# Stimulating stakeholders to open up education data

Submitted on 14 Feb 2014 by Reinout van Brakel

A new initiative to stimulate the use of open education data was launched: The Open Education Challenge. The initiative stimulates entrepreneurs and incubators to develop applications using educational data. Although primarily funded by private investors, the European Commission supports the event and is an official partner.

Interestingly, the Open Data movement uses challenges, contests and "hackathons" a lot. In so-called "hackathons", programmers, visual designers, database experts and sector specialists cooperate and compete to develop new applications within a short timeframe. It attracks interest from the media and it ensures that young and eager wizzkids use their skills for a good purpose. I was at one such event last year, and although it can lead interesting ideas, it is not a gamechanger when it's used in isolation.

Challenges and contests are not traditional policy instruments, yet one has to persuade stakeholders from the traditional policy arena in education. Certainly in education, there are many stakeholders that one has to deal with. But only relying on traditional policy instruments, won't do the trick either.

So what can you do to stimulate open education data in your country? I am interested to hear your thoughts. Here are some of mine.

My impression is that Open Education Data cannot be effectively developed, when one ignores the specific needs of stakeholders. And these needs are not always "idealistic": it often comes down to being able to earn some money, attract more students, increase reputation or being able to complete a Phd in a new and promising field of research. When one understands the "triggers", it is easier to mobilise people.

Here's some thoughts on the various stakeholders involved, and how they can play a role in supporting open education data. They are presented in no particular order.

**Accountants** – Accountants have traditionally played an important role in increasing transparency of organisations: when done right, they play a key role in building trust. They are known for their expertise on the financial figures, and less for other types of data. However, the profession is changing rapidly. The standard financial reports are more and more automated, which is both a threat and an opportunity for accountants. Through new standards like XBRL, reporting processes are standardized and speed increases. Many of the bigger firms are stressing the importance of adding value: "Integrated Reporting" includes both backward and forward looking components and much more than just financials. However, new ways of reporting are a big risk for accountants. If they put a signature under an annual report which includes data that are not reliable, they have a lot to loose, also personally: they can loose their licence to operate. Therefore, open and reliable data are key. Involving accountants in discussions about open data, and ways they can use data in annual reporting cycles, is probably wise. A contest for the best annual report in education, is one idea to do that.

**Agencies that deal with financing of schools** – Public funds for schools need to be transferred to the schools. In the Netherlands we have a separate agency for that, which operates directly under the ministry (DUO). This agency transfers more than 20 billion euro's to schools every year. So you better make sure that the data are correct and reliable. In The Netherlands, DUO has been one of the key drivers for open data.

**Consultancies** – Consultants often use data to increase awareness and a sense of urgency within organisations. Benchmarking is a popular tool to do that. Within educational institutions, benchmarking can give information on efficiency and performance. For benchmarking to be effective, open data is needed.

**Entrepreneurs** – As the Open Education Challenge shows, businesses can use open data to develop new applications. In education this can be anything from websites that support school choice, to websites that help cities to communicate with their citizens.  Building a business model based on open data is not easy: therefore it is very interesting to see what applications will be submitted.

**Journalists** – This is probably one of the most powerful groups in terms of raising awareness and using data. There are 4 groups of journalists that are particularly interesting in this respect. There are special networks for educational journalists. In the US they even have their own organisation, awarding prizes every year to the best educational journalists (see the [Education Writers Association](#)). A second group is focussing on " investigative journalism": using public and non-public data to support stories. They are professionalising rapidly, and they use techniques like "scraping": getting data from websites to allow comparisons (see for example the [Association for Investigative Journalism](#)). A third group is focussing on regional journalism: making stories at local and regional level, with a lot of knowledge on what is going on in schools  (see for example a website on [education in the province of Brabant](#) in The Netherlands). And a fourth group focuses on datavisualization: using data to make attractive stories.

In a next article, I will focus on various other stakeholders involved, i.e.:

- Ministries of education
- Parents
- School boards
- Scientists and research bodies
- Teachers
- Testing agencies

Please let us know your experiences and examples of specific initiatives by these stakeholders in your country.