

European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU)  
5 Drienerlolaan  
P.O. box: 217  
Enschede 7500AE  
NETHERLANDS  
Identification number in the register: 84640907750-09

## Collective ECIU Response to the Public Consultation on Opening Up Education – A Proposal for a European Initiative

*By Jan Evers, Rolf Vermeij and Katrin Dirksen*

### *Introduction*

The European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) welcomes the initiative of the European Union to consult with relevant stakeholders on its proposal on “Opening Up Education”, which aims at promoting the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) and of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in education.

The impact of OER and ICT in education is a multidimensional and dynamic process which is challenging the universities in multiple ways. In the past, universities were the only knowledge brokers. To have access to knowledge and training skills it was indispensable to go in person to the university building. The traditional, unequal way of learning was based on face-to-face education and personal presence in the lecture hall or library. At the same time, knowledge was limited to potential students who had access to printed material, to those who could timely afford to visit a university and those who lived in the surroundings of a university. With the introduction of ICT and OER in education the perception and access of knowledge and universities in general has completely changed. For the potential students fundamental and partially insuperable barriers to entry to education have been removed. By the use of OER knowledge is made available and accessible for everyone, everywhere and at any time. This has not only changed the role of the learners, but also of the teachers and universities. The perception of the learners as recipients of knowledge who previously could only obtain knowledge and have now become creators of learning content, who can thereby customize the education on their personal needs and subjects of interest. Due to the increasing use of OER and ICT in education, the forms of teaching and mentoring as well as the pedagogical and assessment approaches and with it the role of the teachers has changed. The universities have lost their position as knowledge brokers but they kept their role as an agent of training skills and therefore, they are challenged by providing the perfect training skills to the students.

### *Part I – Rationale and scope of the initiative*

The ECIU supports the initiative of the European Union to take action to promote and facilitate the provision and use of OER and ICT in education. The ECIU strongly agrees that a systematic use of ICT in education, together with extended availability and use of OER could have a significant and positive impact on the quality and on learning outcomes. The ECIU identifies the following benefits of OER and ICT in education as particularly relevant:

- An open and equal access to high quality instruction
- Availability of knowledge for citizens from rural communities to inner cities by overcoming access barriers such as time, money and distance
- Reduced costs of learning resources for learners and for knowledge institutions
- More flexible and creative ways of learning through learning networks and communities of practices and thereby constantly modernized teaching methods.
- Improved quality of education and training, digital literacy and dissemination of best practices.

In the first instance, Initial Vocational Training, Adult Education and Higher Education, despite their own specific needs, will gain benefit from opening up education. As a restriction, we see limited benefit for the pre schooling and school education sector.

The ECIU is aware of the profound potential of OER to generate high levels of innovative practices in education and training institutions. As a consortium, which feels very committed to developing new forms of teaching and learning, we benefit to great extent from academic synergies and from sharing experiences and best practices at European and global level. Based on its experience, the ECIU agrees that an EU initiative would not only complement the fragmented and unsustainable initiatives at national level but also allow significant synergies and increase overall results for society by attracting individuals who so far have had no access to formal education. We support the development of an EU knowledge base and of an evidence-based policy making through an international political dialogue, reforms, networking, collaboration, sharing of good practices and through innovative pilots.

The impact of the use of OER and ICT in education means not only benefit but also challenges for the universities. They need to adapt to the new ways and forms of learning, which take place outside of the university building and without the traditional face-to-face education between lecturer and student. The shift of universities as the only knowledge broker to dynamic creative and innovative learning settings implies a set of problems which have to be considered particularly not only at national level of education institutions but also at EU level.

We think comprehensive policy intervention at EU level is very appropriate to solve the following specific problems:

- The flood of available learning materials requires clear quality standards, quality assurance tools and cooperation on quality improvement. This would also help the users in identifying quality resources.
- The variety of resources, their types and sources make it difficult for the learners and educators to find and select the right resources for their specific needs.
- ICT didactics on the use of OER and new pedagogical practices are not made sufficiently available to teachers and other educators, particularly during initial teacher training. As a further step, teacher education and their professional development have to be adapted to the new teaching and educational practices.
- Different forms of assessment of skills and certification have to be developed due to informal learning settings, missing constant mentoring of teachers and control of the students.
- Universities using the traditional forms of education and training need incentives to become more open and modern educational providers following the technical advances, but also focussing on their unique role as agent of training skills. A stronger cooperation between the traditional higher education institutions and Open universities could also contribute to a better use of OER.

In opposed to these problems which need to be addressed by the European Union, the ECIU sees no urgent necessity for the European Union to set a clear legal framework for Intellectual Property Rights, copyrights, licensing and publishing rights for using OER in the best possible way. It appears to us that policy intervention at European level aiming at promoting ICT and OER in education would not contribute substantially to find a clear definition on how different actors can adopt their strategy and business models. Besides, it would not significantly increase the motivation of born-digital learners and thereby reduce early school leaving. The availability of free digitised books could on the one hand lead to a significant reduction in the cost of education for the learners but, on the other hand, would not reduce levels of dropouts from education. Moreover, the availability of high quality Open Educational Resources would not have a significant positive impact on the attractiveness of the European education and research system and therefore would not contribute significantly to the recruitment and retention of high quality students and researches in the EU. Our claim to not install EU-regulations implies that Member States will also not set these regulations because that would create chaos. So, no regulations, but if there are any we need them at EU level, in line with international standards.

### *Part II – Actions at EU level*

Regarding the priority, we don't see that the second priority area (quality, efficiency and internationalisation), and here mainly the question of quality assurance, is adequately addressed by the proposed actions. Due to the new informal learning settings and with the accompanying changing conditions for assessment, certification and validation of skills, we would like to accentuate the basic need for developing European quality standards for OER. This would also help the learners to find the content for the specific needs and interests. In addition to the mentioned actions, we think a learner rating of the learning resources would be very worthwhile.

We agree that the following three areas are adequately addressed by the proposed EU actions:

- Access, inclusion and equity
- Teaching, educational practices and assessment
- Policy development

Regarding the first priority area of access, inclusion and equity, we particularly support the proposed establishment of an EU-wide platform for facilitating access to all OER portals for citizens and institutions. In this platform, guidelines and best practices for the use of OER should be included to provide practical advice, to share information, to identify areas for future collaboration, to encourage new innovative teaching and learning methods and to reduce costs for learners and institutions. As the second most important action, we consider the establishment of an open access requirement for educational resources developed with public funding which is in line with the UNESCO's Paris Declaration on OER.

In terms of changing teaching and educational practices and assessment, we consider the following two EU actions as the most important: first, a support of the teacher education and professional development on ICT didactics and the use of OER as well as a support of an increase access to communities of practice to develop transnational collaborative models. And second, the development of assessment methodologies and models for assessing learning outcomes in non-formal and informal learning. We regard the first action as very important for the inclusion of OER in a blended educational setting, the second one as especially relevant for long-life learning and certification.

Concerning the fourth priority area of policy development, we endorse the proposed EU actions, especially the promotion of exchange of best practices and peer learning among the EU Member States, the establishment of a broad multi-stakeholder platform for strong stakeholder involvement and policy discussions on adapting funding and quality frameworks to incentivize engagement in open education.

All in all, we consider the majority of the proposed EU actions as very important. Nevertheless, we would suggest leaving out the following three actions in the EU initiative on “Opening up education”:

- Establish, if appropriate, a requirement for digitised free versions of school books after an initial period following the first edition.  
Instead, we would suggest focussing first on material developed by teachers and institutions.
- Incentivize new innovation models based on OER.  
We see the relevance of finding new teaching and educational models, nevertheless the focus should be first on how learners can find their own way in the use of OER.
- Launch trans-national, large-scale policy experiments to explore pedagogical approaches, curriculum and assessment practices.  
We suggest starting with a pilot which is at a later stage followed by large-scale policy experiments.

Regarding the question if there are any other actions that we consider essential, we would suggest to take necessary actions in order to make finding OER easier for teachers and especially for learners. Besides, we would endorse an EU action which supports the development of guidelines for publishing OER, such as on the desired granularity and technology (e.g. file types).

### *Conclusion*

The ECIU supports the new EU initiative on “Opening Up Education” with its three main goals Opening up content, Opening up learning, Opening up to collaboration. Education is indeed the responsibility of the EU Member States; nevertheless we think cooperation should not be left to each Member State. Cooperation at EU level in the field of OER, regardless of different geographical areas, is not only appropriate, but also very positive and offers a high synergy potential. Therefore, we can confirm the statement that an EU initiative would enhance clear synergies because they complement existing or future actions by Member States. We also agree that joint actions at EU level are needed to maximise the benefits from opening up education. Finally, we would like to suggest starting with the EU initiative at a practical and realistic level, for example with facilitating the OER market place, and at the same time focussing on the most relevant actions, for example on quality assurance.

Universities must adapt to the new situation, where a combination of OER and problem-based learning seems a good approach. ECIU invites European Commission for future discussions and is open to share and contribute to discussions on policy developments.

*The European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU)*

The European Consortium of Innovative Universities was founded in 1997 and its universities are united by a common profile, by shared beliefs and interests, and mutual trust. ECIU maintains the profile of a network of universities that are relatively young, entrepreneurial, and progressive and have close ties with industry and the region where they are situated. The ECIU universities all have academic strengths in engineering and social sciences; also life science and humanities are strongly represented within ECIU. The partners are very committed to developing and implementing new forms of teaching, training and research, to assuring an innovative culture within their walls, to experimenting with new forms of management and administration, and to supporting and nurturing internationally-minded staff.

The ECIU is a unique network of universities with its base in Europe, but building on the experience and insights of institutions in other parts of the world to reflect the global nature of Higher Education in the 21st Century. The ECIU has a collective wealth of experience and expertise in innovative education, research, knowledge exchange and administrative structures and practices. The ECIU offers a pool of resources e.g. in the field of problem based learning; in promoting entrepreneurship amongst students and staff and in treading new roads in the collaboration with business, industry and the public sector which provides a sound basis for the ECIU's various activities. ECIU membership is a vehicle for maintaining a competitive edge, allowing members to learn from each other and to take forward activities that individual institutions could not pursue on their own. By combining resources, ECIU institutions develop top quality activities by picking out the very best of education and research activities in selected institutions and combining this into offering e.g. new joint masters programmes. Externally, the ECIU provides a collective, more powerful voice with greater impact than individual institutions engaging in European public debate on their own.