



*Creating European standards for open education and
open learning resources – EU-StORe*
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EU-StORe

Dissemination Activities

Specify your target group

Partner 6 – LUMSA University

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A brief report on the situation of open learning resources and open education

The target group definition

The role of e-learning

The European Commission underlined the strategic importance of e-learning starting since a decade ago the "e-Learning Programme" to support and develop the effective use of basic skills in European education systems (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). Since its inception, the importance of e-learning is growing in terms of the variety of courses offered and in the quality of the learning process it provides that is comparable or even better than a classical face-to-face setting. The "e-learning" concept covers a wide range of systems, from students using e-mail and accessing course work online while following a course on campus to programs offered entirely online (OECD, 2007). The worldwide globalization process is changing the permeability of the educational boundaries. In this context, the internationalization of higher education triggers a high level of competition (cooperation and competition) among countries and educational institutions (Mason, 2006).

More in general, the last two decades have witnessed the revolutionary effect that the Internet has brought to many facets of our lives. By means of the Internet, users can interact, participate, communicate and express themselves in an unprecedented way. This is the core of what is defined as *participative web* or *web 2.0* (OECD, 2007). Data suggest that the Internet has become the most important information source both for leisure and for learning, and particularly for young people who have wide access to digital technology. However, young adults should also possess the basic skills to use this powerful tool and this is not always the case, as many studies show their vulnerability in judging the quality and the reliability of the information (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

Digital literacy as a key competence

In the e-permeated society, "digital literacy" becomes a key factor in enabling participation to education, as well as enhancing opportunities of employment and leveraging other aspects of social life. Literacy has a decisive role in supporting the development of basic skills in technology use, the so-called "e-skills", and it underpins the complex construct of digital literacy, i.e. the ability to retrieve information on the Internet and to evaluate its pertinence in relation to the individual needs in education (Cordell, 2013). However, digital literacy is a complex and controversial term, often understood also as the ability to participate in a number of critical and creative practices that involve understanding, sharing and creating meaning through different types of technology and media (Hague, 2010).

Definitions of Open Educational Resources (OER)

Improve standards of literacy for adults and children is a goal constantly confirmed among the priorities outlined in the most recent documents produced by the European Commission¹. The importance of formal education and training for the development of transversal and basic skills as literacy and numeracy is more evident today than ever before. And "most countries need to increase participation in higher education, but higher education institutions generally have not so far been able to meet this challenge" (OECD, 2007).

¹ For example: HORIZON2020 (2011). Regulation of the European Parliament and of the council establishing Horizon 2020 - The Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020) SEC(2011) 1427-Vol 1, SEC(2011) 1428-Vol 1.

Open Educational Resources (OERs) provide an opportunity to improve the quality of education as well as facilitate policy dialogue, knowledge sharing and capacity building. Open Educational Resources (OERs) are becoming a priority and entering powerfully the global mainstream in education (Weller, 2014). The Open Educational Resources concept is based on the philosophical view of “knowledge as a collective social product” and therefore on the possibility to make it a common shared possession (Downes, 2007).

The term “open educational resources” first came into use during a conference hosted by UNESCO in 2002, and it was defined as “the open provision of educational resources, enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes” (Johnstone, 2005). The definition of OER mostly used is: “digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research”. Johnstone’s classification of three types of OERs implies that OER is restricted to ‘content’ alone:

- 1- Learning resources and courseware, content modules, learning objects, learner-support and assessment tools, online learning communities;
- 2- Resources to support teachers – tools for teachers and support materials to enable them to create, adapt and use OER;
- 3- Resources to assure the quality of education and educational practices.

By contrast, in their definition of OER, Atkins, Seely-Brown and Hammond suggest that OER can include also developmental aspects such as those related to processes and techniques used (Atkins, Seely-Brown & Hammond, 2007).

In September 2013, with the project “Opening up education”, the European Commission established the portal “Open education Europe” (<http://openeducationeuropa.eu/>) to provide a specific access for open educational resources in Europe. The portal, which was originally developed on elearningeuropa.info (available since 2002), is an example of the transformation of education through technology and it can be considered a privileged place for the analysis of change and innovation in teaching.

In the OER there are inevitably the world of MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) and in recent years there has been a rapid expansion of training courses available online, i.e. in 2010 there were more than six million students (31% of students) who participated in a course and course participation has grown by 358% since 2003 (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

The OERs in Italy

In line with the global revolution in teaching and learning, Italy is also going to take part in a worldwide effort to make education more accessible and more effective. In Italy, the philosophy of “open access” is developing continuously thanks to Web 2.0 technologies built on e-learning platforms. The Ministry of Education decree of September 2013 on the use of digital textbooks presented a difference between different types of learning resources:

- on the one hand, there are the educational tools with a specific function in the national curriculum, such as textbook - paper or digital
- on the other hand, there is the growing need to introduce a systematic use of open educational resources at the school level, as they already are at the university level.

The decree contains guidelines on the book of the future that will be increasingly in an electronic format and not anymore in a paper format. The software used for digital books will be open and interoperable, accessible with the same quality on all electronic devices, from computers to tablets. The conversion to digital will therefore happen gradually from 2014/2015 at different school levels.

In Italy, many portals were created with the purposes of OERs definition. One of these is called "Federica" (<http://www.federica.unina.it>), it is a comprehensive e-learning portal established in 2007 at Federico II University in Naples, and it offers over 100 courses covering all 13 University departments from Engineering to Medicine, Social Studies and Agriculture. In the overview of open educational resources, the Italian experience of "Federica" has allowed to promote a new culture, a culture-bridge between the *printing literacy* and *digital culture* (De Rosa & Zuccarini, 2011).

The Tuscany Region promotes another web learning system called TRIO (<http://www.progettotrio.it>). The system is based on open source software environments and it provides free training products and services in specific areas. TRIO offers a broad portfolio of training activities (currently about 1,700). TRIO was awarded with "Italian Web Awards 2002" and the "Public Administration Award" (June 2002).

The growth of open educational resources set the basis for a participative way to learn, create, share and cooperate among individuals, which is necessary in our constantly changing society. Nonetheless, many barriers to the complete achievement of this vision are still present, i.e. a distrust towards the authoritativeness of OERs and the recognition of the benefits they can bring, the differences between the types of license to open resources and the access to computers and networks².

Target group definition for Italy in the EU-StORe project

The twenty-first century has seen substantial changes as the revolutionary development of information technology and communications, the emergence of the knowledge society and the new ways of learning by the Net Generation³ or *Generation Y*⁴.

The renowned OECD report entitled "Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators" (OECD, 2014) notes that European countries have recorded age increases in levels of education. Despite this, the number of young people between 15 and 29 years without employment, nor enrolled in training courses or dropped out from the education system (the so-called NEET, Neither Employed nor in Education or Training) has dramatically increased.

OERs initiatives might serve higher educational institutions as vehicles for outreach to non-traditional groups of students, widening participation in higher education, and to provide learning opportunities for those unable to use more traditional tools or for those that are not part of the traditional groups of higher education students. Such initiatives can bridge the gap between non-formal, informal and formal learning. At the same time, OERs can be used by professionals for in-service training and home study by older people, opening new lifelong learning strategies as a means of tackling the challenges of ageing societies.

The wide accessibility of the Internet allows a heterogeneous group of potential learners to approach and familiarize with various OERs at different level of use. Traditional target group of OERs are mainly teachers and students. In the case of students, in general, can be broadly distinguish between three different target groups:

- 1) Prospective students who make use of OERs to get an idea of what a program or institution is like

² Cape Town Open Education Declaration: Unlocking the promise of open educational resources. Available online at <http://www.capetowndeclaration.org/read-the-declaration> [Accessed 16 March 2015].

³ Bennet S., Maton K., Kervin L. (2008), The 'digital natives' debates: a critical review of the evidence. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39,5, 775-786; Oblinger D.L., Oblinger J.L. (edited by) (2005), Educating the Net Generation. *EDUCAUSE*, [net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/pub7101.pdf], (accessed 2015-03-16); Jones C., Ramanau R., Cross S., Healing G. (2010), Net generation or digital natives: is there a distinct new generation entering university?, *Computers & Education*, 54, 722-732.

⁴ The phrase "Generation Y" first appeared in an August 1993 "Ad Age" editorial to describe young people of the day.

2) Enrolled students, i.e. students who are formally registered within an educational institution and who use OERs of that institution or third parties for the purpose of study

3) Finally, there is also a large group of self-learners who are not formally enrolled in an educational institution, but who are interested in OERs to enhance their knowledge and personal development. These can be professional or alumni, for example.

More in details, possible target group envisaged for EU-StORe project development in Italy are:

- 1) students (Higher education, secondary school students);
- 2) adult learners for educational and occupational purposes (i.e. job search) or professionals who want to get a job or promotion (employed full-time or self-employed, but also unemployed);
- 3) young people aged 16-24 like as NEET (Neither employed nor in education or training);
- 4) teachers (pre-service and in-service training) who do not have prior knowledge or skills related to free and open education resources Low achievers in basic skills but that are interested in open educational debate and its possibilities.

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