

## **Opening education in the MENA region: Focus Group data with experts in open education in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine.**

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### **Introduction**

This document presents the transcript of a focus group which took place in Agadir (Morocco) in May 2018, with open education experts from eight universities: Alexandria University (Egypt), Cadi Ayyad University (Morocco), Cairo University (Egypt), German Jordanian University (Jordan), Ibn Zohr University (Morocco), Princess Sumaya University of Technology (Jordan), and An-Najah University (Palestine). The data presented here is part of a study which aimed at identifying cultural barriers in the adoption of open education in higher education in the Middle East and North Africa, specifically in Egypt, Jordan Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine. This study was conducted in the context of OpenMed – Opening up Education in South-Mediterranean countries, an international cooperation project co-funded by the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education programme of the European Union during the period 15 October 2015 – 14 October 2018. The focus group was conducted in English and was digitally recorded. It was later transcribed verbatim. The focus group had a duration of 55 minutes.

More information: <https://openmedproject.eu/>

### **Participants**

<b>#1</b>	Adiy Tweissi (PSUT, Princess Sumaya University for Technology)	<b>Jordan</b>
<b>#2</b>	Ibn Zohr University	<b>Morocco</b>
<b>#3</b>	Cairo University	<b>Egypt</b>
<b>#4</b>	UCA, Cadi Ayyad University	<b>Morocco</b>
<b>#5</b>	GJU, German Jordanian University	<b>Jordan</b>
<b>#6</b>	GJU, German Jordanian University	<b>Jordan</b>
<b>#7</b>	An-Najah National University	<b>Palestine</b>
<b>#8</b>	Alexandria University	<b>Egypt</b>

During the focus group, the project manager of OpenMed and another project partner from the University of Coventry were also present.



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## Focus Group Transcript

### THEME 1: The local circle

The goal of this focus group is to share experiences among the facilitators of the different local circles that were working during the course. As most of the interaction took place among students and facilitators at a national level, now it is interesting to compare and contrast experiences of the course in different contexts and universities.

*To break the ice and have a panoramic view of the project I would invite each of you to make a brief description of the experience in your local circle. Could you please describe in 1 minute the experience of teaching and learning in your local circle?*

**#1: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** The experience was new and rich to me. I learnt as much as my learning circle. I see a lot of potential for this one to grow as a course and as a project. I see huge opportunities for growth in the future and also in terms of research. My concern in terms of sustainability, in terms of the marketing aspect. How are we going to market this to so many interested targeted audience?

**#6: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** Technically, it was a good learning experience. Whether it was about open education resources or finding out what it actually about, when everyone had a different view of what it is. The other part, when it came to the circles themselves, sometimes it was hard to bring people together. We organised it both at alternative times. I think pushing people to do work, when they do not have any sort of understanding of the incentive for them was the hard part.

**#2: MOROCCO PERSPECTIVE** For me the experience was positive definitely. I have been working a facilitator in many programmes and online courses for twenty years. But this is the first time, I have to deal with an eclectic public. With my group, it was not a problem. We are working in my university and I had the opportunity to see them one at least once a week, plus working on the platform. But anyways, during the experience of the course, translating some parts of the course and exchanging with some partners, that was in my mind, the most important thing. When I say exchange with the other facilitators, that includes all the cultural problems, misunderstandings sometimes, but it was part of the work. And this is what I appreciated the most.

**#7: PALESTINE PERSPECTIVE** It was a very interesting and challenging experience. In the learning cycle, there are people from different backgrounds and different experience, online and open education, so that makes it a bit difficult. After the first two weeks, after Torino, it seems people went back to their work and you need to bring them back. We decided to have regular face-to-face meetings. Every two or three weeks we meet in the lab and they do the work and they can support each other. We divided into three teams. People with skills and previous experience and people without, so they could support each other. The most interesting thing is how people changed, reaching the same standards, starting to use the open education terminology. At the end, to do the project, they

divided themselves according to their skills and their interests. That was fantastic because they enjoyed doing the project. It felt like it was not something imposed on them, but rather that they were interested in it. Timing was the problem. The main challenge was how to let them have time to do it.

**#4:** I agree with EXPERT #2 about the opportunity to have feedback from the group. The difficulty is that one of them is not engaged. People ask why do I have to accomplish the course? And I say, it is because you agreed to go to Torino. They are members of the project. Since I checked with the learners about the work project, they did the work project. One of them knows all the modules. Because one is responsible of the information division, he is working every day in digital and the other one is our *MacGyver*. They did it very easy. To make research about these kind of things, it should be linked to what happened on the platform and all the people you can diffuse at the team will give us feedback on what is going on around the course, which is important for my university, for my office. But if we put people engaged outside of this research, they will not go with you. I have PhD students who is working daily on this kind of thing. As EXPERT #2 said, this is our bread, this is what we are doing, like you. As we work with Moodle and OpenEdx, we have data, we analyse, we publish. Here in the group, 70 people is not too much. But actions are too big. The course is very complex, it's a lot of modules and not very compact. They got lost.

**#6:** JORDAN PERSPECTIVE A comment on that point, and I think it was mentioned in Torino. Everybody was told not to have huge goals for projects, but nobody had a sense of how big it should be.

**#4:** MOROCCO PERSPECTIVE My concern is to do research, also. I know that Erasmus is not for research, but for this project, we have been able, everyone of us (and it has been a big challenge with project manager and another colleague from Coventry University, you are not in this discussion), we did too much work. And it's an Erasmus, but the department of psychology maybe they are not used to having this kind of thing and to publish this kind of things. Not for me. I am finished. This is why our action was nowhere.

**#8:** EGYPT PERSPECTIVE I think it was quite an experience for me and the group. We started with a group, which is completely away from open education. I can say most of them did not know anything about open education, but they were doing their best to go through the field. This is the main criteria for choosing the group. Everything went fine, until as EXPERT#4 said, it was too heavy regards the time, especially if these people are committed to something else. I have two of them who were about to finish their PhD. They do not have the luxury of time to follow up every week, or every other week. That is too much. They are very committed people, if they are free. They are not. Maybe if it was planned for more space of time to the learning cycle. But again, at the end of the day, they are very strong believers of open education. I can confidently say that we can do it. They actually started to create parts of their courses by openness. This is the first part. The other part is about building research. Everything should be clear and transparent.

(During this part, an internal issue of the project came up, in which different participants discussed for some time with the coordinator of the project the issue in question).

**#4: MOROCCO PERSPECTIVE** When working with PhD students, it is considered plagiarism, if you ask your students to work something which has nothing to do with their PhD. It is not allowed. Even if I am the professor. Even if he/she publishes something it is her work not mine. It is very complicated.

**#5: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** For the organisation of the project, it would be better if we had the learning in the beginning and then we did the compendium and the workshops. Just to give some common flow. Like EXPERT #1, who is an expert in the field, we are engineers, we are very informed about the subject. It would have been better to have this common flow at the very beginning so that we can contribute better for the project. In the future, it is easy to access Wikipedia, as an online course. I want to reemphasize the motivation of the people. We really had a problem to motivate these people. And the way it worked is that during the semester breaks, me and my colleague (EXPERT #6) had to get people in a single room, to organise meetings to make sure we are progressing. The good thing is that we have very good knowledge about open education. We are in the process of establishing the open education centre at GJU. And what these people have learnt from the project and open education will be carried forward to other colleagues.

**#3: EGYPT PERSPECTIVE** It was a really nice experience to be a *super* facilitator. I decided to be a learner, just to see in details what is the course and to support the team. As others mentioned, the time was a problem. And the effort from the people who were busy. The lack of policy and from the university and what they are going to do with open education. I am talking mainly about the Faculty of Engineering and how they can use it, whether it is part of the course, whether they can be graded or not was not clear. Most of the learners were asking how it fits in the Cairo University policy. We have an initiative but not a policy. This is my struggle with the course. But as I said, it was a really good experience.

**#6: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** I guess in my mind, at least when I think about our experience with this course, if I want to take on a new course, whatever it is, there's probably too many questions that I ask myself: what is it about? Is it something that excites me? Is it a trendy topic? Let's say, artificial intelligence that everyone talks about. And what is the benefit for me? Am I going to learn a new skill? What is the outcome? I think the struggle for most learners, both of those questions, the answer was I do not know. One of them is I do not know. The other is I do not understand the benefit of this. At least from a facilitator's part, I could answer one of those questions, because somewhat, although we did not understand correctly, we thought we know what OER was and that was adjusted. But still, for me it is something that I like, so I enjoyed it. For learners, it felt like you were force feeding them to learn. They do not quite understand what it is about.

## **THEME 2: Adaptation of content:**

*Suppose an alien, a professor of Mars, arrives at your university: what two key things should s/he know about Egypt / Morocco / Palestine / Jordan when adopting her teaching to open education?*

**#6:** JORDAN PERSPECTIVE I think number one, there should be an excitement factor. Some buzz words.

**#5:** JORDAN PERSPECTIVE We have a concern. The students we get have a different range of education. Basically, in some classes we need to take attendance to make sure students are attending the course. While in other courses, especially in higher years, students are aware of the importance of a subject. When it comes to open education, we need some discussion on how can you afford to have students who are not really interested in taking the course to take open education? In Jordan, like probably in other countries, it is something to be considered, especially if we do not offer full degree that is in open education. Based on the discussion we had in my institute, the best strategy is to have open education as a supplementary material, so that it can provide students with some complementary kind of presentations and education material. I really liked when you (to EXPERT #1) give your open education course in Germany. That is something we do not have in GJU. They (PSUT) are advanced in this field compared to us. We would like to learn from them. We in GJU, think we need to think to provide material without losing the advantage of meeting face-to-face with our students.

**#4:** MOROCCO PERSEPCTIVE I would say if someone is coming from Mars or Venus, I would need to observe people on Earth. Because if you are not able to share with them anything, you cannot be good in sharing your course. The majority of people do not share anything with others. The second thing is the institution. You need to have someone who has an open mind. You need to do your job correctly, to be a good teacher, if you want to perform something. If you do not like your job, do not become a teacher.

## **THEME 3: The notion of sharing**

*I think it is really interesting because it links as well to our next question. This is a quotation from one of the facilitators during the interviews: "In general, Europeans like to share. You see it on Twitter. They show what they are doing, they share what they are doing. This is something which is much needed in the Arab countries...The idea of sharing and collaboration is not yet in the Arabic culture." Do you agree, disagree, what do you think? (33: 50)*

**#1:** JORDAN PERSPECTIVE I disagree completely.

**#8:** EGYPT PERSPECTIVE Especially the young generation, they are open minded. If you can read what they write in Arabic, you will be amazed at what they know and how they are catching up with the ages that they are living.

**#6: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** I see two parts in it. One, it could be read in the sense that people do not want to share their knowledge, such in a way that somebody learns it and gets better than them. The number two is going back to the fear factor. If I share it, someone will judge me, you are stupid. What you are saying is not right. It could mean two things.

I am sorry to keep bringing back this point. But the whole point of benefit when you see those online motives and how to make a million dollars. When you see it, you think I want to take that course because you want to learn how to make a million dollars by making a MOOC. But when you make your course open, you think am I just going to get criticism, nobody is going to pay me for it. That is the fear sometimes that people could have to do open resources.

#### **THEME 4: Hierarchy**

*From the interviews, various experts seem to imply that high ranking professors feel that sharing their knowledge is giving off their status quo. Is that right?*

**#5: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** Identification is really basic. When it comes to teaching, you teach basic courses. By the end, all of us sitting at this table are researchers. What we do is publish the success of our work. How you interpret is different to what is really happening. For instance, people do not appreciate open education in my country, compared to some other countries.

*Why?*

**#5: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** Because we do not need it. We have a lack of a number of students at the university and we do not attract students from outside Jordan. In other countries, there is the challenge of adapting the huge number of students with the limited resources. In Jordan, we have a good face-to-face education. Sometimes we have to force students to attend lectures. Open education to replace face-to-face learning is not a good idea in Jordan. But it would be a good idea to provide open material. That is a way of seeing open education something that is not as an urgent need in a country that has ten public universities with less than ten million inhabitants. That is different than when you think that you do not appreciate open education because this will make you lose the edge of having something that you think that will make you a better adult. Because again, we are publishing the real innovative work as a part of our success. If you publish a course that everyone knows, I do not see it as losing knowledge or the edge, because you can basically adapt some other slides. But if you publish something that is cutting edge research, the success in our thinking is to publish what we have achieved. We need to think about it this way, rather than to try look at it at a very high level and try to make reasons that this will interpret the real course of what you are trying to do with the course.

**#6: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** In relation to EXPERT#5's point, when it comes to our field of engineering, the topics that we teach are already available as open by MIT and Stanford and top schools. In terms of us fearing of giving something away, at

least in our background, it is not much of a concern. But if it comes to research, in a way you have to be secretive about it, because somebody else will pick up your ideas.

## **THEME 5: Open education as a transformer of culture**

*Some of you suggested during the interviews that hierarchy could be a barrier to open education. For instance, we have been told that high-ranking professors are more likely to give teacher-led lectures, perhaps they are less conversant with ICT, might ask students to pay for their notes, etc. But at the same time, from the interviews we have learnt that open education could transform some aspects of hierarchy such as, adult learning, facilitators as intermediaries, closer proximity between students and lecturers, etc. We would like to know your opinion on how could open education transform some cultural dimensions related to hierarchy and power?*

### **#1:** Can you define hierarchy?

*In various interviews, facilitators mentioned the different ranks of the lecturers, for instance, trying to keep harmony between the different ranks in the learning circle.*

**#1:** JORDAN PERSPECTIVE This is an interesting question. I would like to answer this question by proposing another question and answering both together. Why did we, especially Jordan, accept eLearning and we are resisting OER? They are both new, they are both fostering education, etc. They are both coming from the essence of openness and sharing. But eLearning is a skill, open education is a culture. When you are transmitting a new culture in a university, you have to have the new mindset that could definitely affect the hierarchy.

**#4:** MOROCCO PERSPECTIVE I want to add one point, but not related to this last question, but to the previous question related to comparison with Europeans. Imagine someone who is sharing with you his resources for nothing, for zero. If you have everything, you just will ask your team to do something. You have the idea and they will produce it for you. But if you have no laptops, no internet and all these kinds of things and still able to share something, this is much better. Take this in account.

*You are saying, just to rephrase, that somebody with less resources has more significance when s/he shares?*

**#4:** MOROCCO PERSPECTIVE If he is able to produce resources, this is for me is an added value than someone else who has an office, money, resources. When you say European, we cannot compare countries and countries. If you produce something from nothing it has more value. This for me is very important.

**#8:** EGYPT PERSPECTIVE Coming back to this hierarchy question, I think it is very important for the administration. I think on the two sides, the side of the learn and the side of the tutor, and also the side of the administrators. If the administration does not support at all levels, the principle of open value in teaching learning processes, it will never happen. It will be a fight between

generations. Support from the administration for any policy is really very important. Suppose there is a post that I am teaching, and the full professor is the instructor and I am just helping. He is not believing either in eLearning or open culture, it will never happen. Finally, he is the course instructor, he is the main person in charge of that course. If you try to do something innovative in the way of teaching, there would be sometimes issues. This is not only in Arabic countries. Try to do this in Germany. The head of department is a one man show. His word is his word. If he says something, nobody can say no. You should do it his way or you leave. For any new policy to be adopted there should be the support of the administration and senior stuff, head of the department, the dean etc. The policy should be adopted by the university. This is what helps us now in Egypt because of the mass number of students. This is a magic solution for the mass number of students. Our university by definition, there is what we call a mega university which is over 100,000 students. Our university is a quarter of a million. There is no definition for our university. Alexandria is 170,000. The magic solution for this mass number of students is eLearning, open learning and new means of teaching, learning. Instead of the old fashioned, face-to-face. Or it least, we can make it a blended learning. At the end of the day, no policy could be implemented without the support of the administration, at all levels.

**#6:** JORDAN PESPECTIVE I think it is true in that sense, if you speak about hierarchy, maybe if you want to think about it as a culture. Maybe culture enforced by people on top and everyone implements, and skills are things that people would learn and develop. They do not really need anyone to force them to learn. Probably hierarchy in that sense make a lot of sense, to be implemented as a culture. (50:09)

## **THEME 6: Language**

*What potential do you see in the use of Arabic language in OER? On the one hand we observe that while in some universities English is seen an easy transition to adopt OER, in other universities, translating OER in Arabic is seen as an opportunity to become pioneers in creating and adapting content in Arabic.*

**#6:** JORDAN PERSPECTIVE I can bring back a lot of what we abandoned.

**#1:** JORDAN PERSPECTIVE Arabic has been until 2014, the number 12 of the most spoken language on earth, now as far as I know it is number 6. There is a potential which is raising by the Internet according to the Arabic content metric internet.org. I think when you speak about open resources, I think Arabic has a place in there. Our course can be one of the first steps taken in that direction when it completely translated.

**#6:** JORDAN PERSPECTIVE In that sense, the internet, at least, if we want to look at it as *eMaterial*, not open, it is really lively when it comes to Arabic countries.



**#1: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** I asked my students, if you read an article in English and another one that talks about the same topic in Arabic, who would you trust more. They were all honest and said definitely the English. Why is that? Don't you trust Arabic resources? The culture perception, I do not know how it would change, but I can see the change in the numbers when Arabic jumps to number 6, in almost two years.

**#4: MOROCCO PERSPECTIVE** A country in middle east, I think it is Kuwait launched a project to produce 80 million OER in Arabic and they will get financed. They take this issue of producing material in Arabic very seriously. Initially, to develop something you have to make resources and make resources in the native language of people.

*Who is funding this?*

**#6: JORDAN PERSPECTIVE** This is in the Gulf.

**#8: EGYPT PERSPECTIVE** Actually, few years ago when I was vice president of the medical school, a young group of Egyptians whose workers were working in Google International, they visited us and they wanted the students and the stuff to share in making subjects and material in Arabic, so when you google search, you also find material in Arabic. They get paid when the item is searched and pops up. It was mainly because there was not enough material in Arabic in different subjects. And one of the subjects that everyone search is medicine, so we produce some material on that and they did beautiful things and still are up there until now. The new one from the Gulf area, I heard about but I do not know who is funding it. I know this one was funded by Google.

*Thank you so much for your time.*