Chapter 1

Widening Participation in Higher Education through Open Educational Resources

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the role that open educational resources might play in widening participation in higher education. It begins by highlighting the perceived importance of widening participation in higher education throughout the world and how that is defined, followed by the role that openness plays more generally in higher education, and then discusses the many ways in which open educational resources may help in opening up higher education by widening the audiences for them. It goes on to set out a conceptual framework for analysing both widening participation activities and open educational resources. It concludes that openness, as exemplified by open educational resources, is beginning to influence educational opportunities around the world, but that care is needed in setting out the contexts in which such activity is taking place.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education is widely seen as important for economic and social development and that increasing access to, participation in, and successful educational attainment and employment through higher education are all enormously important for all countries. As noted in the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education Communiqué (UNESCO, 2009):

In the past ten years, tremendous efforts have been made to improve access and ensure equity. This effort must continue. Access alone is, however, not
enough. Much more needs to be done. Efforts must be made to ensure the success of learners. [...] 

ODL approaches and ICTs present opportunities to widen access to quality education, particularly when Open Educational Resources are readily shared by many countries and higher education institutions. (p 3)

Similarly an earlier OECD (2006) report is clear about the benefits of educational attainment to learners and nations:

A well educated and well-trained population is important for the social and economic well being of countries and individuals. Education plays a key role in providing individuals with the knowledge, skills and competencies to participate effectively in society and the economy. Education also contributes to an expansion of scientific and cultural knowledge. The level of educational attainment of the population is a commonly used proxy for the stock of “human capital”, that use the skills available in the population. (p 7)

While it follows that widening participation in higher education has both a social and an economic dimension, as noted in this quote, the levels of educational attainment and personal achievement in a particular population may hide great inequalities in the chances and opportunities to do so throughout all sectors in society. Inevitably the chance to participate in higher education is currently constrained firstly by the absolute availability of places for study within a country (the absolute number of higher education institutions and the capacity of those institutions to teach students). It is constrained secondly by the accessibility of opportunities (study may involve the use of new technologies, be taught in a second or third language for the student or involve significant travel). Thirdly there is a question of affordability of the provision (study may involve great costs to the student and/or the state). And lastly there is the acceptability of the opportunities on offer (the provision may be of poor quality or it may be in subjects students do not want to study or may be of little interest to employers). Nevertheless, even where provision is available, accessible, affordable and acceptable it may not be taken up by some less privileged groups in society for other social and cultural reasons or they may not achieve the rewards by attaining the hoped for knowledge and skills often recognised through qualifications.

WHAT IS MEANT BY WIDENING PARTICIPATION?

Widening participation is a relatively new term used within higher education. More frequently references are made to widening access, as in the earlier quote from UNESCO, but many may think they are synonymous. At the same time there is often discussion in national and regional policies about improving life long learning and work place learning, and greater use of open and distance learning, whereby people are not just relying on their initial higher education experience (usually following on directly from their secondary school education) for the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills. This plethora of terms, and the initiatives they represent, is all part of a trend around the world to find new ways to expand the ability and provision of higher education to aid social and economic development, as set out in the OECD report.

Thus a number of trends can be indentified for higher education over the past 100 years, such as:

• An increase in the diversity of higher education institutions with different missions (e.g. focussing on just science or part time students) and modes of teaching (e.g. classroom based on campus, work based alongside employment, distance teaching).