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DESIGNING OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES CURRICULUM FOR VIRTUAL MOBILITY. BREAKING THE WALL

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ABSTRACT

Due to the awareness of Open Educational Resources (OER) as one of the main opportunities for learners to take advantage of free resources, six doctoral students from Latvia, Lithuania, Italy, Portugal and Spain formed a team focused on the importance of the international cooperation on this field. Virtual Mobility (VM) is a useful learning tool in what concerns to information and communication technologies to create learning environments that can join people from different countries. The current paper analyses the benefits and challenges of OER in VM, presents the results of focus group discussions within the team pointing out the success factors and barriers to introduce OER in VM curriculum development, and represents and analyses the VM curriculum designing case on the topic "Open Educational Resources" prepared by the interuniversity team.

KEYWORDS:

Virtual Mobility, Open Educational Resources, Curriculum design

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are rapidly changing the world and the way how people all over the world undertake many activities, such as working, communicating, learning, etc. Reacting to those global changes the aims and content of education, along with the attitude towards knowledge and the means of acquiring it, as well as technologies and channels used have changed. Prensky (2011) speaking about education in the 21st century based of belief, that we must educate people to be better equipped to face the challenges of the world they will live in – that is, a world far different than Yesterday's. Technology has an important place in Prensky's (2011) vision for the future, with technology being regarded not as dominate but as a support- technology as a foundation for education.

ICT contributes to break barriers between elitist and often for broader society unavailable knowledge, thus making the education process and knowledge accessible for everyone, irrespective of their age, gender, place of residence or state of material welfare. In 1998 UNESCO "World declaration on higher education for the twenty-first century: vision and action" named most important features of modern higher education, mainly focusing on two of them - the potential and the challenge of technology and sharing knowledge and know-how across borders and continents. Both of them nowadays are not only theoretical topics but are already becoming real in Higher Education (HE) learning environment based on OER (D'Antoni& Savage, 2009; OECD, 2007; UNESCO/COL, 2011 and new learning possibilities provided by VM. New technologies offer opportunities to innovate on course content and to widen access to HE. Higher education institutions are already creating new learning environments, ranging from distance education facilities to complete virtual institutions and systems, capable of bridging distances and developing high-quality systems of education, thus serving social and economic advancement and democratization, as well as other relevant priorities of society, while ensuring that these virtual education environments, based on regional, continental or global networks, function in a way that respects cultural and social identities (UNESCO, 1998).

New ICT possibilities change the concept of education and educational resources - from locked to open. The term OER was first introduced in 2002 and was promoted in the context of providing free access to educational resources on a global scale (UNESCO, 2007). OER are teaching and learning materials that are freely available online for everyone to use, whether by instructors, students or self-learners. Online resources provide next 21st century opportunity in HE – virtual mobility. Virtual mobility is defined as set of information and communications technology supported activities, organized at institutional level, that realize or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and/or learning. ICT play an important role in developing internationalization of learning experiences. Therefore, the 'territory' of e-learning may grow significantly in the next years, especially in HE, where the Bologna Process of convergence and creation of the European HE Area requires progressive integration of HE Institutions and students' mobility. Virtual mobility cannot be reduced to studying at a distance education program provided by a foreign institution; nevertheless, some of these elements should be contained in VM: transnational design of the program (virtual seminars or full courses); transnational networks and/or learning resources; cross-border recruitment of students; intensity of communication flows.

VM and OER are both emerging areas, lacking applied research, namely, considering common approaches for curriculum design and planning. The aim of this research is to discuss the factors influencing designing OER curriculum for VM, starting from a case study developed by an international team composed by six doctoral students from Latvia, Lithuania, Italy, Portugal and Spain. The current paper is organized according to the main objectives of the research developed:

1. To describe the benefits and challenges of the use of OER in HE;

2. To introduce international collaborative VM curriculum development case to develop OER competence;

3. To identify success factors and barriers to introduce OER in VM curriculum development.

The methodology used during the research was the analysis of scientific literature and focus group interview.

1. BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF THE USE OF OER IN HE

The use and development of OER – defined as “digitized materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research (...) [including] learning content, software tools to develop, use and distribute content, and implementation resources such as open licenses” (OECD, 2007, p.11) – is challenging HE globally (UNESCO/COL, 2011; D’Antoni & Savage, 2009; OECD, 2007). The need for disseminating OER use and development in education is visible in the recent European strategy “Rethinking Education” (European Commission, 2012), as well as in world surveys on the topic (COL/UNESCO, 2012; Hylén, 2012). Several benefits are attributed to OER, namely, its potential to promote internationalization, to enroll new publics (e.g. remote areas), to reduce costs or increase quality (UNESCO/COL, 2011; Wiley & Green, 2012). Nevertheless, OER is an emerging area facing relevant challenges (COL/UNESCO, 2012; Hylén, 2012), recently summarized in the Paris Declaration (2012), such as *awareness raising*, strengthening research, promotion of “strategic alliances for OER” and “development and adaptation of OER in a variety of languages and cultural contexts” (Paris Declaration, 2012, p. 2).

One way to promote the access of HE students in different countries to OER training courses is to establish a virtual mobility VM curriculum. “Virtual mobility refers to students and teachers in higher education using another institution outside their own country to study or teach for a limited time, without physically leaving their home” (Virtual Mobility for Teachers and Students in Higher Education, Kaunas, 2011). Experiences linking OER and VM, particularly, within European Higher Education Area are emerging, namely, promoted in the scope of European projects. In Lifelong Learning Program “ERASMUS multilateral projects” the use and development of OER is strongly recommended in two of its recent funding priorities “Strengthening quality through mobility and cross-border cooperation (priority 3)” and “Knowledge Alliances (priority 4)”. Projects and experiences founded seem to evidence a promising and diverse relation between OER and VM, focused on educational competences, contents and methodologies, as well as in broader aspects of the HE systems’ organization. Some examples are provided to illustrate such evidence.

Mileva et al (2012), for instance, developed a project focused on VM using OER as curriculum materials for “linking the educational contents with the industrial real-world, and (...) promoting cooperation between universities and enterprises” (p. 348). Teixeira et al (2012) resorted to OER in a VM setting as way of addressing the sustainable development issue, suggesting the such international ICT-based learning scenarios allow the development of “transboundary competence”. Such is defined as the ability to overcome boundaries between different perspectives. De Kraker, Lansu & van Dam-Mieras (2007) authors of this concept, underline the advantages of ICT-based learning environments, when compared to the traditional ones: “in traditional learning environments, group work on projects in realistic, cross-boundary contexts is difficult to realise. It requires bringing students from different disciplinary, national and cultural backgrounds repeatedly together at the same time, at the same place (...) computer-supported collaborative (CSCL) learning environments provide an innovative and almost ideal solution to this problem, as the modern ICT-tools they exploit allow time and place

independent communication and group work" (p. 112).

VM seems to be an ideal scenario to promote the dissemination, awareness raising and discussion and around OER in HE, a process already started in virtual universities that "should take place at the international level to leverage expertise and experience from around the world" (OECD 2007, p. 121). An inspiring example is provided by VUSSC - Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth of Learning, created in order to "serve the small states of the Commonwealth¹, using existing structures and capacity" (Lesperance, 2013, p.7) of ministries and HE institutions. Resorting to OER materials and curriculum, VUSCC allows consortium partners to equally produce and consume educational content, in a networked environment, that tries to combine flexibility and commons standards.

Another example regarding the definition of standards that become possible the recognition of OER used amongst different HE institutions was the major outline of OERTest Consortium (Camilleri et al., 2012). This European project considered that "OER module-based learning, a similar situation to physical Erasmus exchange arises and the 'home' university must be assured of the quality of the OER Module based education that the student will receive. (...) In fact, quality assurance may be easier for OER module-based study than for traditional study, as all the curriculum will be online and open to scrutiny. The assessments will be "known' and the standard to which they are marked can be quality assured" (Camilleri et al., 2012, p. 35). In such perspective, OER are given multiple roles in VM (e.g. in Erasmus), notably, as course content, as quality assurance mechanism and transparency tool between partner institutions providing a course, and as instrument for recognition of acquired learning.

Other recent projects continue to focus on recognition and overcoming barriers experienced in OER and VM in higher education. *VM-PassProject* (2013)² promoted by the University of Leicester is also focused of recognition, aiming to "implementing recognition of virtual mobility and OER learning through a learning passport [...] especially where it happens cross-border, the project aids the harmonisation of the European Higher Education Area" *Ubicamp Project – Integrated solution to virtual mobility barriers* (2012)³, promoted by University of Oviedo "attempts to respond to the need to overcome the usual barriers for virtual mobility (VM) within HEIs in the EU". It aims to create a framework "that defines the basic features of a Virtual Mobility experience (organizational, technological, pedagogic and didactical, & cultural)", and to create OER aligned with such framework.

The diversity of examples found seems to confirm that European Higher Education is aware of importance of both VM and OER. Most examples were found in institutions already working on open and distance learning (e.g. Open Universities and Virtual Universities). Institutions mostly relying of face-to-face modalities are starting to embrace such challenges.

The literature points the importance of enhancing the connection between VM and OER, considering advantages in internationalization, cost and barrier reduction, broadening of education practices and training experiences, sharing and creation of collaborative knowledge, as well as formal aspects such as quality assurance and learning recognition. The properties of OER – editable, translatable and adaptable to different technical formats – make these resources adequate for collaborative VM settings. On the other hand, these two different areas share similar challenges, providing alternative approaches for openness and flexibility in HE, particularly, concerning new teaching and learning methods, resources and training offer, in a "transboundary" paradigm.

This is the rationale behind the course "The use of OER in Virtual Mobility", to be described in the following section.

1 "States with Population of less than 4.5 million; specific cultural context; vulnerability" (Lesperance, 2013, p. 6).

2 http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/projects/copy_of_vm-pass

3 <http://www.ubicamp.eu>

2. INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE VM CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT CASE TO DEVELOP OER COMPETENCE

Case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Researchers have used the case study research method for many years across a variety of disciplines. Social scientists, in particular, have made wide use of this qualitative research method to examine contemporary real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods. Researchers (Noor, 2008; Smith, 2010) define the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. Critics of the case study method believe that the study of a small number of cases can offer no grounds for establishing reliability or generality of findings. Others feel that the intense exposure to the study of the case biases the findings. Some dismiss case study research as useful only as an exploratory tool. Yet researchers continue to use the case study research method with success in carefully planned and crafted studies of real-life situations, issues, and problems.

Doctoral students from 6 European universities, namely, University of Aveiro (Portugal), University of Pavia (Italy), University of Latvia (Latvia), University of Oviedo (Spain), Jagellonian University (Poland) and Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania) gathered in Lithuania to attend an Erasmus Intensive Program (IP) training course in June 17 - 28, 2013, in five stages (a common empirical training design is presented in Table 1). The training course was organized during the first week of the doctoral school, following TeaCamp project methodology for international multilateral cooperation for VM curriculum designing. One of the interuniversity teams, consisted of 6 doctoral students, prepared the VM curriculum designing case on the topic "Open Educational Resources", using Moodle virtual learning environment (version 2.5, internet address <http://www.teacamp.eu/moodle2>), presented and analyzed in this paper.

Table 1. Empirical training design of case development and analysis for virtual mobility curriculum designing for "Open Educational Resources" module

	1 ST STAGE	2 ND STAGE	3 RD STAGE	4 TH STAGE	5 TH STAGE
AIMS	Scientific literature overview and analysis with the group	Definition of learning outcomes for the joint study module "OER" for virtual mobility mode	Curriculum planning for learning outcomes (methods and assessment methods and tools)	Analysis of the process using focus group interview method with the doctoral students working on the virtual mobility module	Analysis of the content of the focus group interview data, and preparation of the research report
RESULTS	virtual mobility defined and analysed as a concept using mindmap tools	learning outcomes defined in a group of international doctoral students for international virtual mobility implementation	learning resources developed and uploaded at Moodle virtual learning environment	all participants in the working group interviewed on the process, success factors and results they achieved	interview and focus group data interpreted and conclusions on success factors for virtual mobility curriculum designing identified



RESULTS	Search, selection and analysis of educational policy, juridical documents and scientific literature				
	Professor presentations and interventions used to facilitate virtual mobility curriculum designing				

The course curriculum content (resources) was developed using Moodle virtual learning environment. Each participant prepared 1 topic corresponding to 1 learning outcome which had to include compulsory readings, a student’s guide, activities, recommended resources, and communication tools.

Table 2. Open Educational Resources Module structure

PARTICIPANT / INSTITUTION	LEARNING RESOURCES AND TOOLS	LEARNING OUTCOMES COVERED
Liene Valdmane, University of Latvia	1. OER definition and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify OER definitions and backgrounds List different existing OER types
	2. OER benefits and challenges and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> List OER benefits List OER challenge Express a self-positioning about OER challenges, supported with theoretical basis
Dalila Coelho, University of Aveiro	3. OER models and repositories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain existing models of OER adoption/creation. Locate OER repositories
Elena Alchieri, University of Oviedo	4. State of art of OER in our countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the state of art of OER (initiatives, policies, programs, courses, repositories, main authors...) in Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Spain and Lithuania Identify OER in order to build a SWOT analysis about Italian, Latvian, Portuguese, Spanish and Lithuanian present situation Contribute to a comparative vision about OER state of art in Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Spain and Lithuania
Concetto Daniele Galati, University of Pavia	5. Use of OER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> List the quality criteria for evaluation of digital resources for education Describe and identify the steps and concerns to attend in different types of OER use
Gintaras Arbutavicius, Vytautas Magnus university	6. Implementing OER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Select OER for use in pedagogical practice Select a practical context for implementing OER
Sofia Nogueira, University of Aveiro	7. Evaluation of OER implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share the video recorded during practical implementation. View videos recorded by other students during practical implementation. Provide peer-feedback on videos presented and suggestions for further improvement. Discuss future suggestions on OER use for pedagogical purposes with the group.

“Open Educational Resources” module curriculum content was developed. It was divided into 7 parts, each one taken under development by individual teacher, however, all learning outcomes for the module were consistently agreed among themselves.

The general introductory part for overall study in the module was presented, namely:

1. Student guide considering the information sessions, responsibilities and assessment strategy.

2. Technical support forum.

3. News forum.

4. Chat room (for synchronous communication and help).

5. OER dictionary.

Module calendar was enabled for time schedule implementation and deadlines, and synchronous and asynchronous meetings (Figure 1).

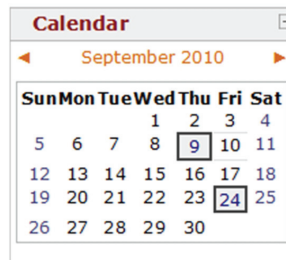


Fig. 1. Calendar tool in Moodle VLE

Mind mapping tools, dictionary filling in tasks, video records, video lectures, collaborative working documents and assignment tools were implemented for interactive and collaborative learning.

The OER course was planned to have ECTS, as it is included in teacher training courses. For that, it will be taken into account video lecturing and expected time spent with individual and group work after classes.

The team developed 6 learning outcomes which students had to acquire during this course. It elaborated 7 sub-modules, during which these learning outcomes were to be reached. Each sub-module was conceived to last about 2 hours in presence each complemented with distance. The team tried to define diversified learning scenarios, activities, tools, and assessment strategies. The course curriculum content was developed using Moodle virtual learning environment. Each sub-module includes information regarding to: main topic, teacher/university delivering the lesson, learning outcomes, main curriculum content, essential resources, additional resources and the roadmap of the activity proposed for each session.

Partners agreed that each one would be responsible for, at least, one weekly session. Sessions were organized in a synchronous (video conferences organized each Friday 10 a.m. CET) and asynchronous way (records of the videoconferences were available for students who could not participate in the videoconference).

This course addresses students attending OER course at formal university studies. English will be the language used in the course, therefore being required that students master it.

3. SUCCESS FACTORS AND BARRIERS IN VM CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

One moderator worked with the team involved in designing the OER VM curriculum and interviewed each one, in order to identify success factors and barriers to introduce OER in VM curriculum development.

The research took place in VMU distance learning classroom, as a round table discussion, after attending two weeks of a doctoral school, resorting to TeaCamp project methodology for international multilateral cooperation on VM curriculum designing.

The group of participants had to answer six questions, concerning to: positive and negative aspects in the process of designing VM curriculum; the identification of the process phases that required the most efforts from the group; the identification of phases where the team reached an agreement more easily and with more difficulties; and suggestions concerning the changes in the process of VM curriculum designing.

The positive aspects of designing VM curriculum process pointed out were: i) collaboration between very different persons with different background and experience; ii) opportunity to share points of view; iii) absence of fixed structure of course designing and opportunity to better incorporate their own backgrounds; iv) reaching the agreements for each phase between all members of the team; v) developing intercultural communication skills and; vi) the possibility of starting a new activity from scratch, regarded as useful for personal development.

As negative aspects, the participants mentioned: i) initial different individual approach because team members came from different backgrounds and different levels of domain in OER and VM issues. Therefore, some team members didn't know enough about OER to design a VM course from scratch and; ii) dividing the team into the groups and working separately after receiving assignments...

The first barrier for the team was to establish the course structure. Participants had different perceptions on OER because most of them were not connected to this field. Therefore, firstly, the team had to reflect upon the course designing, then to reach an agreement. Team members suggested that before creating a new joint course, each member should have previous knowledge on the subject.

The team easily reached an agreement when defining the learning outcomes but experienced difficulties in activities and assessment strategy designing, mostly because of the complexity involved in those issues and the lack of time to discuss it.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The literature points the importance of enhancing the connection between VM and OER, considering advantages in internationalization, cost and barrier reduction, broadening of education practices and training experiences, sharing and creation of collaborative knowledge, as well as formal aspects such as quality assurance and learning recognition. The properties of OER – editable, translatable and adaptable to different technical formats – make these resources adequate for collaborative VM settings. On the other hand, these two different areas share similar challenges, providing alternative approaches for openness and flexibility in higher education, particularly, concerning new teaching and learning methods, resources and training offer, in a “trans boundary” paradigm.

2. The current case study stresses some ideas evidenced on the literature on VM course designing, notably, in what respects common difficulties and potentials, connect with collaborative work in international settings. It seems to be essential to improve the methodology for international multilateral cooperation for VM curriculum designing, namely, how to enhance each participant and respective institution's participant in a team in charge of designing a VM course. The case study evidences that would be desirable to explore and discuss participants' backgrounds in an early stage of the process, in order to better understand the team's profile and individual difficulties and potentials. This first step would be particularly important for task allocation, guaranteeing a balance between participants' interests and competences.

3. Leadership and coordination is another important question. In current course, no formal leader was assigned in the team. Although the participants considered necessary to have a person

or an institution to conduct the overall planning process and to connect the contributes from all participants.

4. Collaboration between people with different cultural, geographical and academic backgrounds seems to promote both potential drivers and barriers in VM curriculum development. Promoting collaborative work between all team members along aVM course designing is crucial, in order suppress weaknesses and promote mutual learning and growth.

More research is needed in what concerns VM course design with multidisciplinary teams. Although it is important that all team members (specially, teachers and designers) master the course topic as well the VM tools used (e.g.Moodle), perspectives from different profiles can enrich the approaches adopted, as well embedding VM course in real institutions.

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SANTRAUKA

Remdamiesi atvirųjų švietimo išteklių teikiamomis galimybėmis besimokantiesiems naudotis laisvai prieinamais mokymosi ištekliais, šeši doktorantai iš Latvijos, Lietuvos, Italijos, Portugalijos ir Ispanijos įvertino tarptautinio bendradarbiavimo šioje srityje reikšmę. Virtualaus mobilumas yra naudingas mokymosi instrumentas, leidžiantis žmonėms iš skirtingų šalių naudotis informacinių ir komunikacinių technologijų pagalba sukurtomis mokymosi aplinkomis. Šiame straipsnyje yra analizuojami atvirųjų švietimo išteklių virtualaus mobilumo srityje teikiami privalumai ir iššūkiai. Straipsnyje yra pristatomi fokus grupės diskusijos rezultatai, kurie atskleidžia atvirųjų švietimo išteklių taikymo sėkmės veiksnius ir kliūtis projektuojant virtualaus mobilumo mokymo turinį. Taip pat yra analizuojamas virtualaus mobilumo mokymo turinio rengimo atvejis dalykui "Atvirieji švietimo ištekliai", kurį parengė skirtingų universitetų atstovų grupė.

PAGRINDINĖS SĄVOKOS:

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