

Opening Remarks: Middle East & North Africa OER Regional Consultation



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Mr Issa Al Manai, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies & Gentlemen

A very warm welcome to each one of you joining us for the OER regional consultation for the MENA region. This is the third in the series of six consultations being held globally. The Commonwealth of Learning is organising these in partnership with UNESCO, the government of Slovenia, with generous support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Let me begin by thanking our hosts ‘Reach out to Asia’ represented by the Executive Director Mr Isa Al-Manai for their generous hospitality. We are also very grateful to his colleagues Zarmina Nasir Ali and Anwar Abdul Baki for their support and guidance. This is not my first visit to Doha since I’ve been closely associated with the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) community for several years and have admired the leadership role that Sheikha Moza and the Qatar Foundation are playing in transforming education for the most marginalized communities in the world. In fact, the WISE award for Teacher Education in Sub Saharan Africa (TESSA) gave a boost to the OER movement on the continent.

Let me introduce my organisation the Commonwealth of Learning or COL. The Commonwealth has 52 member states that span all regions of the globe, representing the rich diversity of our world. As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government with our headquarters in Metro Vancouver and a regional office in New Delhi. Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to quality education and training. COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development.

Why do we think its important to promote OER? Let me share one example from a COL project supported by ROTA. Many people in developing countries do not have computers or connectivity and cannot benefit from Open Educational Resources. COL loaded quality OER on Aplus a low-cost offline virtual classroom. Students of Allama Iqbal Public School in the remote mountains of Pakistan started using this content in January last year and a study shows that the learning outcomes of the students have improved as have the practices and motivation of their teachers.

Last year the world community adopted the 17 SDGs. SDG 4 aspires to promote equitable and quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. Early reports indicate that many countries will fall way behind this target. Therefore innovative approaches are needed to achieve both speed and scale. We believe that OER have tremendous potential for increasing access and lowering the costs of quality education. The theme of these consultations then is ‘OER for equitable and quality education: from commitment to action’.

COL was promoting the development and sharing of open content well before the term OER was coined in 2002. For example, COL worked with 140 teachers in 8 southern African countries to develop 46 teacher training modules. This content was uploaded on Afristar and could be downloaded for free use and reuse by anyone anywhere in Africa. Openness has always been part of COL's DNA.

This is something that we share with our partners UNESCO. We share a long-standing partnership based on collaboration, complementarity and clear division of labour. For example, UNESCO developed the high level Competency Framework for Teachers and COL created the resources to achieve these competencies. This is a nice example of the complementarity of our work. The joint UNESCO-COL publications on OER are used globally and in a number of languages. We are really pleased that Zeynep and Fengchun have been able to join this meeting.

Slovenia is a more recent partner. Gaspar Mitya and Davor have been working closely with us in the planning of the regional consultations and played a very active role in the earlier meetings.

Without the support of Hewlett, it would not have been possible to organise the regional consultations which will lead up to the second World OER Congress in September this year.

Language is an important aspect in the development and sharing of content. The uni-directional flow of English content from the global north to the global south has now given way to multi-directional flows of knowledge in English as well as in Arabic and other languages. OER in tropical medicine from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana were adopted by universities in the US and the Netherlands. Many institutions from this region have played a leadership role in developing and sharing OER in Arabic.

MENA countries are taking notable initiatives to promote OER and ALESCO, has been at the forefront of the OER movement. The 2012 government survey report prepared for the first World OER Congress refers to three countries taking key steps to join the OER movement—these were Bahrain, Morocco and Lebanon (p.6). Today many more have joined them. According to MIT, 'the Middle East is emerging as educational leader in the digital age through the provision of open educational content online'<https://ocw.mit.edu/about/media-coverage/press-releases/mideast/> . We have much to learn from the region and I hope this meeting will lead to closer collaboration so that we can collectively move from commitment to concrete action. Let me once again thank our hosts, ROTA, our partners UNESCO, Slovenia and Hewlett who have contributed generously to making this event possible.