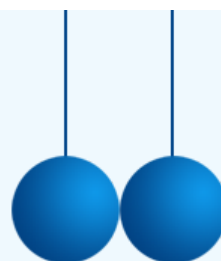


OPENUCT INITIATIVE

opening scholarship



Open Everything at UCT Open Education Week

The first global [Open Education Week](#) took place from 5-10 March. One of the questions that I found myself asking when I was asked to participate in some of the UCT events was 'What is open education?' Is it the use of OER – putting course materials online – or something broader? The answers that emerged from panelists at the University of Cape Town moved well beyond the narrower frame of courseware to a challenging and interesting discussion of the interconnectedness of communications for the university's different missions in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

This is in line with the Open Education Week's aims:

Open education is about sharing, reducing barriers and increasing access in education. It includes free and open access to platforms, tools and resources in education (such as learning materials, course materials, videos of lectures, assessment tools, research, study groups, textbooks, etc.). Open education seeks to create a world in which the desire to learn is fully met by the opportunity to do so, where everyone, everywhere is able to access affordable, educationally and culturally appropriate opportunities to gain whatever knowledge or training they desire.

At UCT, the key event was an afternoon-long Western Cape-based panel discussion on Tuesday 6 March involving speakers from [UCT](#), the [University of the Western Cape](#) and [Stellenbosch University](#). A gratifying number of people attended, filling the seminar room on what was a mid-term working afternoon. My impression was that 'open everything' is a much more mainstream cause that has been the case in the past and is attracting wider attention than before. Of course, attitudes to open approaches have received a boost in South Africa with the Department of Higher Education's adoption of OER policies in its new Green Paper, as I wrote [in a recent blog](#) and the Department of Basic Education's adoption of OER resources in schools.



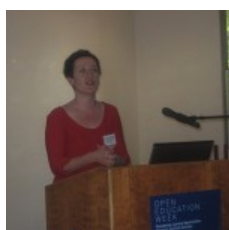
Dr Max Price

The UCT Vice-Chancellor, Dr Max Price, opened the panel discussion. This was significant in itself – a Vice-Chancellor lending support to an open education event. Commenting on the mainstreaming of OER policy internationally, Price identified the challenges facing wider open education practices as not only technical, but residing principally in the attitudes of staff. There are a number of fears that have to be dealt with, he argued – IP issues, fear of loss of control, of the work required. Very usefully, Price suggested the need for the creation of incentives, a citation system for OERs and career credit awarded to participating academics.

It was good to hear such a direct message of support from the leader of a university that I have long seen as ambivalent about these issues, but which is now clearly moving steadily towards a more comprehensive institution-wide open agenda.

The panelist's presentations revealed different approaches in the participating institutions, with Stellenbosch standing out for the strength of the open access programme it is able to implement as a result of top-level logistical and financial support. From UCT, a narrative emerged of longstanding commitment to open dissemination by individual academics and departments, often going back decades. There was also a lively introduction to citizen science initiatives taking place at UCT. There is also a sophisticated understanding of an understanding of what is now an integrated research communication. From UWC also, insight into a long tradition of open source, open education and open access and the increased capacity that this brings.

The two chief challenges appear to be the question of institutional buy-in and top-level championing, and the challenge now being posed to a silo approach to the three university missions of research, teaching and learning and community engagement.



Michelle Willmers

This emerged clearly in the presentation by Laura Czerniewicz from the [Open UCT Initiative](#) and Michelle Willmers from the [Scholarly Communication in Africa](#) project, also at UCT. They presented a dynamic vision of developments in the ways in which research is now communicated. There is a shift from from a linear model of research publication as the end point and terminus of a research programme to a dynamic networked research environment in which communication takes place at every stage of the research cycle and the distinction between different outputs is diminished. The boundaries are blurring between research outputs as formal publications, research reports and other 'grey literature'; enhanced publications such as 'translations' for policy purposes or community impact; and teaching and learning resources. This also allows for the development of alternative metrics for valuing research contributions.

Dr Marion Jacobs, Dean of the UCT [Faculty of Health Sciences](#), spoke, from her perspective as the Dean of a world-leading medical faculty, of a strong political and context-driven Afrocentric approach to communications in health studies. This involves recognition of excellence in research publication alongside commitment to meeting the needs of the SA health system in which access to health services is of primary importance. She provided examples of a number of online resources that contribute to public health care, ensured effective communications between health workers and patients in a multilingual country, and ensured the production of students fit for purpose in the South African context.

[Ed Rybicki](#), an A-rated virologist at UCT, confirmed an unacknowledged tradition – that there are a number of academics at UCT and other SA universities with a long record of putting research and teaching resources online for free access. Ed said that Africa produces just 0.7% of global research, 66% of that from South Africa. We need to share it, he insisted. Ed says everything that he produces is and has long been open. He described a productive relationship with an Australian illustrator combining free and commercial provision of high quality scientific illustrations and the value of new developments like Apple's iTextbook formatting tools. The advantages that have accrued have been wide global takeup of open resources and the immediacy of web exposure of new developments.



Dr Reg Raju

Dr Reggie Raju, the Director of Library IT and Communication at [Stellenbosch University](#) (SUN) described the impact of institutional support at Stellenbosch in creating a shared research space. The goal is to create a research footprint for the university, through an institutional repository, Sun Scholar, now ranked 165 out of 1,200 repositories internationally, and through an investment that has allowed the creation of a suite of [online journals](#) published by SUN and hosted on an OJS platform. The results of this programme, instituted in 2011 have been immediate, with rapid and substantial increases in journal readership and impact and growth in international submissions to the journals.

Mark Horner, of [Siyavula](#) told a story of a fairly common occurrence – a public interest project that emerges from a university but finds its space for expansion outside the walls of the institution, in Mark's case with the [Shuttleworth Foundation](#). A programme for open access science textbooks from schools has, in a 9-year trajectory, taken off from the basis of a collaborative postgraduate effort to becoming a mainstream government-supported resource now aiming for independent sustainability. The success story is that 2.5 million print copies of open access science and maths textbooks for high schools are being distributed by the Department of Education.

The afternoon ended with vivid overviews of citizen science programmes in biodiversity, presented by Tali Hoffman and Prof Les Underhill from the [Avian Demography Unit](#) in the [Zoology Department](#) and the [Department of Statistical Science](#).

What was clear is that open education is alive and well in a number of centres in the Western Cape. However, there is fragmentation and too much dependence on often unacknowledged departmental and individual contributions. The SUN example, demonstrating the power of institution-level investment could usefully be explored in other institutions. Institutional and government policy development to support open education in its widest sense would go a long way towards delivering our national goals of growing participation in higher education and the enhancing university contributions to national development.

by Eve




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