

Connecting the Opens (IV): Institutional strategies to embed openness in Higher Education

Connecting the Opens leadership series | 4

This fourth item in the series continues exploring how university leaders across Europe are connecting Open Science and Open Education. Based on interviews conducted by SPARC Europe, the series aims to inspire more leaders to connect the opens and support institutions in addressing complex challenges through an integrated open knowledge framework.

Leadership, collaboration and pathways to implementation

Leadership is a decisive factor in shaping institutional direction. University presidents and senior leaders play a key role in setting priorities, promoting knowledge sharing and ensuring that openness is embedded across institutional strategies. Formal action plans, developed through broad consultation and endorsed by governing bodies, provide a clear roadmap for implementation. Aligning these strategies with international frameworks, such as those promoted by UNESCO, reinforces their legitimacy and provides a strong foundation.

Despite these shared trends, institutions are adopting diverse pathways to implementation. Some follow structured approaches based on clearly defined strategic pillars and governance mechanisms, while others take a more organic route, focusing on building infrastructure and services that integrate seamlessly into existing systems. Practical measures may include making research datasets available for teaching purposes, strengthening support services for open research, exploring new organisational models, or hosting events that raise awareness and foster collaboration across departments.

Importantly, effective strategies also take into account disciplinary differences and varying levels of readiness. While some academic fields may readily embrace open practices, others require more targeted support and clearer incentives. Understanding what motivates researchers and educators to engage with openness is therefore essential. This includes exploring how open contributions can be recognised within career progression and evaluation systems.

In some cases, institutions are adopting longer-term, exploratory approaches, focusing first on understanding their internal culture and the motivations of their communities before formalising strategic frameworks. Others are embedding openness within broader institutional transformations, such as digitalisation or data literacy initiatives, recognising it as a core component of the contemporary university. Collaborative development of

open-source software across institutions is also emerging as a more efficient and sustainable model.

From vision to strategy: structuring openness

As institutions move from recognising challenges to implementing solutions, strategic thinking becomes central. Approaches to connecting the opens are inherently multifaceted, combining practical implementation frameworks with broader conceptual shifts. One important distinction emerging in institutional strategies is between the production and participation in knowledge, where collaboration, co-creation and sharing are emphasised, and its dissemination, which focuses on accessibility and is often shaped by licensing frameworks. Recognising this dual dimension enables institutions to design more precise and effective strategies that address both how knowledge is created and how it is made available.

At the same time, many universities are adopting a more integrated understanding of open science. Rather than treating its components, such as open access and open data, as parallel or isolated efforts, institutions are increasingly viewing them as part of a cohesive system in which elements like open peer review, open metrics and open research assessment interact and reinforce one another. This more holistic perspective is gradually extending to open education, reflecting a growing awareness that the processes of creating, sharing and applying knowledge are deeply interconnected across research and teaching.

As stated by one leader:

“University strategy and new digital learning strategy have brought open research, scholarship and education together. University strategy emphasises community, collaboration and impact.”

Strategic planning in this area often revolves around a set of core dimensions that institutions are beginning to address in a coordinated way. These include:

- The development of infrastructures,
- The strengthening of skills,
- The alignment of reward and recognition systems,
- The clarification of roles and responsibilities,
- The establishment of governance frameworks and standards, alongside the identification of sustainable funding opportunities.

Taken together, these elements provide a structured foundation for advancing open science while simultaneously enabling stronger connections with open education.

Certain universities are now embedding these priorities within comprehensive institutional strategies. Such plans typically articulate openness through dedicated pillars for both open science and open education, while also incorporating cross-cutting themes related to values,

such as ethics, equity and safety, legal considerations including copyright and intellectual property, and the development of skills for students, staff and broader societal actors. Community building is also a recurring component, as institutions recognise that fostering engagement and collaboration is essential for long-term impact. Monitoring mechanisms, ranging from grassroots initiatives to formal assessments of policy effectiveness, are used to track progress and ensure that strategies remain responsive.

As one leader stated on work in integrating the opens,

“It highlights something else beyond revenue generating and credit bearing. There is an equity in the offer.”

Some leaders also highlight the need for strategic and sustained investment in open infrastructure, support services and capacity-building efforts required to ensure that institutions can effectively support and scale open practices across research and teaching, including strengthening institutional support teams and ensuring that new systems and infrastructures are aligned with open principles.

From fragmented initiatives to integrated frameworks

A common direction among institutions is consolidating previously fragmented initiatives into more unified frameworks. This can involve expanding areas such as citizen science into broader forms of civic engagement and formally incorporating elements like open hardware. Emphasising shared values, rights, skills and community helps translate strategic intent into operational practice. Some universities are working to mainstream Open Education across all levels of study and to integrate open science activities into wider institutional developments, including digitalisation strategies and evolving systems of reward and recognition.

Another important aspect of these strategies is the recognition that progress occurs simultaneously across multiple levels. Internally, some institutions are fostering collaboration among academic staff, researchers, librarians and administrative units.

As one university leader put it,

"Work in parallel. Have regular meetings with some staff but not as a group. ... meet together with the president but also at the level of the political team. Share experiences."

Externally, they are engaging with national and international initiatives, positioning themselves within broader ecosystems of open knowledge. Some universities are moving towards making open education practices the default, linking them directly to promotion criteria and institutional evaluation processes. Structured action plans illustrate how clear priorities, annual targets, and progress monitoring can support this transition. At the same

time, the allocation of dedicated resources, including the reorganisation of library roles to support open initiatives, signals a clear commitment to addressing and improving access to knowledge

Collaboration emerges as a central principle in connecting the opens. Institutions are increasingly creating mixed teams that bring together researchers, educators, librarians and senior management, fostering environments in which different perspectives can converge. Aligning university-wide strategies, particularly in areas such as digital learning, with open research and education further strengthens coherence and impact. Initiatives such as the Knowledge Equity Network demonstrate how these collaborative approaches can extend beyond institutional boundaries and contribute to global engagement.

Students are also playing a more active role within these strategies. Their involvement in actively co-creating Open Educational Resources not only enhances digital literacy and understanding of knowledge production but also fosters a sense of ownership and engagement with open education practices. At the same time, collaboration with other educational institutions, especially those sharing linguistic or contextual similarities, supports the reuse, repurposing and adaptation of resources and approaches. Engagement with non-academic organisations and civil society, such as non-academic societies or NGOs, further expands the reach and societal relevance of open initiatives.

Following the previous item exploring [the challenges on the path to openness in higher education](#), this piece has examined how institutions are developing strategies to embed openness across their missions. As one university leader put it “we must move from talking about it to doing it.” Strategic development is a key step in this process. Differing approaches illustrate a shift from isolated initiatives to coordinated, systemic action. These insights are grounded in our [Connecting the Opens Position Paper](#).

In the next item of the series, we will explore how policy approaches and incentive structure for connecting the opens in higher education are evolving.

References

Open Source Hardware Definition.

<https://oshwa.org/resources/open-source-hardware-definition/>

UNESCO. (2019). Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER).

<https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-open-educational-resources-oer>

5 key actions

- 1. Advocate for a holistic and integrated "open by design" approach:** Emphasise the strategic advantage of moving beyond siloed open initiatives towards a unified framework encompassing open science, open education, and open infrastructure. Highlight how this synergy can amplify impact, foster collaboration, and create a more efficient and equitable knowledge ecosystem.
- 2. Champion strategic investment in foundational open infrastructure and support:** Stress the critical need for robust and interconnected infrastructure, coupled with dedicated support services and skills development programs. Position these investments as essential enablers for the successful adoption and integration of open practices across research and teaching, ultimately enhancing institutional capacity and reach.
- 3. Drive cultural change through incentivization and recognition of open practices:** Underscore the importance of aligning institutional reward and recognition systems with open scholarship. Advocate for incorporating open contributions (e.g., OER creation, open data sharing) into promotion and tenure criteria to foster a culture that values and incentivises openness among faculty and researchers.
- 4. Prioritise active engagement and co-creation with students:** Highlight the strategic imperative of involving students as key partners in the open movement. Emphasise the benefits of co-creating open educational resources and of fostering a learning environment in which students understand and value open practices, preparing them to become future open scholars and citizens.
- 5. Position the institution as a leader in the global open ecosystem:** Advocate for the development and implementation of a comprehensive open strategy that aligns with national and international frameworks (e.g., UNESCO recommendations, EU definitions). Emphasise the opportunity to showcase the institution's commitment to knowledge sharing, social responsibility, and global collaboration, enhancing its reputation and impact on a wider scale.

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