



## Editorial of the Special Issue Open Educational Practices in Higher Education

*Editorial del número especial: Prácticas educativas abiertas  
en educación superior*



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The notion of openness is not new in education (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). However, far from remaining stable, its meaning has varied widely over the years and across geographies (Peter & Deimann, 2013), resulting in a complex and multi-layered concept (Bozkurt et al., 2023). Like any other realm of society, education is defined by different kinds of boundaries that control access to learning opportunities as embodied in content, people, spaces and other resources and infrastructures. Individual organisations devoted to the delivery of teaching, and education systems at large operate on the basis of both tangible and invisible borders. The doors of educational organisations have typically remained closed to those not enrolled as students. Furthermore, curricular demarcations and intra-organisational boundaries provide some students with access to certain teaching and learning experiences while excluding others. Closure is based on rather heterogeneous criteria, including age, gender, socio-economic background, prior qualifications, competencies and other personal attributes. At the same time, such boundaries are determined by conventions, values and the resources that societies decide to invest in education.

Education, particularly Higher Education (HE), has traditionally been reserved for the elite. Indeed, widening access to HE is a relatively recent phenomenon that only started to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the idea that universities should go beyond teaching and research to fulfil their role in society became firmly established. The so-called ‘Third Mission’ (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020) encapsulates all other activities to strengthen and improve the links between universities and the social contexts and communities in which they are embedded, including university extension as expressed in lifelong learning and continuing education offerings. Such a redefinition of HE can be interpreted as *opening up* institutional structures and resources that used to be inaccessible to a larger population.

Another way in which HE increased its openness to society during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was through the proliferation of distance universities, as epitomised by the UK Open University (est.1969). The model, aimed at widening participation by catering for populations traditionally excluded from HE (e.g. mature students in employment) thanks to higher flexibility and use of information and communication technologies, was followed by similar institutions all over the world: Athabasca University in Canada (est. 1970), UNED in Spain (est.1972), FernUniversität in Hagen in Germany



(est.1975), UNED in Costa Rica (est.1977), Open University of the Netherlands (est.1984), Indira Gandhi National Open University in India (est.1985), etc.

In the transition from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the meaning attached to the term ‘open’ shifted to be primarily concerned with notions of intellectual property and authors’ rights. In 1998, David Wiley proposed the Open Content licence, and in 2001, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) launched OpenCourseWare (OCW) as an initiative to release online teaching and learning materials created by its faculty members. The term “Open Educational Resources” (OER) was coined at an event organised by UNESCO (2002) to focus on the impact of OCW in developing countries. Since then, it has become a core element in UNESCO’s policy efforts in the field of education, which culminated with the adoption of a recommendation at its General Conference (UNESCO, 2019), regarded as the “first international normative instrument to embrace the field of openly licensed educational materials and technologies in education” (UNESCO n.d.). UNESCO has also published numerous materials intending to foster the use and sharing of OER, including guidelines aimed at educators, institutional leaders and policymakers (UNESCO & COL, 2012; 2019). The European Commission has created a framework to support open education in HE (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2016), while private funders, such as the Hewlett Foundation, have also established programmes devoted to this area.

The initially narrow focus on content associated with OER has gradually expanded to cover a broader range of educational activities, as signalled by a shift to Open Educational Practices (OEP) (Koseoglu & Bozkurt, 2018). Beyond the production and (re)use of resources, OEP also covers aspects such as the implementation of open education infrastructures (Decuyper, 2019; Marín & Villar-Onrubia, 2022; Villar-Onrubia & Marín, 2022) or the adoption of innovative pedagogical models that respect and empower students as co-producers in their lifelong learning paths (Andrade et al., 2011). Most notably, Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) have become integrated into the regular operations of many universities worldwide. They can be regarded as open education experiences, even in those cases when they are not OER strictly speaking (Stracke et al., 2020). Other pedagogical innovations, from embedding Wikipedia-editing tasks into the curriculum (Petrucco & Ferranti, 2020) to initiatives aimed at supporting the emergence of peer-to-peer community-centred open learning (Damasceno, 2023), have proliferated over the last two decades.

Overall, OEP have become globally institutionalised across the HE sector through policies (Atenas et al., 2019; 2022) and infrastructures (Marín & Villar-Onrubia, 2022). However, despite a few prominent cases, the sustainability of open education initiatives has proved challenging (Tlili et al., 2023), and early promises of a radical democratisation of access to HE have largely remained unrealised. Indeed, research on OEP has matured over the last few years and increasingly included critical perspectives that reveal some of the unintended consequences and tensions that may arise in connection with OEP (Bayne et al., 2015; Cronin, 2020; Funes & Mackness, 2018; Veletsianos, 2021; Villar-Onrubia, 2022).

With this special issue, we provide an international perspective (with research from the Global North and Global South) on the diversity of forms and shapes that OEP may take across different HE contexts.

The first two articles in the issue ([Supporting open education practice: Reflective case studies from the University of Edinburgh](#) and [Impact of Open Educational Practices in Higher Education: A Literature Review](#)) provide a micro and macro view, respectively, of the range of practices and types of initiatives that may fall under the notion of open education in HE. Lorna Campbell, Melissa

Highton and Ewan McAndrew present the case of the University of Edinburgh as an exemplar of full integration of OEP into the core of institutional values and operations. The authors showcase examples of inspiring practice in the context of open education (e.g. co-creation of open books, evaluation of content in Wikipedia), drawing on different kinds of data to evidence positive impact. The authors highlight the importance of the University of Edinburgh's strategic commitment to open education for its sustainability, creating a permissive open policy environment, and launching a number of core services that provide digital capacity to facilitate engagement with OER among students and educators. They argue that such engagement is vital to effectively supporting OEP at an institutional level and providing recommendations for other HE institutions.

Alejandro Fernández-Pacheco García presents in his manuscript written in Spanish a literature review, following a descriptive-retrospective approach that reveals key aspects and findings that emerge from research on this topic ([Impact of Open Educational Practices in Higher Education: A Literature Review](#)). Looking at 24 papers published between 2018 and 2022, he identifies noticeable patterns, such as the prevalence of quantitative methods and the interest in researching OEP in interdisciplinary contexts. The themes addressed by these investigations include the relationship between the implementation of OEP and the improvement of students' learning processes, the pedagogical equity promoted by these practices, the gap between their benefits and viability, the support for a more active role of students, and the need to strengthen teacher training in digital education competences. Additionally, the author stresses the need for such capacity building efforts and a more innovative organisational approach of universities to effectively support OEP, as well as political and strategic barriers.

The majority of articles in the issue focus on the intersection between OEP and the training of educators. Javiera Atenas, Leo Havemann, Virginia Rodés and Manuel Podetti analyse academic development opportunities on open data literacy, delivered to university educators and learning and teaching support staff in Central and South America between 2016 to 2022 ([Critical data literacy in praxis: An open education approach for academic development](#)). Their study revealed an overall improvement among participants in terms of both data literacy and their ability to engage in OEP. After discussing some of the key aspects that contributed to a positive evaluation of those training courses, the authors outline open pedagogical strategies that can be used to develop critical data literacy by addressing data inequalities, data justice and civic engagement.

Carolina Álvarez Loyola and Diana Margarita Córdova Esparza contribute a literature review in Spanish on the use of nano (as opposed to massive) open online courses for the delivery of online training aimed at supporting the development of digital teaching competence ([NOOCs for developing digital skills and virtual training: a systematic review of the literature](#)). Drawing on the results of five studies conducted in Spanish-speaking countries, published between 2017 and 2022, the article concludes that so-called NOOCs can be useful for that purpose, especially in relation to digital content creation, information literacy, communication and collaboration skills. Likewise, they argue that NOOCs can be an effective way of fostering continuous professional development and highlight the importance of strategically planning the design of learning resources to enable the achievement of intended learning outcomes.

Two of the articles focus on the preparation of school teachers. Janaina de Almeida Sousa and Tel Amiel present a study carried out with teachers in basic education and HE teacher educators in Brazil ([Open Educational Practices from the perspective of open educators: Contributions to teacher professional development](#)). Through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, they analysed participants' perceptions of the design and implementation of OEP, examining what it means to be an 'open educator'. The results point to a vision of OEP as a set of diverse participatory

activities that promote collaboration, sharing and balance in teaching/student relationships, as well as the freedom and autonomy of learners. Moreover, participants' perceptions show that the development of these practices is intrinsic to the attitude of the educator, goes beyond OER and is an evolving process in multiple dimensions. The authors identify pedagogical dimensions to explore for the development of OEP.

Michael Paskevicius surveyed students in an initial teacher training programme in British Columbia (Canada) on their adoption of OEP and understanding of open education concepts ([\*Empowering Future Educators: Leveraging Openness by Design when Integrating Technology in Teacher Education Programs\*](#)). The study reveals a limited understanding of most concepts related to openness in education, while the most familiar elements are open textbooks, OER, open access research, and open licences. Even though many recognise their relevance, few of the research participants knew how to practically embed them into their teaching practice. The article concludes by claiming the need to develop OEP abilities as part of initial teacher training programmes and stresses the need for educational design and, in particular, openness by design as a starting point.

Laura Fernández-Rodrigo, Arnau Erta-Majó and Eduard Vaquero Tió describe in their manuscript in Spanish the interdisciplinary design of a transmedia educational object aimed at supporting the continuing professional development of educators as an example of open education initiative ([\*Design and interdisciplinary production of an open Transmedia Educational Object for lifelong learning of educational practitioners\*](#)). Following a design-based research approach based on the TPACK model, the study looks at the production of Teenpods materials at the Universitat de Lleida (Spain). The initiative involved producing a series of OER amenable for individuals, for self-directed learning development purposes, or by educators in a context of facilitated learning that encourages coproduction and reuse/remix.

Finally, the special issue also contains an article concerned with fostering of research on OEP, namely by means of an international network established to support early-career researchers working in this area. Francisco Iniesto, Rebecca Pitt, Carina Bossu, Rob Farrow and Martin Weller present the results of an evaluation of the Global Open Education Student Network (GO-GN) ([\*Community, Fellowship, Openness: Supporting Early Career Researchers through Open Educational Practices\*](#)). Drawing on qualitative data, they evidence the impact of the programme on participants and conclude with some recommendations and learnt lessons: the need to introduce flexibility, openness in communication (sharing research ideas and feedback), relationships of trust between fellows and in the nature of the network itself, as well as consistent support to fellows through meetings with the team.

As illustrated by the diversity of approaches and topics covered in this special issue, OEP have permeated HE in multiple ways and with varying levels of institutionalisation and success. Capacity building initiatives on OEP aimed at educators, both at pre-service and in-service stages and across all educational levels are highly relevant to a meaningful adoption of such practices. In this regard, universities play a central role as the institutions usually responsible for designing and delivering the qualifications required from educators to enter the profession. Furthermore, OEP are not only important as a topic in this regard but also for the design and delivery of educators' capacity building itself.

In terms of future research and development around OEP, beyond initiatives concerned with generic pedagogical training, it would be important to understand the specificities of OEP adoption in subject-specific contexts. For now, this has remained largely absent from the literature. Likewise, research on OEP comes primarily from English-speaking regions in the Global North, and one of the

aims of this issue was to offer a broader perspective. However, more research is needed to shed light on which OEP are meaningful and appropriate in other cultural contexts. While it is not our intention to gather OEP recipes' to be replicated in other contexts, the articles in the issue highlight elements and factors that contributed to positive outcomes and should be taken into consideration by educators and institutional leaders interested in open education.

Bottom-up efforts by educators are very important, but without institutional support and the willingness of decision-makers to embrace open education principles, the reach and sustainability of OEP can only be limited and subject to the interest of specific individuals. In any case, rather than pursuing openness for its own sake, it is essential to define the role that it is expected to play in relation to the mission, vision and core values of HE institutions. Openness in HE is only worth pursuing as long as it helps universities fulfil their social responsibility, acting as an enabler of the commitment of HE to the common good (Manzano-Arrondo, 2012).

We would not like to conclude this editorial without sincerely thanking the authors and reviewers for their valuable contributions to this special issue. We hope that the authors' contributions are of interest to the *Edutec Journal* readership and that they encourage further reflection on OEP, as well as new research and practices.

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