



# Supporting Open Education in Irish Higher Education

This *Forum Insight* outlines the National Forum's commitment to supporting open education principles, practices and policies in Irish higher education. In light of the growing development of open education across Europe and internationally, as well as the increasing urgency of supporting Irish higher education staff and students in an increasingly networked society, the need is clear. The National Forum Strategy 2019-21 includes a specific focus on supporting open education across all of our strategic priorities.

A key objective of the National Forum since 2013 has been to build digital capacity to enhance teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The Forum has worked to accomplish this through broad and deep sectoral engagement as well as research, development, reviews, awards and other initiatives (National Forum, 2018a). One of the key priorities for success in building digital capacity is to "develop and implement open education principles and practices for Irish [higher] education that are aligned with EU policy and emerging international practice" (National Forum, 2015a).

In light of the growing development of open education policies and practices across Europe and internationally, as well as the increasing urgency of supporting Irish higher education staff and students in an increasingly networked society, the National Forum Strategy 2019-21 includes a specific focus on supporting open education principles, practices and policies in Irish higher education.

**Open education** refers to resources, tools, and practices for learning and teaching that seek to 'open up' education by increasing access to higher education and enabling learners and teachers to work across boundaries of all kinds, e.g. classroom (physical or online), discipline, institution, sector, geography, and legal/copyright restrictions. The term 'open education' includes open educational resources (OER), open educational practices (OEP), open pedagogy, open access publishing, open data, open science, and open scholarship.

**Open educational resources (OER)** are resources made available for others to use to support learning. OER vary enormously in granularity and form: individual OER might include specific learning activities, assessments, full courses, textbooks, journal articles, software, datasets, images, etc. The 'open' in OER means that the resources are not only free of cost but also come with reuse rights, typically granted through an open license such as a Creative Commons license<sup>1</sup>. A broader term, **open educational practices (OEP)**, includes the use of OER by teachers and learners, as well as open pedagogy and open sharing of teaching practices.

## Use of OER and OEP in Irish higher education

The National Forum research report, Learning Resources and Open Access in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland (2015b), summarised the results of a study on the use of OER in Irish higher education. The study found a relatively low level of OER use among higher education teaching staff as well as a lack of clarity about the precise workings of copyright, open licensing, and intellectual property rights in relation to teaching. This concurs with similar findings from numerous other international research studies on the use of open educational resources in higher education<sup>2</sup>.

This National Forum OER report and other international research note that multiple factors act to variously enable and/or inhibit the use of OER and OEP by staff in higher education. These factors tend to interact in ways that are contextual and complex.

Inhibitors of openness include lack of awareness of the potential benefits of open education; confusion and/or lack of knowledge about copyright and intellectual property rights; concerns about OER quality; lack of training and support; time constraints; lack of reward and recognition for use, creation and sharing of OER; and lack of institutional policy and commitment to open education.

Enablers of openness include the opposites of all of the above, namely: understanding how OER and OEP can enhance teaching and learning; institutional policy, strategy and culture that act together to support open education; professional development and targeted support for OER and OEP; being part of a community and/or network that supports open practices; and opportunities to discuss issues with respect to openness and higher education.

Finally, in addition to these individual factors, other factors may act to enable or inhibit open education at an organisational or institutional level. These include: development costs, technological infrastructure, evidencing impact on teaching and learning, and sustainability challenges.

## Supporting open education in Irish higher education 2019-21

Based on the research cited above, by the National Forum and others, there is a clear rationale for fostering and supporting engagement with OER and OEP in Irish higher education in the context of enhancing teaching and learning, increasing access to education, and facilitating lifelong learning. Realising the potential of open education within higher education, however, requires both support for individual open practice as well as a commitment to openness at programme and institutional levels.

1 <http://creativecommons.org>

2 See: Allen & Seaman (2016), Bossu, Bull, & Brown (2012), Farrow et al (2015), Hodgkinson-Williams (2014), Karunanayaka et al (2015), Reed (2013), Walji & Hodgkinson-Williams (2015)



The Higher Education Authority (2018) System Performance Framework 2018-20 recommends that all Irish higher education institutions have in place policies for digital teaching and learning. The National Forum Guide to Developing Enabling Policies for Digital Teaching and Learning (National Forum, 2018b) is a useful resource for those engaged in this work, with 'enabling policies' defined as those that are implementable, situated in practice, and reflective of the institution. As illustrated in this guide, considerations regarding openness permeate many if not most institutional decisions around digital policy. For example: How will digitally recorded lectures be used and shared? Can third-party platforms be used for teaching and learning? Will open access to teaching and learning materials be supported by the institution? How will decisions about access to teaching and learning materials be agreed? Where teaching and learning resources are shared openly, which open licenses are appropriate?

In line with our role in leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education, including support for all who teach and learn in Irish HEIs, the National Forum supports open education principles, practices and policies. In the coming year, we will engage in this work in several ways:

**Engagement:** Actively engaging with National Forum Associates, national and international experts in digital and open education, and staff and students in Irish higher education institutions to gain insights and to collaborate in designing, planning, delivering, publicising and evaluating activities

**Resources:** Curate a set of current resources re: (i) copyright, intellectual property rights, open licensing, use/creation/sharing of OER, and use of OEP; and (ii) development of enabling policies for digital and open teaching and learning

**Workshops/Webinars:** Host workshops and webinars to (i) support staff and students re: open licensing and OER, and (ii) support the development of enabling policies for digital and open teaching and learning

The National Forum welcomes broad involvement by staff and students in these activities. If you wish to discuss ideas, contribute resources, or engage in any of the activities outlined above, please contact Catherine Cronin at [catherine.cronin@teachingandlearning.ie](mailto:catherine.cronin@teachingandlearning.ie)

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