

OER in the Nordic countries - The NoricOER Project

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Abstract

Open Educational Resources (OER) are discussed widely on a global, European and even Nordic level. The UNESCO OER Declaration shows the importance of Open Educational Resources and gives recommendations to governments and institutions around the globe. The European Union launched in autumn 2013 a large-scale initiative on *Opening Up Education*. These developments have been the starting point for a Nordic initiative in promoting and utilizing OER in the Nordic countries with a focus on creating a strong base for OER and Open Educational Practices (OEP) amongst the Nordic countries and in the Nordic region, also with a global outreach in mind. The Nordic countries have a potential to become a forerunner in OEP and the use of OER in Europe.

The Nordic countries share many values related to education and technology development and use. The political and governmental institutions are quite similar; and there is a tradition of cooperation, exchange of knowledge and solutions between the countries. To focus on a relatively homogeneous region, which shares many basic values allows building knowledge and coming up with specific recommendations that can be useful for policy makers at different levels, be implemented in policies and practice, and used to form new co-operations. OER could potentially be a change and an innovation agent in schools, as well as in universities, vocational and adult education. Having OER as a scope allows using one strong prism to reflect crossroads the educational system has to navigate in the Nordic countries.

This Nordic OER initiative financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers aims to work for awareness, knowledge building, networking and creating an arena for dissemination of OER and openness in education. The foundation for the project is to establish a ground for Nordic and global collaboration. Open approaches are widely used in the Nordic countries, but there is a lack of awareness about OER and no policies are in place. Furthermore, there are few Nordic collaborative projects in this area and a lack of global collaboration. A position paper has been agreed among the Nordic partners where goals, objectives, actions, recommendations and barriers are stated. More exactly the project will aim for:

- Awareness building
- Create a Nordic network
- Explore, transformative capacity, innovation potentials, cost efficiency and quality, open and flexible learning opportunities
- Help institutions positioning OER in their strategies
- Cross border and cross cultural collaboration
- Good practice, policy building and implementation
- Small languages and cultures
- Collaboration with the Boldic OER project, an OER project in the Baltic countries also financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers

Furthermore the project strategically will work for establishing the Nordic OER Community of individuals representing stakeholders and institutions. This Community is aiming to support uptake,

adoption and collaboration around OER and to contribute to a strong OER movement within the Nordic countries with an outreach globally.

Keywords

open education norden, nordicoer, nordic community, oep, oer, opening up education

Introduction

Open Educational Resources (OER) are discussed widely on a global, European and even Nordic level (Ossiannilsson & Creelman, 2011a). Both the OER Declaration by UNESCO (2012) and the European Union large-scale initiative, *Opening Up Education* (EC 2013), show the importance of OER and gives recommendations to governments and institutions around the globe. A Norwegian Public Commission presented in 2013 a report on how Norway will contribute to those initiatives on opening up education, launching and validating MOOCs and the use and reuse of OERs (MOOC-utvalget 2013).

These developments have been the starting point for a Nordic initiative in promoting and utilizing OER in the Nordic countries, Denmark, Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, with a focus on creating a strong base for OER and Open Educational Practices (OEP) in the Nordic region, also with a global outreach in mind. The Nordic countries could have a potential to become a forerunner in OEP and the use of OER in Europe. They share many values related to education and technology development and use. The political and governmental institutions are quite similar; and there is a tradition of cooperation, exchange of knowledge and solutions between the countries. To focus on a relatively homogeneous region, which shares many basic values allows building knowledge and coming up with specific recommendations that can be useful for policy makers at different levels, be implemented in policies and practice, and used to form new co-operations. OER could potentially be a change and an innovative agent in schools, as well as in universities, vocational and adult education (Ossiannilsson & Creelman, 2011b c). Having OER as a scope allows using one strong prism to reflect crossroads the educational system has to navigate in the Nordic countries.

There are a number of definitions of OER. UNESCO's 2002 definition is "teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions. Open licensing is built within the existing framework of intellectual property rights as defined by relevant international conventions and respects the authorship of the work" (UNESCO 2012). The European Commission has a shorter definition in its Opening Up Education initiative of 2013: "OER are learning resources that are usable, adaptable to specific learning needs, and freely shareable" (EC 2013, p. 3). Open Educational Resources (OER) can also be defined as "*Any digital resource which can be freely accessed and used for educational purposes*". This broad definition includes a lot of different objects, such as digital learning resources, software tools like wikis or authoring systems, simulations or animations, electronic textbooks, but also lesson plans or records of shared experiences. The main aspect is that the resource is used to improve education (Pawlowski et al. 2013).

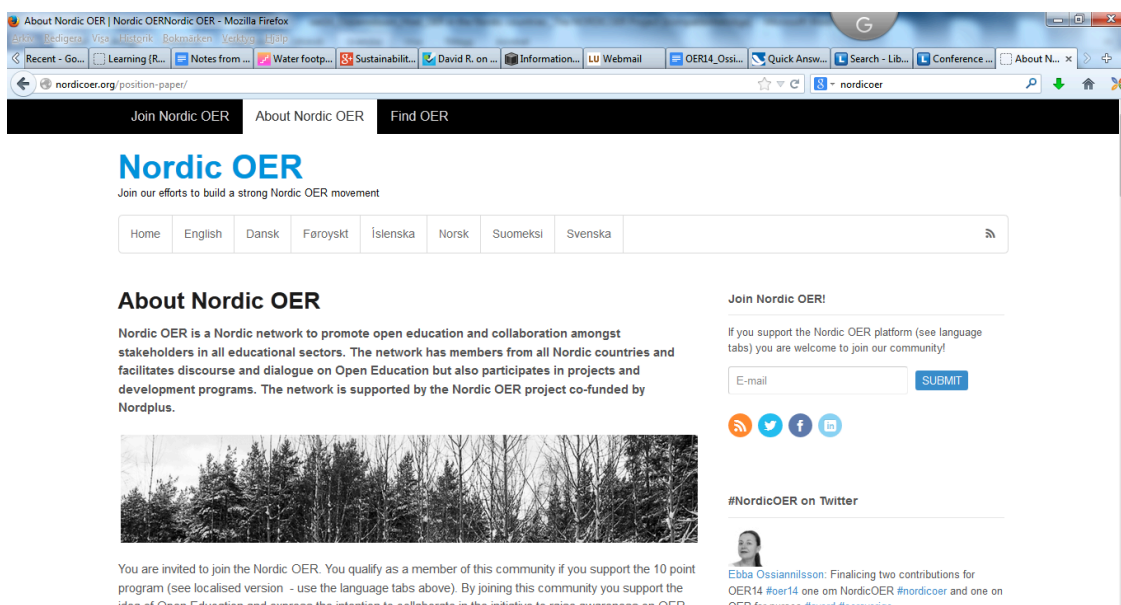
The Nordic initiative – Nordic OER

Nordic OER is a Nordic network to promote open education and collaboration amongst stakeholders in all educational sectors. The network has members from all Nordic countries and facilitates discourse and dialogue on Open Education but also participates in projects and development programs. This Nordic OER initiative financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers aims to work for awareness, knowledge building, networking and creating an arena for dissemination of OER and promoting openness in education. The foundation for the project is to establish a ground for Nordic and global collaboration. Even if the Nordic countries subscribe to a number of the 'openness values', like Open access to research literature, Open data, Open software, Open infrastructures, Open standards, Open innovation, etc., the general awareness of OER are rather low. OERs are used to a limited extent across educational sectors in the Nordic region, even though there are some interesting exceptions. There are few Nordic collaboration projects in this area, and there is a lack of global collaboration.

It is therefore no surprise that the primary aim of the Nordic OER project is to build awareness, besides creating a Nordic network on OER. Further aims are exploring the transformative capacity, innovation potentials, cost efficiency and quality, open and flexible learning opportunities or OER; helping institutions positioning OER in their strategies; cross border and cross cultural collaboration; spreading good practice, policy building and implementation; and enhancing the development of use and reusing OERs in small languages and cultures.

The first step of establishing the network was to publish a position paper (Pawlowski et al. 2013) agreeing on some goals and actions, presenting a first analysis of enablers and barriers. Furthermore the project strategically will work for establishing the Nordic OER Community of individuals representing stakeholders and institutions. The Nordic OER will also collaborate with the Boldic OER project, a recently launched OER project in the Nordic Baltic countries (www.boldic.org), also supported by a small grant from the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Figure 1. The webpage for NordicOER, with special pages for all the Nordic countries



10 recommendations to drive the discussion

Looking for a more precise platform for community building, Nordic OER has come up with 10 recommendations, which are translated into the different Nordic languages and used as entry points for the different constituencies in the community web portal. The 10 recommendations open with a reference to the Nordic shared values and the innovation potential of OER, and conclude with highlighting the institutional and governmental responsibilities for developing an OER policy.

1. In the Nordic countries, we share values of openness and transparency, access for all to education, and commitment to citizen participation. Open Educational Resources (OER) build on these values. Uptake of OER will improve Nordic education.
2. OER raises all sorts of unprecedented questions about education. Thus, OER will play an increasingly important role in innovating global educational practices. There is a need to focus the innovative potential of OER for Nordic knowledge economies.
3. OER gives organisations an opportunity to redesign their educational and/or financial models. Promoting OER helps identifying opportunities and dismantling barriers to high-quality learning and teaching.
4. Freely shareable OER does not mean the end of commercial markets. Authors, content providers, publishers, school authorities and others should discuss how OER can be integrated into the Nordic educational systems.
5. Raising awareness is first priority to promote OER in the Nordic countries. UNESCO's Paris Declaration, and EU's Opening Up Education are international initiatives that offer sound foundation. Inspiration should also be sought from emerging policies in our countries on Open Source, Open Access, Open Data, Open Education, Open Research and Open Innovation, as OER is part of this open practice.

6. Sharing enhances the quality of education, and OER introduces an aspect of peer review in learning and teaching. Quality should be the focus integrating OER in Nordic education.
7. The Nordic languages and cultures are small and have to find their own position in an OER community dominated by English language and Anglo-American culture. The Nordic countries will benefit from close cooperation when coming up with their own policies on how to contribute to the local and global OER commons.
8. OER is a global phenomenon with no limits to who can publish or who can use. Through promoting OER, the Nordic countries can strengthen their contribution to global educational development.
9. Educational institutions should have a policy and plans for promoting OER. The Nordic collaboration in OER should help schools, colleges, universities, vocational training institutions and other educational institutions develop their OER strategy, e.g. through knowledge sharing and exchange.
10. Governments are responsible for providing a favourable framework for OER. Local, regional and national authorities should develop policies and strategies for use of OERs within their remit.

It is expected that each national constituency in the Nordic OER network uses this list to structure their activities and to explore enablers and barriers to uptake of OER related to each item. In the next part of this paper the list will be used to drive the discussion.

Discussion

The first two recommendations advocate the ideological and economical potential of OER, and claims that these affordances would be particularly well received in the Nordic countries. If these countries are examples of high level of transparency and openness, and strong support of an open innovation model is of course an empirical question not to be tested here. However, it is clear that the reference to the Nordic model will put OER in perspective for the stakeholders of OER in these countries («Nordic model» 2014). The second recommendation also resonates the discussion on disruptive education, which for example, was a theme under the 2013 EDEN conference in Oslo (<http://de2013.drupalgardens.com/>).

Recommendation 3 and 4 address the business models of educational institutions in general, and of authorship and publishing in particular.

First, most education is free in the Nordic countries, so the economic benefits of OER are seldom voiced. However, the economic perspectives on OER re-emerge under the headline of 'quality' (Ossiannilsson & Creelman 2011). Lately, the discussion on MOOCs has had a similar framing effect on the OER discussion (Mooc-utvalget 2013). The observation in the fourth recommendation that OER does not mean the end of commercial markets for learning content is directed towards the publishing industry, which has been sceptical of the market effects of OER. The Norwegian Publishers Association has actively resisted the activities of one of the Nordic OER project partners, NDLA Open Educational Resources for Secondary Schools. NDLA has been brought in for the EFTA Surveillance Authority with claims that their OER practice is in conflict with free trade agreements (NDLA 2014). NDLA is a not-for-profit public consortium co-owned by 18 county councils in Norway. The main purpose of NDLA is to develop and disseminate OER for upper secondary schools. Teachers and learners are involved in developing the resources; however, most of the resources are commissioned from authoring teams bidding for projects announced in a competitive market. Free-of-charge OER does not mean that money is not spent on authoring high quality resources.

The fifth and sixth recommendations provide reference to Nordic political discourse that could give legitimacy to the OER movement, i.e., the UNESCO declarations, EU policies, a range of policies on openness, and educational quality policies. The last four recommendations intend to focus activities on particular actions.

In building a regional OER movement the issues related to small languages and small cultures are most interesting. It is easily observed that uptake of the OER idea implies a translation and adaptation to local contexts, i.e., national languages; thematic focus that is recognisable for the different user groups; reference to national curricula and competency frameworks, etc. So far, flagging the consciousness of language and culture is easy and gives an immediate response; however, outlining concrete actions for the Nordic OER communities to follow up is more difficult. For instance, we don't know how easily learning resources 'travel' between the Nordic cultures and languages. In principle Norwegians, Danes and Swedes should be able to understand each other's languages; however, maybe language is not the most important barrier, but culture and 'not-invented-here' are more important for uptake?

If Nordic OER could make a contribution to the understanding of the 'OER and small languages & cultures' issue, it would certainly be of interest to other OER communities around the world. Even if the Anglo-American influence on educational discourse is very strong worldwide, educational policies tend to be developed in a regional context. If institutionalised practices should be changed you need arguments that are grounded in local culture and contexts. On the other hand, there is a strong tradition in the Nordic countries to engage in global development, especially in the educational area. Therefore, the capabilities of OER to contribute to the global educational development make a strong case for OER in the Nordic countries.

To include references to OER in institutional and governmental policies are important in order to give legitimacy to teachers, students and others that want to embrace new educational practices. The Nordic OER project has therefore on the agenda to develop a detailed analysis of enablers and barriers on different levels and in different sectors in order to support policy development in each country. The rather high level language in UNESCO and EU publications does have a limited appeal when read by practitioners. Nice goal statements need to be followed up with case studies, prototypes, best practices and all other kinds of concrete material that will make a difference in a busy working day of a teacher or a student.

Conclusions and further development

The Nordic OER project represents an example of national and regional activities that are spurred by the global initiatives like UNESCO (2012), OECD (2007), and EU (EC 2013). The Nordic project is run for only one year; however, it has been able to inspire community development outside the Nordic countries, e.g., in Scotland (<http://openscot.wordpress.com/>).

OER Community building is also happening in other parts of the world, e.g., through Creative Commons OER Policy Registry (http://wiki.creativecommons.org/OER_Policy_Registry), and Open Knowledge Foundation's OER Handbook (<http://booktype.okfn.org/open-education-handbook/>), and the UNESCO OER chairs' mapping exercises (<http://unescochair.athabascau.ca/oer-mapping-exercise>). It is a challenge for the Nordic OER community to manage to contribute to this international policy development, while breaking new

ground related to OER practices in smaller non-English speaking cultures. Hopefully, the emphasis on OER in EU's Opening Up Education initiative will lead to more funding and better access to collaborative platforms through the Horizon 2020 program now to be launched.

Even if the educational environment in the Nordic countries could be described as more oriented towards collaboration, better funded and less competitive than, for instance, in the UK, it has not been easy to promote OER as a common good and resources to be prioritised. The 10 point platform developed by Nordic OER tries to balance the soft and hard arguments for sharing open educational resources. Further work needs to be done to see what is the most efficient ways to build communities of practice in countries that share a lot of values and history, but are part of an international educational market that are driven by factors not always controlled by national policies.

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