# Higher Education as a public good: Pushing forward, pushing boundaries

## Abstract
This paper reports on a project which has embedded Open Educational Resources (OER) into the teaching and learning of students who are undertaking professional degrees in social work and nursing. It raises profound questions regarding the role and purpose of Higher Education by asking to whom does knowledge belong and who is permitted and able to produce knowledge in Higher Education? Historically professional training has been configured, led and taught by the professions themselves with little input from those outside. This paper will argue that a more democratic production and dissemination of knowledge is imperative in the changing context of Higher Education. The presentation will incorporate examples of OER developed by a range of non-traditional educators, such as students, practice assessors and service users/patients, and will explain how these are being used in learning and teaching to provide an inclusive, rich, diverse and varied learning environment.

## Introduction
This paper describes a creative, exploratory project at the University of Lincoln that seeks to embed Open Educational Resources (OER) into the learning and assessment of students who are undertaking professional degree programmes in nursing and social work. The paper addresses the conference theme in questioning what Higher Education is for by probing to whom knowledge belongs and who is permitted and able to produce knowledge that is purposeful and credible in Higher Education? The project reported on in this paper has explicitly drawn on the knowledge and expertise of a range of non-traditional contributors and raises a debate about the production and dissemination of knowledge. Historically professional training has been configured, led and taught by the professions themselves with little input from those outside. This paper will argue that a more democratic production and dissemination of knowledge are morally and educationally imperative in the complex changing context and landscape of Higher Education.

## The democratisation of knowledge
The production of OER can be seen as part of a wider social movement (Winn 2012) that seeks to move the advantages and knowledge of Higher Education outside of university walls and into the public domain. This paper will analyse how the project has embraced and encouraged the production and dissemination of knowledge beyond traditional boundaries and promoted the concept of Higher Education as being accessible and free to all who wish to learn. The potential for OER to widen participation to Higher Education, particularly amongst those in disadvantaged communities who historically do not access such learning, is significant, especially in an era when university education is an increasingly expensive commodity to purchase. Equally, OER are a key means of sharing knowledge in a way that transcends national and international boundaries and enables learners in different countries to access high quality learning materials.

The OER produced by the project have drawn on a range of knowledge and expertise beyond the confines of academia and traditional sources of knowledge production. Thus whilst Deem *et*

*al* (2007) discuss the notion that 'knowledge work' is potentially everyone's business, the project reported on in this paper puts that contested idea into practice in its widest sense. For example, contributions have been received from students, those who assess students in practice, practitioners, educators, managers and service users/patients. This socially inclusive explicit valuing of wider expertise in professional teaching and learning has produced a number of benefits, not least the development of a community of learners and educators who are willing to share their knowledge and experience.

**Knowledge production and the development of social capital**
This paper also recognises that this more democratic approach to knowledge production produces an investment by the public in professional learning and teaching. Thus whilst 'teaching as a public activity' is known to 'have a profound impact on the relationship between teachers, students and the higher education curriculum' (Bell 2012: 2), this paper takes the debate beyond the confines of the institution to the wider stakeholder community. Contributors invest in the training of the future professional by actively shaping the evolution of their professional identity and persona by enabling access to 'their' knowledge. This in turn leads to an increase in social capital, or 'social wealth' (Winn 2012: 133), as tangible links and networks are created between professionals in training and those they seek to serve.

This sharing of knowledge and involvement in the shaping of professional learning corresponds to other drivers in education and wider society. In particular it resonates with the 'student as producer' agenda (Neary and Winn 2009) but pushes the boundary further by incorporating other knowledge producers. This work recognises how students can contribute to learning and knowledge as they not only have their life experiences, but a wider range of knowledge and self-understanding to share (Burawoy 2005). It also, more controversially, echoes the political ambitions of the 'Big Society' proposals that seek to increase community involvement in all aspects of life.

**The OER project**
This paper and presentation will define OER and outline the process of working within and beyond the institution to engage stakeholders in the development of multi-media OER to support students in their practice learning and assessment within professional degree programmes in nursing and social work. This will include consideration of how materials are licensed and made publicly available. The paper will also explore the shared goals and ambitions that led to and have supported the work, whilst also illuminating the challenges and concerns that emerged from different perspectives through aspects of the project. Within this, the presentation will incorporate examples of the resources that have been developed and will explain how these are being embedded in learning and teaching to provide an inclusive, rich, diverse and varied learning environment.

**Conclusion**
There is a growing international movement of educators and institutions that are promoting the development and use of OER in what could be seen as a 'radical form' of higher education (Winn 2012: 133). This paper embeds itself within that movement as,

through an exploration of a particular project, it examines how, in the complex changing context of Higher Education, a more democratic production and dissemination of knowledge is a moral and educational imperative. In particular, the project reported on this paper pushes the commonly accepted boundaries of knowledge production, particularly the usually tightly-guarded knowledge production in the professions, as it involves students, practitioners and the wider community in the development of learning materials to support learning.

*[934 words without reference list below]*

## References

Bell, L. (2012) 'Education as a Public Good' in M. Neary, H. Stevenson and L. Bell (2012) *Towards Teaching in Public: Reshaping the Modern University* London: Continuum pp 1-3

Burawoy, M. (2005) 'For public sociology' *American Sociological Review* 70 (1), pp. 4-28

Deem, R., Hillyard, S. and Reed, M. (2007) *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Neary, M. and Winn, J. (2009) 'The Student as Producer: Reinventing the Student Experience in Higher Education' in L. Bell, H. Stevenson and M. Neary (2009) *The Future of Higher Education: Policy, Pedagogy and the Student Experience* London: Continuum pp 126-138

Winn, J. (2012) 'Open Education: From the Freedom of Things to the Freedom of People' in M. Neary, H. Stevenson and L. Bell (2012) *Towards Teaching in Public: Reshaping the Modern University* London: Continuum pp 133-147