

Developing low-barrier courses using open textbooks: A University of Southern Queensland case study

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Open Educational Resources (OER) have continued to gain significant global traction over the last decade, with research claiming the transformative power of these resources for broadening access and participation in Higher Education and driving new pedagogical approaches. In 2015, the University of Southern Queensland funded four open textbook grants as a pilot project that aimed to not only provide students with free and open learning materials, but also purposefully support staff as open practitioners. As part of an institutional commitment to open education, this project actively sought recommendations and strategies from the grant participants to mainstream the creation, use, and reuse of openly-licensed resources within holistic course design to support critical 21st century literacies. A community of inquiry model was used as the mechanism to support a discovery approach to the creation of open materials and qualitative participant data was gathered at key milestones during the grant through semi-structured interviews.

Keywords: open textbooks, open educational resources, open educational practice, 21st century literacies, case study, regional university

Introduction

Open textbooks refer to textbooks that are freely available (usually online) through an open copyright license. The use of open textbooks within higher education has been popularised by initiatives such as Rice University's *OpenStax College* (a collection of free textbooks), and the *BC Open Textbook Project* (a Canadian initiative providing flexible and affordable access to higher education resources). Open textbooks were identified in the New Media Consortium's *2015 Horizon Report* (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada & Freeman, 2015) as indicative of developing traction of OER in higher education. According to this report open textbooks are a "viable means for cutting excess costs with the goal of making education more affordable for students" (p. 14).

This paper outlines an open textbook project at a major regional Australian university. The paper first provides the background to the study, by introducing existing literature and initiatives that have explored the use of open textbooks within higher education. Next the paper describes the 2015 USQ Open Textbook Grant scheme including application process, selection criteria and activities undertaken by the grant recipients. This is followed by an overview of the current study, providing details of the data collection method and analysis as well as presenting the study's findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the study's findings relate to current literature, the study's practical implications and suggestions for future iterations of the grant offering and process.

Open textbooks and higher education

Whilst the superficial focus of open textbooks is financial, the underlying concern is about equitable and inclusive access to higher education – a long-term issue of concern to the Australian higher education sector (James, 2012). Textbook prices continue to rise in Australia (Soos, 2013) and, unlike US counterparts, Australian students cannot add textbook costs to HECS – meaning financially disadvantaged students must seek alternatives to access their required reading. The growing demand for university placements (both in Australia and internationally) challenges traditional approaches to course delivery, the role of resources in student-centred pedagogies, and the need for authentic content. Additionally, this demand calls for a holistic view of equitable access to education. Open educational systems, of which open texts are a part, offer practices that align with meeting these challenges.

Openly-licensed textbooks have been the focus of institutional projects and policy, especially in the UK, US, and Canada. Open textbook projects have been previously mentioned, but localised and national supporting policies are being developed to enable wider authoring and dissemination of open resources. The University of Leicester and University of Nottingham, for example, both have policy to encourage an open-first approach to course resources. At the legislative level California Senate Bill 1052 identifies the fifty most used textbooks in the state and will fund the creation and storage of openly-licensed replacements. However, the primary motivation of the Bill is reducing financial burden on students and their families – not explicitly improving the quality of teaching and learning, despite assertions that the decision will “bring California’s college and university experience into the 21st century” (State of California, 2012, n.p.).

Open texts represent a financially viable alternative to commercial texts, and the student experience of textbook purchase is often used in an attempt to leverage change. A report by the US Public Interest Research Group (Senack, 2014) found that 64% of students surveyed (n=2039) did not purchase a required text due primarily to price, and that of these 94% felt “significant concern” (p. 4) about the impact of this decision on their overall grade. Furthermore, over 50% of the students admitted that the cost of text was significantly factored into their choice of courses.

Whilst perceived quality has been a significant barrier for OER, research continues to emerge regarding Faculty and learner acceptance of open content. A 2013 study (n=125) found Faculty and learner respondents reported no significant differences in quality after a semester of using open texts (Bliss, Hilton, Wiley, Thanos, 2103). Allen and Seaman (2014) likewise found that Faculty perceptions of OER quality were favourable, of the 34% (from n=2144) who were aware of open texts, 61.5% indicated their trust in OER quality was comparable to commercial resources.

The open licensing of these texts allows for content to be remixed, revised, and reused. Whilst the immediately identified benefit is local contextualisation of learning resources by Faculty staff, there is an increasing trend for student-generated open content to be the basis for assessment (Wiley, 2012). Open textbooks become an attractive proposition when Faculty staff traditionally invest time producing study guides that situate learning examples and exercises in the Australian context.

In contrast to these experiences, Australian awareness and adoption of OER remains low (Bossu, Brown & Bull, 2015) and whilst the Australian Government has adopted open policy in relation to research data and software, this has yet to gain traction in the education sector at any level. More broadly, the Asia-Pacific sector experiences challenges similar to Australia. Research conducted in China (Hui, Li & Li, 2015), Korea (Lee & Kim, 2013), India (Roy, 2015), Pakistan (Malik, 2013), and Hong Kong SAR (Yuen & Wong, 2013) identify a *lack of*:

- awareness of open resources by Faculty staff
- time to search for open texts; or uncertainty about where to search
- awareness of open licensing implications for learning and teaching practice
- material for specific disciplines (Senack, 2014)
- incentive to move beyond traditional texts, especially in light of increased accompanying publisher content (such as lecture slides and quizzes)
- reward and recognition for using/authoring open texts
- start-up funding for original authoring of open texts (Senack, 2014)

Whilst the foci of many open text grants are awareness-raising and the production of open resources, it represents the first phase of an institutional journey to progress from OER to Open Educational Practice (OEP). OEP aims to create sustainable environments wherein OER can be produced and used to support high-quality educational outcomes (Ehlers & Conole, 2010). Creating this OEP environment therefore requires a deep understanding of practitioner experience and the manner in which it interacts with, and is impacted by, the broader institutional environment. By extrapolating this approach, one comes to see OER as simply one aspect of OEP – rather than a wholly discrete issue. It is this translational research approach that is able to link literature, practice, and policy (Wethington & Dunifon 2012).

The Research Project

Research Aims

The aim of the research was to explore the experiences of the university staff participating in a newly established USQ Open Textbook Grant scheme. The research investigated the challenges participants faced, the enablers that assisted them in achieving their goals, the skills and knowledge they learned, and the community supporters who assisted them throughout the process. The wider significance and purpose of the research and the Open Textbook Grants was to foster a wider engagement with OEP throughout USQ, and to improve future iterations of the Openness grants through the implementation of recommendations derived from the participants' experience.

USQ Open Textbook Grant

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is based in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, with additional campuses also in Springfield and Ipswich. USQ has two faculties, the Faculty of Business, Law and Arts, and the Faculty of Health, Engineering and Sciences. In addition, the University has three colleges: The Open Access College; College for Indigenous Studies, Education and Research; and the Queensland College of Wine Tourism. USQ has a diverse student population, including undergraduate and postgraduate students from more than 100 countries, with more than 80 nationalities. The current student enrolment is approximately 28,000 and of this total, more than 20,000 study off-campus by online/distance learning. Just over 54% of the students are female, over one quarter are classified as low socio-economic status and only 10% are first school leavers. As a higher education provider USQ is committed to partnering "with learners in the pursuit of their study objectives regardless of their background, location or stage of life" (USQ, 2013, p. 6). In 2015 USQ released the Educational Experience Plan, an aspirational document "leading the USQ community to important and practical investments in our educational experience" (USQ, 2015, p. 2). The first educational objective articulated in the Plan is that "learning and teaching at USQ is to be characterised by flexibility and accessibility, enhancing opportunities for learner access engagement, and learner defined success". The USQ Open Textbook Grant scheme introduced in 2015 was designed to help meet this objective.

The USQ Open Textbook Grant was developed to encourage the use of technology, development of 21st century literacy skills and use of information resources to support students' learning and to assist academics that are interested in pursuing OER as an alternative to the traditional textbook (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). The goal of the Grant was to provide the opportunity for USQ academics to experiment in finding new, better and less costly ways to deliver learning materials to their students.

Participants

To decide upon successful participants in the Open Textbook Grant, an Advisory Board consisting of representatives from across the university was established. The Board was responsible for reviewing all applications, with successful applicants selected based on the following criteria: (i) quality of the application and how well it responds to the questions stated in the form; (ii) innovative and creativity of approach proposed; and (iii) well-articulated evaluation plan; and (iv) transferability to other USQ courses and to other institutions or the open environment.

Fifteen grant applications were received, of which four met the above criteria and were funded. The successful applications covered tertiary preparation, arts education, education, and knowledge management. Three chose to submit as individuals and one as a team of nine, with an overall participant pool of twelve academics. The participants formed a community which met fortnightly and was facilitated by the eLearning Designer. This community was a space for shared inquiry and dissemination of practice, and often included 'guest speakers' from specialist areas in the university who could offer support and assistance. They were also required to present at a whole-of-institution event later in the year, and to prepare an interim and final report, where feedback was provided for both tasks.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Kvale (2007) describes interviews as "a conversation that has structure and a purpose determined by the one party – the interviewer" (p. 7). Through this conversation, the interviewer has a "unique opportunity to uncover rich and complex information" (Cavava, Delahaye & Sekaran, 2001, p. 138). Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate choice for this study because of their suitability in obtaining information about people's views, opinions, ideas and experiences (Arskey & Knight, 1999).

All interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio recorded. There was no predetermined length for the interviews and participants were free to continue talking for as long as they wished. On average interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes. One member of the research team conducted all the interviews, and this helped to reduce interviewer bias and to limit variation in interview technique. All twelve people who took part in the grant scheme were invited to take part in an interview. Seven people were interviewed, three males and four females. Interviews were conducted in the last month of the twelve month grant scheme.

The general aim in the interviews was to see through the participant's eyes by having them explain their experiences. The interview was divided into three parts. The first part involved what Kvale (2007) calls the "briefing" (p. 55). It involved the interviewer introducing themselves, describing the interview process and establishing a basic profile of the interviewee. Kvale (2007) notes that the briefing is an extremely important part of the interview as it sets the interview stage and helps encourage the interviewee to feel relaxed enough to talk freely. The second part of the interview was aimed at orientating the participants to the concept being examined.

A protocol was developed and used to guide the interview. The protocol included questions exploring the participants experience with, and understanding of, open textbooks and OER, before and after their involvement in the grant scheme. In addition, the participant was invited to provide comments on the lessons learnt, barriers and enablers to undertake the activities of the grant. Unstructured follow up probes were used to further explore points as they emerged during the interview. During the life of the grant, the Facilitator maintained a field journal where they recorded reflections and observations of the participant's progress and interactions during the regular meetings. These reflections and observations were used to inform the design of the interview protocol.

The semi-structured interview, perhaps more than other any other type of interview, depends upon the rapport established between the interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 2007). The skill and ability of the interviewer is therefore very important in establishing a quality interview. To ensure this was achieved, the interviewer followed the advice of Kvale (2007). The interviewer was sensitive to the respondent and listened actively to the content of what was said, and the many nuances of meaning in an answer. The interviewer was open and willing to hear which aspects of the interview topic were important to the interviewee, and followed new aspects when they were introduced by an interviewee. The third and final part of the interview was the "debriefing" (Kvale, 2007). This is when the interviewer thanked the respondent for their involvement and answered any questions they may have had with respect to the research project.

Analysis

Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran (2001) noted that thematic analysis is undertaken to "identify the underlying themes, insights and relationship within the phenomenon being researched" (p. 69). Qualitative analysis is not just about "counting or providing numeric summaries", instead its purpose is to "discover variation, portray shades of meaning and examine complexity" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 202). The data analysis process undertaken in the current study was an iterative one, constantly grounded in the interview data. Using NVivo software the interviewer spent time listening to the audio recordings, coding and reviewing the transcripts, with the aim of identifying the emerging themes in the data. Additionally, coding was used to determine the similarities, differences and potential connections among keywords, phrases and concepts within and among each interview. Furthermore, analysis considered the concepts and themes indirectly revealed. Rubin and Rubin (1995) noted that "you may discover themes by looking at the tension between what people say and the emotion they express" (p. 210).

Findings

The findings from this study highlighted three key themes that relate to the participants' experience of the Open Textbook project:

- challenge
- community, and
- learning

These three themes were observed in the data following a linear pathway, where **challenges** participants' faced resulted in them seeking support from their **community** and which facilitated participants' **learning** from the community support.

Each theme can be further separated into three interdependent sub-themes. These sub-themes interact between the main themes: the participants' experience of challenges (*time*, *technology*, and *Openness*) influenced the type of interaction (*collaboration*, *support*, or drawing upon *connections*) that they sought from the community,

which then influenced their key learnings (*project management, technology literacy, and understanding Openness*) from the project.

Arrows denote which sub-themes were found to have relationships in the data, if no arrow is present the sub-themes did not appear to have a strong thematic relationship. A visualisation of the interactions and relationships between the themes and sub-themes can be seen in Figure 1 below.



FIGURE 6: THEMES AND SUB-THEMES ARISING FROM THE ANALYSIS

An outline and description of each of these themes and sub-themes will now be discussed. Where relevant a de-identified participant quote is provided for richer contextualisation.

Challenges

The theme of challenge encompasses the issues and barriers experienced by participants across three main sub-themes of time, technology and Openness. These challenges were often framed as barriers to the progression towards completion of their OER, and across these sub-themes participants described their experience of these challenges as “difficult” (P1, P2) and “confusing” (P2) to navigate.

Time

Time was reported by the majority of participants to be the greatest barrier to completion of their project. Time challenges were experienced by participants through deadlines, workload and staff availability.

Firstly, the challenge of time was felt by participants through deadlines for the OER content and reports, as these participants demonstrate through the following statement:

“There was so much to do, I think, so much to learn, in a reasonably short time, as well as writing the material that it could be a little bit problematic.” (P1)

This statement alludes to balancing concurrent, interdependent activities, such as building open discipline knowledge, enacting the knowledge for specific projects, navigating internal institutional networks, and meeting grant deadlines.

Furthermore, all participants expressed concern regarding their ability to dedicate time to developing their OER due to their already high workload which had been allocated to them before the grant funding began.

“The only limitations, the only questions that I had, was about just workload and the amount of work and being able to fit it in. And that’s just academic life at the moment, so it hasn’t changed. It was, yes, I can do it, given time and everything else, no problem. It was just whether or not time would permit it.” (P7)

Lastly, multiple participants identified that time spent waiting for staff availability to attend meetings or the amount of time available for staff members to dedicate to supporting them was a challenging experience.

“I found it really difficult waiting for other people around the uni to... do the technical things that we couldn’t do. So they’ve got their waiting lines of jobs and their workflow things and that was just all difficult because I wasn’t a very good time sequencer for jobs like that.” (P2)

Overall, the sub-theme of time, encompassing the stress of deadlines, the burden of their set workloads and waiting for support staff availability was a major challenge that participants faced.

Technology

This refers to participants' varying levels of knowledge in using technology such as computer software and Open platforms such as WordPress and Moodle, and how this challenged their ability to progress in completing their OER. This challenged the participants in both small and significant ways. For example, two participants highlighted issues interacting with platform interfaces:

“Probably the technical issues because... Even little things like using Airdrop and drag activities that seem so simple, but they weren't.” (P1)

“The particular module part of Moodle that I'm working with, hasn't been changed regularly and there's been problems that have been known about for years, which haven't been done. So, I mean, the simplest one is an ability to search all the Moodle books.” (P7)

Another participant highlighted that their knowledge of software technology and coding was outdated, and they faced the challenge posed by both the sub-themes of time and technology in learning this technical knowledge:

“I will mention; another problem is just my own knowledge. I have a background where I'm able to do some of these things but that background, that knowledge, hasn't kept up with some of the more recent things. So, my hindrance was that I had to learn a bit, and that took time, which I didn't have a lot of time.” (P7)

Openness

The Openness sub-theme refers to the participants' reported lack of understanding of how OER interact with the legalities and permissions of copyrighted materials and creative commons licensing. For example, one participant commented that they “... hadn't even heard of open education resources before, or creative commons licencing, before this experience.” (P5).

Furthermore, the reported severity of Openness challenges was moderated by the participant's previous experience and confidence in engaging with OER, this is demonstrated through the following participant comment:

“And of course copyright is, I suppose that's where confidence comes in...copyright's something that if you don't know about it, it makes you frightened of making mistakes and people limit themselves and, you know, they don't want to risk getting into trouble with copyright.” (P2)

Another participant identified a specific instance of how their limited knowledge of Openness and copyright concepts impacted their assumptions that YouTube clips could be used in OERs:

“I had an idea how I assume that all the YouTube clips might be open sources or not copyrighted. But then again, I meant to understand “Oh that's not the case, so we had to go through these copyright issues. And then yes, to find out whether they are off copyright or not, we had to go through the process of these copyright offices.” (P4)

The participant also reported that the challenge of Openness and copyright issues were also experienced alongside the challenge of technology.

Community

The theme of community was the dominant emergent theme from the data collected, and encompasses the participant's experiences of collaboration between grant participants and team members; support and guidance from other USQ staff members to enhance 21st century learning and innovation skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009); and connections forged with academics from other higher education institutions and with the Openness community. Therefore, the sub-themes of community are collaboration, support and connections.

Collaboration

The sub-theme of collaboration can be further separated into a subset of the participants' experience of teamwork in a group of nine, and the entire pool of participants' experience of collaborating with each other. Participants reported that collaborating within their team was a very positive experience due to the opportunity to share ideas.

“The team worked well, we found the resources we needed, we applied ourselves to the task... I couldn't have asked for much better really. There haven't been many hurdles.” (P2)

Additionally, the team dynamic for participants was a major enabler for their OER progress, as all team members were retained without any problems or disagreements which is evident in the following quotes:

“The only good enabler over our side was that we were a team of nine, at the beginning we were a team of nine, nine at the end and everybody in the group did what they said they would and nobody had any disputes. I mean, it's almost unbelievable really but essentially it just was a cohesive group all the way through and that was a big enabler. I mean if it hadn't been the case, it would have been very different.” (P2)

The participants were also able to draw upon the support of the whole OER grant community through regular meetings, with participants reporting a feeling of connection between the grant participants, as can be seen in the following statement:

“As we've gone through this project, we have regularly met and so we've had that shared experience of going through a particular project, coming from different perspectives, but we still had that shared experience and that's created somewhat of a connection or a bond between the participants.” (P7)

Through this connection, group members were able to share their knowledge with each other to assist in their collective learning experience, as one participant commented that “there were times... because I had more knowledge, I would share that knowledge.” (P7). From this shared knowledge, participants reported a rich learning experience from the expertise and mistakes of other group members, as can be seen in the following participant quotes:

“The whole set of group members and their expertise and knowledge - it was also enabling us to do this along the pathway.” (P4)

“Listening to the other people, when we go to ...meetings... there are other people doing their own projects and the way they were doing them, was a real eye-opener. It was something that gave me ideas, things to aspire to.” (P1)

Support

The sub-theme of support refers to the participants' experience of “wonderful” (P4) “step-by-step guidance” (P4) from USQ staff members and technology and media services towards their goal of creating an OER. Participants reported that the support of the USQ staff in the face of challenges was very positive.

“As grant participants, the grant organisers were very... encouraging of us. I never felt as if we were being judged or pushed. We were being enabled and, you know, for me and my group that really felt great.” (P2)

Additionally, most participants identified that their new knowledge of the USQ staff members and services which were available to support them in this project was an important learning experience.

“[Most valuable learning] That there are possibilities to develop things, that there are people in this university who will want to support those things, that there is an opportunity in this university to put money towards supporting those things - that is the greatest thing, because it encourages further work, it encourages further research, and it encourages the people working on the ground to communicate more with other people. I hate the word “network”, but at least learn from other people who were involved in the same thing, and get the chance to be involved in building things, so that the next time that it comes to me going, “Okay, what are the resources that I need to develop for a course?”, I'm going to have a much better idea of where I'm headed and where I can go for help.” (P6)

Connections

The sub-theme of connections refers to the participant's interactions with the community of other academics and university institutions outside of USQ, and support from the Openness community. Connecting with other universities has allowed participants to receive feedback for areas to improve upon in their OER projects and provided inspiration for ideas or concepts to integrate into their OER.

“The sort of stuff I'm researching here, it's just given me the impetus to read a lot further and see beyond USQ, what other universities might be doing, and thinking, “Oh, that's really great, you know, that's an idea I could think about, and incorporate something like it.” (P1)

“In terms of enablers... our critical friends from <another university> because they had a program like the same as ours so they had already finished it. We used to have contacts with them and they were just going through our drafts... and they gave us some feedback which was really good.” (P4)

Connections with the Openness community and their values and philosophy has created a sense of community and belonging in participants, as can be seen in the following participant statement:

“There was that learning that I mentioned before, about the spirit of generosity within the openness environment and what that means. I love that mindset of wanting to really share and be generous. And then you know, I think that it encourages the same from others.” (P2)

Learning

The theme of learning is interwoven throughout the narratives of each participant, and can also be seen in the themes of challenges and community. This theme is divided into three sub-themes of learning as a response to the three sub-themes of challenges, with the vehicle of this learning being the collaboration, support and connections from their various communities. To describe the participants' *'strong learning experience'* (P2) in detail, the three sub-themes of project management, technology and Openness learning will now be described.

Project Management

The sub-theme of project management connects the theme of time challenges to the themes of community support and collaboration and which has resulted in learnings surrounding project management, a sub-theme reported by the majority of participants. Participants in the team of nine project group reported that the challenge of time was able to be addressed through seeking collaboration within their team community to divide up tasks and by using communication and discussion to drive progress on their OER, as summarised in the following quote:

“I thought my involvement with this would be a three to four month thing. It's turned out now eight or nine months, but by changing my strategy, and rather than just sending off emails to people, sitting down with people, walking them through.” (P6)

The entire pool of participants also learnt to address time challenges by learning about project management through support from the USQ staff community who provided them with feedback, awareness of deadlines, and assistance with funding management: “I learnt a lot about project management too ... in a really nice supported way. It was a very supported, gentle, kind way to learn about that.” (P2)

Technology Literacy

The sub-theme of technology literacy refers to participants overcoming the challenges of technology and any gaps in knowledge though seeking collaboration and support from their community. Through collaboration with other grant recipients, participants have been able to share their technical knowledge and learn key 21st century literacies from others within the group, as highlighted by the following participant quote:

“With technology... we used to contribute our expertise with the expertise of knowledge within those areas... I also got to learn more from the other group members as to how they do what they do and about their areas.” (P4)

Additionally, though the community of USQ staff, participants have learned that there are a range of people and resources they can turn to for developing their technical skills and knowledge of software and platforms, as explained in the following quote:

“Learning, to a fuller extent, what kind of resources exist at our university to create things like audio-visual material for our courses.” (P3)

Understanding Openness

The sub-theme of Understanding Openness and OER concepts refers to the influence of the sub-themes of Community Support and Connections in assisting with the challenge of understanding Openness concepts, resulting in a rich learning experience for participants. Through the support of USQ staff members sharing their knowledge, participants have learned about copyright, licencing, and the possibilities that Openness provides as a vehicle for knowledge.

“One other thing that shifted is that I probably ended up with a deeper understanding, though, of what openness means, because, of course, “open” can mean a variety of things. The licensing terms can be quite different, from a Creative Commons license to Use With Modification, Use With No Modification, Use With Credit, whatever, so I did discover that “open” actually has many shades to it, and you do need to be aware of the licenses very carefully.” (P3)

Furthermore, through interacting with their connections in the Openness community, participants have learned more about the concept of Openness and the values of the Openness community.

“I know I started this interview saying I’ve already worked in the open space, but that doesn’t mean I knew everything about it. Far from it. So I... just kept finding our thinking would shift, and the space around us would change, and we would have to adjust.” (P3)

Overall, the findings of this research can be encompassed in the following quote, which highlights the relationships between the themes of challenges, community and learning:

“Things will go wrong, deadlines will be impossible, your health may go wrong, family problems will crop up, technology problems will crop up, work problems will crop up, things will go wrong and you need to know who to call on for support, and you need to be brave enough to go out and say “Look, I’m in an awful mess at the moment”, and actually, not to see that as a bad thing – to see that as part of the human domain of learning... I’ve also learnt that sometimes, when really awful things happen, they’re opportunities. They’re opportunities to rethink and start again, and wipe the table and re-weave all of those ideas.” (P5)

Implications for practice and future directions

The intentional use of a participant-driven community for the grants was validated by the respondents. This remains the core of the experience and mirrors open practice groups internationally. The current grant recipients modelled a consultative, non-judgemental group that was tolerant to risk and failure. However, this did highlight the need for more explicit support options especially in the use of technology; assistance to navigate internal processes; and a revision of timelines. In response to the latter point, internal permission was received to extend the grant funding for an additional twelve months to give the recipients additional time to refine and revise their resources.

In terms of meeting some of the aforementioned challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, this grant represents the first institution-wide steps to raising awareness, and demonstrating (through completed grant work) that open resources are a viable, achievable approach for higher education. However, the pedagogical discussions over the last year have challenged the institution to critically examine the role of resources in course design. In particular, there is the question of the goal of open texts as a discrete focus: “Let’s assume a world where textbooks are free. Did we win? Or did we just make the act of passively interacting with information less expensive?” (Croom, 2015, n.p.)

Notionally the rationale behind open texts has been affordability and access, but larger questions need empirical research. Merely providing access to free texts may support broader participation in higher education, but does not guarantee the success of these students. Likewise, using the concept of openness to simply replicate traditional activities does a disservice to the sector. The more fruitful conversation occurs when the discussion moves from *resources* (OER) to *practice* (OEP) as identified in the Introduction of this paper, and this has been realized in re-focus for USQ’s 2016 grants. These practice-based grants are one aspect of a broader institutional journey that will see openness gain traction as a viable and achievable teaching and learning approach.

Conclusion

The open textbooks grant represented an exploratory whole-of-institution mechanism to foster a wider engagement with OEP. It provided participants with a supportive learning community that was valued by the recipients and actively leveraged local skills to collaboratively develop open resources and frameworks. The inclusion of a formal evaluation has provided evidence for revision when offering the next round of grants, and for informing institutional strategic planning. As a low-barrier, supported activity it could be replicated and transferred to other Australian institutions seeking to purposefully engage with OEP.

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