

Using Open Education Practices across the Mediterranean for Intercultural Curriculum Development in Higher Education

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This multinational authored article presents the findings and recommendations of a three-year, European-funded project ‘OpenMed: Opening up education in South Mediterranean countries’, which brought together five higher education partners from Europe and nine from the South Mediterranean region. This was the first cross-European initiative to promote the adoption of Open Educational Practices (OEP) within higher education involving educational institutions in each of the countries. A three-phase project design included gathering and analysing case studies of OEPs globally, and, in particular, in the South Mediterranean; the organisation of regional forums to encourage priorities for change; and the multi-national design and pilot implementation of a ‘training of trainers’ course for academic capacity building in OEPs as part of curricula reform. We will discuss how the cultural approaches used among experts and project partners with different national, linguistic, and educational backgrounds have instigated change in policy and practice at a personal, institutional, and national level.

Keywords: Open Education Practices; international collaboration; intercultural; dewesternization; higher education

Introduction

In a world that is increasingly interconnected, interdependent, and diverse, engaging in international and intercultural learning and exchange is a key focus for higher education (HE) (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009; Krutky 2008). This trend can be considered in relation to several issues. For example, universities are experiencing an increase in their recruitment of international students (Beech 2018; Borjesson 2017; Fliegler 2014); online international learning is increasingly becoming a core pillar of university collaborations (Bell 2016; Wimpenny et al. 2016); and open courses such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) target learners, regardless of their geographic and cultural background (Brahimi and Sarirete 2015; Maringe and Sing 2014). In addition to the pressures arising out of the internationalization of HE, in countries that, due to their demographic and socioeconomic context, are experiencing a massification phenomenon with respect to learners accessing HE, responsive, effective education processes are required to maintain quality learning experiences (Affouneh et al. 2018; Dian-Fu and Yeh 2012; Hornsby and Osman 2014; Foley and Massingila 2014).

In addressing such issues, the OpenMed project¹: Opening up education in South Mediterranean countries, which provides our focus, envisioned a multilevel and organic intervention, which articulated three key dimensions for curricula reform in the S-M (South Mediterranean) region:

- (1) Developing content for teaching and learning: understood as open education resources (OER), which are freely available, and promoting their continuing re-usability, replication, updating, and sharing;
- (2) Building capability: collaborating, designing and piloting implementation of a ‘training of trainers’ course for promoting academic capacity building in OEPs as part of curricula reform;

- (3) Examining cultural aspects: promoting awareness of OER, explaining the value of openness, describing the educational and also the inter-institutional benefits, and not only identifying best practices, but implementing the incentives required to foster these open education practices (OEP) in a variety of teaching-learning environments.

The project consortium included five partners from Europe; a project management team from the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED) in Italy, and academics from universities in Spain, Italy and England, with nine partners from the S-M; made up of two universities each from Morocco, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan, including the Association of Arab Universities, Jordan (whose role involved supporting and connecting universities in the Arab world and to enhance cooperation among them).

This paper contextualizes the project by initially situating the role of universities, as part of their service mission, to engage in the creation and use of openly available educational resources for the democratization of higher education, especially in aiming to improve accessibility, equitability, and quality of education for disadvantaged learners. The particular issues in embracing OEP within the S-M education context are considered, and an overview of the design and delivery of the three main project phases presented. The discussion conceptualizes how the principles of openness were experienced across the OpenMed partnership as an intercultural and multilingual learning experience, both from the way in which the project was conceived and developed, to the way it has been delivered, resulting in change in policy and practice at a personal, institutional, and national level.

Informing Context

Open Education Practices

As recognized by important international organizations (European Commission 2013; UNESCO 2017), opening up HE teaching and learning should become common practice for a more equal and democratic access to knowledge, especially if universities are to invest in better teaching and research and open up to larger student and researcher cohorts without having to dramatically increase their budgets. However, opening up education means different things in different contexts, and entails working on different dimensions considering universities experiences, level of engagement and priorities for opening up (teaching and research) practices, which goes beyond solely promoting the use of open educational content (Inamorato dos Santos, Punie, and Castaño-Muñoz 2016). As Harbi (2016) contends, the open sharing and localization of resources needs to be both enabled and encouraged within course design. However, this also requires attention paid to the possible undesired side effects of adopting open practices such as increased workload for educators and/or the use of content developed within different contexts without appropriate localization, adaptation and facilitation (Knox 2013; Weller 2014). Further, academics need to network and collaborate on course development in ways to help students get to know open education resources (OER) (Hu et al. 2015; Mossley 2013).

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have enabled access to courses from institutions to the world (considering international language proficiency, digital skills and internet connectivity), and OER have opened up access to high quality educational materials that permit reuse and repurposing by others (Atkins, Brown, and Hammond 2007; Weller 2014). However, there is a lack of substantive evidence on making such technologies accessible in relation to issues such as geographical access, minority access and reduction of access barriers (Fichten et al. 2009; Lane 2012; Navarrete and Luján-

Mora 2013;). Further, despite the growing use of OERs as an innovation to share educational resources and to bring changes to HE worldwide, over the past decade, (see for example, Glennie, Harley, and Butcher 2012; Kanwar 2011; Lane and McAndrew 2010; Phelan 2012), there is limited literature on OER usage, especially from the perspective of academics and students in non-western countries, who are often presented as the recipients and beneficiaries of OER (Hu et al. 2015). As Hatakka (2009), Leidner and Kayworth (2006), and Mishra (2017) contend, understanding the cultural context of educational institutions within a country is important to consider in the successful mainstreaming of OER.

The South Mediterranean Higher Education Context

In terms of education, the S-M region has achieved remarkable progress over the last decades. It has quadrupled the average level of schooling since 1960, halved illiteracy since 1980, and achieved almost complete gender parity for primary education – with some countries in the region having even achieved gender parity for secondary and tertiary education (The World Bank 2010). According to the World Bank statistics, the Net Enrolment Ratios in 2012 are almost as high as the Net Enrolment Ratios in developed countries, and the public expenditure on education (as a percentage of total government expenditure) is higher than in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) or United States of America (USA). However, despite this, and against the background of the call for the modernization of universities, education challenges in the region remain, most notably in relation to accountability, quality and productivity, not least due to the high demand for learners to access HE, due to growth in the youth population (El Hassan 2013; Heyneman 1997), and the shift to massification expected by governments directing public institutions (UNESCO 2012). In terms of teaching and curriculum

quality, concerns have been raised about the need for capacity building for academic staff, especially with regards to digital fluency, participative-teaching techniques, institutional resources for knowledge production, and strengthening international collaboration and connectivity (El Hassan 2013; Weber and Hamlaoui 2018).

Moreover, the problems outlined above are compounded by a lack of understanding about what OER and OEP are, including shared culturally-relevant definitions of terms. For example, ‘open education’ is a term often used synonymously with ‘online education,’ and within the S-M region, online education has acquired negative connotations, with graduates awarded open/online education degrees not being viewed as having equal status within the labour market to peers holding traditional degree awards (Bouhlila 2015; Elshamy 2016; The World Bank 2010). Further, the resistance to embrace institutional changes, the mistrust of exchanging educational content and syllabi, and systemic and cultural barriers to adopting new teaching methods (which shift from an instructor-centered to a more learner-centered approach) are also major constraints in HE in S-M countries (Enaba, Fouad, and Nargundkar 2016).

In consideration of the above and the pedagogical opportunities of open education for curriculum development and the democratization of higher education, the appreciation of educational context, the necessary capacity building of staff, and cultural definitions of open education for the S-M region, have all been factors considered in the planning and implementation of the OpenMed project.

Project Overview

The overarching aim of OpenMed was to promote the adoption of OER and OEP in the S-M, in order to address concerns raised about teaching and curriculum quality, online- and participative-teaching techniques and development of institutional resources for

knowledge production. This intention also included the strengthening of international collaboration and the use of internet connectivity as essential ingredients necessary for the integration of academic and scientific cooperation networks to benefit Mediterranean communities and economies (Scalisi 2016).

The specific project aims were to:

- Raise awareness and widen HE institution (HEI) participation in adopting OEP and use of OER as part of teaching and learning.
- Define an OER Regional Agenda for the re-use of learning resources at HE level by defining mid-term strategic roadmaps for implementation, according to local, cultural, and institutional needs.
- Build capacity for university teachers in knowing how to use and repurpose OER in a pedagogically-rich context whilst improving their digital competences.

To achieve these goals, the project has followed three main objectives consisting successively of 1) the identification of good practices, 2) the organization of forums in the region, and 3) the design and pilot implementation of a ‘training of trainers’ course for promoting capacities in open education. Each is outlined below.

(1) The identification of good practices

An important first phase concerned gathering and analyzing data about OEP globally and in particular in the S-M region, in order to inform the subsequent phases of the project. This was useful in identifying educational experiences that could be proposed as examples of good practice, which universities in the S-M region could consider. Of central importance was ensuring indigenous knowledgies were brought together as reciprocal exchanges of cultural wealth (Patel 2017) and to avoid dominance of western-

centric practices (Aman 2018). It also served to locate leaders of open education and identify some peculiarities of HE in local contexts (in terms of cultural values and/or university organization systems, pedagogies, and languages used), which require the adaptation of contents and methodologies.

It was evident that S-M countries have disparate levels of readiness and preparedness in terms of ICT and its use in education (Jemmi and Khribi 2016). While there are a few studies on the use of ICTs for enhancing education in the Arab countries (see for example, Rhema 2010; Regional Focus Issues – Learning Technologies in the Middle East IRRODL 2009; Tubaishat, Bhatti, and El-Qawasmeh 2006), the amount of research on OEP initiatives in the S-M region published at the time when the project started, by early 2016, was minimal. As such, to complement what literature was available, and to identify good practices, the OpenMed S-M partners proposed eleven case studies, showcasing local institutional and in-country practices to offer an overview of the state-of-the-art of OEP within the S-M partner countries in the project, and the region at large. In addition, country reports were developed from Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Palestine, providing details about the education context, demographic details about learners, as well as covering educational issues regarding digital connectivity, governance and the legal framework of higher education within the region. Finally, a number of initiatives and insights from other areas of the globe were incorporated with the aim of sharing expertise and good practices within open education initiatives. Special attention was paid to previous experiences that could be transferable to the target region.

(2) The organization of forums in the region

Using the learning from this first initial phase, national Policy Forums were held in each of the four S-M region participating countries. These meetings served to raise awareness

about OER for curriculum enhancement, connecting it with access needs and the problems of overcrowding identified in the four countries. They also fulfilled the function of involving the government and the key educational institutions in each of these countries in the goals of the project, through participatory dynamics and recognition of culturally sensitive curriculum development practices (Gervedink, Pieters, and Vogt 2013), for example, in building trust about exchanging educational content.

Utilizing a top-down approach, four OER National Strategy Forums took place between November 2016 and April 2017 in HEIs in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Palestine, gathering Education Ministers, educators, managers, and decision makers from several institutions. The objective of these events was to give the stakeholders an opportunity to discuss, revise, and validate the OER Regional Agenda, produced by the project, as a long-term policy plan. The Agenda presented educational challenges and priorities for strategic actions (identified in institutional ‘roadmaps’) aimed at maximizing the benefits of OEP and the use, reuse, and remix of OER for university course development, thus facilitating equity, access to, and democratization of HE.

(3) Design and pilot implementation of a ‘training of trainers’ course

Finally, a course for academic capacity building in OEP was designed and implemented experimentally by the OpenMed partners. The course ran as a pilot from September 2017 to March 2018, involving 70 staff (including academics and learning technologists) from across the S-M partner HEIs. An active learning approach was used, whereby learning was complemented through a number of blended learning activities including intense hands-on project work with the idea that, after having taken the course, participants should be able to use OER and implement open teaching practices in their daily work.

In its pilot run, the course started with a face-to-face element within each of the partner regions and HEIs, aimed at creating a learning community from which the learning activities could be considered and worked through. In the online learning phase (all hosted on the open source learning management system, Sakai), staff sat the course modules and completed the activities proposed. This phase was facilitated through local learning circles (inspired by the methodology devised by P2P University [2015]), meaning that groups of staff met face-to-face and collaboratively worked through the online course and respective activities. Each learning circle was coordinated by a local facilitator, who was a key mediator, tasked with organizing meetings, supporting learners, providing feedback, and reporting back to the wider community of facilitators. In terms of content, the course programme covered the following themes: Introducing Openness in Education, Open Licensing and Copyright, Creating and reusing OER, Localizing OER and MOOCs and OEP. A guiding principle when designing the course structure was that open resources are just one component of the learning context, and that creating OER repositories is not a guarantee for a sustainable change towards open education. Indeed, OER were considered as one of the many ‘entry points’ for the transition of educators towards open education (Nascimbeni and Burgos 2016).

Following the online learning experience, staff applied their skills to develop project work aimed at opening up ‘their course’. The project work involved developing an open teaching plan and sharing it within the local learning circle, as well as with the other local learning circles across the partner regions. The pilot course phase ended in February 2018 with the submission of the final project works by end of March 2018.

Research Methodology

A collaborative education project requires a participatory research approach, and a mixed

methods design, framed within social constructionism, which recognizes the influence of social perspective and the political sphere (Gergen 2003), was adopted. Research Ethics was secured at each partner institution, as per the local institutional practices.

Throughout the three-year period, the OpenMed partners from across the different HEIs, took leadership roles on the various project phases. For example, in phase one, all OpenMed partners were invited to nominate relevant initiatives, from their institution or elsewhere, to be considered for inclusion in a collection of OEP case studiesⁱⁱ. Further, eleven experts in OEP, also identified by the OpenMed partners, were asked to comment on relevant initiatives and share recommendations with the aim of facilitating and encouraging the adoption of OEP in the S-M region. The experts were representatives from the S-M region, the EU, and from the wider international OEP communityⁱⁱⁱ.

Partner visits occurred at each of the participating HEIs, where senior management (Pro Vice-Chancellors, Rectors, Deans), academic staff, learning technologists, administrative staff and PhD students attended, enabling the opportunity for everyone to engage in discussion about the project as it progressed, and to share ideas about next stage developments. Furthermore, during the S-M partner meetings, local government officials as well as international experts in OEP were also invited to present on the local and global context.

The research methods used to capture attitudes and perspectives, importantly took account of understanding the varied educational contexts across the partners, including the different languages used (French, Arabic, English, Spanish, Italian) as reciprocal exchanges of intercultural communication (Arasaratnam and Doerfel 2005). The data came from observations, interviews, documents, including meeting reports and focus groups, collaboratively negotiated.

The analysis of the various data collected showed the range of challenges and opportunities created in the adoption of OEP at the partners in the S-M region. The analytic process involved thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), and a progression from description (where the data were organized to show patterns in content and then summarized), to interpretation (where themes were developed, illustrating the significance of the patterns, and their broader meanings and implications). The analysis process also considered the socio-cultural contexts which support the individual accounts that were provided.

The quality assurance process included an external reviewer and OEP expert. In addition, a team of representatives in Jordan had overall responsibility for reviewing quality as part of the project.

Findings and Discussion

What was evident throughout the project was the importance of developing cultural awareness for curriculum transformation, and not only in sharing a vision about the value of openness and its educational value, but in how best to implement incentives and practices across the partner HEIs. With this dewesternization approach in mind, and considering key findings from the research process, two main themes are presented:

Examining intercultural practices to foster open education in a variety of learning environments

Developing educational skills to communicate effectively, to form and maintain relationships, and work cooperatively with people of different backgrounds requires not only enhanced interpersonal skills across cultures (Krutky 2008), but also due consideration of pedagogies to support such learning, with the required organizational

practices and structures that effectively facilitate intercultural dialogue and learning (Gervedink et al. 2013; Knox 2013). OpenMed was an example of an intercultural and multi-lingual learning experience in many ways, with a specific focus on OEP across the S-M. Firstly, from the beginning of the project the North European and S-M partners consciously considered the importance of finding ways in which to work together (Cachia et al. 2019), not least in providing a space for collaborative learning and knowledge co-creation among the partners. For example, in the review of the case studies quality review mechanisms were warranted whereby HEIs worked with other HEIs from another country to consider the essential criteria for the case studies, and the different types of OEP, which the partners wanted to highlight.

The partner visits conducted throughout the project were also of key importance, not least as for some, they offered first time opportunities to travel to Europe or to the S-M region. During these visits the importance of experiencing local cultures (Wimpenny et al. 2019) and educational contexts offered a powerful means of reflecting upon education systems at the macro, meso, and micro level. This attitude towards dewesternization and the infusion of local knowledge was reflected by the decision taken by the Consortium to start the OpenMed course design through a partner workshop organized in Madrid in May 2017. This event enabled time for discussions and debates on the different course design options. During these discussions, different visions, linked to the partners' institutional roadmaps, were openly shared and considered, in order to reach a common structure and programme of content for the course and the necessary support structures learners would require (Knox 2013).

Furthermore, alongside the benefits of sharing resources and expertise, an important consideration was how OEP could complement and augment current education provision for all the partners, especially when considering how the learning resources

produced could be made accessible for learners beyond the institution (Macintosh, McGreal, and Taylor 2011). A number of important differences among the target academic communities emerged, for example, in terms of the language used in Morocco, which is both Arabic and French in tertiary education, depending on the University and on the subject area. In contrast, within Egypt, Arabic and English are the main languages used. Indeed, the OpenMed course contains a module on the adaptation of OER and MOOCs to the specificities of the involved communities. This module develops the capabilities to adapt OER to the local contexts of the Middle East and the Maghreb, as well as to address an international audience. Following Zualkernan, Allert, and Qadah (2006), the widespread diffusion of OER, requires careful examination and understanding of the applicability and limitations of such materials in different cultural settings, as well as an appreciation of education for those who are guided in their learning by institutional expertise, and those who must self-direct (Knox 2013). As such, in the course, it was important to consider ways in which educators across cultural contexts, might reuse and adapt contents to their regional and disciplinary settings, with practical recommendations to overcome institutional barriers and improve local accessibility and relevance. Underpinning such factors was an acknowledgement of academic traditions, drawing on the concept of cultural distance (Hofstede 1980), the model of psychological acculturation (Berry 1997; Tropp et al. 1999) and the theory of intergroup relations (Brewer 2000).

It would be fair to say that there were cultural distance elements between the European and S-M countries; for instance, in the S-M instructor-directed educational frameworks versus the more learner-centred approaches of North European HEIs. There were also differences in academic traditions in the Middle East and the Maghreb in terms of English or French influences. However, the common Mediterranean style of open communication seemed to be an effective facilitator to overcoming those potential

intercultural barriers (Cachia et al. 2019). Nonetheless, it would be shortsighted of OpenMed to engage in intercultural collaboration without acknowledging the reality that social and cultural identities have. This includes a conscious awareness that the partners have not held equal status in the past, and that the North European Partners ‘power voice’ (as defined by both feminist and critical race theory) (Lee et al. 2012), and privilege, were at risk of being perpetuated.

As a related example, the diffusion of open education in Moroccan universities is closely linked to that of digital educational resources in general. As the use of these resources to date remains quite limited, one might suggest the uptake of OER is gaining traction but has yet to make its impact. Yet, in the context of the limited resources of Moroccan (and African) HE and training institutions, the OER movement has considerable potential for curriculum studies. The promise of OER for curriculum enhancement lies not only in the accessibility of digitized information, but also in the development of methodological approaches and mechanisms to manage and make sense of this information in a variety of dynamic learning contexts. An inspiring example of how partners in the project have addressed this concern is the case of one of the partner HEIs in Morocco, wherein a focus was developed around the four cornerstones of the evolving OER process, and the creation, organization, dissemination, and use of OER. The strategic combination of these elements, within what is called ‘OER Architecture,’ is leading the development of a dynamic, meaningful, rational and comprehensive OER strategy for HEIs in Morocco. In this light, the OpenMed project is an example of collaborative strategy, which enables the institution to be meaningfully situated, politically and educationally, in relation to the other countries of the S-M, and of Europe in general.

Developing a shared vision about the educational value of openness including impact

on policy and practice at a personal, institutional, and national level.

A significant issue, which continues to play out, was not only the starting point for understanding the basic concepts related to open education but the continued ways in which partners used the very term ‘*open education*’, which was defined in different ways across the partners, particularly in the S-M where in some cases it was used as synonymous with online learning. Also, the perceived benefits associated with the adoption of open approaches differed across the partnership, depending mainly on the institutional and national context of each partner. This was particularly relevant in those countries where national legislation is preventing the delivery of fully online courses, which limits the potential impact of OER and OEP. For example, during the Policy Forums the partners were exposed to the fact that in Jordan, online learning can be used only within courses accredited by the Ministry of Education and only to a certain percentage (varying between 20% and 25%). In response to this, blended learning examples and cases were preferred to the delivery of fully online ones.

Also, partners’ visions differed with respect to the inner value of opening up education. Even if research has in fact demonstrated that the use of OER and OEP has generally a positive impact on students' achievements and on international collaboration (de los Arcos et al 2014; Wilde 2012), it must be noted that most of the analysis on the impact of OER has been focused on developed and western countries. Among the few studies that have tried to measure the generalized impact of OER and OEP in developing countries (see for example, Hoosen and Butcher 2019; Hu et al. 2015), there is no common vision, and this was mirrored by the different approaches of S-M partners towards the inner value of opening up teaching and learning practices. In order to take these differences into account, and in valuing that partners on the project were coming from different starting points with regards to a shared vision about the educational value

of openness, each phase of the OpenMed project included opportunity for discussion and debate to reach the optimal balance between the needs of the academics from all participating universities. What is key to bear in mind however, is that the closer the partners were in understanding and unifying a definition of OEP and OER, the clearer the message could be in working to target and mobilise other regions, countries, HEIs, and education and policy strategy. Thus, the capacity for the OpenMed partners to effectively engage in intercultural dialogue has relied on a nexus of factors including intention, intercultural awareness, respect for plurality in ways of knowing (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018) and pedagogical skill-development (Johnson and Inoue 2003; Lee et al. 2012; Otten 2003).

Whilst the North European partners both in the UK and Spain had experience of designing and delivering OEP, an institutional policy on the use of OER had not been developed at either university, but was instigated, and both have since been approved. Being part of the OpenMed project was the motivating force for this, as colleagues were spurred on to think globally and act locally, and serves to demonstrate the reciprocal benefits of both sharing and localising learning for mutual benefit.

To date, the OpenMed project has contributed to the setup of a multi-stakeholder platform in Morocco, culminating with the ‘Open Education for Morocco Declaration’, a unique initiative to foster OER and open education adoption at a system level in the country. It is anticipated that this country-level approach will ensure that the cultural learning experiences of the OpenMed Course can be transferred in a sustainable way to HE staff across Morocco and, be replicated in the other partner countries, across the Mediterranean region. In Egypt, OEP and online programmes offered by the governmental universities vary in their definition of “open” and reflect the character of each university, and ways to meet the needs of the surrounding locale. The two Egyptian

universities participating in OpenMed are now taking the lead on re-defining the concept of open in line with the UNESCO definition, and are focused on spreading awareness of OEP and OER and taking direct action to model such practices in their own institutions. What is encouraging to see is how the bottom-up and top-down actions initiated by the project are already combining to result in actual systematic change in education practices in the Mediterranean region.

In Palestine, being exposed to other Arabic academics' experiences across the S-M, as well as the European partners' experiences, has shed light on the Arab context, and on ways of developing education systems from learning about the challenges others have faced, which can then be avoided or at least minimized. With the stark reality of living under Israeli occupation for more than 50 years, the opportunity for opening up education in Palestine was viewed as an essential requirement to advancing scientific research being developed in-country on a global level, whilst also meeting the local community's needs by considering accessible, sustainable, economic, technical and human development (Wimpenny et al. 2019). The networks developed between the different contexts has empowered partners at the two Palestinian universities to share their own pedagogical experiences in developing their OEP and policy. This is visible in the sharing of how the first Palestinian MOOC was developed (Affouneh et al. 2018). The openness to share curriculum practices has engendered a new sense of strength and commitment to project plans, and the launch of a second MOOC 'Genetics and Society' in Arabic, has been launched, making use of open licenses.

A number of lessons learnt during the Policy Forums informed the OpenMed course design phase, both in terms of addressing existing challenges and in how 'state of the art' open education could be integrated, considering ICT for learning. The OpenMed Course has thus been designed as the 'capacity-building-backbone' of the OpenMed

project and is being accompanied by a number of other activities, tackling the level of national policy with government ministers, and institutional policy with university leaders, who are developing institutional roadmaps for the adoption of openness as part of curriculum accessibility and enhancement.

As the post-pilot course is rolled out, and as staff continue to share their final project works, it will be important to examine the research findings of both the educators' and facilitators' experiences, including the OER teaching and learning resources developed and shared.

As a consequence of the findings of the three project phases, a set of summary recommendations^{iv} including country specific recommendations, have been circulated in order to provide a reference for focused policy development at an institutional, national and regional level, and not only in the S-M region but as part of work being conducted by all the partner HEIs. These include;

- University leaders recognizing their responsibility to promote democratic and diverse access to knowledge and the importance of developing localized educational governance and institutional policy regarding justification for the development of OEP and licensing of quality OER;
- Building capacities in Open Education through investment in infrastructure and strategies to enable the transition of materials and programmes into OER including adapting and delivery the OpenMed Course;
- Instilling a culture of openness by rewarding open education, through incentivizing and upskilling staff in curriculum review and engagement in open education;

- Supporting direct human and economic resources towards open education initiatives, including the technical support and through the adoption of open platforms and open source software to foster the use of OER.

Conclusion

What was central to the vision of OpenMed was the necessity to embrace integral and inclusive actions that would be meaningful and relevant for the local beneficiaries, thus avoiding fragmentation of interventions. That is why the project maintained focus on both top-down (national and strategic) and bottom-up (individualised) initiatives designed to deliver a multilevel, culturally responsive, pedagogical, and organic intervention.

In relation to the project findings, the OpenMed partners, together with the wider educational community networks that have taken part in the exercise, have been mobilizing change both by influencing senior management, through the Educational Resources (OER) Regional Agenda¹ and the development of Institutional Roadmaps, and by providing training opportunities, inspiring educators themselves to embrace and adopt OEP. Further, as evidenced in the Moroccan National Declaration² driven by the two Moroccan partner institutions, OpenMed has served to target action at a national policy level. Requesting international endorsement from the Open Education global community before being presented to the Moroccan Educational authorities at governmental level, and other dignitaries such as rectors and deans, evidences the partners' determination in supporting, enhancing and developing OEP in the country, and the local-international connection that the project has enabled.

¹ Starting from an understanding of the long-term challenges and priorities which are necessary for opening up HE in the S-M countries, the Educational Resources (OER) Regional Agenda presents a set of strategic actions aimed at maximising the benefits of OER and OEP to increase the access, the quality and the equity of HE in the region.

² <https://openmedproject.eu/oer-morocco-declaration/>

Information sharing and collaborative learning has also been taking place, not only within the local learning circles within individual institutions, but also within and across the countries participating in the OpenMed Open course. This finding indicates the collaboration readiness of universities from the S-M to engage in regional dialogues, learn from one another's experiences and display a willingness to discuss common challenges and innovative solutions. Further, from the project works, based on the work of individual learners and of small teams from the same learning circles, the OpenMed course has been able to not only offer a meaningful learning experience to participants but also to create a set of artefacts (i.e. OER, new curricula, new teaching strategies, etc.) that will represent an important knowledge bank for open education in the S-M region.

Nonetheless, a key challenge remains in changing perspectives across all levels of education policy, development and practice, and in developing and positioning open education within the respective countries' and institutions' agendas as valid and significant. Managing this transition will take time and will require not only building the necessary leadership and resources required to develop strategic planning and academic development, but also working with academic champions locally and in direct engagement with students.

From the start, OpenMed has supported positive action amongst academics working across both shores of the Mediterranean in promoting cooperation networks, necessary for the integration of Mediterranean communities and economies (Scalisi, 2016). Further, the partners have been encouraged to consider their own cultural practices and expectations of one another to embrace a range of OEP. As noted by Maya Jariego (2017) this proactive focus on the cultural dimension is a key element, often ignored in the open education discourse.

What the OpenMed community has learnt through the process is that OEP is not only about changing and updating teaching practices, it is also about giving and sharing the produced knowledge to the (digital) community (McNally and Christiansen 2019). Additionally, openness is the result of continuous negotiation processes at different levels within both universities and educational systems, as decisions to adopt OEP are complex, personal and contextual (Cronin 2017). The OpenMed project has demonstrated that open education is not only a catalyst for change in teaching-learning practices, but also sets in motion a dynamic of institutional change and intercultural learning for all the partners engaged.

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Declaration of interest

None.

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