Article 3 -
Facilitating lifelong learning with OpenU

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New educational approaches with OER

Changes in society and in the education market mean that higher education institutions in various parts of the world are switching to new educational approaches in which OER play a major role. So as to give an idea of what such a new approach involves, this article describes the Dutch Open University’s “OpenU”. With OpenU, the Dutch Open University (OU) aims to assist knowledge workers in flexibly developing knowledge and skills at academic level and keeping them up to date. This approach arises from the necessity of facilitating lifelong learning and the realisation that the learning requirements of knowledge workers cannot be satisfied solely with courses and programmes. In this article, Wilfred Rubens and Anda Counotte deal with the background, content, and target groups for OpenU.
Investing in knowledge, investing in learning

In today's post-industrial network society, lifelong learning is necessary for an individual's professional development, for the competitiveness of work organisations, and for society as a whole. According to Sloep and Brouns (2011, p. 16), economic considerations are not the only reason to invest in knowledge; there are also democratic reasons, for example. They find that society is becoming increasingly complex and imposes ever-higher demands on the level of education of the citizen. Once gained, diplomas cease to be valuable within just a few years because different knowledge and skills have become relevant.

Lifelong learning: the Netherlands is failing

Unfortunately, it is often only lip service that is paid to the urgency of lifelong learning. As the Chairman of the Executive Board of the Dutch Open University, Theo Bovens, put it at the opening of the academic year in 2008: "Everybody embraces lifelong learning, but when I look back at the initiatives of the past few years, I find that in the Netherlands we are mainly good at lifelong drivelling."

Generally speaking, the Dutch education sector is failing as regards lifelong learning. In 2008, for example, the OECD found that, compared to other countries, there were relatively few students aged over 30. In that year, 2.9% of Dutch adults were enrolled in courses or programmes, as opposed to the OECD average of 5.6%. In the United Kingdom, the corresponding figure was 15.6% and in Sweden 13.5%. The reasons for this low participation level were expressed as follows by the European Commission in 2003: the Dutch education system is insufficiently open and insufficiently flexible. As a result, it is insufficiently able to key into the needs of the individual learner.

The Dutch Open University (OU) has been a major player in the field of lifelong learning for a number of years now. It increasingly offers flexible education in the form of courses, Bachelor's degree and Master's degree programmes not only via distance learning; it is also currently developing short programmes (for example "Computers and Communication Networks", with an estimated duration of 10 months) and "Certified Professional Programmes" (for example "Management and Organisation of Operational Processes", with a duration of six months at a study load of 8 hours per week). The OU also offers services to assist students in the learning process, for example speed reading, mind mapping, and time management. So as to promote lifelong learning, the OU was also the first Dutch university, in 2006, to start using Open Educational Resources (OER). A selection of courses are made openly available free of charge on the Internet. The OU also publishes articles, blog posts, and videos (for example via iTunesU) as OER. Even so, the OU believes that it must become even more flexible if it is to play a greater role in the area of lifelong learning.

Learning networks as an alternative

Lifelong learning does not take place, however, solely through courses, training sessions, and programmes. Sloep and Brouns (2011) show that the learning needs of adults differ from those of young people. In their view, traditional learning models from initial education are unsuited to satisfying the learning needs of adults. Traditional models are directed, after all, at objectives that are no longer relevant to adults, for example socialisation or the acquisition of certain basic competencies. Moreover, there are hardly any uniform learning needs among adults, meaning that greater flexibility is necessary. The highly formal nature of traditional education, with the associated bureaucracy, is also an obstacle to adult participation in educational activities. Finally, Sloep and Brouns assert that traditional educational models ignore technological innovations that play an essential role in the day-to-day life of the modern knowledge worker. When it comes to facilitating learning in the knowledge society, they see the future particularly in learning networks. A learning network is then an online social network designed to support conscious, goal-oriented learning by adults (Sloep & Brouns, 2011, p. 25).
Taking account of varied learning needs

The necessity of facilitating lifelong learning and the realisation that the learning requirements of knowledge workers cannot be satisfied solely with courses and programmes form the basis for a recent initiative by the Dutch Open University: OpenU. This is a system in which the OU aims to meet the varied learning needs of adults via a range of web-based services. A “learning infrastructure” is being developed within OpenU that can meet all the needs within the spectrum of informal, non-formal, and formal learning in a wide range of contexts of working and learning. For the present, OpenU is aimed only at the disciplines of Education and Training and Computer Science, which each have their own portal within OpenU. A decision will be taken at the end of this year as to what other disciplines will be implemented within the system and how. There are different emphases for each discipline within the framework of OpenU.

Collaboration is essential

One crucial factor is to realise that collaboration and knowledge sharing are of fundamental importance for enabling lifelong learning within the network society. The OU, for example, provides only a limited range of courses and programmes. In order to meet the range of learning demands expressed by the varied group of knowledge workers, the OU will therefore need to collaborate with its partners. In the post-industrial network society, the strength of an organisation is to a large extent determined, after all, by the strength of its network. OpenU is also the platform within which the OU collaborates with other parties.

Content of OpenU

OpenU comprises a great variety of content, which also differs from one faculty to another. In this article, we will discuss a number of components (see also Rubens, 2011). In the first place, there are blog posts. Arrangements have been made for staff of the participating faculties to regularly blog about their discipline. With their blog posts, they increase the transparency of their discipline, help interested parties focus on matters that are actually important, and reinforce their position as an expert.

The second component that I wish to explain consists of “topic communities”. Each discipline has a number of important themes that occupy a central position within the profession for a long period. Within OpenU, information, discussions, and learning activities are arranged within “topic communities”. Within the discipline of Education and Training, there are some fifteen different topics which will be made openly available in the course of 2011–2012. One of the topics that is already active concerns learning analytics, with information about, for example, a learning analytics framework within which six critical dimensions are distinguished. Mobile technology is currently central to the discipline of computer science. A symposium on that topic was held on 12 November 2011, forming the starting point of a community dealing with the topic.

A third component is the “search and invite” function. Someone can create a profile on OpenU and search for other users on the basis of profile information. The user decides for him/herself what profile information will be shown (and to whom). This function is used, for example, by OU students who feel that they are learning “in isolation”. They can use this function to contact other students who are taking the same course, or students who live near them.

A fourth component of OpenU consists of online master classes; these are currently provided only for Education and Training. During OpenU master classes, participants deepen their understanding of a specific topic in this field. They can follow the master class online from their PC. An expert is interviewed about a topic in his/her discipline, for example: how do you breathe life into an online community, or how can you utilise social media in education? Students can participate actively in the master class by putting questions to the expert via the chat function. After the master class, discussion can continue within the forum. Participants are also offered relevant resources. Some master classes are available to anybody.

A fifth and final component of OpenU consists of Open Educational Resources. Within the portals, one can find free courses such as Scala. This is a familiar programming language; it was used, for example, to develop Twitter. When you have studied the course, you can use Scala as an object-oriented language and as a functional language, and you can write scripts in it. The course is a basic one with a study load of 30 hours, enabling the student to program in Scala. Another example of OER are the “snapshots” of Computer Science. Potential students/visitors are given an idea of existing Computer Science
courses, namely by means of a portion of the course material that gives a good impression of the course as a whole. One example is the introduction to the development of information systems. This snapshot concerns a number of examples of information systems and their development, including the reasons why developing complex information systems sometimes goes wrong in actual practice. Initial experience shows that these snapshots give potential students/visitors parties a better idea of the courses as a whole.

However, OpenU also comprises resources that do not come within the definition of Open Educational Resources. For example, the Education and Training Institute offers all the subject matter online via OpenU, whereas only some of it can be considered as OER. The other subject matter can, however, be made “open” with just a few clicks of the mouse. Computer Science is currently experimenting with a technology allowing it to make all the subject matter for a course available to a restricted target group online, without it being possible to copy or download it.

Who is OpenU intended for?

Within OpenU, there are four types of user. In the first place, there are visitors, i.e. anybody interested in the content of the portal. They can access news reports, blog posts or free courses, for example, but they do not have access to all the information. Anonymous visitors also have restricted rights; they cannot reply to other people, for example. Secondly, there are registered users. These can not only access the freely available information but can also reply, create a profile, and contact other users. The third group of users are “knowledge subscribers”: for a small annual payment, they can access additional products and services. The knowledge subscription is a revenue model for OER. Given that neither the government nor third parties are as yet financing the development of educational content, the OU makes use of a knowledge subscription system. Subscribers are in practice adults who wish to keep abreast of new developments in the discipline, but who do not wish to sign up formally (at least not yet) for a course or programme. They are not therefore students; they cannot, for example, request feedback from instructors or take tests, and they do not receive a diploma or certificate. The Education and Training Institute has, for example, made all the digital learning materials for its Master’s degree courses available to knowledge subscribers. This means that a knowledge subscriber can go through all the different study assignments, including the digital resources. The online master classes will soon also be covered by the knowledge subscription. Finally, actual physical conferences are also organised, which knowledge subscribers can attend at a discount.

With OpenU, the Dutch Open University is so far the only higher education institution to offer students and other interested parties the opportunity for lifelong learning while taking account of learning needs that cannot be satisfied with the traditional educational model. In order to meet the learning demands for people engaged in lifelong learning at higher education level, the OU will seek collaboration with other parties. Experience will show what the impact of OpenU will be. Will there be a shift from courses to knowledge subscriptions, for example? How can facilities for “social learning” be embedded within courses and programmes? Will the OU be able to build long-term relationships with students by means of OpenU, for example because a graduate first becomes a registered user and then a knowledge subscriber (a new type of recurring learning)? What form will the collaboration between the various parties take?

The ultimate test will be whether OpenU leads to a more accessible and flexible range of material that meets the varied learning demands of today’s knowledge workers. The learning experience gained with OpenU is therefore also relevant for all higher education institutions that wish to promote lifelong learning.

OpenU can be found at http://www.openu.nl.
Bibliography