

Sharing our Common Wealth



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The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organization that helps Commonwealth governments and institutions use various technologies to improve and expand education, training and learning in support of development.

Our slogan is Learning for Development and

We work in 54 Member States that cover all regions of globe.

Our collaboration with UNESCO enables us to reach a much larger constituency. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and UNESCO have been working together to strengthen the OER movement globally and the World OER Congress is a historic moment in that process.

Our partnership with UNESCO goes back to a Memorandum of Understanding signed in mid-1990s. COL and UNESCO have been elaborating and implementing triennial work plans within the framework of this MOU.

This has resulted in several joint publications and resources on OER.

This Congress would not have been possible without the financial and intellectual support from our staunch partner and ally – the Hewlett Foundation, which continues to make a major contribution to the OER movement globally.

COL has taken several concrete steps to promote the use of OER. In fact COL was promoting the development of OER in the nineties with its STAMP 2000+ teacher training materials well before the term OER was coined in 2002.

More recently, COL is one of the first intergovernmental organisations to declare its commitment to OER through the development of an OER policy.

COL with support from the Hewlett Foundation has facilitated the development of OER for secondary schools by teachers in six Commonwealth countries.

Thirty-two Member States of the Commonwealth are actively engaged in developing OER under COL's Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth initiative. This long engagement with OER gives COL a perspective about the inherent challenges and emerging opportunities.

Why is COL interested in promoting OER? When COL was first established, its fundamental goal was that "any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth".

Its purpose was to "assist[ing] the acquisition and delivery of teaching materials and more generally facilitating access to them; and commissioning and promoting the adaptation and development of teaching materials". This was visionary at the time and is now beginning to bear fresh fruit as OER.

The OER movement is a people's movement, founded on principles that challenge the organisational values and pedagogical practices of many educational institutions that still represent closed systems. The principles of openness, sharing and collaboration that characterise the OER movement are different from centralized and closed education models based on elitism and exclusion. The OER movement is an important milestone in democratising education for the 21st century.

However, if we must harness the potential of this movement, OER cannot be viewed in isolation as mere technocratic products or forms of technology that are neutral and value free. As Manuel Castells (2009:50) put it:

"...there is a fundamental form of exercising power that is common to all networks; exclusion from the network....However, because the key, strategic networks are global, there is one form of exclusion—thus, of power—that is pervasive...: to include everything valuable in the global while excluding the devalued local." We need to place OER in the socio-political context in which they exist. Democracy, governance, the status of teachers and culture are important determinants in the uptake of OER.

We believe that although infrastructure and technology are important in relation to the capacity to develop and use OER, there is a need for a paradigm shift that explores the link between OER and institutional structures, institutional values and the freedom of stakeholders such as teachers and students.

The OER movement can help transform education, particularly in the developing world, by

- Involving all stakeholders to participate, collaborate, create and share educational resources;
- OER can encourage consumers to become the producers of knowledge: Traditionally knowledge has flowed from industrialised to developing countries, from speakers of dominant languages to those who speak indigenous languages and from teachers to students. The OER movement by providing the opportunity to reuse adopt and adapt materials can help change this trend.

- The Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative of COL is an example through which peer learning takes place in local languages. OER can help us to harness the wealth of tacit knowledge of local communities across the globe to address the great development challenges of our time.

I'm sure some of these issues will be addressed during this Congress. Thank you for your kind attention.