

# *Ten Years of Open Education Resources: Future Directions*

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## *Keynote Address*

*China International Distance Education Forum 2012 & Open Universities Presidents Roundtable: Cooperation, Mutual help, Sharing, Win-win – Education shapes the future of the global change*

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Distinguished Colleagues,

It is a pleasure and an honor to be here and I am very grateful to President Hu of Beijing Open University and the organisers for the invitation. I would like to offer threefold congratulations to Prof Hu and his colleagues on the successful transformation the Beijing Radio & TV University to Beijing Open University; for being the No 1 OER in Chinese on iTunes with over 100,000 global users each week and for partnering with the University of Hong Kong to provide capacity building in elearning to participants from 17 countries during the ICDE conference in Bali. These are landmark achievements and we salute you for them. My topic today is **‘Ten Years of Open Education Resources: Future Directions’**

I shall first speak of some of the major developments in OER in the last ten years, look at the lessons learned and the future directions

Let us first look at some key developments in the last decade.

With the rise of social media, there has been a global movement towards collaboration in the development and sharing of content. We have seen the emergence of a global commons powered by the collective intelligence of the masses. At a meeting in 2002 at UNESCO, Paris, the term Open Education Resources or OER was coined to promote the development and use of free materials for education.

As you know, COL and UNESCO have been working for several years now to promote the development and use of OER. The 2012 World OER Congress was organized jointly in Paris to mark the tenth anniversary of the term OER.

This conference was organized with generous support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Led by our former President Sir John Daniel, both partners carried out a worldwide survey on the use of OER. Responses were received from nearly a 100 countries. The report shows that ‘there appears to be a great interest in OER across all regions of the world with several countries embarking on notable OER initiatives’. The report also signals the need for continued advocacy, as there is still a great deal of confusion regarding the ‘concept and potential of OER’.

In addition to the survey, policy forums were convened in the six regions of the world that brought together policy makers and practitioners to draft the Paris OER Declaration. What were the trends that emerged from the various regional policy forums?

The first forum was held in the Caribbean. Most Caribbean countries are introducing computers in schools and new learning materials are needed. Participants believed that OER could support the development and adoption of quality learning materials.

The next policy forum was held in Africa. While the majority of the 17 countries represented were active in OER, only South Africa had a policy on OER. The issues prominent in this region related to electricity, connectivity, availability of OER in languages other than English.

The Latin American forum showed that 10 countries in the region had some strategy or policy related to OER. Most countries had educational portals and policy on open and distance learning or ICT in Education, which included OER. The main issue that emerged was on open licenses—the licenses should have restrictions if necessary.

The forum for Europe was held in Cambridge. Eighteen countries had responded to the survey. Participants felt that the governments have invested substantially in the development of OER. The consensus was that private providers and non-governmental organisations should also contribute to the OER movement.

Nineteen countries from the Asia-Pacific region responded to the survey. Five governments have OER policies in place. The ministry of education, China has an OER policy and supports several OER initiatives. The main issues here focused on capacity building, incentives for teachers, promoting respect for indigenous knowledge and open licenses.

Of the 11 countries that reported on the status of OER in Oman, five had a strategy related to elearning which included OER. The participants stressed the need for governments to develop OER policies and strategies.

The forums drafted the Paris OER Declaration which was presented at the World OER Congress held in Paris during 20-22 June 2012 and adopted.

The Paris Declaration makes 10 recommendations. Let me just refer to three that may be of interest to you:

- Foster awareness and use of OER

- Encourage the development and adaptation of OER in a variety of languages and cultural contexts
- Encourage the open licensing of educational materials produced with public funds.

This is an important development as governments tend to take such internationally-agreed documents led by multilateral organisations like UNESCO and COL, seriously and the Paris Declaration could have a major role in influencing policy makers.

What have we learned in the last ten years?

First, when the term OER first emerged, the primary focus was on higher education. In the ten years that have since lapsed, the world has changed radically. There is a greater global participation in primary education, which has inevitably led to a surge in secondary schools. As more governments address the issue of providing secondary education for all, any discussion of OER must include this sector as well.

The Commonwealth of Learning through a six-country partnership has developed 20 sets of course materials in print and online formats, based on the secondary curricula of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia. This has not only established communities of practice but has helped teachers and institutions save time and money by collaborating on the content development.

Second, recent surveys in some of the Asian countries revealed that access to the Internet for using OER is no longer such a dire issue among institutions in the Higher Education sector. This is a welcome development. One of the most popular technology platforms in the developing world today is the mobile phone. Linking the issues of access and re-use of OER with the increased availability of affordable cell telephony would be one way forward.

Third, the OER movement is resulting in a multi-directional flow of knowledge. We have usually seen a one-way flow of knowledge from the developed to the developing world. OER can provide for a global exchange of knowledge. A lecturer at the University of Ghana, Medical College developed a simple procedure for a Caesarian section and video-taped it. It is now being used in the Netherlands. Similarly a lecturer at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana, who also happens to be a world authority on the buruli ulcer has developed an OER module which is being used by the World Health Organisation and the University of Michigan.

Open licensing as an approach to foster the spread of global public goods is here to stay. Extending copyrights for wider use without compromising the moral and intellectual rights of the creators is a sensitive task that has to be relevant to specific contexts. Creative Commons appears to be the most significant licensing framework but licensing options can vary in different countries.

Research on OER will be critical to the sustainability of the OER movement. Currently, such research is done in isolated pockets and will need to be scaled up to generate the evidence needed. Current availability of software tools to search for, locate and retrieve OER is a limiting factor in the wider use of OER. There is a need to foster innovation and adaptive research in this area. An alliance of various stakeholders can make such global research more effective in terms of delivering value for money.

Finally, what do these trends indicate? What are the directions for the future? Can OER increase access improve quality and cut the costs of education?

There are several initiatives relating to increasing access. The students of Bunda College of Agriculture, Malawi, had no text book on Communications Skills and were entirely dependent on lecturers. Now they have a textbook, 75 % of which is based on OER harvested from the web and supplemented with locally relevant activities, examples and assignments. A lecturer at the University of Jos, Nigeria discovered this textbook and has adopted it, a nice instance of south-south collaboration.

These materials can be made available to new constituencies through translations. China Open Resources for Education (CORE) has translated MIT OCW materials into Chinese. COL's Instructional Design template, an OER, has been translated and adapted by the Open University of China. Materials from COL's website have been translated into Ukrainian.

What about costs? Let me first take the example of the OERU, a consortium of 18 universities which includes the University of Southern Queensland, Otago Polytechnic and Athabasca, among others. The consortium is using OER to open up education to anyone anywhere in the world.

The participating universities are putting a percentage of their courses on their websites as OER so students anywhere in the world can access them. They will then recruit retired teachers and volunteers on the lines of Doctors without Borders, who will provide free tutorial support to the students. Students pay only if they wish to take exams towards a qualification. This will cost students only 20-25% of what they would normally pay thus making higher education more affordable and accessible to anyone in the world.

Can OER improve quality?. The premier Indian Institutes of Technology or IITs, in partnership with the government, have made their engineering and technology courses available as OER. These are being used in over 600 institutions, most of them in remote locations with very limited resources. Both teachers and students are using the free IIT resources to improve the quality of their teaching and learning.

As we can see, OER can help increase access, cut costs and improve quality. But in order to harness the tremendous potential of OER, the first question is, can OER thrive in closed educational settings? Many educational institutions have traditional governance structures and teacher-centred pedagogic models. The OER initiative requires a learner-centred and decentralised approach. Will the centralised structures allow a decentralised approach? Innovations in institutional governance will be critical to the success of OER.

The second question relates to the curriculum. This needs to change to become relevant to the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What do employers really need? Within the context of a knowledge and service-related economy, there is a great deal of emphasis on non-cognitive skills such as leadership, communication, honesty/ethics, teamwork and flexibility. How can we integrate these skills into the curriculum? Can access to quality OER support this transformation?

The third opportunity is to involve a wider constituency of stakeholders. Innovative approaches are needed to include various stakeholders in the development, renewal and use of content so that passive consumers can become active producers of knowledge. What incentives can be provided to involve faculty to participate in this movement? Who are we promoting the OER for? The fundamental players are the teachers and the students. How can we reach them in remote and marginalized communities? It is these communities that need most help to improve the quality of education. Many of them have not heard of OER. How can we make them active partners in this movement?

Access to OER can help us improve quality and diversify course content

The reputations of open universities were made by the high quality of content that they offered. Now that high quality content is available as part of the global OER movement, the emphasis can shift to providing quality support services. This will be the key differentiator between the best and the rest

We can open up our business models from providing full services to services that the learner can choose from, reducing costs and increasing flexibility.

Finally, many strong players in OER have emerged in the different regions of the world. There are many international regional and national initiatives in OER. How can these different groups come together as a network of stakeholders to enhance our collective impact? Do we have a roadmap for how this will be done?

What will the Commonwealth of Learning do to reach the unreached? COL will continue its partnership with UNESCO and other like-minded organisations to focus on four areas: one, advocacy and awareness generation regarding the benefits and availability of OER; two, policy development on OER at the national and institutional levels; three, capacity building so that more governments, institutions and individuals are able to effectively harness the potential of OER and four, promote research through its publications on OER and its Chairs programme.

I hope this forum will address some of these issues. With that, let me thank you for your kind attention.