

OER policy development and usage: a study of progress in two countries since the 2012 COL & UNESCO Survey

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Abstract.

Valuable information on the nature and extent of existing OER policy and activity has been provided in the 2012 *COL & UNESCO Survey on Governments OER Policies* which, inter alia, noted that the qualitative responses from this survey suggest that few OER policies “exist, as many policies are still in the process of being drafted”. In 2008 COL and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation initiated a large scale “OER for Open Schools” project to help educators in six countries to improve their knowledge and skills in developing effective open and distance learning (ODL) materials at the secondary-school level. The next phase of this project has begun, with the roll out of the usage of the recently developed materials and the dissemination of the skills to implement, adapt and re-use the materials beyond the unprecedented development initiatives. One issue emerging from these two initiatives, the policy survey and the OER for Open schools, is the role that participants of the OER for Open Schools can play or are already playing in OER policy development, dissemination and in the usage of OER in their countries.

This paper aims to present the results of a survey on the educators who participated or are still participating in the COL and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation OER for Open Schools project in two African countries. These countries, Ghana and Zambia were neither listed among countries that have OER policies nor those that have references to OER in other public policies in the COL & UNESCO survey. The paper will examine the educators’ current roles in OER movement, in policy development and in the dissemination and usage of OERs. It will also solicit their views on the progress achieved by their countries in development of OER policy, national contexts, institutional participation and general rolling out and usage of the OERs developed through the COL and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation OER for Open School project.

INTRODUCTION

Our interest in this project was inspired on the one hand, by the valuable information emanating from international activity on the OER movement and by studies on OER policy like the *COL & UNESCO Survey on Governments OER Policies 2012*. The latter study considered OER policy on a macro level, by inviting various governments to provide information on their policies relating to OER as part of the on-going campaign for advocacy, information gathering, capacity building and greater understanding of the concept and its potential. The study, noted inter alia that the qualitative responses from the survey suggested that few OER policies “exist, as many policies are still in the process of being drafted”. The study also disclosed that in the case of “Africa, countries appear to be most active in tertiary education, with 29% of respondents noting most OER activity in that subsector.” On the other hand, in 2008 COL and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation initiated a large scale “OER for Open Schools” project to help educators in six countries to improve their knowledge and skills in developing effective open and distance learning (ODL) materials at the secondary-school level. Asha Kanwar (2013) highlights that through this six-country partnership, “COL has developed 20 sets of course materials in print and on-line formats, based on the secondary curricula of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia.” One issue emerging from these two initiatives, the 2012 policy survey and the OER for Open schools project, is the role that participants of the OER for Open Schools project can play or are already playing in OER policy development, dissemination and in the usage of OER in their countries.

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a ‘small-scale’ survey on educators who participated or are still participating in the OER for Open Schools project in two African countries.

These countries, Ghana and Zambia were neither listed among countries that have OER policies nor those that had references to OER in other public policies at the time of the COL & UNESCO survey. The study examines the current roles of some of the educators in OER development, in policy development and in the dissemination and usage of OER in their countries. It also solicits their views on the progress made in their countries with regards to the development of OER policy, the rolling out and the usage of the OER which were developed through the OER for Open Schools Project.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires

The questionnaire used in the 2012 COL & UNESCO Survey on Governments OER Policies was adopted and adapted for use in this micro level study. Some of the key questions used in the 2012 survey were cascaded and a number of questions which could relate more specifically to the educators' participation and experiences on the ground were added. Some of these were open ended questions aimed at soliciting the participants' views on their country's progress in the development and application of OER policy. The questionnaires were the primary data collection method of this study. They were disseminated by e-mail to the participants of the "OER for Open Schools" project which was completed in Zambia in 2012. Similar questionnaires were sent to the educators who are participating in the project in Ghana. It is important to note that in Ghana this project was launched in 2012 and that the participants are in the introductory stages of training.

As already stated, communication with the target group in Zambia, was by the e-mail with addresses which were originally provided by the master teachers whilst they were on the "OER for Open Schools" project. Despite several attempts, the e-mails sent to these addresses were repeatedly rejected. It is difficult to determine how many questionnaires actually reached the target audience. Follow up attempts made through smses sent to the mobile phone numbers which were originally provided by the master teachers' yielded positive response from only 2 participants. A sms received back from one of participants who had completed the questionnaire stated the following:

... I wish to inform you that I completed answering the questionnaire last week. I could not post it to you due to poor internet we are experiencing... (Received on 28/06/2013)

Respondents

Questionnaires were sent to all 33 participants of the OER for Open Schools Project in Ghana and Zambia. Finally, only four responses (2 per country) were received, that is 11.7% and 12.5% return respectively. The responses from Zambia and from Ghana have been included in the following analysis, see Table 1.

Table 1: Questionnaires distribution and return rates

Country	No. Distributed	No. Returned	% Returned	No. Unreturned	% Unreturned
Zambia	16	02	12.5	14	87.5
Ghana	17	02	11.7	15	88.2
Total	33	04	12.1	29	87.9

The respondents' institutions and occupations as indicated in Table 2 show that the respondents are involved in public secondary level education institutions which offer open and distance learning academic courses or face-to-face technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The one respondent working as a private consultant is involved in training hospitality practitioners.

Table 2: Respondents' institutions and occupation of the respondents

Country	Respondents	Occupation	Institution
Zambia	Respondent 1	Lecturer/ ODL Course Developer	Zambia College of Distance Education (ZACODE)
	Respondent 2	Lecturer/ ODL Course Developer	ZACODE
Ghana	Respondent 1	Director: training; research & development	Royal Plumbing Engineering College (ROPEC)
	Respondent 2	Facilitator: Consultant	Hospitality Industry Agency

FINDINGS

Nature and extent of OER activity in the countries

The quantitative responses from three respondents confirmed the COL/UNESCO study's view that there were still no specific OER policies in place in Ghana and Zambia. However, both countries appear active in the OER movement mainly through initiatives by institutions and engaged individuals and through specific projects or programmes with public funding.

The Zambian respondents gave a number of examples which include the partnership between Commonwealth of Learning and the Ministry of Education in Zambia which resulted in the development of a number of courses as print- based OER at secondary school level. They also noted that there has been tremendous improvement in the development of distance education learning materials and growth in the number of institutions that are now teaching through distance education or dual mode. Other examples given include the engagement of organizations like the Flemish Association for Development cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) to work with the Teacher College of Education to familiarize them with OER and access to some websites.

In one case the respondent from Ghana further indicated that the government started to show interest in the OER movement since 2012. However both respondents from Ghana acknowledged that there is limited activity in the OER movement through initiatives by institutions which engaged some individuals. Whilst the government is not providing much funding for such resources, it is encouraging participation from the private sector.

Intensity of OER activity in the educational subsectors

The participants were asked to rate the intensity of OER activity in the various educational sub-sectors using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) scale. One respondent from Zambia noted that OER activities were not clearly noticeable especially by ordinary citizens. However, both respondents concurred that the activity was low at the lower and upper secondary levels. Dramatic increase was noticeable at the tertiary level with more institutions of higher learning using distance education. They also highlighted that the government in partnership with VVOB is encouraging the use of OER like the TESSA (Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa) materials in some Colleges of Teacher education.

The respondents from Ghana experienced difficulty in responding to this section as they were unfamiliar with the ISCED concept. They therefore indicated no activity in all sub-sectors, with low activity in the tertiary sector.

Nature and extent of existing policies

The quantitative responses from both Ghana respondents indicated that there was still no policy on OER.

In the qualitative responses, the Zambian respondents mentioned that they were not aware of the existence of a specific policy on OER, but one respondent was of the opinion that currently the ministry of education is developing a draft policy on distance education, thus confirming the earlier study's comment that "several other countries do not have policies yet, but are in the process of developing them as part of ODL initiatives". But this respondent did not know the details on how much the draft policy on OER has been developed.

Perceived benefits of OER

The Zambian respondents also shared the view that their government decided to be active in the OER movement to increase: open and flexible learning opportunities, efficiency and quality of learning resources, cost-efficiency and to explore the innovative potential of OER. They however mentioned that due to the digital divide in the country, many education institutions experienced the challenge of internet connectivity.

Public Funding for learning material

Respondents were asked to comment on the extent to which the learning materials are produced or paid for by public funds. One respondent from Zambia said that the learning materials were funded from public funds to a large extent. The government is instrumental in the production and to some extent funding the learning materials for the learners. On the other hand the second respondent noted that due to poor funding by the government, the college where he works finds it difficult to provide the course developers with good reference or text books. As a result this becomes quite difficult for the development of the study materials. However, one noted that governments tend to be willing to receive donor support and to encourage private sector involvement rather than provide public funding

One respondent from Ghana indicated lack of knowledge with regards the funding of the learning materials whilst the second respondent stated that there was no public funding provided. He further commented that as educators:

"We make photo copies out of photo copies to the extent that sometimes we can barely see the text."

The respondents were also asked to determine what percentage of publicly funded materials was in digital format and what percentage of the digital materials were offered as OER. All the respondents indicated that they could not give any estimation because they did not know. One respondent from Zambia noted that at the moment it would be difficult to provide statistics on this issue however information would be available from the financial section of the Ministry of Education.

Usage and access to OER

As educational practitioners, the respondents were asked, to indicate how much they made use of OER in their teaching activities. The respondents from Ghana could not share much insight in this regard, perhaps because of their limited experience in the OER movement thus far. They unanimously indicated that they do not use OERs at all in their teaching activities due to lack of access.

For Zambia, one respondent declared that he used OER extensively for teaching and that the learners could also use OER to acquire knowledge and skills in their respective subject areas. The second responded stated that he did not use OER at all because it is difficult to access OER

due to lack of internet connectivity in the college. Above all it is expensive to access OER from the Internet Cafes.

The respondents were also asked to what extent they received assistance from the Ministry of Education or other public agencies to gain access to computers or the internet for use of OER. Both respondents from Zambia indicated that assistance was to a minor extent. However they both acknowledged the existence of a government strategy through public and private partnerships in order to expand opportunities for access to computers. For example the Zambia Information and Communication Technology Authority (ZICTA) have donated computers to their college; which are used to develop print-based material. But, they emphasized that due to lack of internet connectivity access to OER on the internet is still very difficult. Another example which was re-emphasized is the partnership with Commonwealth of Learning which provided assistance in enriching their knowledge and skills for development and use of OER. Limited support is also provided by government to learners to gain access to computers through initiatives such ZICTA and other agencies such as UBUNTU who donate computers to secondary schools and colleges in rural and urban areas.

Role of Participants in OER policy development

Respondents were asked to provide examples of their current or future role in the development of OER policy. The response from the Ghana participants was rather limited as the OER for Open Schools Project is fairly new to them. However, these respondents looked forward to playing active roles in the future.

The Zambia respondents as lecturers in the ODL environment stated that they are responsible for course development, information dissemination, monitoring and evaluation of OER. But, they are not involved in OER or other policy development activities. Such responsibility is designated to the management level like the college principal. However one respondent felt that, in future he could contribute to OER policy development by providing the technical team with data on learner-needs at grass root level; needs of the distance education colleges and how such colleges should be involved in the provision and dissemination of OERs.

Obstacles to OER adoption

As participants in the OER for Open Schools' project the respondents reflected on some of the impediments to the growth of the OER movement in Zambia. These include poor financial investment in the production of OER and limited internet connectivity in education institutions. Respondents felt that educators and the greater community need to be more sensitized and encouraged to make use of the OERs on the internet. Development of policy on OER would help the citizens; enhance the awareness about the availability and free-usage of such materials. Political will on fostering the use of OERs was, thus required and the government should consider employing suitable personnel in management or decision making positions, who would be able to promote the development, usage and dissemination of OERs in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning especially at the secondary school level.

Studies and research on OER

Respondents concluded by saying that they were not aware of any studies or research on OER in their countries. Therefore they could not provide any references in this regard,

DISCUSSION

The analysis above indicates that the respondents are not aware of the existence of formal OER policy in their countries. This could imply that from their perspective not much progress has been achieved in this regard. This observation could also be attributed to the limited timeframe from the 2012 survey and the acknowledgement that in most African countries the OER movement appears to be most active in tertiary education, We are convinced that the present study plays a constructive role in extending the campaign for advocacy, information and capacity building not only on understanding the concept and potential of OER but it also raises awareness on the intensity of OER activity in the various educational sub-sectors in the countries that we surveyed. The comment made by one respondent that some OER activities which are in progress in their country are not clearly noticeable especially by the ordinary citizen highlights the lack of knowledge about important OER initiatives which may be in progress in their countries and endorses the notion stated above. For example the quantitative responses from the Ghana respondents indicated low OER participation in all educational sectors. On the other hand there is literature which gives extensive evidence of Ghana's active participation in the OER movement especially at the tertiary education level. Ng'ambi & Luo (2013) for example, indicate active involvement of the University of Ghana and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in important initiatives like the African Health OER Network. The analysis of our survey highlights the need for greater institutional participation, broader community and national awareness campaigns to promote usage and benefits of OER and also to showcase some of the important initiatives which are already in place in the respective countries.

The study confirms the educational role played by the participants of the OER for Open Schools, but underscores that they are currently not involved in OER policy development. In many countries, policy development is the domain of decision makers from the specific Ministries. However, one of the respondents provides intuitive projection of the kind of support functions that the master teachers could provide to the policy makers. With the skills and knowledge acquired in the OER for Open Schools' project, these educators could provide valuable technical support, research on learner-needs and share insights on the needs of the ODL colleges. The master teachers can be an important resource which could contribute to the OER policy debates as OER champions who could also be instrumental in mobilizing for equitable provision of relevant resources. Ng'ambi & Luo (2013) explain that OER champions are usually academics or senior management who are passionate about the OER phenomenon of sharing educational resources and are willing to acquire skills that empower them to accomplish these goals (p230). This position concurs with the views expressed by the respondent from Zambia.

RECOMMENDATION

We believe that the study has great potential to draw more insights from a wider diversity of participants in Africa and could have a bearing on the broader educational community in the continent and beyond. We recommend an extension of this study to a broader survey soliciting the views of a larger body of master teachers from the other countries that participated in the COL and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation OER for Open Schools Initiative. The wider participation could make a meaningful contribution to the realisation of the OER movement as a "people's movement" (Asha Kanwar 2013).

CONCLUSION

We deduce that the study has achieved the objectives as outlined in the introduction, gathered and presented valuable feedback from the respondents. Whilst confirming the views of the COL/ UNESCO (2012) Survey that OER policies may not be in place yet, it highlights that both countries appear active in the OER movement. It acknowledges the important contribution made by the OER for Open Schools' Project in the development and empowerment of the master teachers with valuable ODL knowledge and skills. Some of the views emerging from the study reveal that the respondents have not only developed into leaders who are able to cascade their skills and knowledge to their colleagues; but they could also play a much bigger role in unlocking

the potential of OER in promoting access to and enhancing the quality of education through promoting the greater usage of OER in the schools. The study also asserts that with the knowledge, skills in ODL and exposure to the OER movement, the master teachers are well-placed to play a major role in enhancing OER policy development debates and creating the synergy between emerging OER policies and application in their countries.

The respondents from both countries highlighted the digital divide as one of the major impediments to access, effective dissemination and utilization of OER. We suggest that one very important by-product of their training through the OER for Open Schools initiative is that the master teachers could explore possible strategies to overcome the limitations imposed by the digital divide, by investigating and making recommendations on strategies to promote OER access in environments with and without ICT infrastructure. In conclusion, we acknowledge that the findings of this survey could be deemed limited as the study was extended to participants in the Open Schools Project in only two countries. It is for this reason that the above recommendation on extension of the study to other countries has been made.

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