

It's All Academic Podcast #6:

The free learning revolution! with Simon Ashby

Ben Wood and Simon Ashby:

BEN WOOD: Hello, and welcome to It's All Academic, the free learning podcast from OpenLearn, part of the Open University. I'm Ben, I'm your host for today's podcast, and I'm going to be chatting to, well, to the boss. We're going to be talking to Simon-- Simon Ashby, who is the head of OpenLearn. And so, yeah. Today, we thought, we've spoken to the academics that create the content that go on to OpenLearn, and they've shared their insights into what they know and what they've shared with us.

But we thought, let's lift the lid. Let's have a little look behind the scenes. Let's learn a little bit more about the free learning sector, perhaps. And yeah, Simon is going to give us the rundown, tell us what's going on. We're going to talk about digital badging, skills recognition, and maybe how some of the content comes to be on OpenLearn. So without further ado, let's get learning.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Simon, thank you very much for joining us today on the podcast.

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah thank you for having me. I'm an avid subscriber and listener as well to podcasts, so yes, thank you very much for having me along today.

BEN WOOD: Yeah, you've got to be. You're the boss. You have to listen and subscribe to it, of course. But we'll take the compliments anyway, thank you. So yeah, we thought today, let's lift the lid on OpenLearn and lift the lid on free learning in general. We don't want this to be just a podcast that extols the virtues of just OpenLearn. So yeah, we want to talk about free learning.

So if we could start off with maybe, just give us a little bit of background on yourself and your role, and where you fit into the Open University and free learning. And then we'll dive in and discuss the free learning market. Let's find out a little bit more about what it actually means, and what it is. So tell us about you.

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah, thank you. I am-- it's been 20 years for me. Just recently I had celebrated my 20-year anniversary at the Open University. I came to the OU in 2005, and started as an editor working on our paid-for courses, and I've had various different jobs in between around the University. And then about six years ago, I came to the OpenLearn team. I wanted to-- I've done various detours into IT and other things, and I wanted to come back into media and the a world of editorial.

And I've been in charge of the OpenLearn team for a couple of years now-- two years, and it's just great. I really like the platform. I love the social mission of the OU in general, and I like our little corner of that-- our little part we play, and all the free materials, the free content we get out to our learners around the world. It's just really inspiring and makes you-- after you log off at night after a day's work, it makes it feel worthwhile, that sort of mission, that North Star for us.

So that's me, and yeah. And I've been enjoying it. We have a team of around about 20 of us that produce the content. We obviously have a wide array of academics from across the University writing the content, and then we package it up and put it online for our learners.

BEN WOOD: Well, I'm going to jump back to something you said at the start there, about social mission. Something that we're aware of that maybe other people aren't. So when you say that, what do you mean? What is the social mission of the Open University and open learning, and free learning? Explain that for us.

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah, so the social mission is really-- stems all the way back from the Open University's charter upon its inception in 1969, and it's really about advancing and dissemination of learning, and knowledge to promote the general well-being of the community and wider society. And so, that was then, back in 1969.

And in 2006, OpenLearn was born, was put online to further that social mission in a digital world in the 21st century. And so, yeah, that's all what we contribute to, our little bit of that. And yeah, really our North Star, really, for us to make sure that we're thinking about how do we benefit wider society.

BEN WOOD: So this is not something, I mean, as the bigger free learning market. This is not something that every University offers. It's not a case that all universities have got their own little bit of free learning they offer alongside it. So this is an Open University thing. So tell us a bit more about the free learning sector, if you like. I mean, how does this work? I mean, the OU is giving away this learning for free. Are there a lot of other people doing it? How big is the market? Are there a lot of people out there offering this? Give us some idea, if you can, on the size of the free learning market, and how popular it is. How many people are doing it, how many people are using it?

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah, so what we contribute to is, as you say, the wider world of free content. Or you'll hear the term OER, which stands for Open Educational Resources. And what they are, are free, accessible, openly licensed teaching and learning and research materials. And there's all sorts of people across the world who are contributing to that OER resource online. I would say that we've been really strong on that as a University, and I think it's a unique offering for us in OpenLearn.

Other universities, as you say, don't really have quite something comparable. There are lots of big players, a lot of people out there doing short courses, and educational providers across the world, ever more. In fact, I think there's ever more focus on that, and how can people bring things online, how people serve up smaller pieces of-- bits of learning.

But yeah, I mean, a lot of that tends to be paid for, and a lot of the competitors out there, you have to actually pay some money for subscription models or for courses, individual courses. So what we pride ourselves on is really, at The Open University, making sure we're serving up our content, but keeping it free and keeping it open and available to everyone.

BEN WOOD: I'm guessing, in the current economic climate as it is, everything is getting tougher. Everything is getting more expensive. I'm guessing then that free learning is something that's hugely important, that there are growing numbers of people that are wanting to take advantage of this. I mean, I'm guessing there's the skill shortages, there's job shortages. The content, obviously, that we have ranges from everything-- from the interesting niche, absurd little articles that you might read for a couple of minutes to the longer courses that really are about skills development.

And is that reflected in what you're seeing? Are we seeing a growing audience of people who are taking advantage because well, free learning? Why wouldn't you, when nothing else is free in this world? Is this something that people are hugely being drawn to?

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah. I mean, that's the thing. You hit the nail on the head, I think, is you don't get much for free in the modern world, do you? And a lot of things-- if living costs are globally getting higher and higher and making things difficult, it's great to have something where you can just log on, start your learning. You can create a profile if you wish-- you don't even have to do that-- and you can start your learning immediately.

There's no waiting for a tutor group or waiting for a start date. You get on, get cracking, and you can start making a difference to your life today, which I think is great. It's for proactive people. You can get on and get cracking straight away. And in terms of the free aspect of it, yeah, I mean, the number of people we see, mainly here in the UK-- but then our audience globally grows year on year. We have thousands of people logging in and creating a profile with us and studying.

And it's great how we see it pop up all around society-- both here in England and in the wider UK, and then the wider world as well. Great to see it pop up. And still a little bit of a well-kept secret, I would say. And you think, we have really good numbers in terms of our people logging on, unique users. But it could be something that ever more people could make use of.

And there's all sorts of reasons why people come to OpenLearn, and that's the beauty of it, I think, really. It's a good catch all, it serves up a bit of something for everybody, and something for everybody in different walks of life-- in employment, school, or in other forms of education. So it's a bit of a-- yeah, something for everybody, which I think is great.

BEN WOOD: I mean, mentioned that about people coming from the world over. Can you give us any-- just people who are thinking. I don't know how many people that is. Maybe it's hundreds, maybe it's thousands. How many people are coming to OpenLearn on an annual basis? You said it's mainly UK, but where else in the world? Have we got any particular areas? Give us an idea of the number of people that are coming, and where are they coming from.

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah. I mean, it is a complete mix, as you say. There's a lot of people coming in from the UK, which is-- we spend in the Four Nations of the UK. We spend a lot of time and effort promoting OpenLearn and the OU. The numbers tend to be, in terms of unique users, we're about 7.5 million unique users in a year. Lots more views, but obviously that's a bigger number of about 13-- over 13 million, I think.

In terms of, say, for example, some of the countries we have the biggest audience outside of the UK, USA is about 1.5 million views a year. India is a growing number, I think, with about a million views last year for India. So quite a lot of English speaking world as we expect. Predominantly, the materials are English speaking, or written in the English language. But yeah, it's fascinating, actually, when you look at that world map of all our figures and you see all sorts of people across the globe logging in and doing something.

BEN WOOD: I mean, there's one element of the free learning sector, I think, that is-- it doesn't matter what language you speak that's maybe globally recognized. It might be a term that some people are aware of. If it's people who are listening to this, or already know the site, or know free learning, which is digital badges or digital badging. Can you explain a little about that? I know that there are a number of courses, again, on our site, that when you complete it, you earn a digital badge.

But what is that? Obviously, I mean, it's not a physical thing. We're not going to get something through the post. But can you tell us a bit about what this digital badging means? What does it demonstrate? What does a digital badge contain? What does it tell the person that's earned it, and people that they might want to share that with?

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah. It's like-- anniversaries seems to be a common theme right now for me on this podcast. So I've been at the OU 20 years. Next year is our 20-year anniversary of OpenLearn's inception, or the birthday of OpenLearn. So that's 20 years. And it's been about 10 years since we launched our badged open courses on OpenLearn. So before that, and we continue now, have a huge roster of all sorts of different courses-- around about 900 live, from one hour to 12 hours of study typically.

But these badge courses were created specifically for this platform, and in response to a lot of our learners wanting to have something to show for it at the end-- some form of assessment, some sort of proof of learning. And so these badge courses-- there's 84 of them live on the site at the moment, last I counted, and they're all in a specific format. They're all 24 hours of study, so a wee bit longer than our typical courses, standard courses.

And they all have some assessment questions at the end, or in the middle of the study. So what you have is something tangible, a success story to tell. And that's in the form, as you say, Ben, of a digital badge. And you get that-- you log into your profile on OpenLearn, you collect your digital badge, and you can share that on platforms like LinkedIn and other ways of sharing. And what that does is it's just proof. It's a free course with proof of I've done something here, I've passed an assessment.

And here in the UK we're aligned with-- all of the badge courses that are aligned with our Continuous Professional Development Standards Office in the UK, which regulates and provides standards for this. So it's accredited. It is meaningful in the outside world, outside of the Open University. And that's really, yeah, it just adds an extra bit of oomph, shall we say, to our courses there. Something that really people can use and help them get ahead.

BEN WOOD: So there you go. If you're an individual looking to boost your CV and demonstrate your learning, that's a great way to do it. Equally, if you're an employer, you've got staff there who are looking to build their own CPD, a free resource for all your staff who can work on free courses and gain digital badges, and build their CPD that way. So there you go, two takeaways from this. Whether the individual or the business, there's something there for you.

I want to talk to you about something. I'm going to say, let's try and lift the lid a little bit. We talked about the courses, and obviously we've done a few podcasts already where we've spoken to the academics about the content that they've got on OpenLearn, be that articles. We've spoken to-- had an outing with our Sport and Fitness lecturers about the numerous articles and courses she's been involved with. We've had exoplanets and psychology.

How does it come to be on OpenLearn? Can you give us-- don't give us chapter and verse. We don't need an hour on the intricate details of how it all started. But let us take a typical badged course, for example. How long does it take from the inception of an idea, or where does that badged course, or where does a course come from? How does a course come into being? And talk us through, give us the quick fire from that idea through to development. How does a course happen?

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah well, I mean, as you'd expect, the starting point for us here in Open Learning is what is the Open University doing. So we're going to reflect-- our free offering is going to reflect what things are happening across the University in terms of our course content, in terms of what research is happening, and educational trends, et cetera.

So every year, we have a commissioning round. We get our faculty colleagues to come along and pitch ideas, and then we work with them to come up with a pipeline of what we can do in a year. Some of it is based on research, and really, as I think you alluded to, Ben, earlier, really niche areas of academic research and development. And others, we are looking for really popular stuff. Things that people really want to learn about, really want to add to their CV, or their personal interests for leisure learners.

So we have a plan for the year. It adapts as we go. And typically, something like a badge open course is fairly quick to produce. Certainly, compared to our huge, paid-for University modules at the OU. So we're looking about 3 to six months for our production team. The academic obviously writes the content. We package it up, make it look nice, make it nice and edit it and make it all polished, and stick it up live, and.

So in three to six months, typically. And one other thing to say is, as part of this OER world, all of these materials are part of Creative Commons. So they're all cleared to share and share alike so people can use our content for free and adapt it within-- there's a licensing agreement, so you have to stay within those rules. But basically, it's open to everyone, and can be adapted. So we make sure it's all cleared and the rights are all sorted for that, and then put these courses live. And yeah, fairly quick to market, certainly in terms of the wider university degree production timelines.

BEN WOOD: So what we're saying, though, is don't come looking to the OpenLearn site because the Open University doesn't offer hairdressing skills, or classic car maintenance. If it's not something the OU offers, you're not likely to find it on OpenLearn.

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah. Although we have-- as you know, Ben, we've got so much. I mean, we've got all sorts of things on there. You'll be surprised how much we've produced recently. Things about floodplain meadows, we've had drone technology in farming. We've had all sorts

of-- microbiomes and the gut health at Christmas for your Christmas meal. So all sorts of things. You dip in.

And every time I go on, I think, oh god, there's so much stuff that on there that really just piques your interest, and just such a range as well.

BEN WOOD: I mean, I won't necessarily throw this at you. You've mentioned a couple of things there. What's your favorite? What is some of the most-- I don't know, the most interesting, or the best thing you've seen that's on there, or something that just is always going to stick in your head and think, I can't believe we ever produced a course about-- a whole course about that. What are your highlights? Give me a couple of things that we should look out for on the boss's recommendation.

SIMON ASHBY: Oh, it's really hard to pick. You put me on the spot now, Ben. And especially as we've got such a passionate team of people who work on these things, it's difficult to pick a favorite child, really. But I have-- personal highlights for me in the last few years. I really enjoyed our psychology of villains course, which was about fictional villains. The ones that we all love, and why do we love them? Why is it so good to be bad in fiction and literature? And what's the psychology behind that?

I fancy my chance as a bit of a writer myself, so I really found that interesting, and a really interesting spin. There's a lot of great stuff on workplace. I always turn to OpenLearn if-- there's some good stuff on communicating in the workplace, and. If you ever need a bit of a reminder, or am I doing the right thing at work? Am I showing up and being my best version of myself at work? We've got some really good stuff on that which I really like.

And the other one that pops to mind, a lot of our planetary courses on things like moons, and a lot of our space-related stuff is endlessly fascinating and intriguing. I started a little while back about microgravity on the International Space Station-- a course which we've got. I found myself way out of my depth, and I remembered that I'm pretty poor when it comes to physics. I was never very good at science at school, but it really was fascinating, and. So a couple of highlights, but there's tons of it on there, and really good stuff.

BEN WOOD: I'm going to put even more on the spot and say, come on, tell me something you learned about the International Space Station, then. Anything stick in your head from that one? SIMON ASHBY: Well, I mean, it was-- there was all these explanations about what it takes to actually get something into orbit. And I can't remember them offhand, but the things orbiting the Earth, the speed at which they're orbiting the Earth is mind blowing, really and you can totally see why.

If you're ever getting into space and there's debris, or space stations, or whatever it be coming at you. If it's coming at-- I can't remember how many hundreds of miles it was. No wonder you need to be careful up there. You do not want to be hit at that sort of velocity, or. So there was a few things like that, and just generally, yeah. As I say, lots of what I found, quite complicated maths-type related physics-y type stuff.

So definitely recommend if that's your thing, or even if it isn't. But yeah, I found myself feeling a bit inadequate, I must say.

BEN WOOD: We'll make sure that some links in the notes for those courses that Simon just mentioned. And just to say, if you haven't listened to that podcast. The author of the fictional villains course, Zoe Walkington. We've had a chat with Zoe about that. So yeah, if that sounds interesting, if that sounds like it's your thing, then give that podcast a listen and check out the course as well. So you get double bonus on that particular one, if that's your interest.

Something that has just popped into my head and I want to ask you about is, home learning. I think that's something that's probably changed over the last few years. I think we've seen an increasing number of people opting out of traditional school learning in building and tutoring at home. I mean, I'm guessing that free learning is a huge resource for people who are looking to do that as well.

There's maybe been an increased number of people. They're just looking for something different-- that traditional school and the Open University here. It's not traditional. It's not a brick university. People are not going to traditional brick schools. Do we fit into that? Does free learning suit the homeschooling sector as well? Is that something that we can supplement help with?

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah. The short answer is absolutely. And with-- I think it's always been there. But particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of that, with everybody disappearing off home.

And we had a huge spike in traffic during those years, where teachers, parents, pupils were all desperate to unstuck at home. What can I do? How can I-- education materials, are they available to me? How can I get my children doing work when they're not having to go-- or not able to go to school?

So we developed quite-- we did quite a lot of work. And we're doing ever more really with stuff like elective home education hubs and pulling together content that might be suitable for people trying to learn at home, or parents and teachers.

I mean, Home Education Hub is quite regularly updated and has lots of content on there now, and is one of our most popular-- still one of our most popular hubs. In terms of schools, we have to get a profile on opening. You've got to be 13. So that's mostly people in UK, what we call secondary school age, can log on to OpenLearn, and sign up, and get learning.

Those children are younger. They can also get involved. You don't need a profile to look at a lot of the OpenLearn materials. So it's great for people popping in. And we know lots of anecdotal evidence of people across the world-- teachers, and adults, and pupils, and all sorts who are popping in and doing little bits of pieces on OpenLearn.

And one example of things that could be going back to space again. But in one of our courses, you can access a astronomy tower in Spain, and spend a bit of time online accessing that, and looking out into space and looking at a bit-- looking at the stars.

So I know that their teacher used that, and was telling us they used that for their class. And they did it as a group activity, looking at through this telescope in Spain in the classroom. So just one little anecdotal example of the sorts of things you can do on OpenLearn, and part of something you can do at home as well.

BEN WOOD: Cool. We should be check in-- checking that one out later for sure. That sounds fun. Last thing I want to ask you then is looking forward, you mentioned about the 20th anniversary. So we've been around 20 years now. You said the society is growing. Not specifically about that and what we're going to do. I'm sure people will see plenty of stuff next year that we've got planned to celebrate, and mark that.

But free learning, going forward, I mean, what is there out there? What can be done? What is there still to put out? I mean, is there anything you can tell us about maybe the growth of the market? Are there new technologies that can be incorporated? You mentioned digital badging. Is that an area that could be expanded and grown? What does the future hold for the free learning sector?

SIMON ASHBY: It's a huge topic that-- a lot of the world of education and all sectors of the educational world we're grappling with here at OU. And the one that pops up in conversations all across YouTube and all across the wider world is AI. How do we use AI? What do we do with AI?

And there's lots of opportunity on OpenLearn to use some of this new technology. New things coming in to potentially personalize-- add more personalization to your experience when you're free learning and help you as a tutor. And you can see some of the educational resources out there online now do have things AI assistants, and tutors, and things that you can use.

So I think that's inevitably going to be a big factor in the educational sector as in the wider world. So it'll be interesting. We want to find a balance, I think, on OpenLearn. We love to use new technology and find ways to improve the experience, but we don't want to sacrifice-- make any sacrifices in terms of our learner experience. And so we want to think carefully about using technology in the best way possible.

And then really, I mean, plugging into-- we've talked a little bit about the badge courses, and it fits to a particular framework here in the UK. But it'd be great if we could plug into-- think about the wider world and other ways we can conform to standards and find more ways to have meaningful, awarding, and recognition of free learning. Certainly, there's a huge appetite for that. And I think that will continue in the future.

So there's a number of ways which we know we'll evolve. We'd love also to get on-- make perhaps an app for our platform so that in areas of the world, where access to internet and things like that is not readily available-- we've got very used to that in places like the UK. But it's not so uniform across the world. And to have something that yeah could study offline and take elsewhere would be great. And definitely, going back to our social mission, that's what we're all about at the university.

BEN WOOD: I'm just going to throw something, again, in at the end here. So you've just talked there about development of new ideas and new technology. You mentioned earlier on, you said there's 900 courses. There's however much other content on our side. There's 84 badged courses.

If anyone's still listening to all this and thinking, they keep saying this free learning, yet they're talking about developing things, and adding new technology, and adding more courses. And there's already 900 courses. There's got to be a trick in that. That can't be free.

Just reassure everyone that this is-- there's no little hidden tricks. It's not-- it's free learning, but there's going to be an ad pop up every 30 seconds during the course you're listening to, during the course you're working through. And there is nothing hidden. If you want to get your badge, you don't suddenly have to-- no one's saying, send us 9.99 to download your digital badge. Free learning means free learning, right?

SIMON ASHBY: Yeah, most definitely. I mean, we've all got used to, I think, in the world, logging on to things and there being different price points, or so. You get some free bits. But then if you click on this, that's more-- you have to pay or you have to do something.

On OpenLearn, not the case. And it's really, really great to have that there, just a complete, full list of resources that are there for everyone, and it is entirely free. And all the aspects of it are free, which is great. And it's just one of the reasons why we still think it's a bit of a hidden gem, really, for this site and for people to come to that and be part of that. It's great. So all free. And we hope-- very much hope it remains that way.

BEN WOOD: Excellent. Well, then. I'm sure everyone else hopes though, too. Let's say, if you've been listening to this today and you haven't discovered OpenLearn for yourself yet, this seems like the ideal time to go and do so. So we'll put all the links to all the fascinating stuff that Simon has mentioned during that chat in the notes for this episode.

And so I think we'll leave it there. I've kept-- I've kept the head of OpenLearn away from his day job for too long already. So I'll say thank you very much for joining us today, Simon. And that's been great. Thanks for your insight.

SIMON ASHBY: Nice. Fun. Thank you very much, Ben. And thank you all for continuing to support us. It's brilliant. And also, we hope to do many more of these podcasts in the new year. And so thank you, Ben, and the team behind all this stuff for putting it together.

BEN WOOD: For me, an absolute pleasure to be doing them. So I will sign off and say, thank you for listening once again. Please do remember to like, follow, subscribe. If you've enjoyed listening to us today, leave a review.

And what we'd also love, leave a few comments. It really does help us be seen by more learners. I say this whole free learning, the more ways we can get the message out, the more ways we can make free learning accessible even better. So this is another way of doing it.

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