Fostering Governmental Support for Open Educational Resources Internationally

6th REGIONAL POLICY FORUM
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Sir John Daniel & Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić
Commonwealth of Learning

Sir John Daniel

Introduction

Representatives of the Governments of UNESCO's Arab States Region, Sponsors, OER practitioners, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here and to welcome you to the Regional Policy Forum for the Arab Region that we are organising within our Project *"Fostering Governmental Support for Open Educational Resources Internationally",* which is being implemented by the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO. We express our warm gratitude to the Government of Oman for hosting this meeting. I recall my previous visits to Oman with special pleasure. I first came here when I was Assistant Director-General at UNESCO.

I shall make this joint presentation with the Senior Consultant to the project, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, who was in charge of Higher Education at UNESCO Headquarters until last year.

I will begin by describing the background to the project and list its three elements. Then Stamenka will share highlights the responses we have received from countries in this region to our survey questionnaire on OER policies and then tell you about the other Regional Policy Forums in this series. She will present this as background for the discussions we shall have later on the draft Declaration on OER that governments will be invited to support at the World OER Congress at Paris in June.

Stamenka and I were both here in December 2009 for the International Council for the Education of Teachers (ICET) Conference organised by the College of Education of Sultan Qaboos University. In my keynote address on that occasion: *How do we recruit and train 10 million teachers* I noted that "Open educational resources, which are an Internet empowered worldwide community effort to create an education commons, are already making a powerful contribution to teacher education in Africa."

In her presentation at the same event Stamenka also made reference to the new revolution of OER as a worldwide pool of excellent teaching and learning materials that can be fully adapted to local needs.

On that occasion, we also visited the Oman branch of the Arab Open University and we are pleased that the Arab Open University is represented here today. I well recall the signing ceremony in Kuwait that launched the Arab Open University when I was Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University.

Let me turn to our project and tell you about it. Since we talked about it here in 2009, the OER revolution has continued to evolve. The aim of this project is to foster governmental support for OER.

Later Stamenka will share a first analysis of the responses from governments in the Arab States Region to our survey about OER policies. Globally, we have received replies from over one hundred jurisdictions and they are being analysed in South Africa for presentation at the World OER Congress.

I shall begin by setting the stage.

UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education

Three years ago UNESCO held a World Conference on Higher Education of which Stamenka was the Executive Secretary.

For those who were present one of the memorable moments of the Conference was a robust exchange about Open Educational Resources between two South Africans. Professor Brenda Gourley, then Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University, explained how the UKOU was making much of its course material available as OER on its OpenLearn website.

However, Professor Barney Pityana, then Principal of UNISA, the University of South Africa, asked if OER were not potentially a form of neo-colonialism, with the north pushing its intellectual products at the south.

We believe that this was one occasion when flagging a potential problem early helped the world to avoid it. At our Policy Forum on OER in Africa in February we found a vibrant culture of creation, re-use and re-purposing of OER.

Our host for the African Regional Policy Forum in February was none other than UNISA which now has a proactive institutional strategy in favour of OER.

And UNISA is not alone. The African Virtual University (AVU) has developed an Open Education Resources Portal launched in 2011 which makes available 219 open educational modules in three languages (largely in maths and sciences); developed collaboratively in 10 African countries and the resources have been downloaded by 142 countries, with significant downloads in Brazil and the USA.

The flow of OER is now becoming truly multi-directional and global. For example, OER created at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana are used at the University of Michigan. Similarly medical OER from Malawi have found their way into teaching in a number of other countries.

The reason that we are conducting this project and holding these Regional Policy Forums is simply that Open Educational Resources have great transformative potential for education at all levels. OER make a

strong statement that education and knowledge are public goods and enable governments to maximise the benefits of their considerable investment in educational materials.

So let me recap the story so far. I take you back to 2002, when UNESCO began its involvement in OER. At the beginning of the century an important trend began to develop.

In 2001, MIT announced its OpenCourseWare programme and began putting some of its course material free of charge on the web, an initiative that sounded too good to be true, coming from such an eminent institution.

UNESCO Forum 2002

As a consequence of the enthusiasm generated by MIT's OpenCourseWare project UNESCO organised a Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries in Paris in July 2002.

The Forum brought together major partners, MIT, the Hewlett Foundation, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and HEIs from the developed and developing worlds to explore this new approach to making teaching materials available and suggest how it might help developing countries to access knowledge and educational resources of quality.

This Forum was a major milestone for the OER movement. The term Open Educational Resources was coined at that meeting to mean educational materials that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared.

The participants adopted a Declaration which expressed "their wish to develop together a universal educational resource for the whole of humanity, to be referred to henceforth as Open Educational Resources".

This 2002 Forum on Open Courseware and OER stimulated a series of developments and created a global movement for the open licensing of educational and creative works.

Through an internet discussion forum led by UNESCO's Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in 2007 an OER community was developed bringing together some 500 individuals from 90 countries to chart the future of OER in education.

In 2010 UNESCO's Communication Sector developed this into the World Summit on the Information Society Platform OER Community, which now has upwards of 1,600 members.

Despite all the enthusiasm and idealism, however, the awareness of the OER movement was mostly limited to the grassroots level. The 2002 Forum at UNESCO, building as it did on the MIT OCW experience, focussed only on higher education.

By 2009 it was easy to get the impression that the Open Educational Resources community had become, paradoxically, a somewhat closed group of enthusiastic producers of OER with much less attention to their crucial value, which is their re-use, adaptation and re-purposing.

I mentioned the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, which brought together close to 2,000 participants representing higher education worldwide. In its Communiqué the Conference urged governments to give more attention to the roles of ICT and OER.

As a result, later that year a resolution was presented at UNESCO's General Conference, requesting it to promote OER further, and arguing that the time was now ripe to bring OER to the attention of politicians.

Taking OER Beyond the OER Community

UNESCO and COL took up this challenge with a project called Taking OER Beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity for Developing Countries, led by UNESCO's Zeynep Varoglu and COL's Trudi van Wyk, both of whom are here with us today. The project took us through 2010 and 2011 and achieved some useful outcomes.

We held nine workshops on OER for education leaders in Africa and Asia along with three online forums and a policy forum in Paris. Taken together these workshops reached hundreds of decision makers from many countries, most of whom previously had only a vague idea of OER and their potential.

Following the advice from those meetings UNESCO and COL produced two documents late last year and they are available to you: *A Basic Guide to OER* and *Guidelines for OER in Higher Education.*

Both documents can be downloaded from the COL website.

All this laid the foundations for the next stage. Having increased awareness of OER among educational leaders the project has now evolved to focus primarily on governments. It is called *Fostering Governmental Support for OER Internationally* and is partially funded by a grant from the Hewlett Foundation.

The project has three interlinked activities.

Survey of Governments

First is a survey of all the world's governments, being conducted collaboratively by COL and UNESCO to find out whether they already have, or intend to develop, policies on OER. All the governments of the countries represented here will have received survey questionnaires from UNESCO. To date we have received replies to the Survey from 8 countries in the Arab States Region as listed here. In some cases more than one reply was received, from different ministries.

We are most grateful to those who have already replied and invite governments who have not replied to do so.

I now hand over to Stamenka to share some highlights from the responses that we received to our survey from this Region and tell you about the other Regional Policy Forums.

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

Responses from the Arab States Region

Sir John noted that we had received responses from eight countries in the Region.

Responses to the Survey questionnaire were received from: Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar and Tunisia, and some have sent back more than one questionnaire (e.g. Morocco).

Although none of the eight countries report on having explicit governmental policies on OER, half of the countries have some strategy related to eEducation or eLearning that includes or could include OER (Algeria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco). A few examples follow.

Algeria is developing a strategy on eEducation and would like to become involved with OER through the newly established Division on pedagogical and didactic resources within the Ministry.

In Bahrain, the Ministry of Education has developed an eLearning project with a website for sharing resources.

Although Lebanon reports not having a specific strategy on OER, its Ministry of Tele-communication is planning to promote "A tablet for every student" and in this context OER will be offered as an extra-curricular activity.

The survey response from Morocco indicates that the Ministry of Education has created a National Laboratory of Digital Resources, which, among its tasks, is in charge of the production and labeling of digital educational resources. Within this laboratory, some resources were produced as OER. In addition, an official ICTs website of the Ministry, with a management platform for open source content "DRUPAL" has been created and Ministerial briefings make a reference to OER.

In addition there is an interesting example of the Morocco-Korea Centre under the aegis of the Ministry which has developed good argumentation for the promotion of free software and OER and has a wide range of capacity building activities.

Other capacity-building activities for OER in Morocco have been provided by the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF).

Countries that are not as yet active with OER, are interested in becoming so in the future for a number of reasons, international collaboration and knowledge sharing being strong incentives.

For example, for Iraq and Qatar, the motivation to become more active is becoming part of global movements and trends. Iraq is also interested in OER because they provide flexible learning resources, and tools for teachers, and foster the use of modern technologies.

Other reasons for becoming more active in OER are that they promote equity of access and reduce costs (Morocco), and promote knowledge sharing and quality resources (Oman, Tunisia).

Oman already has an Education Portal at the level of the Ministry of Education that shares resources and could be used for OER because of the benefit they offer as quality educational resources to teachers and students.

Obstacles cited to the use of OER vary in this region as in others. Sustainability is a major issue but piracy on the Internet is mentioned by Morocco. Language and cultural diversity are also cited by Bahrain and Qatar as prominent challenges as very few OER exist in the Arabic language.

Most countries require or depend on government plans (Tunisia, Qatar) and would need to have government incentives or action plans to become active with OER. Responses emphasize that educational materials and textbooks are provided entirely or to a great extent from public funds (Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Tunisia).

These varied responses from the Arab region resonate strongly with the responses we got from Africa, Latin America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific Region. You could summarise it by saying that although there is a sincere desire to create and share digital resources, relatively few countries have formalised it into an OER policy or initiated systems for the open licensing of educational material that clarify who may use it and how.

Regional Policy Forums

The second element of this project is a series of regional policy forums like this one.

This meeting in Oman is the sixth and last in the series.

We held a mini-forum in January in the Barbados for Caribbean countries and a Regional Policy Forum for Africa in February in Pretoria, South Africa. At the end of last month there was a similar meeting in Rio de Janeiro for Latin American countries. Three weeks ago we held a mini-forum for the Europe Region in Cambridge, England as part of the Open CourseWare Consortium Conference. Two weeks ago we held the Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Forum. We have now come to the last Regional Policy Forums on OER in the series.

One focus for those meetings – and for the discussion here in a moment – will be the third activity, which is the drafting of a Declaration on OER that will be presented to the World OER Congress in Paris in June.

A very preliminary text was developed late last year after a meeting of the project's International Advisory and Liaison Group. In the Caribbean we did not have the opportunity to discuss the Outline Declaration in detail. However, after the Regional Policy Forum in Africa, a second version of the Declaration was produced, incorporating inputs from Africa.

This was substantially revised and simplified at the Regional Forum for Latin America in Rio, which then received minor revisions at the Europe Forum in Cambridge and improvements in content and style at the Asia-Pacific Forum in Bangkok. You have this fifth version in your packages. Following this meeting, inspired by your inputs here and in the next two days, version 6 of the Declaration will be created.

The International Advisory and Liaison Group will then make any further revisions before the draft Declaration is presented to governments at the June Congress. The IALG will also act as the Drafting Committee during the Congress.

World Congress on OER

Let me conclude with a word about the World Congress on OER.

The culmination of our project to alert governments to the significance of OER is the World OER Congress in Paris in June. You will hear more about it from Zeynep Varoglu in her presentation tomorrow. It will bring together ministers, officials and experts to assess the state of play with regard to OER.

One important aim is that governments endorse a Declaration encouraging them to support OER and to make educational materials developed with public funds freely available to everyone. There will also be a parallel event where non-governmental bodies can showcase their OER initiatives.

As I noted earlier, there is now an iterative process of refinement of the Declaration. You can comment on the current draft on the Weebly indicated here and in a week's time we shall do a new draft for Oman taking your comments into account.

We also invite you to register for the Congress and its parallel event.

I shall stop there. The aim of this project is to encourage governments to promote OER and the use of open licences for educational materials.

We hope that this project will help both governments and practitioners in the OER movement to integrate the concept of open availability of materials into the mainstream of education.

Thank you.