

GO-GN: Lessons in building an Open Research Community

Abstract

Whilst the range and amount of published OER research has increased over the past few years the OER research community is, in academic terms, still a relatively new area of interest. It is also an area which is often characterised by advocacy and personal values. The combination of its novelty and the type of activity in the sector can lead to a research deficit. As the field matures, the need for high quality, objective research has become more apparent, in terms of effective approaches, and also developing a critical mindset within the field. However, given the globally dispersed nature of OER practitioners and researchers, it is often the case that any individual researcher will be acting in isolation within their institution.

In order to nurture and expand the OER research community, the Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN) network was founded in 2012. This is a global network supporting PhD researchers in the area of OER.

The GO-GN is based around an annual seminar, providing researchers with intensive support. This is associated with a major OER conference, which the researchers attend. Supporting this annual activity is a set of online activities, including monthly webinars, social media use and newsletters. The central team at the UK Open University also produce guides and resources for researchers. There are currently over 100 GO-GN members, with 20 alumni, covering 16 countries. They have produced 30 publications in peer reviewed journals.

This paper will set out how the network operates, the data representing the network, the range of research conducted by the members, lessons learned and plans for the future. It will also provide an opportunity to hear from the students themselves. This represents a model for techniques in developing and nurturing research communities.

Introduction

Open Educational Resources (OER) can now claim a history that goes back at least 18-years, dating back to 2001 and MIT's announcement of the Open CourseWare project. There are several definitions of OER, but with a good deal of overlap between these. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, who funded the MIT project, define OER as:

teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge. (Hewlett Foundation n.d.)

This broad definition can include whole courses as well as individual resources, textbooks and software. A crucial element to this definition is the stress on the license that permits free use and re-purposing. In order to satisfy the Hewlett definition it is not enough to simply be 'free' at the point of use; it should also support intellectual and creative re-use. This is usually realized through the use of Creative Commons licenses.

As the adoption of OER projects expanded to different countries and institutions, so it was accompanied by research into its effectiveness. However, like many new fields, this research was often slow to materialize, and this was exacerbated in the OER field by an understandable inclination to prioritise expenditure on the creation of resources, rather than the evaluation of their usage.

However, an emergent research community can be evidenced by the number of publications. Using the OER Knowledge Cloud as the basis for this analysis, Figure 1 demonstrates how the number of OER publications has grown since the inception of the concept in 2001.

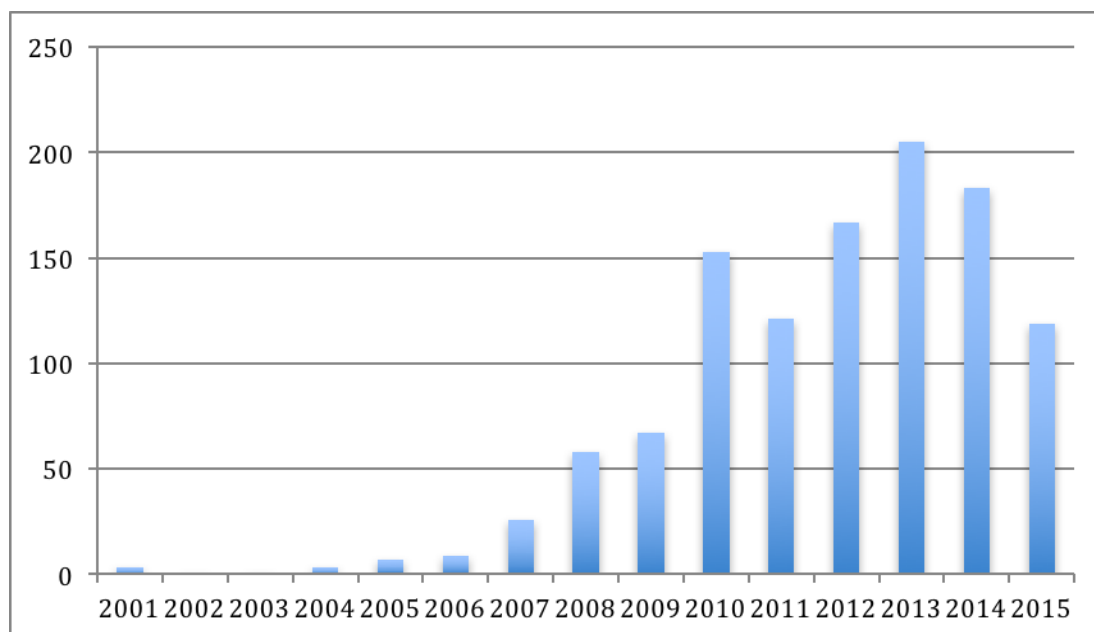


Figure 1 – Number of OER publications per year, as represented in the OER Knowledge Cloud.

From this we can see that OER research outputs increased towards the end of the 00s, establishing the field. As the OER field matured, so the need for high quality research increased. This research could be used to aid the shift from belief-driven advocacy to evidence based decision making. In recent years some significant research initiatives have emerged: the OER Research Hub at the OU in the UK, ROER4D, and the Open Education Group in Utah. One such project was the Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN), founded by Fred Mulder of the Open University Netherlands and funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The aim of this project was to nurture an OER research community by encouraging and supporting doctoral research students in this area.

The project transitioned to the Open University UK in 2015, with the aim of expanding the global network. The relative novelty of OER research often resulted in a lack of local expertise in open education. By connecting to the GO-GN Doctoral researchers gained access to a network of experts, and a range of services. The network also connected individual PhD researchers from different regions in the world allowing them to exchange contexts and experiences. This was particularly valuable in the global context where many researchers may not have access to others in their region, but also where OER may have the greatest impact.

It was not just PhD researchers that require support however. Many post-doctorate and early career researchers may still require access to a network of peers. As OER programmes are implemented at various levels, for example, Z-degrees in community colleges in the US, many teaching practitioners find themselves cast in the role of OER researcher. The GO-GN supported these researchers through the provision of open resources, so that their research was as valuable and robust as possible.

As well as research into openness the GO-GN seeks to develop openness as a process of research. This includes developing open dissemination approaches, releasing open data, publishing open access, and sharing findings openly.

Having established itself over this period, the GO-GN is now completing a phase of funding. This has led to reflection and planning for future work. This paper sets out the approach, contribution and lessons gained from this project.

Approach

There were six main outcomes the project set to realise:

1. The main outcome will be an increase in the OER research community.

The remaining five outcomes can be seen in service to this larger aim:

2. An annual face to face seminars at an international open education conference, eg. OEGlobal, attended by selected PhD researchers.
3. A set of OER Researcher resources produced or assembled by the project, for use by all OER researchers.
4. A set of webinars and events designed to foster community.
5. The establishment of two GO-GN prizes, for best research paper and best open research practice.

6. A research output record from GO-GN members that demonstrates the growing research field. This will include journal articles, as well conference presentations, blog posts, media outputs and open data sets.

In order to meet the needs of the core group of doctorate researchers and the wider OER community, we differentiated between PhD student members and associate members, which includes researchers, experts and teachers with an interest in the OER research community. Different messages and services were available to these two groups.

The annual seminar forms the central activity and identity for the GO-GN network. Every year GO-GN members are asked to apply for funding to attend the seminar. It is held over two days prior to an OER conference (usually OE Global). This seminar allowed each researcher to present to the group on their research, seek advice and gain feedback. There have also been sessions on being an open researcher, effective dissemination, getting published and surviving the PhD. Around 15 members are selected each year, with the team balancing several variables in the decision-making process including global coverage, researchers at different stages of their PhD, a range of topics and methodologies, whether people have attended before, and who might benefit the most from attendance. The researchers also then had registration at the associated conference, and were encouraged to present their work as a full conference presentation also.

In order to realise the further outcomes above, the project team developed three inter-related sets of activities which can be broadly defined as recruitment, community building and incentives. With regards to recruitment the GO-GN website formed the basis of the online activity. It was relaunched in September 2015 with a simplified sign-up process, and combined with the Twitter and Facebook accounts developed the GO-GN online profile. The team commenced a monthly webinar series at this time also, featuring guest speakers, and GO-GN researchers showcasing their work. The Twitter profile in particular was used to share resources, engage on a regular basis with the community and maintain a brand presence throughout the year. It was used to actively recruit members also who were engaged in OER doctoral research. This account was particularly prominent around the time of the annual seminar. Members were encouraged to use the #GO_GN hashtag also to raise its profile and share resources.

Combined with targeted recruitment it was necessary to make the GO-GN a beneficial and attractive proposition for researchers and associate members to join. This was realized through creating useful resources for the community. An open researcher pack was developed which included advice, survey questions, an ethics approval form and our own research data under an open licence that could be reused by researchers. In association with the resources were monthly webinars from a range of speakers.

In addition to the recruitment and benefits strands, the GO-GN also developed two incentives for joining. The main one of these is the fully funded place at the seminar. The second incentive was the establishment of two GO-GN prizes. These rewarded the twin aspects of open research: subject and process. The first being for the best research paper published by a GO-GN PhD student. The second for the best example of open research practice.

Performance

Having set out the activities of the GO-GN project, the performance against them can now be detailed. In terms of membership, the network has seen a steady growth. At the time of writing this report GO-GN comprised of 102 PhD researchers and alumni registered at universities in twenty countries. A map indicating the location and research topic of GO-GN PhD candidates and alumni is available at <http://go-gn.net/where-we-are/>. The 2019 survey is currently being completed and will be updated at the conference.

The increase in membership of the GO-GN is illustrated in Figure 2.

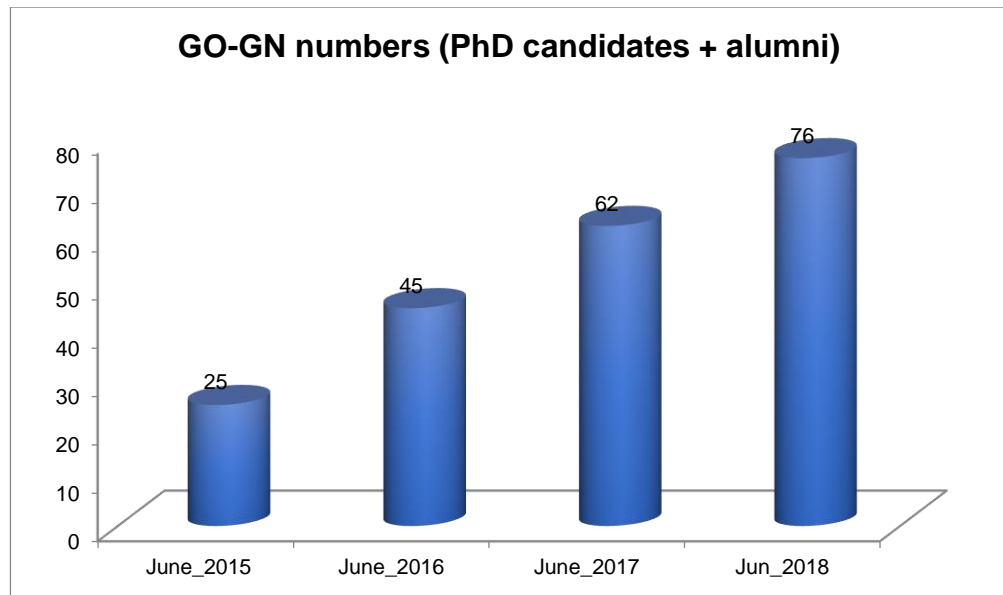


Figure 2 – Growth in GO-GN membership since 2015

Webinars

Over the past four years GO-GN hosted 22 webinars scheduled on the first Wednesday of every month. In these webinars established open education experts and GO-GN PhD candidates and alumni shared their initiatives and work in progress. These were open to anyone to attend, and each webinar was recorded and added to the GO-GN YouTube channel. Typical attendance at each session was around 30 people, with a similar number then watching the recording.

Five GO-GN seminars took place in locations including Krakow, Ljubiana, Cape Town, Delft, and Galway. A total of 68 PhD candidates were funded to attend these seminars. These numbers were increased by a further 9 researchers who were attending the associated conference under their own finances and came to the GO-GN sessions in addition.

The GO-GN Awards for Best Open Education Research Paper and Best Open Research Practice were launched in Cape Town in March 2017 to encourage student members to publish their research and engage in open practices. Awards were given at the 2018 and 2019 seminars, after adjudication by an international panel.

GO-GN PhD members and alumni continue to publish in open access journals with over 40 publications, and at the recent OER19 conference 31 sessions were by GO-GN members. 'Open Education: a Beginners' guide', (Jordan & Weller 2017), was produced as an introduction to different aspects of open education and has so far received over 3,400 views on SlideShare.

Traffic to the GO-GN website (<http://go-gn.net/>) averages around 1200 visitors a month. The Twitter account has seen the most activity (https://twitter.com/gogn_oer) with 1369 users increased from 209 in 2015. In addition there are active YouTube, Flickr and Slideshare accounts.

Lessons learned

GO-GN provides an example of both how to build research within the open education community and more broadly, a means to develop a research community in any emerging field. As technology impacts on a wide range of topics, the intersection of technology and disciplines creates emergent fields with their own communities and sets of interests. For any such area there are likely to be a number of priorities, founding beliefs and motivations. Research is an essential tool in establishing these areas, and allowing fields to develop around agreed foundations. However, in emergent areas there is often a lack of established funding agencies to promote such research. There is, though, a wide range of doctoral students who are often keen to explore such topics.

There can be a mismatch between these doctoral researchers and the amount of support and supervision available. GO-GN researchers, although all appropriately supervised in their studies, were often the main expert in OER in their institution. They frequently described finding GO-GN as a vital element in their support and motivation to completing their studies. The network has now established itself, with influential alumni, and a global reputation. It has provided a significant contribution in establishing a global OER research community that is evidenced through active participation in conferences such as OEGlobal, the UK OER conference, OpenEd and ICDE.

Therefore, it is useful to extract some lessons that can be applied to other areas. The first of these is the combination of face-to-face and online activity. GO-GN members value the annual meeting, and getting the opportunity to interact with other researchers from different contexts. The relationships formed at these

meetings have lasted beyond the project, with self-forming study groups forming around methodologies or topics of shared interest. While this face to face seminar forms the central strand of GO-GN activity it is expensive to realise in terms of travel, organisation and staff time. The number of researchers who can benefit from it is therefore limited as only one event can be accommodated annually. It therefore needs to be supported by extensive and regular online activity to support the network throughout the year and maintain a presence. This is realised through a very active Twitter presence, the regular webinars and a monthly email newsletter. These types of activity fulfil different purposes, the webinars maintain a research profile, the newsletter is a means of sharing news and the Twitter account is used for social interaction with members as well as resource sharing. Allocating sufficient staff time to such activities has been an important component in GO-GN. These different purposes highlight the second lesson, which is to recognise the significance of the emotional support aspect in such a project. While GO-GN is aimed at developing the intellectual, research capabilities of its members, completing a PhD is an emotional undertaking also, with members often talking about self-doubt, imposter syndrome, loss of motivation, and personal issues interfering with study. The connection with other researchers, and a supportive network has been as, if not more, significant for GO-GN members as the intellectual support, but the value of such work is often difficult to surface through standard metrics. Allowing different routes to legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) can be seen as a means of supporting both this emotional and intellectual development. The seminar provides a 'safe' environment in which to present their research, and be honest about areas they need support and advice on. Presenting to a group of supportive peers has been instrumental in the development of many members progress to presenting their work more broadly. The presentations in the seminar are compulsory for anyone who is selected to attend. They are also encouraged, but not mandated, to present at the associated full conference also. At the start of the project this was a separate strand, but this resulted in just other GO-GN members attending and marking them as distinct. For the past 3 seminars the GO-GN presentations have been part of the standard conference programme, and reviewed accordingly. This provides them with a legitimate conference experience, but they can use the seminar which precedes the conference to develop and hone their presentation. The webinars also provide a means to share research, and researchers who have passed their viva or nearing completion, are encouraged to be the guest speaker in one of the monthly webinars. These are then compiled into a playlist, where their webinar sits alongside presentations from well-known experts in the field. However, one aspect that the project has not always been successful at is gaining other forms of input from members. While members made frequent use of the twitter account and hashtag, and were active in participation in the seminars, finding useful ways of capturing the power of the network has proven difficult. This is despite most members being willing to contribute. The website is a WordPress installation, which runs a plug-in to allow guest posts from members. However, the barrier to use is still substantial, and guest blog posts have been relatively few. The next phase of the project is examining low-threshold ways of contributing, including automatic curation of blog posts, using a simple form to create blog posts such as SPLOT (<https://splot.ca/>), regular Twitter chats similar to #PhDChat (Ford, Veletsianos & Resta 2014) and a schedule for members to control the Twitter account.

Conclusions

The GO-GN has been a successful approach in developing a global research community and is highly valued by its members. By offering a range of services it has connected students and supported them through their doctoral studies to become significant contributors to the research community. This provides a model for other emerging fields, particularly interdisciplinary areas where local expertise may be limited. The nurturing of such a network requires significant investment however, and the appropriate allocation of staff resources to foster.

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