Name: Gabi Witthaus
Institution: University of Leicester
Fellowship project title: TOUCANS (Testing the OER university Concept and Assumptions: a National Study)
Project start date: 01/09/2011
Project end date: 29/06/2012
Duration: 107 (number of days spent on project)
Aim of project:
To investigate the perceptions of stakeholders in the UK higher education sector towards the OER university concept.

Keywords
OERu, OER university, TOUCANS project, UKOER,

Activities
- Interviews with members of OERu network institutions (13);
- Informal communication with OERu network members via email and Web-based forums
- Survey aimed at staff in UK HEIs, produced and disseminated in collaboration with University of Southern Queensland (42 responses);
- Interviews with thought leaders in the UK HEI sector (11);
- Ongoing dissemination via the TOUCANS blog and at conferences – feedback from the open education community incorporated into the findings throughout the project.

Outputs
- Book chapter based on Cambridge OER12 presentation - ‘The OERu: from vision to reality’. (Okada et al, 2012.)
- Interview transcripts, survey data and discussion of findings on the CC-BY-licensed TOUCANS blog
- Slide presentations and short videos on TOUCANS and the OERu (all available under a CC-By licence on the TOUCANS website at www.le.ac.uk/toucans.)
- Presentations by guest speakers: Prof. James C Taylor (Australian Digital Futures Institute, University of Southern Queensland); Vasi Doncheva (Flexible Learning Manager, Northtec Polytechnic, New Zealand); Prof. Grainne Conole (Professor of Learning Innovation and Director, Institute of Learning Innovation, University of Leicester, UK); George Siemens (Associate Director of the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute at Athabasca University); Anthony Camilleri (Policy Consultant, European Foundation for Quality in e-Learning; OERtest); Prof. Martin Weller (Professor of Educational Technology, Open University, UK); Prof. Patrick McAndrew (Professor of Open Education, IET, Open University, UK); Prof. Sandra Wills (Executive Director, Learning & Teaching,
University of Wollongong) at three Open Education Week webinars hosted by the TOUCANS project in March 2012. (See [http://tinyurl.com/open-ed-week-webinars](http://tinyurl.com/open-ed-week-webinars))

- A draft “OERu compatibility” tool, developed in collaboration with OERu network members, which aims to enable institutions in the UK and elsewhere to gauge how compatible their existing practices are with the OERu concept, and to identify areas that will need attention if they are considering joining a collaborative venture such as the OERu. (Currently under discussion within the OERu network.)

### Findings

Findings from the interviews with members of the OERu network institution indicated that for those that are participating in the OERu, the main anticipated benefits include:

- Fulfilling a social responsibility towards ‘under-served’ populations;
- Creating a sustainable infrastructure for higher education globally;
- Further developing their institutions’ open education practices at both a strategic and an operational level;
- Gaining from staff development opportunities arising out of their collaboration with other institutions, some of which are considered to be world leaders in aspects such as APEL and IP policies;
- Benchmarking institutional practice against the practices of others in the network;
- Enhancing the institution’s profile through being seen to be innovative;
- Potentially attracting a new body of fee-paying students in the long term;

Findings from the UK HEI survey and interviews fell into two broad categories of response: those indicating a positive but cautious interest in the OERu concept, and those expressing varying levels of scepticism of the concept. For those who saw the OERu concept in a favourable light, the key perceived benefits of participation in the OERu were:

- Potential business benefits (e.g. undergraduate students studying through the OERu might return as fee-paying students for post-graduate studies; also the marketing potential for the institution as a result of being seen to be innovative)
- Contributing towards the OERu’s philanthropic mission, particularly now that university fees are so high for local students (up to £9,000 per year for students in England as of September 2012)
- An opportunity to build on previous work done within the sector on creating OERs
- Potentially adding value to existing collaboration models, such as the Erasmus programme for students in Europe
- Potentially giving institutions a platform for offering short courses
- The potential for massive reach and global impact, especially in the light of recent high-profile MOOCs (massive open online courses) run by Stanford and other North American universities that have achieved high participation rates.

### Concerns about the OERu concept focused mainly on the following themes:

- Collaborative provision with other institutions (for example via joint creation of OER content) was seen to be very difficult under the current Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) regulations
- The quality of the likely student experience was questioned, particularly in relation to the lack of structured academic support. There is a strong belief in the importance of social constructivist approaches to higher education within the UK HE community, and the OERu model was seen to focus on content and assessment rather than learning processes, to the anticipated detriment of the students’ learning.
- The OERu’s philanthropic mission was questioned by some respondents, who saw it as patronising (imposing Western values and knowledge structures on people in developing countries) and it was seen by some to be ‘helping the wrong people’ – i.e. people who already have access to the internet and digital literacy skills, as opposed to the relatively disadvantaged audience that it is aiming at.
- The OERu was perceived as being ‘parasitic’ on mainstream higher education, in the sense that it relies on mainstream academia to generate the knowledge and infrastructure needed for its successful implementation, and this was seen by some as undermining traditional HE.
The true cost of participating in the OERu initiative was seen to be significant by some respondents. It was noted that creating and maintaining OERs is expensive. In addition, the cost of managing credit transfer arrangements was viewed by some as being prohibitive.

While the benefits of collaboration were recognised, the failure of the UK eUniversity in 2004 was mentioned by many of the research participants as a reason for caution when considering future collaborative ventures.

While many individual respondents seemed to be personally in favour of the OERu concept, there was a sense that a general lack of institutional strategies and policies for open educational practices would hinder any attempts at its implementation in the sector.

The altruistic elements of the OERu concept were seen to be in conflict with the current economic climate for UK HEIs, in which the new fee structure for English students, combined with general belt-tightening measures including staff recruitment freezes and redundancies, has led to concerns about institutional survival.

General lessons learnt that can be used by others:

- Many of the objections raised to the OERu concept were, in fact, simply objections to distance education. Online education is seen as second best by many people within institutions that offer primarily face-to-face tuition, and the quality of a qualification awarded for online studies is questioned. This view was occasionally tempered by comments about the good quality of the Open University’s provision, especially when discussing the importance of structured academic support for students. However, there appeared to be little appetite to venture into the territory of online learning amongst the more traditional campus-based institutions that participated in the research.

- The fee increase for English students is a significant concern for both senior management and academics at present. The focus for now is on income retention and institutional survival, and philanthropic projects are seen as an unnecessarily risky distraction. This is likely to change once the impact of the increase can be gauged both in terms of the enrolment numbers and any new demands made by the first fee-paying cohort of students starting in September 2012, and institutions may well be more open to considering new ideas in the medium to long term future. Anyone interested in making use of the TOUCANS research findings needs to view them in the context of ongoing developments in the field.

- The OERu network has produced, and continues to produce, many useful resources that could contribute to the open education work of UK HEIs, such as templates for OER ‘wrappers’, sample OER prototypes including assessment and accreditation information, and training materials for academics on copyright and related topics (all available via www.wikieducator.org/oeru).

Suggestions for future research:

- Evidence is needed to establish the risks and benefits to institutions that participate in collaborate initiatives such as the OERu. Ongoing research is needed to help the UK HE sector engage with such initiatives in an informed way.

- There is great interest amongst senior management in capitalising (both metaphorically and in the financial sense) on the gains of the OER activity that has been done in the sector to date, and a desire to interrogate a range of innovative alternatives for the way forward. The OERu is one possible answer, but there are many factors to be considered, and many other possible answers. Further research on this topic would be of benefit to the whole sector.

I will be taking forward the research from this project in the following ways:

- While working on other, OER-related projects (e.g. the POERUP project, in which I am conducting research into OER policies and large-scale OER initiatives globally), I will be building on the knowledge I have gained through TOUCANS.

- I will continue to follow developments within the OERu and to contribute informally where possible.

What should SCORE do with the findings?

- The TOUCANS findings indicate that there is a great deal of interest amongst academics, support staff (such as learning technologists, educational designers and copyright officers) and senior managers of UK HEIs to engage in discussion about how to build on the work that has already been done around OERs. There is general agreement that simply continuing to release OERs is no longer sufficient, and that many (albeit rather vaguely defined) opportunities could be lost if we do not take some
An innovative step soon. A spectrum of OER-related activities that fit this profile is emerging – from offering MOOC-type courses with ‘soft-badging’ for successful students, through to the OERu’s full accreditation model. At the same time, a number of innovative, lower-cost options are emerging as alternatives to the mainstream, £9,000/year model, such as the University of Coventry’s ‘no-frills’ degree programmes (www.coventry.ac.uk/cuc) the Lincoln-based ‘learning centre’ in which academics from various universities volunteer their time to tutor informal students, who can then apply for assessment and accreditation (http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/) and the University of Derby Online (http://www.derby.ac.uk/online/). UK HEI stakeholders could greatly benefit from having a trusted ‘mediator’ to help them engage with these developments. A body such as SCORE or its successor could usefully disseminate knowledge and facilitate dialogue through conferences, workshops, newsletters and, if feasible, further funded research fellowships.

### Reflection

The following reflections may be of particular relevance to the OERu network members:

- Almost a third of the survey respondents said they did not know whether their institution was a member of the OERu network or not. This seems to imply that the OERu “brand” is not well known amongst university staff in the UK.
- The OERu concept is not clearly understood in the UK. In particular, the fact that the qualifications given by the participating institution will be equivalent, in every sense, to the qualifications given to students studying via the mainstream route, appeared not to be clear to respondents. (For example, I was frequently asked how employers would perceive the quality of an OERu award, on the assumption that students would only have a pile of certificates from different providers to show for their efforts.)
- The promise of collaboration with other HE institutions globally is a double-edged sword. In principle, the TOUCANS respondents could see the value of it, but in practice there appears to be significant reticence around collaboration, in large part because of the failure of an earlier (profit-making) collaborative initiative in the UK called the eUniversity. Also, The complexities of credit transfer, in combination with the quality assurance requirements of the QAA (Quality Assurance Association for Higher Education in the UK), make collaboration with other institutions along the lines envisaged by the OERu rather unattractive to UK HEIs.
- The new fee structure is currently a significant obstacle to all attempts at innovation in higher education in the UK that are not seen to be directly related to recruiting and retaining fee-paying students. With the first cohort of students enrolling under the new regime for the new academic year starting in September 2012, this is likely to continue to be the primary concern for senior management for some time to come.

### Dissemination

TOUCANS data, findings and discussion around the findings can be found in the following places:

- TOUCANS project blog: www.toucansproject.wordpress.com
- ‘Open Learning News’ on scoop.it: http://www.scoop.it/t/open-learning-news
- Book chapter in press (Okada, 2012)
- Presentations (see links on the TOUCANS website at www.le.ac.uk/toucans):
  - Keynote for Durban University of Technology Online Conference (Nov 2011);
  - Presentation at OU-EADTU workshop (Feb 2012);
  - Hosting and presentation at a series of Open Week Webinars (March 2012);
  - Presentation at Follow the Sun online festival (March 2012);
  - Pre-workshop conference at OER12 (Cambridge, April 2012);
  - Presentation at OER12 (Cambridge, April 2012);
  - Presentation at the South African Institute for Distance Education (Johannesburg, June 2012);
  - Presentation at the HEA Conference (July 2012);
  - Presentation at the HEA SCORE Showcase Event (11 July 2012)
  - Symposium at ALT-C Conference (September 2012)

### Conclusions
From TOUCANS it was learnt that, while many stakeholders in UK HEIs are personally in favour of the aims of the OERu network, there are significant stumbling blocks for institutions, including regulatory requirements such as those from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The timing of the research also coincided with the introduction of the new fee structure for English students in the UK, resulting in a general air of uncertainty and concerns about institutional survival, and limited interest in engaging in philanthropic activity at the present moment. There was, however, a great deal of interest in discussing possible ways to build on previous work done in the area of open educational resources, with MOOCs (mass online open courses) and MITx-type certificates or ‘badges’ (i.e. less formal awards than those given in mainstream accreditation) being seen as an appealing and low-risk way forward, with potential business benefits. For the OERu, or any similar global initiative aimed at increasing access to accredited learning opportunities and wanting to attract partner institutions in the UK, it is important to ensure that the risks do not outweigh the perceived benefits of participation.

500 Word Summary

The Open Educational Resources university (OERu) is a partnership of HEIs around the world, collaborating to provide formal assessment and accreditation for learners on a mass scale. Fifteen institutions had joined the OERu network as anchor partners by November 2011— all from countries other than the UK. The aim of TOUCANS was to investigate the perceptions of stakeholders within UK HEIs towards the OERu concept.

The TOUCANS research was carried out in three phases: 1) interviews with members of the OERu network institutions (13 in all); 2) a survey aimed at staff in UK HEIs (42 responses received); and 3) interviews with thought leaders in the UK HE sector (11).

Findings from the first phase indicated that, from the perspective of OERu network members, there were many anticipated benefits of participation. These included the opportunity to create a sustainable infrastructure for higher education globally; the ability to widen participation in higher education, and the opportunity to benchmark practices against other partners in the network.

Findings from the survey and the interviews with UK respondents indicated that, in principle, there is a high degree of support for the OERu concept, and the majority of respondents supported the idea personally. However, there were many perceived barriers and concerns about the viability of the concept. The Quality Assurance Agency was seen as a significant potential barrier, as it places restrictions on the nature of collaborative provision that is allowed. Reservations were expressed about the benefits of cross-institutional collaboration, as a result of the failed UK eUniversity initiative in 2004. There were concerns about the quality of the education that could be provided for students with no structured academic support and only volunteers to assist them. The costs of maintaining OERs and of managing credit transfer arrangements were expected to be high. There were concerns that the OERu would not be able to reach its real target audience due to access problems for learners with limited resources. Some respondents expressed the view that the OERu was not necessarily an appropriate solution to the demand for higher education within developing countries.

There was a clear desire amongst UK stakeholders to find a way forward to reap the fruits of the OER work done in recent years. However, the current fee increase for students in England has created an air of anxiety in the sector, and the TOUCANS respondents seemed to be more in favour of apparently lower-risk alternatives such as soft-badging for students (rather than full accreditation) and MOOCs. The latter in particular were seen to promise prestige and potential marketing benefits for institutions.

These findings represent a snapshot of opinion within the UK HEI sector in July 2012. Open educational practices in this sector are taking place within a developing and constantly changing environment, and the picture could look radically different a year down the line (once the impact of the fee increase can be gauged) or at any point in time if just one prestigious UK institution joins the OERu network, thereby possibly causing others to rethink their stance on the subject.

References

Okada, A. (2012, in development.) Open Educational Resources and Social Networks. Scholio Publisher.