The eMundus project: Fostering international Higher Education collaboration through ICT and Open Education

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Abstract

This paper presents the work of the eMundus project that began in October 2013 and reports on the project activities to date. The aim of eMundus is to strengthen cooperation among HE institutions from the involved regions (EU, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, Indonesia, Canada and New Zealand) and globally, by exploring the potential of Open Approaches (e.g. OER, MOOCs and Virtual Mobility amongst others) to support long term, balanced, inter-cultural academic partnerships for improving learning and teaching through Open Education approaches. The project’s vision is that Open Education should not be seen solely as a solution to the urging challenges of reducing the unitary cost of higher education - moving towards a “market-oriented” global higher education system, but rather as a way to help establish long-term international partnerships, aiming for an open international setting where universities cooperate on the basis of their capacity not only to attract international students but to meaningfully share experiences with counterpart universities.

Keywords
Open Education, Virtual Mobility, OER, MOOCs, higher education, international cooperation.

1. Context and background of eMundus

The higher education world is nowadays the subject of intensive challenges, where the pressure to perform placed both on HE institutions and on their graduates has increased, coupled with budget cuts, especially in those countries most affected by the actual economic crisis. The impact of this pressure is partly one of efficiency, restructuring and innovation, while also contributing to the strengthening of flexibility. Universities in Europe and elsewhere today operate in a global environment and are challenged to update and internationalise their study programmes, to establish partnerships, to engage in mobility and, at the same time, to do all of this in a cost-effective way, keeping the cost of HE for learners and governments at a reasonable level.

In this context, the concept of Open Education is gaining ground, often seen as a solution to the need to educate an increasing HE population within the existing financial constrains, while Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP) are increasingly being considered as an option by universities around the world. In its Communication “Rethinking Education” (European Commission 2012), the European Commission stated that: “technology offers unprecedented opportunities to improve quality, access and equity in education and
training. It is a key lever for more effective learning and to reducing barriers to education, in particular social barriers. Individuals can learn anywhere, at any time, following flexible and individualised pathways.” This can imply “scaling up the use of ICT-supported learning and access to high quality OER”. Further, promoting the creation and use of OER is high on the agenda of international organizations, e.g. the OECD, UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). Governments, such as the Netherlands, Poland, Indonesia and the USA have started to make large investments in developing Open Educational Resources.

According to Curran (2004), ICT strategies (including Open Education Resources and Open Education Practices) adopted by universities respond to three most frequent objectives: a) widening access to educational opportunities, b) enhancing the quality of learning and c) reducing the cost of higher education. The last point is particularly important, since it responds to the recognised social demand for equity in access to and progress/completion of higher education programmes, challenging universities to find new ways of organising/supporting learning. The use of ICT allows institutions to combine efficiency with quality and support administrative and pedagogical processes.

While agreeing with this, the eMundus project consortium partners believe that ICT and Open Educational Resources and Practices are having a broader impact, which touches upon the very core of the higher education sector, affecting how universities expect and plan their future. The project partners believe that OER and OEP should not be seen only as a solution to the urgent challenges of reducing the unitary cost of higher education - moving towards a “market-oriented” global higher education system, but also as a way to help establishing long-term international partnerships, aiming for an open international setting where universities cooperate based on their capacity not only to attract international students but to meaningfully cooperate with counterpart universities.

2. MOOCs and Virtual Mobility: drivers for innovation in Higher Education collaboration

The above is particularly true if we consider two rather recent developments in terms of ICT-enhanced open education, on which the eMundus project will focus its activities. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have proved in recent years to be an alternative source of access to free courses from top universities through the Internet. These MOOCs aim to provide a quality learning experience using some of the best professors in their respective fields, and want to offer an adequate platform for interactive learning. This can include sets of videos with integrated questionnaires, weekly assignments, discussion forums, programming environments and interactive simulators, final grading exams, etc. At the end of the course, the students that have completed the requirements set by the course can be awarded with a certificate. Most of these certificates are currently offered for free, but some platforms are offering validated certifications for a fee.

MOOCs can be an extremely powerful tool allowing ubiquitous access to higher education. They can reach - for example - good students from remote places who find difficulties in accessing higher education due to the high costs and/or long distances to universities. MOOCs can also make learning possible for people with special social situations, for example parents with little
children or persons who need to work and cannot attend classroom-based courses. For them, MOOCs could become the norm for accessing higher education. In addition, MOOCs are being used by students or professionals who want to complement their knowledge or be in the continuous higher education learning loop to excel in their professions. MOOCs will leverage the opportunities for people who do not have the chance to access the privileged knowledge offered by top universities, making higher education ubiquitous and broadly accessible no matter the socio-economic status, the family situation or the distance to those Universities.

A second development is Virtual Mobility\(^1\) (VM). Internationalisation of higher education provision is a “natural” response to the globalisation of the economy and multiculturalism. Researchers, lecturers and students are engaging in different virtual mobility practices among Higher Education Institutions of different countries/continents. This VM is, to a large extent supported by ICT, having significant potential to address several objectives within the modernisation process of HEIs, VM can:

- complement the physical mobility of students and researchers;
- enhance research collaboration;
- enforce capacity building;
- provide further opportunities for postgraduate students and researchers, to deliver joint titles;
- support the collaborative development of curriculum; and
- exploit the full potential of ICT.

Ultimately, VM is a facilitator and aggregating element providing overall coherence to HEIs fundamental activities. VM supports:

a) students from different countries who mainly study in their local (chosen) university with their fellow students and without going abroad to study for long periods of time;
b) interaction and communication among groups of students/teachers based in different countries to discuss diversity depending on national/local/contextual elements;
c) cooperation in designing, implementing, course programme evaluation;
d) joint choice of subjects to be studied through VM;
e) joint curricula design - which adds value in terms of reciprocity and mutual benefits between the HEIs in the different countries;
f) joint production of learning resources (through reflective tools, non-interactive tools, collaborative tools, communication tools, social networking tools);
g) joint titles - wherever possible; and
h) relationships of mutual confidence..

The emergence of MOOCs and Virtual Mobility practices are challenging the well established idea of universities as the main “guardians” of knowledge stored in libraries with limited access. VM is opening new perspectives in terms of where the “core business” of universities is. Is it producing and delivering content? certifying learning achievements? supporting students to become lifelong learners? and/or teaching students how to make sense out of a wider and wider

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\(^1\) The Being Mobile team defines Virtual Mobility in Higher Education Institutions as follows: Virtual Mobility is a form of learning which consists of virtual components through an ICT supported learning environment that includes cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, having, as its main purpose, the enhancement of intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge (Bijnens et al, 2006).
availability of content. As said before, the introduction of these innovations can have a “marketization” impact on the HE world but can also contribute - if properly managed and planned – to the creation of a more balanced international higher education field, where intercultural collaboration is guaranteeing the development of skills and competences of graduates even those without the opportunity of moving from their home bases.

However, for this to happen, three gaps should be closed:

- the “understanding gap”, meaning that recent MOOCs and Virtual Mobility developments can be mapped, analysed and coherently integrated as part of an international collaboration. Successful patterns can be used as examples to extract recommendations for change, targeted both to policy makers and to HE stakeholders;
- a “sharing gap”, meaning that flows of information among MOOCs and Virtual Mobility experts and practitioners from different countries and world regions must be made smoother and must be based on recognized “good practices which work”;
- a “mainstreaming gap”, meaning that the successful practices of supporting international collaboration through MOOCs and Virtual Mobility must be made visible as ways to popularise a meaningful bottom-up use of ICT for learning. This could be the basis on which future scenarios and visions of HE international collaboration are built and discussed.

3. The eMundus project

The aim of eMundus is to strengthen cooperation and awareness among European Higher Education Institutions and their strategic counterparts in other countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Russia, Indonesia, Canada and New Zealand, by exploring the potential of MOOCs and VM to support long term, balanced, inter-cultural academic partnerships. The project is run with the support of the Erasmus Mundus programme of the European Commission.

To reach this aim, the project will work towards three specific objectives:

1. To map the global state of the art of MOOCs and Virtual Mobility developments (considered as two key dimensions of the Open Education revolution in higher education) both in Europe and in the involved countries, facilitating the identification of successful patterns of ICT-enhanced international collaboration.
2. To foster global sharing of knowledge, tools, practices around MOOCs and VM, stressing their impact on HE internationalisation and on fundamental issues such as employability, quality assurance, credit recognition, joint degrees.
3. To promote and mainstream working practices of MOOCs and VMs as a way towards XXI century academic cooperation, making sure that the best practices of the world leaders in the field are transferred to universities which are starting to adopt MOOCs and Virtual Mobility as strategies for their internationalisation.

Being an Erasmus Mundus project, eMundus has also the underlying objective of promoting the attractiveness and the awareness of the excellence of European Higher Education area. The project will do so not by promoting European solutions as “the best way to do things”, but by contributing to put Europe in a central position in the MOOC and Virtual Mobility debate, acting
as a facilitator for the most promising ideas and practices to be discussed, adapted, and possibly adopted. In doing so, eMundus will support intercultural development of European curriculum components and will generalise successful practices of HE cooperation, based on mutual trust and specialisation, aimed at promoting the emergence of excellence in European HE and, at the same time, broaden equity and accessibility of world level study programmes. Within eMundus, interculturalism occupies a core position, because of its dialogic undertone, seen as a more dynamic alternative to the Cartesian mono-logicality, which is apparently affecting multiculturalism. This is particularly important when facing actual EU challenges; for example, the inter-cultural curricula development on migration issues (welcome and integration policies) would provide a high-quality academic programme investigating that actual issue, providing a more multifaceted picture and strengthening best practices exchange to tackle a common and highly sensitive matter.

The broadness of the project scope – both geographically and thematically - is justified by the need to integrate, in a comprehensive conceptual framework and multi-disciplinary approach, what is now a large but fragmented body of knowledge. In addition to this, the eMundus consortium believes that a major systemic effort to reposition open education and ICT within current and future HE collaboration practices is now important, and this cannot be achieved by a fragmented research agenda which looks at many detailed aspects without linking its achievements to the present “challenge of relevance” that HE systems have to cope with.

4. The eMundus call for action

Preliminary work carried out by the eMundus partnership has demonstrated that a number of efforts exist which are trying to close the gaps presented above, but they are not coordinated nor properly articulated to reach the desired impact at the global scale. Some of these efforts focus on the content side of Open Education, others on the mechanisms to enhance students and staff mobility through ICT, but rarely an action tackles both these dimensions. Further, some real-life cases of integration of different universities around the OER concept exist, such as the “OER universitas” hosted by the OER Foundation in New Zealand, which is part of the project consortium, and which supports a sustainable partnership between accredited universities, colleges and networks, which aims to support free learning for all learners with pathways to gain academic credit from formal education institutions around the world. All the eMundus partners share the importance of running such an integrated exercise with a sense of urgency. This is crucial if we want to transform the impressive possibilities offered by Open Education into tools for an equitable, efficient and participative HE international collaboration scheme.

The project consortium is aware that it is not possible to reach its objectives without engaging as many stakeholders as possible, and for this reason intends to work in a fully open and collaborative way. The idea is to engage a number of “eMundus Community Partners” from the very beginning of the project, and to clearly propose a number of ways they can contribute to the project work. To do this, eMundus has shared its roadmap for action in the www.emundus-project.eu website, and is calling for interested parties to join.
All project results will be co-developed and published through the Wikieducator portal, allowing users to comment and enrich the eMundus outcome. Further to this, there is an open call for Community Partners and they are invited to propose additional activities that they can organise in their own countries and settings replicating the mapping, the webinars and/or the tool gathering of eMundus. The final objective of this open approach is to be perceived not only as a project with a fixed duration and limited objectives, but rather as a trigger for broader debates, knowledge exchanges and best practices mainstreaming, to make the project vision a reality.

References


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