

Open government partnership as a platform for advancing open education policy

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Abstract

An exciting new avenue for establishing and expanding national commitments to open education has emerged through the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative that aims to secure commitments from governments to make their governance more open, accountable and responsive to citizens. In the past, there has not been a strong link between open education and open government, but that has changed in the last year as both the United States and the Slovak Republic adopted commitments to open education in their OGP national action plans. The purpose of this paper is to explore OGP as a strategy for securing national-level commitments to open education in participating countries. We begin by providing background on the OGP, then discuss case studies from the United States and the Slovak Republic, and finally offer recommendations for advocates other countries to consider.

Keywords: Open government; open education; open policy; advocacy

Introduction

Support from national governments can help accelerate the open education movement both directly through supportive policies and projects, and indirectly by promoting awareness and support within civil society. A recent report by Creative Commons found that 14 countries have made national-level commitments to open education (Creative Commons, 2014). An exciting new avenue for establishing and expanding national commitments to open education has emerged through the Open Government Partnership (OGP). OGP is an initiative that aims to secure commitments from governments to make their governance more open, accountable and responsive to citizens. Open education has surfaced as a topic in the latest OGP plan development cycle.

The purpose of this paper is to explore OGP as a strategy for securing national-level commitments to open education, to help advance open educational resources and practices. We begin by providing background on the OGP, then discuss case studies from the United States and the Slovak Republic, and finally offer recommendations for advocates other countries to consider. Overall our aim is to demonstrate that OGP is an important opportunity to establish footholds toward strong open education policy in OGP participating countries.

Background: the open government partnership

The Open Government Partnership is a multilateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. OGP aspires to support both government and

civil society reformers by elevating open government to the highest levels of political discourse, providing 'cover' for difficult reforms, and creating a supportive community of like-minded reformers from countries around the world. OGP formally launched in 2011 with 8 founding nations, and as of March 2015 has grown to 65 nations (Open Government Partnership, 2015).

To join OGP, countries must commit to uphold the principles of open and transparent government by endorsing the Open Government Declaration (Open Government Partnership, 2011). Through endorsing this declaration, countries commit to "foster a global culture of open government that empowers and delivers for citizens, and advances the ideals of open and participatory 21st century government." Specifically, by signing the declaration, countries commit together to:

- Increase the availability of information about governmental activities.
- Support civic participation.
- Implement the highest standards of professional integrity throughout our administrations.
- Increase access to new technologies for openness and accountability.

In addition to endorsing this declaration, participating countries must deliver a two-year national action plan developed with public consultation that outlines specific concrete goals. Countries must also commit to independent reporting on their progress at meeting these goals. OGP national action plans address a wide variety of areas related to open government, including transparency, anti-corruption, citizen engagement, and harnessing new technologies. Commitments in these plans are designed to be concrete and action-oriented, so that the outcomes can be clearly measured. In total, OGP participating countries have made over 1,000 commitments to make their governments more open and accountable (Open Government Partnership, 2014).

Many of these commitments relate to opening up government information, which has naturally formed an intersection with other 'open' movements, including Open Access to scholarly and scientific research, open data, open science, free and open source software, and open education. The principles behind these movements embody the civic participation and harnessing new technologies elements of the Open Government Declaration.

Many countries have focused on making commitments in the area of open data (Open Government Partnership, 2014). Opening up government datasets for use and reuse by the public can support both transparency by opening up information and also citizen engagement by enabling social and commercial innovation. Many countries have launched data portals for datasets containing key government information including budgets and company registers, and also other useful data including national statistics and maps (Open Knowledge, 2015). This has translated to a better ecosystem for companies, entrepreneurs, and developers to build products of value on top of this data, for example through mobile applications (Tepe, 2012). The resulting innovations around open data were initially unforeseen, which illustrates how proactive open publication of data can lead to new economic value.

The success of government open data commitments led to the exploration of opening up other forms of government-created and government-funded information. Over the last year, open education has surfaced as a topic in the latest OGP plan development cycle. As national movements for open education continue to develop and grow, this has created an exciting opportunity for advocates to leverage OGP as an avenue secure top level national commitments for open education.

In the next section, we will explore the case studies of the first two countries to adopt open education commitments in OGP national action plans: the United States and the Slovak Republic. As of March 2015, we are unaware of any other countries that have adopted open education commitments in OGP action plans, but anecdotal reports have suggested there are ongoing conversations in several places that may become visible as the next round of plans are finalized.

Case study: United States

In September 2014, the United States became the first country to formally adopt open education commitments in its OGP national action plan. President Barack Obama announced the new commitments in a speech at United Nations marking the 3rd anniversary meeting of the OGP. (Smith & Sinai, 2014). Incorporated in an update to the 2014–2015 National Action Plan, the U.S. added a new section on open education (United States, 2014). “There is a growing body of evidence that the use of open education resources improves the quality of teaching and learning, including by accelerating student comprehension and by fostering more opportunities for affordable cross-border and cross-cultural educational experiences,” the section states.

The open education section outlines three action items to be carried out in various collaborations between the Departments of Education, Labor and State and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy by the end of 2015:

- Organize a workshop with stakeholders from academia, industry and government to foster international collaboration and produce best practices on open education policy.
- Conduct three pilot programs overseas that use OER to support learning.
- Launch an online skills academy through \$25 million in competitive grants that will offer open online courses and create high-quality free or low-cost pathways to degrees and other credentials (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

The goals of this section are relatively small in the context of U.S. federal policy. However, their announcement and public recognition by President Obama marked an important milestone for the U.S. open education movement, as it was the first national commitment on open education to come straight from the White House. Furthermore, the establishment of a section on open education in the National Action Plan provides an important avenue for future advocacy efforts that could expand and build upon the goals.

In development of the open education section of the plan, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy convened a stakeholder meeting including diverse perspectives from the open education movement. The participants identified several key areas where the goals of open education and open government overlap, including international collaboration, open licensing policies for federally funded resources, and increased transparency in government spending and procurement processes relating to educational materials. These ideas provide potential areas to expand the OGP plan in future iterations.

The U.S. commitments built on existing federal efforts relating to open education dating back to the beginning of the Obama Administration. First, in 2011 the U.S. launched the \$2 billion Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants program, which funded projects to improve workforce training programs at community colleges and other 2-year institutions of higher education (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). As part of the implementation of this program, the U.S. Department of Labor conditioned grants on the use of a Creative Commons Attribution license for all grant-funded educational materials and the public sharing these materials in an open repository (Skills Commons, 2015). A handful of additional programs at the Departments of Labor, Education and State have adopted similar conditions (Creative Commons, 2015). Furthermore, the State Department launched the Open Book Project in 2013 to promote collaboration with the Middle East and Northern Africa region by expanding access to free, high-quality open educational resources in Arabic (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

Case study: Slovak Republic

The Slovak Republic became the second country to include open education commitments in an OGP plan when it approved its 2015 National Action Plan on 11 February 2015 (Slovak Republic, 2015). Couched in the nation's successful open data commitments, the open education chapter lays out a strong case for the benefits of open education for Slovakia. The introduction states:

In education, research and development, a great amount of content is created: educational materials, studies, publications, etc. These are often published in such a manner that access to them is complicated even for experts within academia, not to mention the wider public. Proprietary licenses, as well as technological issues related to publishing create barriers which need to be eliminated. In coordinated approach and removal of barriers at the top using legislation and technological coordination, powerful effects can be achieved.

The open education chapter includes two discrete sub-chapters for open educational resources (OER) and Open Access to scientific and scholarly research publications, each with its own set of commitments.

The commitments regarding OER include:

- Identify digitally available educational resources at the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport that can be released openly, and evaluate existing repositories at the Ministry for the purpose of establishing a central repository to publish OER.
- Analyze the procurement process for educational resources in primary and secondary education and run a pilot program of a new proposed procurement process that would enable the release of such materials under an open license.
- Propose and implement awareness measures for open educational resources.
- Join multilateral activities in Europe and beyond that support the creation, improvement, sharing and reuse of open educational resources.

The commitments regarding Open Access include:

- Identify and evaluate existing repositories at the Ministry for the purpose of establishing a central repository for storing scientific publications, including text and data.
- Work together with affected institutions to identify barriers to Open Access implementation and conduct an analysis of requiring that publications be provided to the public in a free and open manner.
- Propose a mechanism for voluntarily publishing data related to scientific publications as Open Data.
- Inform Slovak educational and research institutions about the benefits of Open Access.
- Cooperate with other countries on the creation of Open Access strategies and share knowledge gained in Slovakia.

The opportunity to incorporate open education into the Slovak 2015 National Action Plan arose when the nation's Digital Champion Peter Pellegrini became Minister of Education. There was a natural connection between open government and harnessing new technologies to expand access to information in education, and after consultation with more than a dozen ministry officials, the open education commitments were proposed in the September 2014 public draft of the plan (Slovak Republic, 2014). A final draft was adopted after consultation with primary and secondary schools, higher education institutions, research institutions, and legal experts within government.

Other OGP commitments from the Slovak Republic include increasing public participation, increasing efficiency and transparency of the judicial system and improving the situation with open data. The Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government for the Development of the Civil Society,

which is responsible for the nation's OGP initiatives, is also participating in the international COMSODE project (Slovak Republic, 2014). COMSODE outputs include an open data publishing platform, as well as methodologies and documentation of best practices for publishing data. These methodologies and software are openly licensed and available to the organizations which are responsible for carrying out OGP commitments in Slovakia. They are also starting to be adopted in several other countries. COMSODE is an example where openly developed software and content can be adopted abroad in new and innovative ways.

Methods for advancing OGP open education commitments

The adoption of open education commitments in the U.S. and Slovakia illustrates how OGP can be an effective avenue for establishing national support for education. This section will discuss how potential advocates can consider initiating this approach in their own countries.

Identifying the opportunity

The first set of recommendations relates to identifying whether OGP national action plans are a viable avenue for advocacy.

- **Confirm OGP Membership:** The first step is to establish whether a country is a member of OGP, which can be easily determined from the OGP website. The website also provides information about the action plan status of each participating country, including whether it is currently developing an action plan and whether it has previous action plans. If the country is not a member of OGP, it may make sense to share information with contacts in government about the initiative and how to join. As of March 2015, 65 countries are members (Open Government Partnership, 2015).
- **Identify Government Contact:** Each country involved in OGP typically appoints a specific office or ministry to lead the development of the national action plan. In the U.S., the key point of contact is the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy plays a leadership role, and in Slovakia it is the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government for the Development of the Civil Society. This information can typically be found within a country's existing national action plan.
- **Educate Government Officials:** Since open education is not yet a mainstream topic in OGP action plans, implementers may not yet be aware that this is a possible avenue for reform. Once the appropriate contacts within government have been determined, it is important to reach out and provide information about open education. It would be helpful to start with basic information, such as a one-page summary about open education, and also provide information about how the U.S. and Slovakia have adopted commitments in their plans. Resources are available with overview of open education policies on a number of levels, as well as inspiring stories from around the world.

Making the case

Once the opportunity has been identified, the next step is to make the case for open education as a potential component of OGP action plans. It is best to start by highlighting the areas where open education and open government intersect.

- **Civic Engagement:** One of the key components of the Open Government Declaration is to promote civic engagement in government, and educated citizens are more active citizens. Open education ensures that more people have access to information, both through formal educational structures and to educate themselves.

- **Transparency:** When taxpayer funding is spent on the development of educational materials and research, citizens should have the right to see the outputs it produces. Open sharing ensures transparency for how funding is being spent.
- **Efficient Use of Public Funds:** When the public buys educational resources, they should only have to pay for them once. The principles of open education ensure that everyone can freely access, use, share, keep, adapt, and build upon publicly funded works. This guards against duplication of efforts, since once a resource is created, it can be used by everyone, forever, for free. It also enables new uses of government-funded information that may have not been imagined before.
- **Harnessing New Technologies:** When information is shared freely, students, teachers, researchers, entrepreneurs, and members of the public can use and build upon it. Much in the same way that open data has promoted economic development, open educational resources can enable businesses and innovators to develop products of value on top of it.
- **Access to Knowledge:** Freely sharing educational resources not only enables citizens of the country to access and use the information, but also anyone else in the world. This can showcase the important knowledge produced within a country to a global audience, and also serve ethnic or cultural populations that reside outside of a country.
- **International Cooperation:** A global movement has grown around open education, with top-level support from numerous governments. In Europe, the European Commission has been endorsed open education through its Opening Up Education initiative. Countries who move in the direction of open education will find important allies and multilateral opportunities to collaborate.

Advocacy strategies

Once a government has expressed interest in adopting commitments relating to open education in OGP action plans, there are several strategies to consider based on experiences in the U.S. and Slovakia.

- **Engage Inside Champions:** As is often the case with government policy, inside champions in relevant governmental divisions were key at driving forward the open education commitments in both the U.S. and Slovak national action plans. Identifying and supporting advocates inside of government can be one of the most effective ways to overcome the administrative hurdles of policy, which can often stand in the way of even the most broadly popular ideas. Even seemingly lower level officials can be influential if they are positioned to intervene at important stages of policy development.
- **Start with Strong Language:** A common strategy for policy development is to start with the strongest possible language, and work backwards based on what is possible given resources and stakeholder support. The Slovak plan took this approach, proposing a set of more ambitious goals in the initial draft, and scaling it back based on the timeframe and input from stakeholders and the ministries responsible for implementation. There are cases when this approach is not appropriate, for example if the timeline for adopting a plan is short.
- **Identify Existing Opportunities:** In cases where governments are looking to start small, commitments can be easier to make when the actions are already in line with current plans and resources. While the OGP requires all action plan commitments to be new (i.e. not previously accomplished), governments can still set meaningful goals based on existing efforts. For example, plans for the U.S. Online Skills Academy, the largest of the nation's three OGP open education commitments, were already underway prior to September 2014. The U.S. formally adopted this program as part of the national action plan.

- **Consult Stakeholders:** Consultation with civil society is central to the mission of OGP action plans, so engaging stakeholders in the development of open education commitments is essential. This is important because OGP action plans are meant to set practical, action-oriented goals that the government will ultimately be accountable for achieving. So, working with the people affected by the goals from the beginning will help lay groundwork for success. Both the U.S. and Slovakia conducted stakeholder consultations that helped address potential barriers at the outset and gathered input on how the commitments can be most effectively implemented. Key stakeholder groups for open education include education and research institutions, teachers and faculty, students, government agencies, publishers, and organizations with expertise on open education.
- **Consult Experts:** Another important strategy for action plan development is to work with open education experts. Members of international open education community have more than a decade of expertise working toward open education reforms, and advocates are often eager to provide advice and recommendations based on experiences in other countries. Once again, both the U.S. and Slovakia sought input from outside experts to help develop and consult the wording of their commitments.
- **Plan for Implementation:** Commitments are only meaningful if they are fulfilled, and policies are only as strong as their implementation. When advocating for OGP commitments, it is critical to plan in advance to ensure the necessary mechanisms, resources and support are in place. Sometimes it is better to adopt a smaller goal that is sure to be successful than an ambitious goal that may not be possible to fulfill. OGP is intended to be an ongoing cycle, so reforms not achieved in one action plan can be addressed in the next – or achieved independently of the OGP altogether.

Conclusion

OGP action plans provide an unprecedented opportunity to establish national commitments to open education that fuel the movement by raising visibility, providing key resources, and enacting supportive policies. This avenue is particularly advantageous because of the visible community around it and the focus on action-oriented commitments. That said, it is important to remember that securing OGP commitments is not the equivalent of enacting reforms – there is still work to do once the plan is adopted. Furthermore, OGP cannot operate as an island, the plans must be accompanied by support in civil society for open education. But, with the right conditions, OGP can be an effective avenue for open education supporters in OGP member countries to pursue.

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