective expertise and experience of colleagues, with on-going involvement in open educational resources, the study explored current practices and potential approaches for future sharing of resources. The experiences gained through the National Digital Learning Resources (NDLR) project, were also considered along with options for the management and discovery of digital teaching and learning resources through local repositories. As part of the exploration focus groups were held with selected groups of academic, library, educational development and educational technologists.

What did the study involve?

Three research questions were developed as follows:

1. How are open educational resources currently being used and shared in Irish higher education institutions and what can we learn from such experiences?

2. What do we know from the National Digital Learning Resources (NDLR) experience about how OER might be shared, utilised, maintained and developed?
3. How can the digitisation of teaching and learning resources be ingested, managed and discovered using local repositories?

A review of the research literature on OERs, a survey of academic staff in relation to OER usage and focus groups with academic staff, educational technologists and repository managers were undertaken. Both survey participants and focus group participants were self-selecting. The project study sample is not, therefore, necessarily representative and should not be taken to support generalisations about the whole sector (pp7-9).

What does the study tell us?

The study provides a good introduction to the topic of open educational resources and the Irish context. From the data gathered it gives a considered account of some of the key issues which influence the sharing of open educational resources based on 192 survey respondents and 35 focus group participants.

Context of OERs

- Open educational resources (OER) represent a relatively new field, about 12 years, and there are many definitions for OER in use. The UNESCO Paris Declaration (2012) describes OER as open licensing which makes publicly funded educational materials publicly available for access, use, and redistribution (p12).
- OER is part of a wider canvas which involves open educational practice, and open pedagogy, Diana Laurillard's work (2012) brings these practices together with OERs into a learning design framework which allows teachers to show and share good learning design and open resources to enhance the learning process (p18).

Irish Context

- Ireland had a National Digital Learning Resource (NDLR) project between 2004-2012 to allow educators to develop, share and distribute OERs. An overview of the NDLR project showed mixed responses in terms of the creation of OERs, the use of repositories, and the community of practice structures developed to support OER activity. These examples had also been mirrored in similar international projects such as the UK Jorum project (p31).

What has been learned from the Irish experience?

- Issues raised by the NDLR experience include, whether: OER initiatives should focus on sharing resources or on supporting collaborative development of learning resources? Advances in social media and online resources freely available remove the need for a national OER service? Support and reward models to support OER creation, use and reuse may be required? (pp30-34).
- The results of the academic staff survey, as part of this research, revealed that 47% had awareness of OERs, 64% had never or only rarely used OERs. Key factors in use and uptake for those staff that did were; quality, time and relevance of materials.
- Institutional repository use was low, with at least 60% indicating that they had never used a repository. Reasons revealed a lack of awareness of the existence of institutional repositories and understanding of repositories (pp82-83).
- For those staff engaged in using OERs, important reasons for sharing of resources were facilitating student learning and collegiality. The biggest reason for not sharing resources related to the protection of rights and work. When asked about the factors most important in selecting resources, quality and relevance were cited as being of equal importance. Quality-related issues and time were identified as affecting the use of OER in teaching (pp50-58).
- Inputs from institutional repository managers highlighted the importance of quality assurance and peer review of OERs in helping to define the scope for repositories. In addition they also suggested that the context of OER's in terms of the history of their creation, use and evaluation would be important for users. OERs could have particular value in supporting research-led teaching, which all institutions are committed to strategically, for which the identification of key performance indicators to measure progress can be challenging (pp101-105).

What does the study recommend?

- Resources for developing structures to curate OERs for use across the sector will need careful consideration. Particular considerations in this regard include the software and archiving processes required for multi- object OERs (which have been used, re-used and re-versioned collaboratively) and accommodating the sometimes annual activities of staff updating and revising OERs.
- Given the relative newness and experimental nature of OER activity, a wider vision for development based on a resourcing strategy informed by quantification of OER activity is needed to make progress. Institutional systems for quality and review of OERs and the decision-making process to support implementation are also important factors (p108).
- A number of practical steps are recommended to develop the use of OERs in Ireland, these include:
 - o awareness raising;
 - o professional development for academic staff;
 - o capturing excellent OERs and
 - o continuing relevant and targeted research to support particular OER initiatives.(pp109-113)

Further information:

if you would like to learn more please see: <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/t-l-scholarship/national-forum-research-projects/>