

Accessible OER: Where to Start?



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My organization, the Commonwealth of Learning shares a strong partnership with UNESCO. Five years ago COL and UNESCO organised the first World OER Congress that resulted in the Paris OER Declaration. We believe that knowledge is our common wealth and that OER have tremendous potential for promoting equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all.

This theme of the second World OER Congress, organized by UNESCO and the government of Slovenia, with COL as a partner, was ‘OER for Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education: from Commitment to Action’.

COL organized the six regional consultations in the lead-up to the 2nd World Congress with our partners UNESCO and Slovenia, with generous support from the Hewlett Foundation. The road to Ljubljana has passed through six regions of the globe. The first consultation for Asia was held in Kuala Lumpur followed in quick succession by the meetings for Europe held in Malta, in Qatar for the MENA region and the regional consultation for Africa was held in Mauritius. Stakeholders in Latin America and the Caribbean met in Brazil and the final regional consultation for the Pacific was held in New Zealand.

In addition to the consultations attended by participants from 109 countries, a government survey on the status of OER was sent out to Member States by COL and UNESCO. We received 102 responses from governments.

Based on the consultations and surveys, COL published the OER Global Report 2017. One-third of the respondents indicated that their country had ensured that OER are accessible for persons with disabilities. Among them, Burundi, Botswana and Armenia emphasized the importance of inclusive education.

As per the survey, Australia, Seychelles and Trinidad & Tobago have special considerations for persons with disabilities. Malawi, Morocco, Poland, Swaziland and Turkey had indicated that they use sign language and Braille literature in an effort to increase accessibility while the Netherlands and Spain have adopted the use of web accessibility guidelines. Several other countries including Belgium, Colombia, Estonia, and Slovenia indicated that this is an area where a lot more needs to be done, especially to make OER accessible for people with visual impairment.

Yesterday we learned from the first keynote that of the 12 Arab countries surveyed, the availability of ICT accessible courses and eBooks in the region was low, but it was higher than the global average. Therefore, given the need, the challenge is to encourage and empower the rest of the world to adopt guidelines for accessibility.

Accessibility guidelines for digital content are not new. Arguably, the World Wide Web Consortium or W3C is the de facto standard used when it comes to ensuring accessibility of web based content. According to W3C, there are four principles of accessibility¹:

Perceivable - This means that users must be able to perceive the information being presented.

Operable - User interface components and navigation must be operable. This means that users must be able to operate the interface. The interface cannot require interaction that a user cannot perform;

Understandable - This means that users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the user interface. The content or operation cannot be beyond their understanding; and

Robust - Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies. This means that users must be able to access the content as technologies advance. As technologies and user agents evolve, the content should remain accessible.

The four principles of accessibility or “POUR” can be used to assess the accessibility of digital content. The College Open Textbooks Collaborative² in the USA is a collection of twenty-nine educational non-profit and for-profit organizations which is focused on driving awareness and adoption of open textbooks to more than 2000 community colleges. Their website reviews open textbooks for accessibility using the POUR parameters. In most cases, they found that the robustness criteria scores low indicating that those OER were less amenable to the use of assistive technologies.

The latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines or WCAG³ by the W3C covers a wide range of recommendations for making Web content more accessible. Following these guidelines will make content accessible to a wider range of people with disabilities, including blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, learning disabilities, cognitive limitations, limited movement, speech disabilities, and combinations of these. These guidelines address accessibility of web content on desktops, laptops, tablets, and mobile devices. In this light, how accessible are OER?

The Ljubljana OER Action plan 2017 provides key recommendations with respect to accessibility for mainstreaming OER. Let me just refer to two. The Action Plan recommends that we provide OER in accessible formats that support effective use by all, including persons with disabilities, by using existing international guidelines for accessibility.

Another recommendation requires us to ensure that OER accessed through different media, including mobile devices, are available and accessible in formats which allow for its use, adaptation, combination and sharing. When juxtaposed, the recommendations of the Ljubljana OER Action and the W3C standards provide a specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time-related or SMART starting point for more accessible OER.

Migrating onto a completely accessible OER ecosystem is a systematic process which is time and resource intensive. The process entails aligning authoring tools, content repositories and technology platforms with accessibility standards while embedding the principles of accessibility in the content development process. In addition, capacity building is required in accessible content development to upskill all stakeholders and more importantly to facilitate a change in mindset. Nevertheless, we can jumpstart the process of creating more accessible OER by answering some basic accessibility questions presented here.

¹Source: WCAG 2.0, <https://www.w3.org/TR/UNDERSTANDING-WCAG20/intro.html#introduction-fourprincs-head>

²Source: <http://www.collegeopentextbooks.org/textbook-listings/accessibility-reviews>

³Source: <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/>

A concrete example of more accessible OER is the OER Accessibility Toolkit⁴ developed by the University of British Columbia in Canada. The goal of this toolkit is to provide the needed resources to each content creator, instructor, instructional designer, educational technologist, librarian, administrator, and teaching assistant to create a truly open and accessible education for all students.

Another example of promoting accessibility in OER is the Flexible Learning for Open Education⁵ or “FLOE” project. FLOE supports learners, educators and curriculum producers in achieving a learning design for the full diversity of learners, leveraging the potential of OER.

Moving forward, we can concentrate on three main aspects for promoting more accessible OER. First, advocacy where “Born Digital” should be “Born Accessible”. Stronger emphasis on policy and guidelines which promote accessible digital content should be promoted at all levels. Second, capacity building where all stakeholders should be upskilled in accessibility issues and compliance with standards. Third, pledge more support for research and development in accessible technologies which can contribute to realizing the full potential of OER.

Further innovations are needed to bridge the digital divide. Assistive technologies are emerging at speed but unfortunately they cannot be scaled up because of high costs. The open source community has a major role to play in developing affordable and accessible solutions. Finally, continuous monitoring of progress will be required to measure impact.

If we wish to leave no one behind, let us all resolve to work together to make a real difference! Thank you

⁴Source: <https://open.ubc.ca/teach/oer-accessibility-toolkit>

⁵Source: <https://floeproject.org/>