

Access under siege: Are the gains of open education keeping pace with the growing barriers to university access?

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Abstract

Traditional and affordable access to a university education is under siege from all sides. National realpolitik and global economic downturns have driven open education into the mainstream to stand against educational elitism, the growing digital divide, and to support the core values that give education its fundamental credence as a human right. Indeed, open is good—open with measurable impacts is even better. In the final analysis, the future of open education is at a crossroads that must be driven by those core values that define education as an essential human right with a commitment to expanding access and strengthening academic quality.

Keywords: Open education, access, distance learning, quality assurance, OERs, human rights

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

(Dickens, 1859: 1)

Indeed, one can imagine Charles Dickens echoing these words in a commencement address to the leadership, faculty, staff and students at the Open University UK or Stanford University rather than as his epoch opening to *A Tale of Two Cities*. And, like the storming of the Bastille, higher education 2012 appears to be under siege from all sides.

University leaders blame the politicians; the politicians blame the economic crisis; the public blames politicians and university leaders alike; and students are left to ponder as they rally at the administration building or text in protest on Facebook . . . how can I afford (how can I not afford) to get a university education. Indeed, it is the best of times, it is the worst of times.

In an era of unprecedented growth of open education systems, content and innovation, many educators and policymakers argue we are on the brink of a brave new world for education. Today, the rhetoric is pervasive—open educational resources (OER), open source, open systems, open content, open universities, openness, open entry and open access—all purport to lead to the promise land. What is exciting is they just may get us there (Butcher, Kanwar & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2011; McAndrew, 2010; Olcott, 2012).

Moreover, the ubiquitous growth of technology has accelerated this seemingly infinite potential for expanding open education. Indeed, the progress and the potential for open education are undeniable and yet one has to ask if, in fact, we are fast approaching a crossroads where the gains

are being outpaced by the realities of a highly complex, economically and politically diverse global landscape (McGreal, 2012; Olcott, 2012).

At the heart of the open education movement is a synergy of core values that reflect the human embodiment of the educational enterprise—access, equity, equality, human rights, self-determination, diversity, tolerance and the pursuit of knowledge (Cape Town Open Education Declaration, 2007; Peters, 2008). All of these, individually and collectively, contribute to a common belief in the power of education to transform lives, communities and nations. Today, perhaps more than at any other time in history, the preservation of these values is essential to the future of education.

Although it is beyond the scope of this commentary to trace the evolution of the diverse components and related movements in open education (e.g., open and distance learning (ODL), OER, open courseware, etc.), it is important to recognize that these quasi-separate and yet interconnected parts have resulted in what today might be described as the ‘conceptual open education repository’ (McNamara, 2012). Each of these has made invaluable contributions to the open education movement. Indeed, defining openness and open education needs to be viewed along a *continuum* with varying degrees of openness and access to knowledge as the guiding core principle.

Despite the progress of open education over the past four decades, the recent trends that are re-shaping education are placing these values at risk. Politicians and policymakers alike are driving economic and social agendas that whilst politically expedient are slowly eroding the essence of these values. Paradoxically, many of these public servants are the politically correct voices for open and distance learning as the panacea for resolving the immense challenges facing education.

Indeed, this dichotomy is not lost on the general public who rightly see this rhetoric as nothing more than a euphemism for catering to the elite who can afford an education; a digital divide that is fictitious, and the premise that education as a fundamental human right is simply good political manners. As Mark Twain so eloquently stated, “of course truth is stranger than fiction . . . fiction has to make sense”.

This article will examine selected myths and realities at the centre of this challenge to open education within the context of these emerging political and economic realities. The article will provide a pragmatic assessment of how open education advocates can position themselves as the future “voices for access and innovation,” particularly for the higher education sector. All that is at stake is the core values of the educational enterprise and the future of open access for the next three decades.

Myth 1: Access to higher education is a public good

Reality: Higher education as a public good is under siege

Indeed, let’s get the heart of the matter straight away. Higher education’s inherent value as a public good is dying. Perhaps a slow death, perhaps with diluted diversions to keep the public bewildered and confused . . . yet the trumpets are fading with the voices of political advocacy into the abyss. A public good provides affordable and accessible benefits to the majority of people in any society. This does not mean a public good is necessarily free, simply affordable to the majority of people.

As government funding to higher education continues to decline, as fees increase, higher education as a public good is slowly becoming a euphemism for *accessible and affordable to the elite who can afford higher education*. It is clearly a very difficult time for the majority of aspiring students and for public universities where the political rhetoric leaves us perplexed and certain that this decline must have “much to do about something” beyond pure politics. The result is the erosion of higher education as a public good.

The paradox for open education is recognising that the advocacy and implementation of open systems, open universities, open content, open courseware, and open sources, is not synonymous with equitable and equal access to higher education. Moreover, despite the expansion of open education to provide greater access to higher education, these gains are being undermined and neutralised because the field is unable to keep pace with the economic and political barriers impeding access to the academy. The profession must come to grips with this reality. Open education is under siege because the front doors to accessible and affordable higher education are slowly closing.

Why is this important? Smith and Casserly (2006), cited in McNamara (2012), describe OER analogous to the *world's knowledge as a public good*. By extension, this means open education and technology in particular provide access to this public good to be shared, used, and reused by anyone, anywhere, anytime. Conversely, the powerful idea of knowledge as a global public good suggests that those without technology access will join the ranks of the growing “digital divide community of non-users” whilst others will be excluded from the club due to their incapacity to pay the exponential cost increases for a university degree. Open education is one of the great equalizers for higher education access and yet all its achievements are slowly being eroded away right in front of our eyes. If you can't get on the playing field, it doesn't matter how much potential you have.

So where does this leave us? The open education movement (1970–2012) has, in fact, has been the primary catalyst for promoting expanded access to higher education for women, underserved minorities, and working adults for the last four decades (UNESCO/COL, 2011); Open universities have expanded access across the globe and the OER movement is having significant impacts on education in Sub Saharan Africa, Asia, and other regions of the world where people are facing exponential economic, political, social and cultural instability (Butcher, Kanwar & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2011).

Moreover, the use of open and distance learning to expand access to underserved populations has been critical to growth of open education in both developing and developed nations, and OER access and use has been accelerated because ODL systems afford ready access to information, knowledge, and education. At the same time open education continues to open doors to higher education for many, competing economic and political priorities are closing these doors for others. Access, equity, and equality to higher education are being left at the doorstep. This will be a dilemma for educators and policymakers for years to come with no easy solutions in sight.

Myth 2: Open and distance learning costs less than traditional higher education

Reality 2: Costs vary across ODL and traditional HE programs

As we turn back the clock twenty years and recall the pervasive rhetoric that open and distance learning was not only going to be cost effective (compared to traditional campus-based instruction), it was going to generate unparalleled profit margins for college and universities. Of course, the promise didn't live up to the hype. In fact, once we learned the labour intensive nature of developing high quality courses by faculty, the profession tip-toed back to normalcy.

At the same time, this was a period of rapid expansion for distance learning worldwide, particularly for traditional colleges and universities. Unlike focused and proven open universities, the majority of higher education institutions then and now are dual mode institutions offering primarily campus-based instruction supplemented with ODL programs often in selected, high demand disciplines. The ODL programs for dual mode institutions tend to be in high demand areas that have high market potential to make money.

Today, the vast majority of open and distance learning programs are offered at comparative pricing to campus-based degrees. This does, however, vary across institutions. Moreover, highly

prestigious institutions offer fully online undergraduate and graduate programs, including doctoral level studies at high cost to the student. This should come as no surprise to any experienced ODL professional.

Open and distance learning was never about promoting low cost higher education and whilst having many “open” characteristics, ODL was never really viewed in the context of “free” or even low cost often associated with some components of the open education movement. In fact, most ODL institutions argue the cost of their degrees are “value for money” given the flexibility, student-centred focus, and convenience afforded students who have work, family, and community responsibilities.

Varying components of the open educational movement, however, are facing the same challenges faced by distance learning institutions in the mid-90s. The fundamental question centred around how to develop a sustainable business plan. We all recall distance learning fees, technology fees, and hidden costs to the point that students became very frustrated with our inability to provide budgetary consistency in many ODL programs. Welcome to the future, what goes around stays around.

Today, the OER movement is facing a similar challenge, perhaps even more complex. Why? The common OER business case is developed without a sustainable revenue stream. Most OER initiatives have been funded by foundations, government agencies, international organisations, corporations, grants, and in-kind contributions by universities who desire to be at the forefront of the field. Regardless how you analyse this, there is no current sustainable business case for OER (De Langen & Bitter-Rijkema, 2012; Olcott, 2012). Without question, this is the most critical challenge facing the OER movement.

On the plus side, many open and distance learning enterprises have developed sustainable and equitably priced ODL programs that have employed a variety of scalability strategies for serving large numbers of students. Despite the unfounded criticisms from “traditionalists” about academic quality and packaged higher education, many open and traditional universities have established sound ODL business enterprises.

In sum, open education, particularly ODL, is on sound access, programmatic and financial footing. There are challenges ahead. The OER business case issue looms large on the open educational landscape that may require advocates to articulate the value benefits of OER to students, faculty, and global society that justifies continuous, sustainable funding as part of the institution’s annual budget.

Myth 3: Open and distance education is universally accepted

Reality 3: What goes around stays around—Quality critiques of ODL

From now until the end of time, the open education field will never achieve 100% adoption by faculty, students, politicians, policymakers, and academic “traditionalists.” I accepted this two decades ago recognising that it is human nature to preserve what is most comfortable, no matter how obsolete. Some faculty (and some students) just have no interest in openness, distance learning, OER or how fast a camel can run in the desert.

We should respect this view by faculty members and move on. Besides, it has been shown time and time again that changing faculty practice is most influenced by their peers. In most instances, faculty don’t care who you are, how many ODL conferences you go to each year, how many articles you’ve published, and the list goes on.

What they do care about is how their ODL participation can save them time, support their research, improve their teaching skills, and support career advancement within the parameters for which they are evaluated for promotion and tenure. If you think you can win them over with the sole attributes of technology, it would be prudent for you to look at this through a new lens.

Ambitious politicians whom are novices to open and distance learning will inevitably target the lack of quality in open and distance learning. Perhaps we should ask them about the lack of quality in traditional courses taught face-to-face everyday on every campus across globe. And like clockwork these attacks by politicians and policymakers seem to surface every time there is an election.

A list of 20 important factors about the efficacy of ODL is not needed here. All that is needed is a focus on the attributes of ODL associated with effective teaching and learning—about that learning experience for the Y generation—about access for underserved and working populations. We won't win all the battles but at least we keep our arguments on sound ground as educators.

The road ahead for open education, ODL and OER

The most important reality is this: the open education movement is expanding access to high quality postsecondary education across the globe. This fact should be applauded, funded, and promoted in all corridors of power from government to business and international associations to one room school houses in Sub Saharan Africa. The only thing greater than the challenges facing higher education is the opportunities that will emerge over the next decade largely due to the promise of open education.

Indeed, the road will not be easy. As we have seen, traditional and affordable access to a university education is under siege from all sides. National realpolitik and global economic downturns have driven open education into the mainstream to stand against educational elitism, the growing digital divide, and to support the core values that give education its fundamental credence as a human right.

In summary, there are many issues that will define open education over the next decade (Olcott, 2009). On the horizon, however, there are two which are essential for the profession to address. First, is our responsibility to stand against the fundamental closing of the main doors to higher education access. It presents a moral dichotomy for the profession; if you can't keep the primary doors to a university education open, then there is the danger that the open education movement will become part of that closed system with only the illusion of "genuine open access" remaining (McGreal, 2012). Open education is about open access for the masses, women and men, rich and poor, black and white, young and old. If this is lost global higher education will face immense challenges in the future. We must embrace this commitment to access and equity for open education to open transverse new boundaries for global higher education. Indeed, it's not just the right choice for our future students, it's the only choice (Vincent-Lancrin & Pfothenauer, 2012).

At a more pragmatic level, the profession must be diligent in addressing the challenge of creating sustainable business cases models for OER (De Langen & Bitter-Rijkema, 2012; Olcott, 2012) that are practical, funded from multiple sources, and supported for their direct impacts on the teaching and learning paradigms. *Indeed, open is good—open with measurable impacts is even better.*

We also need to go beyond thinking outside the box—we need to think like there is no box. We need to foster open imaginations. We need to open discussions about *mega-OER repositories* that bring together consortia of universities, associations, corporations, foundations museums, and other users and providers of open educational resources. There is power in numbers and the business case dichotomy facing OER accentuates the need to bring partners to the table that can build sustainable long-term business and educational strategies (Conole, 2010; Conole & Ehlers, 2010).

In the final analysis, the future of open education is well positioned to enhance educational access to aspiring students worldwide. Indeed, open education's most important contributions to education as an essential human right embedded in equity, access, and quality lie ahead.

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