Sustainability of OpenLearn – short report based on research observations and interviews in the OCWC meeting – Santander 2007

1. Introduction

According to David Wiley (2006), the definition of sustainability in the provision of open educational resources should include both the ideas of accomplishing goals and longevity. Intrinsic to the these ideas are the two core activities of such an initiative: a) the sustainability of the production and sharing of open educational resources and b) the sustainability of the use and reuse of these resources by the end user (Wiley, 2006).

This report intends to address the issue of the production and sharing of open educational resources (a) on a 'institutional model' of funding, by means of briefly comparing our current funding model in OpenLearn to the ones of other initiatives. This comparison does not intend to classify these models as 'good or bad' but instead to explore the potential of some of these models to enhance our own.

2- How does the sustainability model of other initiatives most differ from ours?

Most open content initiatives that belong to the OpenCourseWare Consortium (ex. Tufts, UCI, Universidade de Caracas, etc) do not have grants. Instead, they rely on an 'institutional model' of funding. OpenLearn counts mostly on external funding at the moment but still allocates some of the institutions' own resources to the initiative.

It is very likely that in the near future OpenLearn will have a mixed funding model, including not only external grants but also drawing on internal funding and on the potential for OpenLearn to generate some revenue by means of students registrations, the provision of services such as tuition and accreditation, among other possibilities. The success of this 'institutional model' of funding is highly dependent upon the 'embedment' of OpenLearn activities into the daily Open University operation model. This requires a shift in thinking and culture within the university; and as Andy Lane (2007) says "these changes we need to make anyway to become more cost effective".

2.1 What are the main difficulties the other institutions find to sustain their initiatives?

Based on some research made on the OCWC meeting in Santander (1-4 May 2007), most institutions face the following constraints to carry out their initiatives:

a) lack of financial resources;

b) difficulties in understanding how to motivate and engage the faculties in the provision of content;
c) IP issues;
d) Lack of resources to support internal research.

These institutions try to overcome these barriers by means of giving incentives to their academic staff to provide content, as well as they request the collaboration of the students towards the creation of new content.

This is where this model could perhaps be considered by the OU – at the moment, OpenLearn counts on content created by the academics of the institution and does not explore the potential of using its large student community to contribute in this activity. This could be done by:

a) Embedding content production for OpenLearn in some OU courses as part of a 'end-of-course project' or a TMA;
b) This would require the course teams to be fully aware of what it is to produce for OpenLearn and to understand the importance of this activity for the institution;
c) The course-teams would be responsible for selecting the best materials created by the students to be made available online (a type of quality *sign-off* by the faculties)

Benefits:

a) OpenLearn could have new challenging content, which would present diversity in the *writing styles* as well as in the *pedagogical models* of the units;
b) The community (OU and world) would feel more involved in 'constructing OpenLearn'
c) The faculties would be able to show their teaching and learning outcomes to the broaden OU community and to the world;
d) This could potentially increase faculty engagement in OpenLearn;
e) This would reduce the pressure for the OpenLearn team to convince the faculties to provide content;
f) There is scope for the OU to fulfil its mission of being 'open as to people, places, methods and ideas' in the provision of content for OpenLearn.

Still drawing on the 'institutional model' for sustainability, the Open University could consider offering a course in the near future on the theme of "Providing Open Educational Resources". It could be part of the courses offered in the MAODE (Masters of Open and Distance Education – IET) or part of any other Education course in Social Sciences, for example, or even in courses related to academic administration.

Benefits:

a) The Open University could make an ongoing revenue out of the registrations for this course;
b) The students of this course could also be content creators,
c) The OU would contribute to the dissemination of the idea behind the open content movement (to provide knowledge to all, widening participation, etc);
d) The university could channel its experience in the provision of OERs to help others to do so;
e) It could help the OU to establish its recognition in the field.

PS. Interviews done at the OCWC meeting in Santander can be accessed under request to the research team at the moment (p.mcandrew@open.ac.uk or a.i.santos@open.ac.uk). They will be made available in the LabSpace in the near future.

References:

Lane, A. (2007) The Open Content Initiative. *Sustainability: boon or burden?* Internal Open University document

Wiley, D. (2006) *On the Sustainability of Open Education Resource Initiatives in Higher Education* (COSL/USU)