

## **Launch of the Open Educational Resource University**

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### ***OERs and MOOCs in a time of economic crisis*** ***(The Open Educational Resources university: reflections of two well-wishers)***

Sir John Daniel & Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

#### Abstract

Higher education faces challenges on many fronts in this time of lingering economic crisis characterised by high youth unemployment. We explore the challenges facing the US public university system as an example. The over-hyped and fast-evolving phenomenon of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) may help higher education find solutions to some of its problems. We congratulate the OERu consortium on its work and encourage it to sharpen its focus and to learn from other initiatives in open education.

#### Introduction

It is an honour to have been asked to speak and officiate at this launch event for the Open Education Resource university. I have prepared these remarks with my colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, former head of higher education at UNESCO. Our title is *OERs and MOOCs in a time of economic crisis*. We have sub-titled it: *The Open Educational Resources university: reflections of two well-wishers*.

We both spent much of last year working to make a success of UNESCO's World Congress on OER, notably by organising six pre-congress policy forums in all parts of the world. We used these forums to develop, in a highly consultative and iterative manner, the Paris Declaration on OER. Naturally we were delighted when, in appreciation of the extensive global involvement in the drafting of the Declaration, it was adopted by acclamation at the Congress.

The key clause in the Declaration, the punch-line if you like, is the statement encouraging the open licensing of educational material produced with public funds. We are pleased that governments are already taking notice and, very appropriately, the jurisdiction in which we are holding this event, the Province of British Columbia, has decided to offer students free online, open textbooks for the 40 most popular post-secondary courses. As more governments and institutions follow this example it will augment the pool of quality OER in ways that are particularly helpful to the member institutions of the OERu consortium and the students who will study with it.

On a personal note I observe that the OERu weaves together in a remarkable way the various strands of my 40-year career in open education. It began in 1972 with the

conversion experience of an unpaid internship for three months at the UK Open University. I came back to Canada, in T. S. Eliot's words, 'no longer at ease in the old dispensation'.

I soon joined Québec's Télé-université and spent my subsequent career helping to develop open universities, writing about distance learning and trying to embed the spirit of open learning wherever I could. Thanks to a great collective effort by people like you this 'new dispensation' of open education is making steady progress. Also on a personal note I am most gratified that five of the member institutions of the OERu consortium, including our hosts, Thompson Rivers University, have seen fit to confer honorary doctorates upon me during my career. I thank them warmly.

Our remarks will be in three parts. First, we will demonstrate how timely the OERu initiative is by recalling the major challenge facing most contemporary societies and their impact on conventional higher education. We shall take the public system of universities in the US as an example. Our intention is not to pick on America. First, however, this system has good data, and second, if the strong and widely admired US system of state universities is in difficulty, the situation in the rest of the world must be bleak.

Second, we shall say a word about MOOCs. Although they predate the concept of the OERu it is really only in the last 18 months that MOOCs have become a media sensation. What are the implications for OERu?

Third, we shall reflect, as well wishers, on the challenges you face as you implement this important concept and offer some advice garnered from our joint experience in higher education.

#### Economic crisis and youth unemployment

These are difficult economic times in much of the world. Their worst manifestation is the unemployment of young people. Earlier this year *The Economist* newspaper devoted a major article to this topic. It gave some figures: this chart shows the number of millions of youth who are neither employed nor in education or training. The world total is nearly 300 million – or one quarter of the world's youth. Yet at the same time employers complain that they cannot find graduates with the right skills and competences. There is a serious gap between education and the job market.

The conclusion of *The Economist* article was:

*"Policymakers know what to do to diminish the problem – ignite growth, break down cartels and build bridges between education and work. New technology gives them powerful tools too."*

What are universities doing about this huge problem? Clearly, what I called 'old dispensation' is struggling.

We illustrate the challenges facing conventional higher education with some facts about the US public university system. This great national system of state universities faces serious challenges. This compilation of the issues is from Academic Partnerships, a company that helps universities go online to increase the scale and quality of their programmes. We note in passing that Academic Partnerships has recently published, in English and Chinese and as an OER, a *Guide to Quality in Online Learning* that is available to you at this meeting.

We summarise the situation of the US public university system in 13 points – an unlucky number for a bad situation.

1: Enrolment declined last year for the first time in 15 years – down by 2.3%. That means a quarter of a million fewer students.

2: Tuition fees have increased at more than five times the inflation rate for 30 years. This has been an accelerating process.

3: Adjusted for inflation, the average middle-class family earns \$400 less than it did in 1988. But:

4: In 2012 universities raised fees by a record 8.3% making a 46% increase over the last ten years. Of course, one reason for this is that:

5: State funding declined a record 9% in 2012, down 30% per student since 2000. For that reason:

6: Tuition fees as a share of total public university revenue rose 62% over the last decade. Increasing fees is the easy way to try to balance the books.

7: In June 2013, the total of discounts given for tuition fees exceeded the total amount paid by parents. This is a 50% reduction from posted rates. Nevertheless:

8: Student debt has doubled since 2007. This is a now huge factor in the US economy because:

9: Student loans have topped one trillion dollars, more than all the credit card debt, total car loans or total household debt in America. Furthermore:

10: This year default rates on student loans reached a high of 17%. In the US a student loan is one form of debt that you cannot wipe out by declaring bankruptcy. Some students will drag this debt to their graves. Because:

11: A record percentage of recent college graduates are unemployed when they leave college, 53.6%. Therefore to save money:

12: 45% of recent college graduates are now living at home with their parents. For graduates aged 18 to 34 the numbers living at home have grown from 13% to 21% in the last decade. And to cap it all:

13: 46% of US college students do not graduate, although the extra income you get by having a degree is higher in the US than in almost any other country.

This suggests that higher education should respond by giving students more flexibility, cutting the cost of study, and giving them access to useful knowledge and skills for the labour market. This may mean shorter programmes delivered in different ways.

The challenge, which the OERu is addressing head-on, is to combine the credentialing responsibilities and capacities of the ‘old dispensation’ of higher education with the ‘new dispensation’ of open education that gives people better and cheaper routes to the knowledge required. But make no mistake that credentialing is still vital. This basic point is nicely captured by a quotation from Brown and Duguid’s book, *Universities in the Digital Age*, which Irwin DeVries cites in his recent study of the use of OER.

*They write: “in our highly commodified society it is naïve to believe that access on its own is enough. Those who have the label but not the experience present one problem. But those who might have the experience but not the label face another. Experience without a formal representation has very limited exchange value – as those whose only degree is from the university of life well know.”*

Let us not forget that for most people the primary product of higher education is qualifications. Those with degrees can talk airily about the rich intellectual discourse on campus but for those without them credentials are the name of the game because society values them.

### MOOCs

Which brings us nicely to MOOCs. We still find it curious that in 2012 the news media hailed MOOCs as a revolution in higher education although the key function of universities that we just mentioned, credentialing, was absent. That is changing of course, and we wonder if, had the OERu been conceived last year, you might have called it the MOOCs university? Whatever the case, we believe that higher education proceeds by evolution not revolution. How might MOOCs help it evolve in useful directions?

OER were the long fuse that detonated the MOOCs explosion. Most MOOCs are basically OER with some computerised assessment questions. You know the history.

The University of Manitoba, Canada, first used the term MOOC for a course *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* in 2008. Two thousand members of the public took the course free online. But MOOCs really made news last year when elite American universities like Harvard, Stanford and MIT joined in.

We use the first MIT course, *Circuits and Electronics*, as an example. It was massive, attracting over 150,000 learners. It was open, meaning free and without admission requirements. It was online worldwide and attracted learners in 160

countries. You might question whether it was really a ‘course’ because if you passed the computerised tests you could buy a certificate of completion but you could not receive credit for use to study at MIT. This, of course is where the OERu comes in.

That was last year. Since then there has been a stampede to join the mooing MOOC herd. This is a copycat phenomenon. Few universities have a clear idea of why they are offering MOOCs. And with so many providers piling in to offer them, the definition of a MOOC has become much more fuzzy. One joker remarked that the meaning of every letter in the acronym MOOC is now negotiable.

But in terms of the global economic crisis, this diversification is good. As MOOCs multiply they may provide some answers to the mismatch between higher education and the job market. Many of those taking the first MOOCs already had university degrees, so they provided informal professional development for well-qualified people. MOOCs have also done a great service by making open, distance and online learning respectable.

But two more things are needed to make MOOCs more useful. First, we need MOOCs in employment related topics at all levels. Second, people need credible qualifications for successful study. Both are happening. The range of topics is diversifying fast and the qualifications that define the output of higher education are being put into new bottles. Short online courses – six weeks or so – are more successful than longer ones.

New types of awards, such as Open Badges, are emerging. These badges, which are placed on the Web, carry more information about what was studied and how it was assessed than the usual university transcript. They allow learners to get recognition for short-cycle studies on economically relevant topics and to aggregate a series of badges into a conventional qualification such as a degree or a diploma.

### Whither OERu

So, to conclude, what is our advice for OERu?

At the risk of sounding cheeky, your first task is to prepare more fully for the elevator test. This is to explain convincingly what the OERu is about in the time it takes to go up a few floors in a lift.

We find it useful to place approaches to higher education in one of the quadrants on this diagram. One dimension is who determines the content. The other is who guides the student.

In the conventional ‘closed’ model, top right, the institution decides on the content and teaches it in lectures. In the most open model, bottom left, the students determine the content, guide themselves through it, and then seek recognition for their learning. Until recently we thought that the OERu was an attempt to take advantage of OER to implement the Empire State College model on a global basis. We put this model at top left because the student determines the content and the institution provides guidance. The ESC slogan ‘my degree, my way’ captures this nicely.

As we now understand it, the OERu does not go that far but provides a menu of courses – or parts of courses - derived from OER and gives guidance to the students taking them. There’s nothing wrong with the model because you’ve got to start somewhere, but it does need explaining to people.

Our other comment is about the balance between caution and audacity. Clearly yours is a cautious model. The member institutions are dipping their toes into a new stream of higher education through the community service function. The advantage is that you don’t lose much if there are few takers. The snag is that this model doesn't capture the public imagination in the way that, say, the Open University or the Western Governors University did.

The Western Governors University, in particular, may have lessons for you. Unlike the Open University, which was born almost fully formed, the Western Governors University has undergone considerable mutation, while holding fast to its basic principle of competency-based education. I am sure the OERu will evolve too.

Meanwhile, we wish you every success and congratulate you on striking one more blow for open education.

Thank you.

#### Reference

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