



## FREE ACCESS TO E-BOOKS AND 'OER'S AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF ISRAEL

Yachine Epstein, The Open University of Israel, Israel  
Edna Tal-Elhasid, The Open University of Israel, Israel  
Yoav Yair, The Open University of Israel, Israel

### Summary

*The Open University of Israel (OUI) published over 500 academic titles, and prints over a million copies annually. In May 2008, and adhering to the OCW/OER ideology, the OUI embarked on its own OCW/OER project - aiming to share its best-practice in teaching with other institutions and with the general Israeli public.*

*The portal (<http://ocw.openu.ac.il>) offers free access to course materials and learning objects, recorded video-lectures and to an abundance of exercises, tests, digital albums, simulations, examples and other web-based materials. The novelty and unique feature of this project compared to other OCW efforts is the "Open Books" component, where we publish electronic versions of 50 OUI titles (~300 books). These books are transformed from printed to digital format, accompanied by an audio version (in MP3 format) of the entire text. The books are complemented by video lectures by the authors and other content experts. The project initiated a detailed and careful quality- assurance of the OERs, and each object had to be tested for academic quality, linguistics and aesthetic levels, and IPR rules, so as not infringe on third parties' rights. This talk will present the project status as well as lessons learnt on user preferences.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Open University of Israel (OUI) is the largest public university and academic publisher in Israel. With more than 45,000 students, it offers 650 courses in all major disciplines. Since its establishment in 1974, the OUI has published over 500 academic titles, and prints more than a million copies annually. These books constitute the largest and most comprehensive collection of university-level textbooks in Israel, especially adapted to the needs of distance learners. The books and the accompanying course materials (study guides, assignments, audiovisual, multimedia and web-based) are delivered to OUI students and are used for independent study. The university has a robust Hebrew-based homegrown LMS and it offers a rich variety of online learning models, including Web 2.0 applications. We use a hybrid pedagogical model (Bonk et al., 2005) which combines distance asynchronous tutoring with face-to-face sessions, some by video broadcasting to classrooms in study centers and to students' homes via their broadband web access.

Throughout the period from 1998 to the present, the faculty and teaching staff at the OUI have developed tens of thousands of online learning objects for use in their courses. These were part of the "Opus" Hebrew-based virtual learning environment and were password protected for OUI students only. In May 2008, in line with OER ideology, the Open University embarked on its own project, aiming to share its best-practice in teaching with other institutions and with the general Israeli public. The Pe'er project (Hebrew acronym for "Opening Treasures of the Mind") offers free access to course materials and learning objects, e-books, and audio books, recorded video-lectures as well as an abundance of exercises, tests, digital photo albums, educational computer program, simulations, examples and other web-based materials.

## **2. OER AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF ISRAEL**

The Open University of Israel is the first academic institution in Israel to join the worldwide trend towards providing free access to study material and knowledge for the public good. This special project is based on an endowment from the Yad-Hanadiv foundation that should last until the end of 2009.

The Hebrew OER portal (<http://ocw.openu.ac.il>) offers free access to many of the OUI's academic textbooks in electronic format (e-books) and some also in full audio version in MP3 format or stream format; free access to course materials and reusable learning objects (RLO) (Polsani, 2003); recorded video-lectures and a plethora of lecture notes, lesson plans and lesson summaries, interactive exercises, sample tests, digital photo albums, presentations and other web-based materials.

The unique aspect of our OER, compared to other OER efforts, is the "Open Books" component, where we publish electronic versions of ~50 OUI course textbooks, amounting to some 180 volumes or 40,000 pages. These books were fully transformed from print to digital format and had OCR recognition. Readers can browse through the book, select the reading display format, search for texts, topics and terms within the book, and add personal comments to the books. Thus each time the users return to the book, they get their "own" copy. A forthcoming tool will enable writing "public notes" where users can share comments and ideas on the e-book, though publication is subject to academic quality assurance by the OUI team. The e-books cover the major academic fields taught at the OUI (sciences, humanities, economics and education), most of them in Hebrew and some few in Russian and Arabic. The e-books can only be viewed on-line and cannot be downloaded or easily printed.

Some books also include video lectures given by the authors or by other content experts.

One of the major issues that are confronted when transforming printed books to e-books and publishing them on the Web is the IPR (intellectual property rights). A large part of the project's budget was dedicated to accommodate the costs of IPR requirements, and even the availability of resources was sometimes insufficient to overcome the resistance of copyright holders to digitize and publish certain items which they own. This forced replacement or deletion of the object (picture, text) from the e-book version. Upon registration for books viewing, we require only basic user information (age, gender, profession, geographic location), and the resulting user database is available for research on usage patterns of specific objects and for user statistics. The Open University uses the Creative Commons license for some books and for the learning materials to which it owns the intellectual property rights (IPR).

Some of the e-books include a full audio version (in MP3/stream format). This version allows users to listen to the books via the Internet or to download them to their personal computers and listen to them on mobile players. Audio books are recorded at the OUI's audio studios and narrated by professional narrators skilled in radio recordings. Prior to recording, careful consideration is given to the best way to narrate the book: how to describe pictures referenced in the text; how to read tables, some of them complex, to ensure the listener's understanding of the data displayed; how to treat footnotes so their narration will not interrupt

the listening sequence and impair understanding; how to describe diagrams in the text; how to pronounce terms and names specific to a knowledge field with which the narrator is unfamiliar, etc. Preparing an audio version along with voice editing also entails correcting narration errors, removing background noise, adding bookmarks displaying the table of contents, etc.

Another distinction between pe'er project and other OER projects is the link between pe'er learning objects, opened to the public, and the OUI course materials (exercises, tests, syllabus, glossaries, lessons plans and more) open to OUI's students in our VLE.. All the materials in pe'er portel are identical to the students learning materials. The academic stfff didn't develop new learning objects for the public use. The benefit of this distinction is updating and improvement of materials every semester according to the needs and the student's critique.

### 3. USAGE AND USERS

Since its launch in May 2008, and until March 2009, more than 130 courses and ~5800 RLOs were posted on our OER portal by all OUI departments, most from the departments of Natural Sciences, Psychology, and History studies. The "early adopters" (Rogers, 2003) were 88 courses for which the lecturers volunteered to open their resources to public viewing and use. Additional courses are slowly joining in.

Our research is based on three research tools and resources:

- a. **Google analytics** (<http://www.google.com/analytics>) for identifying the users behavior on the website.
- b. **User registration data** for identifying the user characteristics - up to now more that 8500 users were registered <sup>1</sup>
- c. **User survey** for user feedback and preferences - up to now we have had 830 replies.

'Google Analytics' system supplies statistical analysis of user behavior, enable us to identify what do the users do on the website, such as number of visitors, number of visits, pages viewed, which are the popular pages or content? how long they stay on the site?

How did they reach the site? and more. The average number of users who visited the *Pe'er* portal per month was ~7,785 users, and most of them viewed materials from the Department of Management and Economics and the Mathematics Division. During the first 9 months of the project, there was a steady and continuous rise in the number of users, and the significant increase in December 08 and January 09 is probably due to the academic semester (figure 1). Presently, the average number of e-books visitors is ~1400 per month (figure 2). The two most popular books are *Introduction to Statistics for Students of Social Sciences* and *Fundamentals of Physics*. Demand is highest among students from other universities and from independent adult learners. Most of the visitors are self learner (48%) and it similar to the MIT results of their survey. (Carson et al, 2006) (figure 3). Self learner meaning not registered in any formal learning institution, Educators are teachers and lecturers and Learners are pupils and students. The similarity between the results of the two projects was surprise, because MIT OCW (<http://ocw.mit.edu>) has a different goals and users from OUI *pe'er*, and mainly the substance of the two institutes is different. Bat as the results show the characteristics of the users are similar. Most of our users are young people between the ages of 22-34 (46%) and most of them are male (63%).

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<sup>1</sup> The Open University students and faculty member are not included, not in the registration data and not on the survey's responses. the data refers to external users only.

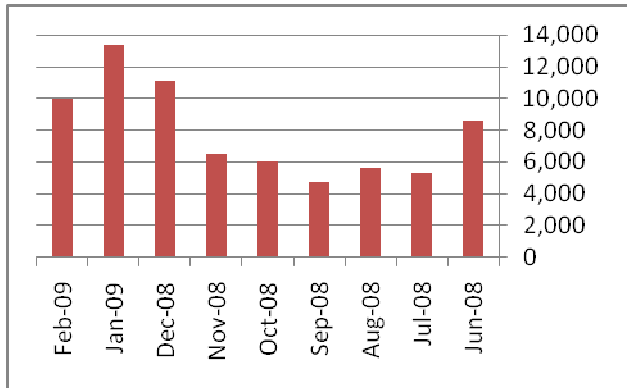


Figure 1: people visited the site

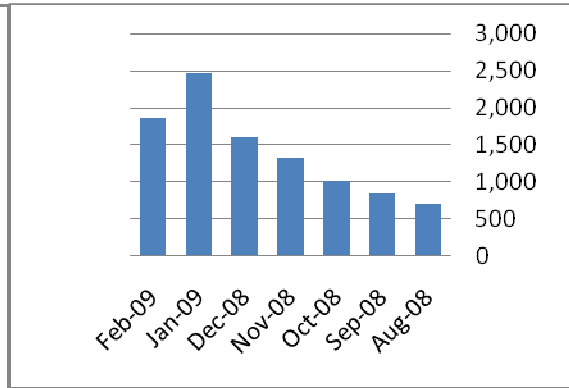


Figure 2: ebooks visitors

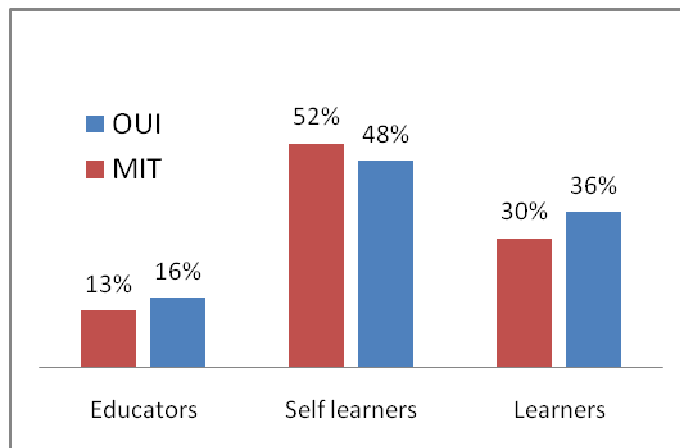


Figure 3: educational roles

Most of the users are satisfied with the quality of the content (59%) and the site interface (77%) (Figure 4). As we assumed the e-books are very popular (85%) as well as the video lectures (64%) (Figure 5). The audio books are less popular (47%) maybe the public in Israel are not yet ready for this technology.

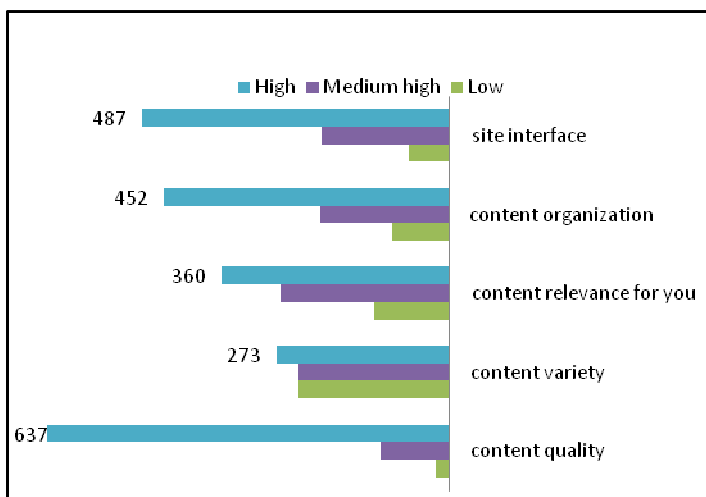


Figure 4: User Satisfaction with PE'ER content

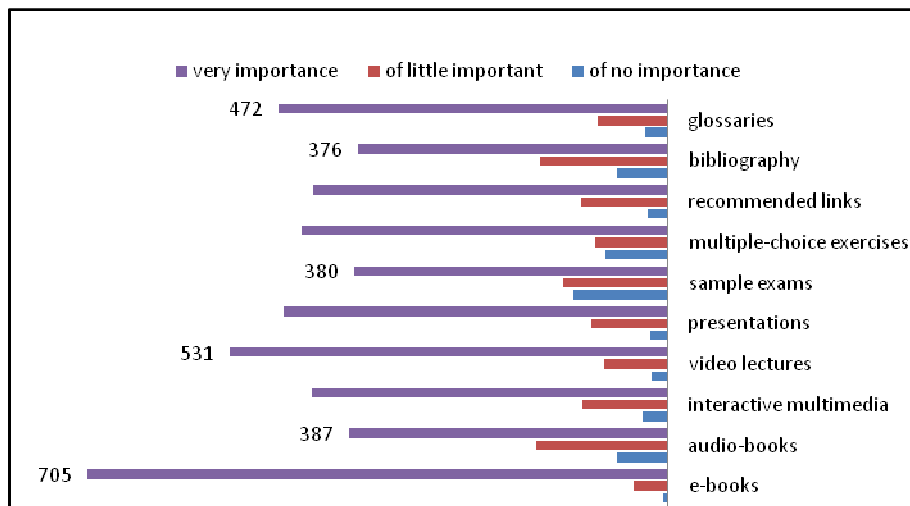


Figure 5: The importance to the user of the different content categories

#### 4. SUMMARY

Publishing books and teaching materials, and making them freely accessible, reflects a changed perspective of knowledge ownership. Willingness to contribute one of the OUI's most important assets – its academic study materials – to the public, without compensation or intent for profit is a revolutionary and challenging idea that has not been tried to date in Israel, and in this sense, the OUI is a pioneer and a trailblazer. Our vision is to enable people with a thirst for knowledge to access OUI learning materials from anywhere in the world.

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