

# OpenSpires

## Opening up Oxford like never before

**Melissa Highton,\* Peter Robinson\*\***

\* Head of the Learning Technology Group, Oxford University Computing Services

\*\* Manager of Learning Technology Services, Learning Technology Group, Oxford University Computing Services

### **Abstract**

Oxford University learning technologies group offer a model for effective practice in creating and using OER in research-led teaching environments where academic practice includes dissemination of research which aids/supplements teaching but is not primarily designed as a teaching resource. The University is perceived by many people to be an exclusive institution. It is certainly unique and complex, with characteristics and traditions established over 900 years. An Oxford education offers an exciting combination of privilege and open-mindedness. The role and sustainability of open education technologies in this environment is subtle. Any strategy to effectively encourage the uptake of OERs must be informed by original thinking and reflection about the culture of the organisation. The OpenSpires project was a successful initiative to establish a sustainable set of policies and workflows that would allow departments from across the University of Oxford to regularly publish high quality open content material for global reuse.

### **Keywords**

OER, institutional culture, institutional change, challenges, sustainability, policy and strategy

---

### **Recommended citation:**

Highton, Melissa; Robinson, Peter (2010). OpenSpires: Opening up Oxford like never before. In *Open Ed 2010 Proceedings*. Barcelona: UOC, OU, BYU.

[Accessed:Dd/mm/yy]. <<http://hdl.handle.net/10609/4842>>

---

# Introduction

It could be said that Oxford University in the United Kingdom is perceived by many people to be an exclusive institution. It is certainly unique and complex, with characteristics and traditions established over 900 years. An Oxford education offers an exciting combination of privilege and open-mindedness. Staff and students work in a closed physical environment –shaped by gates, walls and private cloisters. The business of the University however, is characterised by a deep commitment to publication, communication and the dissemination of new knowledge.

The role and sustainability of open education technologies in this environment is subtle. Any strategy to effectively encourage the uptake of open educational resources (OER) must be informed by original thinking and reflection about the culture of the organisation and lessons learned in other places. The challenge to learning technology managers and leaders working at an institutional level is in matching not just the right technology to the right learning situation, but in matching the best approach to the needs of the institution.

The OpenSpires project has been a successful initiative to establish a sustainable set of policies and workflows that would allow departments from across the University of Oxford to regularly publish high quality open content material for global reuse. The project was supported by the Higher Education Academy/JISC Open Educational Resources Programme.

The trend towards sharing software programmes (open source software) and research outcomes (open access publishing) are already strong at Oxford. This year we have made significant progress with open content by tackling legal, licensing and discoverability issues as part of the knowledge creation and publication process. OpenSpires has given us the opportunity to explore with academic colleagues their perceptions of IPR and their position of comfort in relation to new media platforms. They have challenged us, as so they should, but we have been able to support them in making informed choices and in return 130 colleagues have signed creative commons licences for their podcast materials.

## OpenSpires

In October 2008, Oxford University launched its podcasts web portal (<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk>) and its iTunes U site (<http://itunes.ox.ac.uk>). The University currently has over 1650 audio and video podcasts from all subject areas which are free to download for personal use. The material has been provided by high-profile academics and features talks, interviews, lectures and panel discussions. Oxford has experienced considerable success from its podcasting web site and iTunes U presence: 2 million downloads in the first year, a number one in the global download charts and several items regularly in the top ten.

The OpenSpires project was part of the Institutional strand of the JISC Open Educational Resources (OER) Programme. Within the Institutional strand, Oxford University aimed to assess and report on the implications of releasing OER from a research-led institution. Our project built upon experience of two earlier OER projects at Oxford: the JISC-funded MOSAIC project in

Continuing Education (<http://mosaic.conted.ox.ac.uk/>) and the Mathematics Institute courses which are published under the terms of OpenCourseWare (<http://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/opencourseware>). Building on this success, Open Spires set out to release educational audio and video content as OER, making it free for reuse and redistribution by third parties globally, provided it is used in a non-commercial way and attributed to its creator. The project aimed to support academic content creators in the production of these materials and in the change of practice required to make informed decisions about releasing their material as OER.

## Sustainability

Content generated during the life of the OpenSpires project reflects the academic activity of the University. There are over 20,000 students at Oxford, including 12,000 undergraduates and 8,000 postgraduates. 8,000 staff 30% are fulltime on research. Each year 15,000 people take part in courses offered by the Department for Continuing Education, making Oxford University one of the largest providers of continuing education in the United Kingdom. About 1000 of those learners take courses delivered fully online. Much of the teaching provision is based on traditional methods of small group or one to one discussion.

OpenSpires OER includes lecture series, public seminars, conference presentations, interviews, peer-to-peer conversations, and panel discussions. Generally the recordings are part of regular teaching or research activities and therefore keep the additional work required by the academic to a minimum. Contributors are generally Professors, Heads of Department and visiting high-profile speakers with many demands on their time, which increases the importance of minimising contributor effort and establishing processes which add value at the centre.

We adopted a clear, well-defined format for audio and video recordings to reduce the impact on academics but also to standardise workflows to reduce the costs of production. The Oxford Podcasting Service based in the Learning Technologies Group provided advice and guidance where possible on the best format for the recording, e.g. video, screen cast, or audio only, so that it would best represent the subject matter. We also explored the legal issues around content release. As a result of the University's intellectual property statutes, Oxford academics will tend to own the materials that the OpenSpires project would like to distribute. We thus needed to obtain licences to, or assignments of, the necessary rights from the academics. The licence used for the iTunesU project did not provide us with the rights we needed to achieve Creative Commons release, so we therefore drafted a new licence with much help from the University's Legal Services.

## Open content literacy

For this project Open Content Literacy was defined as: "knowing when and why open content is needed, where to find and share it, and how to create, evaluate, and use it in an ethical manner."

While it is not uncommon for academic colleagues to search the web for materials to use in their teaching most tutors at Oxford remain unaware of the growing pool of open educational resources. The project provided training to increase open content literacy across the University, thereby embedding the production of OER as part of standard institutional activities. If academics are to become creators of open educational content the support for that activity will likely lie with those who currently support the skills for online content creation. These are staff who work in learning technology or media production roles. The training programmes offered by the Learning Technology Group included issues of copyright and IPR along with choices about where to put and publish materials e.g. in a virtual learning environment, on departmental and college websites or on platforms such as YouTube or iTunes U. Learning Technology Group staff and IT trainers also learned about OER in order to take a lead in raising levels of open content literacy within the organisation.

In order to embed the production of OER at Oxford we identified areas of existing academic practice and aligned our technological activities to those. The community of practice at Oxford is shaped and defined by shared history tradition and repertoire. The primary unit of change is neither the individual nor the institution, but the informal 'communities' which academics form within Colleges as they pursue shared endeavours over time. During this project we explored a range of ways to support change and agency in those communities. The result is a broad framework for thinking about learning technology as a process of social participation in a research community.

## Evaluation

Evaluation was carried out throughout the project by the project team. Progress against work packages and key milestones was monitored weekly at project team meetings, following Oxford University Computing Services' project methodology. Members of the OpenSpires Steering Group offered advice and guidance throughout the life of the project and attended an interim review meeting to evaluate progress against the project objectives.

An evaluation framework was compiled itemising factors to evaluate and detailing evidence collected during the project. The factors to evaluate were designed to provide evidence to determine if the devolved model of content creation was sustainable and adept at creating a reliable flow of new material suitable for release under a Creative Commons licence.

## Results

In less than a year more than 150 Oxford academics and visiting speakers donated material to support their subject communities, each contributor signing a Creative Commons licence that allows their material to be promoted for reuse in education world-wide. The material was generated in the life of the project and the subjects covered include politics, economics, globalisation, environmental change, business, research ethics, medicine, physics, English, philosophy, classics, and art history.

The project focused on audio-visual recordings and supporting resources as the University had an existing cost-effective content creation process for this. The success of the project was due to the adoption of a devolved model of content production providing a clear workflow process for department support staff to follow which minimised academic support time. A programme of training activities was established to increase open content literacy across the University. The project leveraged new popular open outreach channels such as the University video portal and iTunesU. Institutional marketing and a clear communication strategy improved the discoverability of the digitised material leading to consistent download figures. Reports of usage by learners encouraged the academics involved and reflected well on the work of the departments. All OpenSpire material is openly available on the web and free to download by anyone, without restrictions or registration. The material is promoted as free for reuse in education worldwide and is clearly labelled with Creative Commons licence. All material is syndicated through RSS to be freely surfaced in subject centre portals and is available through the United Kingdom national OER repository, JorumOpen.

## About the authors

### **Melissa Highton**

Head of the Learning Technology Group, Oxford University Computing Services

Melissa has management responsibility for the Learning Technologies Group in Oxford University Computing Service; she has institutional responsibility for e-learning strategy, the VLE and IT skills and training. She is a Fellow of Kellogg College and works closely with the E-learning Research Group in the Department of Education. She is the senior manager responsible for Oxford's current OER initiatives and the development of open-source learning technologies.

Oxford University Computing Services

University of Oxford

13 Banbury Road

Oxford, UK OX2 6NN

[melissa.highton@oucs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:melissa.highton@oucs.ox.ac.uk)

### **Peter Robinson**

Manager of Learning Technology Services, Learning Technology Group, Oxford University Computing Services

Peter is an experienced multimedia developer and has 15 years experience working on a variety of ICT projects with academics at the University. He is managing the institutional iTunes U project and regularly trains staff on podcasting. Peter was PI on the JISC STEEPLE podcasting project collaboration between Oxford, Cambridge and the Open University and on the JISC OpenSpire OER project.

Oxford University Computing Services  
University of Oxford  
13 Banbury Road. Oxford  
UK OX2 6NN  
[peter.robinson@oucs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:peter.robinson@oucs.ox.ac.uk)



This proceeding, unless otherwise indicated, is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-No derivative works 3.0 Spain licence. It may be copied, distributed and broadcast provided that the author, and the institutions that publish it (UOC, OU, BYU) are cited. Commercial use and derivative works are not permitted. The full licence can be consulted on <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/en/deed.en>.