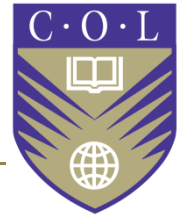


# Ten Years of OER: Enlarging the Circle?

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*Keynote Presentation*

*Regional Symposium on OER (OER Asia)*

*20 September 2012*

*Malaysia*

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*Commonwealth of Learning*

It is a pleasure to be here with prominent members of the global OER community. I am very grateful to Tan Sri Raj Dhanarajan and Dato Prof Ho Sin Chye for the invitation. The Commonwealth of Learning 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, thanks to our then President Tan Sri Raj. More recently, COL was one of the first intergovernmental organisations to declare its commitment to OER through the development of an OER policy. This long engagement with OER gives COL a perspective about the inherent challenges and emerging opportunities. My topic is ‘Ten Years of OER: enlarging the circle?’

I shall first speak of some of the major developments in the last ten years, look at the lessons learned and will finally raise the question of how the circle may be enlarged within the context of COL’s own work.

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

As we all know, the term Open Education Resources or OER was coined at a meeting at UNESCO, Paris, ten years ago . Since then, there have been various success stories that exemplify increased access, improved quality and reduced costs of education through the use of OER.

First, the issue of 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.

Second, the question of 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.

Third, the issue of costs. The Teacher Education in Sub Saharan Africa, a partnership between the Open University UK, the Commonwealth of Learning and 18 institutions in 12 African countries has developed OER for teacher training in four languages: English, Kiswahili, Arabic and French. These were used by 320,000 teachers in 2010 alone, and the free materials as well as the sheer numbers of users have radically reduced the costs of providing quality teacher training to about \$ 10 dollars per teacher.

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 marked the culmination of a COL-UNESCO project on ‘Fostering Governmental Awareness Internationally’ funded by 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. The questionnaire for the survey, based on a similar survey conducted a year earlier by OECD, was sent to all member states and 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 this was one area in which 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 and the need to make a case for the cost efficiencies in using OER.

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 include 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. Austria, Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia were most active in OER. 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. At the regional forum held in Bangkok, discussions focused on capacity building, incentives for teachers, promoting respect for indigenous knowledge and open licenses.

The government of Oman hosted the regional forum for the Arab States in Muscat. Of the 11 countries that reported on the status of OER, 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 four that may be of interest to you:

- Foster awareness and use of OER
- Foster strategic alliances for OER
- Encourage the development and adaptation of OER in a variety of languages and cultural contexts
- Encourage research on OER

This is an important development as governments tend to take such internationally-agreed documents led by UNESCO seriously and the Paris Declaration could have a major role in enlarging the circle to include 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, OER in the last decade has emerged as both a bottom-up movement premised on volunteerism, as well as a set of processes planned and directed from the top-down. The future of the OER movement lies in paying concurrent attention to both these approaches that are evident globally. For example, the large scale production of published OER's in the Asian region have received sustained Government support whereas in most of the OECD countries, OER development has generally proceeded locally, at the institutional and individual levels. Future advocacy therefore will have to clearly align itself to the needs of these two complimentary approaches.

Third, 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. The scarce resources can be harnessed to build capacity in the adaptation and re-use of OER rather than in building ICT support structures. However, when it comes to the primary and secondary levels, bridging the digital divide in this sector needs careful attention. 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. New and sustainable alliances between different stakeholders, especially the telecom industry and OER champion institutions will be necessary.

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.

The discussions at the Regional Policy Forums have tended to position Open Licensing as an extension of author ownership of intellectual property rather than antithetical to it. This is an important development for policy makers who can be assured that the public ownership of OER will in no way diminish the individual's rights.

Sixth, 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? There are clear directions for the future. The fact that 100 countries responded to the survey indicates that the circle is being enlarged. But is it enough? What more needs to 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.

In partnership with UNESCO, COL has developed key resources such as a Basic Guide to OER; Guidelines for the use of OER; open licensing etc.

COL's Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), again conceived when Tan Sri Raj was the President of COL, is a consortium of 32 small states which have come together to develop capacity in online course development. Several need-based courses on "Disaster Management", "Tourism" 'Entrepreneurship' 'Fisheries' etc have been completed and are available on COL's website. Teachers who had never developed online courses are now training other colleagues.

It is clear that more evidence is required to support our advocacy work. COL will work in Kenya to investigate the relative costs of a secondary level course based on commercial textbooks and one offered through the use of OER. Similarly COL will work in the Caribbean to determine the relative costs and outcomes of an OER-based tertiary-level course to that offered face to face. COL will also work in Nigeria to evaluate the costs of textbooks in Math and Science developed entirely through the use of OER. Policy makers need to know how OER adaptation brings the costs down in the delivery of learning services to a much larger constituency.

Last month, the Commonwealth Education Ministers met in Mauritius for their triennial conference. COL made a presentation on the need for OER-based content and this seemed to capture ministerial attention and is reflected in the Communique. This again is an influential document that is taken seriously by policy makers across the 54 Commonwealth Member States. Ministers recommend that 'a common platform for OER materials be set up for ease of access' and 'the development and use of OER in providing quality teaching and learning for all' be promoted.

COL has already been working on a platform with Commonwealth Connects to develop a directory of full open courses in higher education. COL will develop directories for OER in teacher education and secondary schooling next.

Here are samples of two of these courses (slide #37)

Who are the major players offering free courses in the Commonwealth? The UK Open University, the National Open University of Nigeria and the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

We believe that we cannot enlarge the circle to include practitioners unless we influence institutional policy and practice. For example, 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. There is then a basic contradiction between the centralised institutional and decentralised OER models. Will the centralised structures allow a decentralised approach? What kind of advocacy strategies will be needed to reach these constituencies?

Second more advocacy is needed to transform the curriculum. This needs to change to become relevant to the requirements of the 21st 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 to renew the curriculum? OER cannot transform education unless the curriculum is renewed

While the circle has enlarged substantially in the past decade, we still need a wider involvement 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 content.

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?

How can we tap into the tacit knowledge of local communities to address the great development challenges of our times?

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?

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