

OER Strategy – Taking it to a New Level



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Introduction

People have always had the propensity to share. Within the education context, this has underpinned education theory with the knowledge that people learn best when working together, engaging with each other and sharing information and resources. This model of education has led to the global movement towards collaboration in the development and sharing of content. Such content has been termed Open Educational Resources (OER) and the term was first used at a UNESCO meeting in 2002.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has, for some time, embraced the notion of collectively developing and sharing courses and education resources. This had taken various forms, including the development of materials for a Commonwealth Executive Master in Business Administration and Public Administration (CEMBA/CEMPA) Programme, teacher materials in Science, Technology, and Mathematics Programme (STAMP2000+) and other resources developed over the years.

This approach was taken to a different level with institutions like Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Open Courseware (OCW) initiative, in which 'teachers placed their lecture notes online for free use. The UK Open University's Open Learn followed by placing existing self-instructional materials, in online format' (Kanwar, 2013). In 2007, the people leading this movement for open education resources met in Cape Town and agreed to support educators to participate and contribute content that could be shared. The underpinning philosophy for this approach is the belief that public funded education resources need to be made freely available for further use, revision and contextualisation. This became known as the Cape Town Open Education Declaration and served as an important pre-cursor to the 2012 World OER Congress

in Paris. This important global event resulted in the 2012 Paris OER Declaration which created a framework for the promotion, development and use of OER.

This short presentation will focus on COL's strategy in OER, how the organisation has implemented this and our view of future developments in this area.

COL's Strategy

The Paris OER Declaration makes ten recommendations. It is important to remind ourselves of these recommendations as they serve as the framework for COL's strategy in OER.

1. Foster awareness and use of OER

Promote and use OER to widen access to education at all levels, both formal and nonformal, in a perspective of lifelong learning, thus contributing to social inclusion, gender equity and special needs education. Improve both cost-efficiency and quality of teaching and learning outcomes through greater use of OER.

2. Facilitate enabling environments for use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT)

Bridge the digital divide by developing adequate infrastructure, in particular, affordable broadband connectivity, widespread mobile technology and reliable electrical power supply. Improve media and information literacy and encourage the development and use of OER in open standard digital formats.

3. Reinforce the development of strategies and policies on OER

Promote the development of specific policies for the production and use of OER within wider strategies for advancing education.

4. Promote the understanding and use of open licensing frameworks

Facilitate the re-use, revision, remixing and redistribution of educational materials across the world through open licensing, which refers to a range of frameworks that allow different kinds of uses, while respecting the rights of any copyright holder.

5. Support capacity building for the sustainable development of quality learning materials

Support institutions, train and motivate teachers and other personnel to produce and share high-quality, accessible educational resources, taking into account local needs and the full diversity of learners. Promote quality assurance and peer review of OER. Encourage the development of mechanisms for the assessment and certification of learning outcomes achieved through OER.

6. Foster strategic alliances for OER

Take advantage of evolving technology to create opportunities for sharing materials which have been released under an open license in diverse media and ensure sustainability through new strategic partnerships within and among the education, industry, library, media and telecommunications sectors.

7. Encourage the development and adaptation of OER in a variety of languages and cultural contexts

Favour the production and use of OER in local languages and diverse cultural contexts to ensure their relevance and accessibility. Intergovernmental organisations should encourage the sharing of OER across languages and cultures, respecting indigenous knowledge and rights.

8. Encourage research on OER

Foster research on the development, use, evaluation and re-contextualisation of OER as well as on the opportunities and challenges they present, and their impact on the quality and cost-efficiency of teaching and learning in order to strengthen the evidence base for public investment in OER.

9. Facilitate finding, retrieving and sharing of OER

Encourage the development of user-friendly tools to locate and retrieve OER that are specific and relevant to particular needs. Adopt appropriate open standards to ensure interoperability and to facilitate the use of OER in diverse media.

10. Encourage the open licensing of educational materials produced with public funds

Governments/competent authorities can create substantial benefits for their citizens by ensuring that educational materials developed with public funds be made available under open licenses (with any restrictions they deem necessary) in order to maximize the impact of the investment.

It is within this framework, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Commonwealth values and needs within Commonwealth states that COL has located its OER strategy. The organisation has focused on promoting OER and creating awareness within countries, institutions and organisations. COL has placed emphasis on policy (both at country and institutional levels) so that there is a clear policy environment that can support OER developments.

However, COL has also used its Three-Year Plan (TYP) as part of the framework that has shaped our work in OER. COL has worked with institutions to drive the construction of materials and learning resources and ensured these are made available as OER. We have developed strategic partnership with various regional bodies, institutions and organisations to support the development and use of OER to drive education.

This approach to support OER and the [Paris OER Declaration](#) has been integrated into the work of [COL as part of our Three-Year Plan](#). The Plan calls for the use of five core strategies to achieve our outcomes, viz:

- Partnerships
- Capacity
- Materials
- Models, and
- Policy.

As part of COL's commitment to the implementation of the Paris OER Declaration and our firm commitment to the value that widely available educational resources being critical to any education system (both formal and non-formal), COL has integrated OER into its three-year and annual plans. So our support for OER goes beyond a special project. I want to highlight a few examples of this approach.

The partnership with UNESCO and other like-minded organisations has yielded results in the following areas:

- Advocacy and awareness generation regarding the benefits and availability of OER
- Policy development at the national and institutional levels
- Building capacity within governments, institutions and organisations to support the use of OER, and
- Promoting research through its publications on OER and the COL Chairs programme.

In the advocacy and policy areas, COL has recently conducted regional workshops for Southern Africa, West Africa, Caribbean (Eastern Caribbean States) and South Asia. COL further supported workshops in OER focused on open schools in East Africa. The objectives of these engagements were to enable better understanding of the rationale and processes of OER policy development. The next steps are to work with governments and institutions/organisations to enable OER or ICT in education policies to be constructed. For example, COL has helped the government of Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada and St Vincent and the Grenadines to embed OER in their ICT in Education Policy.

We also believe that COL needs to set the standard and has developed an organisational policy on OER in 2011. The World Bank established an Open Knowledge Repository the following year. More recently UNESCO has adopted an Open Access policy for its publications.

Another example of our integrated approach to OER is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). This is a consortium of 32 small states which have come together to develop capacity in online course development. This is a university of, for and by the small states of the Commonwealth. VUSSC has developed various courses based on the needs of the small states. For example, courses on Disaster Management, Tourism, Entrepreneurship, Fisheries have been completed and are available on our website. These courses are also being delivered by institutions in some of the small states.

We have further developed a directory of courses and the URL is <http://doer.col.org>. It contains courses for Open Schools, Higher Education, Teacher Education and Technical and Vocational Skills Development. They are available freely (as OER) from different institutions in the Commonwealth.

What's Next?

The development of OER and its potential to support education and training is only now being realised. As we embark on various activities and projects and there have been the development and use of OER in

some form, we are realising the value, the issues that we need to address further and the potential this offers. It is recognised that we have seen both a bottom-up and structured institutional/country driven approach to OER. Both of these have added great value to the models of OER development and use and resulted in exciting options emerging. This approach needs to be encouraged. Therefore the advocacy strategy is still required and needs to be based on data, analysis and proof.

The developments in the technology fields and the applications to education, both formal and non-formal are important to further enable our work in this area. Increasingly access to technology (both in terms of form factors or devices and the Internet) will become less of an issue and identifying and/or creating appropriate content and its use in the learning and teaching process will become more of an issue.

An interesting and most welcome development emerging from technology developments and OER is the ‘resulting 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, as we have learnt from the work of OER Africa. 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.’ (Kanwar, 2013). During my recent visit to the Open University of Sri Lanka, we met with the Vice Chancellor and his Deans of various faculties. During the discussion, they illustrated the value of having their courses being developed as OER and their development projects with communities enabled them to use the local indigenous knowledge to improve the materials. This ability to localise OER offers unique advantages for communities to have access to quality materials and be able to use this in a local language and customise to ensure greater relevance.

The issue of OER will increasingly become more sophisticated and complex, even if the approach is to simplify without ‘dumbing down’. One area that needs to have further work done is the open licensing models. How do we use the materials developed with public funds and find ways to enable issues of copyright to be addressed, moral and intellectual rights of creators to be acknowledged and enabled based on the context. Creative Commons is one such model of licensing formats and frameworks. However, there is still much work to be done to increase the level of knowledge, understanding and application of both the Creative Commons and other licensing frameworks.

All of these issues indicate a strong need for research on OER to underpin developments and to ensure there is solid evidence of the value to education, to development and to the economy.

Such research also needs to include software tools for the storage, search, location and retrieval of resources. It is here that perhaps we need to foster a Pan-African alliance of organisations and institutions that will drive research and innovation focused on the continent and add to the body of knowledge in OER. There is research being done led by the University of Cape Town (IDRC funded) and the Open University – UK (Hewlett Foundation funded).

An important area that needs to be addressed is the extension of OER to non-formal education and skills training. COL has done some work in this area, for example focusing on support for subsistence farmers to use either mobile phones or radio to improve their agricultural practices, their knowledge of financial

literacy, and their ability to trade and engage with financial institutions. All materials developed in this area are available as OER.

Given the developments in OER, is there a need to address the institutions that use OER? Is it enough to expect institutions to adopt a 'business as usual' approach when using OER? What changes and transformations are required for there to be changes to learning and teaching? How do we ensure the 'open' on OER is translated to include open governance, greater learner centredness and inclusion?

Conclusion

I have provided an overview of developments in the OER field and provided an overview of how COL has approached this. I have further raised a few important issues that can be considered by OER Africa. Let me end with a few important macro questions for us to consider:

1. Does OER offer a unique opportunity to address the issue of the digital and information divide and enable institutions and organisations to use OER to reach the digitally deprived and socially excluded?
2. Can we use OER to address the teaching and learning processes in a transformative way?

References

Kanwar, A. 2013. Ten years of OER: The Road Ahead (closing address of the UNISA/Cambridge International Conference on Open, Distance and eLearning). Cape Town, South Africa.

[Three-Year Plan 2012-2015: Learning for Development](#)

[2012 World Open Education Resources \(OER\) Congress, UNESCO, Paris, June 20-22, 2012 - 2012 Paris OER Declaration](#)