

Inaugurating the use of Open Educational Resources at the University of Swaziland

Abstract

Textbooks are important teaching and learning resources in Higher Education Institutions. At the University of Swaziland, both lecturers and students pay for their textbooks. Over the years, the cost of textbooks has been increasing significantly making access to prescribed textbooks a luxury afforded only by a few students who are sponsored by the Swaziland government. In the phase of an increasing cost of living coupled with dwindling government scholarships, the only viable option UNISWA is left with is that of using Open Educational Resources. Through a generous grant from the Common Wealth of Learning (COL), in October, 2015, the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) held a series of workshops aimed at sensitizing the UNISWA community about, amongst others, the benefits of OER. The main objective of the paper is to explain compelling reasons for the use of OER at UNISWA. It also demonstrates the varying levels of sensitization, among the UNISWA academic staff and students, on OER and their potential to promote access to and enhance the quality of education. The paper further shows the various attempts UNISWA as an institution has done to encourage the use of OER by its academic staff. One of these attempts is the drafting of the UNISWA OER policy, an exercise that started on March 14, 2016. This paper goes on to discuss the challenges UNISWA has faced in the course of developing an OER policy. It further suggests how the use of OER could revolutionize teaching at the University. To do that, In-depth interviews were conducted with a few respondents representing the three campuses to ascertain their feelings, perceptions and attitude towards the use of OER at UNISWA. In addition, to that two focus group discussions were held to elicit further responses on this issue.

Introduction

The UNISWA is way behind. The University should start using OER like yesterday because students have, for a long time, depended on lecturers as sources of information... and their major complaint is that there are no books in the library and the bookshop prices are prohibitive... (Musiiwa, 2016). Email interview.

‘This is the best time for UNISWA to start using OER because it has the staffs to drive and support it at IDE, and the students and lecturers who are willing to use it across faculties’ (Vilane, 2016). Email interview. From both responses it is revealed that the use of OER at the University of Swaziland is long overdue. However, the good news is that attempts are being made for UNISWA to embrace the use of OER. In this paper I have looked at what the UNISWA has done to create awareness, among staff, of the existence of a wide range of OER. I have also revealed people’s attitude and perceptions towards the use of OER in order to demonstrate their understanding, as the UNISWA academic staff, of OER and their potential to promote access to and enhance the quality of education. These perceptions also served to suggest the different ways respondents think the UNISWA could benefit from the use of OER and challenges the staff and the institution are faced with. This paper has also discussed compelling reasons for embedding OER in teaching and learning at UNISWA. But the starting point of the paper has been a working definition of the word OER.

Establishing the use of OER at UNISWA

Open Educational Resources are digitized teaching, learning and research resources which are either available in the public domain or have been released using an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing (re-use, mixing, distribution) by others. These resources exist in the form of full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software and any other tools, materials or techniques used to support access to knowledge (SAIDE, 2000).

Attempts to establish the use of OER at the UNISWA started in October 2015 with an institutional awareness campaign on the potential and usefulness of open educational resources. This campaign was achieved through a series of workshops both for the UNISWA management and the academic staff from all the diverse range of disciplines found at UNISWA. The objectives of the management/staff workshops were: to introduce the University of Swaziland academic staff to COL, VUSSC and OER; to Sensitize UNISWA staff on a wide range of existing OER including programmes which could be repurposed for delivery to UNISWA students; to Alert UNISWA staff on the potential benefits of OER in enhancing access to quality tertiary education and to locate and select quality and relevant Open Educational Resources for University Courses.

During these workshops which ran from October 12 to 19, 2015, we were able to work with individual academics in a range of disciplines to locate open educational resources relevant to their teaching practice. These workshops also educated members not only on what OER are, but also on how to use them and what they do for the user (benefits). They also informed members of staff on the proper attribution method of OER. Because of these workshops, the Faculty of Health Sciences (FoHS) has been able to embed appropriate OER in the modules they started writing in October 2015.

Furthermore, during these workshops, participants appreciated the attempt to make them aware of these readily available resources and some wished they had had more time to learn not only how to locate them but also to be equipped with the technics to start using these resources in their daily practice in class. Some verbally requested for further training on the production of OER. Skeptical members of staff expressed a great need for clear guidance on the University's position regarding the use of OER, fearing, amongst other things, that some of these resources might not be of good quality. Such skeptics were comforted when informed that OER are prepared by content experts in different disciplines. Most participants sung praises on the value of OER in enhancing teaching and learning.

Methodology

In-depth interview were used to elicit information on the perceptions of the UNISWA academic community on the value of using OER, the challenges faced by UNISWA staff in accessing teaching and learning materials and the extent to which OER are currently used within UNISWA. Furthermore, focus group discussions were also used to find out more on students perceptions and feelings on the use of OER at UNISWA. Since these interviews were conducted using email, most of the recipients did not respond. Only a few responded thus restraining the results of this study. Six lecturers, each from the three campuses was given interview questions between February and March, 2016, but only three answered the questions. Furthermore, on 18 August, 2016, a focused group discussion comprising of the students who attended the OER awareness campaign in March, 2016 was conducted.

Compelling reasons for establishing the use of OER at UNISWA

The first quotation in the introduction is one of the responses I got when interviewing colleagues on why they think UNISWA should start using OER to enhance teaching and learning. From the first respondent, it became very clear to me that the academic staff at the UNISWA acknowledges the saving role of OER from some of the stubborn stumbling blocks they have had to battle with in their teaching practice, such as students relying on lecture notes without any further reading. It is also worth-noting the fact that rising costs of texts books have been one major factor promoting the use of OER in some universities of the World, for instance, at the University of Maryland

University College (UMUC) Klein,G. (2015). At UMUC, for instance, it is asserted that text books prices were so bad that they were equivalent to the cost of tuition, when the institution sought for a cost-effective solution in OER. So besides saving students money, the shift to no-cost embedded resources would also help the UNISWA to ensure that all its students have access, right from the beginning, to the materials they need to successfully complete their programmes.

On the other hand, the focused group discussion elicited this information;

The use of OER at UNISWA would encourage us, not only to read what others have produced, but to participate in the production of knowledge that can be shared at an international level... Initially, we were not even aware that we may participate in producing knowledge that can be shared with other students elsewhere. Now that we know, we know the value of the knowledge we produce in projects and Masters Theses we will definitely do our work with enthusiasm and commitment (Focus group discussion 1, August 18, 2016).

Sharing information globally is one of the popular benefits of OER. According to the UNESCO guidelines on OER, 'the transformative potential of OER also includes the benefits of sharing and collaborating among institutions and countries' (UNESCO, 2015).

Further, some other advantages of OER are that they broadens use of alternatives to textbooks while maintaining instructional quality and they also lower the cost of course materials for students. In the phase of an increasing cost of living coupled with dwindling government scholarships, the only viable option UNISWA is left with is that of using Open Educational Resources.

Establishing the use of OER at UNISWA

The sensitization campaign for staff and management held in October 2015 was followed by that of students in March 2016. But before that, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), under the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) Project, sponsored yet another workshop aimed primarily to develop a UNISWA OER policy. This OER policy drafting workshop was held at eSibayeni Lodge on 14 to 16 March, 2016. To acquire funding from COL, UNISWA through the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) put together a proposal which stipulated the amount of money UNISWA would need to finance an OER Policy Workshop. One principal motivation for holding this workshop was the need to develop a UNISWA OER policy in an attempt to embed the use of OER in the teaching and learning process at UNISWA. This proposal was submitted to COL in December, 2015.

The main objectives of the workshop were: to enable management and staff of UNISWA to demonstrate an understanding of OER and their potential to promote access and quality; to identify the specific ways in which OER can be used to enhance access to education and improve curricula in Swaziland; to enable the target group to demonstrate greater awareness of the contexts; rationale and processes of developing sustainable institutional OER policies; and to encourage and guide participants to develop draft plans for OER institutional policy development. Since the policy drafting workshop held in March did not lead to a complete policy, there was need to hold a one day policy drafting workshop to finalize the draft of the UNISWA OER policy. On May 16, 2016 this workshop was held at eSibayeni Lodge. The objectives of this one were: to reflect on the process and output of the previous workshop, to explain compelling reasons for UNISWA OER policy, to present and discuss the draft policy, to continue with the drafting of the UNISWA OER policy and to finalize the implementation of the UNISWA OER policy.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, the student sensitization campaign could not follow immediately after the management and staff workshops. Instead we were able to have it on 17 March, 2016 at Kwaluseni campus. This workshop intended to enable students to: be sensitized as UNISWA students in all campuses on the existence of a wide range of OER; have a better understanding of Open Educational Resources from different perspectives; be sensitized on a wide range of existing OER including programmes which could be repurposed for delivery to UNISWA students; be alerted on the potential benefits of OER in enhancing their access to quality course resources such as open textbooks; compare good practice examples of OER development and utilization by credible worldwide universities.

Asked to respond to the question of the value of OER, one colleague at Luyengo campus said, 'I think OER is a good platform for teaching and learning and it's one that UNISWA could not wish away' (Vilane, 2016, March 9). Email interview.

One reason why UNISWA cannot wish away OER according to one of my informants is because 'our UNISWA students, especially IDE students expect every word to come from the mouth of the lecturer. Musiiwa, A. (2016, February 19). Email interview. We all are aware of the dangers arising from situations where the lecturer is expected by students to be the only source of information. One of them is spoon-feeding, which promotes laziness on the part of the student and further stifles discovery learning. Although the lecture is not the only learning situation where spoon-feeding occurs, it is however, the most common situation. This does not undermine the fact that a 'good' lecture that has been prepared according to the traditional rules and delivered by a 'good' lecturer is still considered one of the best teaching methods. But it does not allow active student involvement in the learning process. All students need to do in a lecture is to take notes, memorize their notes and regurgitate them during the examination, and hopefully get good marks. While lectures could be commended for their cost-effectiveness because one lecturer can deliver the course content to a class of hundreds of students, Alwis (2000) argues that this process is also economic and cost effective for the students in terms of effort expended in information acquisition.

Possible benefits from the use of OER for UNISWA

Open educational resources are basic to university teaching and learning because students and lecturers have the opportunity to construct and share knowledge at a global level... The IDE students tend to borrow notes from full time students so they can reproduce under exam conditions just because they do not have time to visit the library where resources are limited. With OER they can read UNISWA projects online, without having to visit SWAZIANA. Since I joined the University in 2010, I have observed that MA students expect the lecturers to talk. They cannot discuss material as students. There are no debates to talk of. It involves a lot of work to encourage them to source for material in the library and to engage in inter-student debates. I am sure OER could help them produce and share knowledge with other MA students in other universities so that they can catch up in the process of knowledge production. The learning process is learner centred, so students have the opportunity to source for material online instead of depending on hard copy books. Online sources also do away with high costs of buying books. Above all, OER reduces the lecturer centered approach to teaching and learning... UNISWA stands to benefit from OER in that the University can do away with high costs of importing books (Musiiwa, 2016). Email interview.

From this response a number of opportunities or benefits could be identified. These include the fact that according to this informant the use of OER at UNISWA would: allow students and lecturers to produce and share information at a global level. For those taking courses on distant delivery mode, OER bridge the gap between student and their learning resources such as library books. In addition to this, library copies of education resources are usually very limited. Commenting about this limitation of library education resources Lane said;

Even if this copyrighted material is available in public libraries, it is then effectively rationed by the numbers of copies available and the costs and opportunity costs involved in people travelling to the library to use them (with that use being further restricted by the all rights reserved copyright applied to them) (Lane, 2006).

Furthermore, they do away with high costs of books because OER are free. Access to freely available resources would allow a majority of students from economically deprived background to acquire UNISWA education thus widening access to tertiary education while eliminating 'exclusion from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life' of the Swazi people (UNESCO, 2005). OER could promote interactive and learner-centred lessons at UNISWA. Lastly, the UNISWA could save money which it used to pay for importation of books. In light of this, OER would transform the UNISWA learning, the practice of teaching and research and the process of learning and knowledge creation.

From this response and the first one given in the introduction, one thing is very clear and that is the fact that OER allow both the lecturer and the students to be actively involved in knowledge production. OER open the minds of learners to the realization that the lecturer is not the only source of information. From these responses, we also learn that OER allow students to actively take part and contribute to their learning process as it allows the use of active and interactive engagement learning methods. Such methods sustain conceptual understanding. It is widely accepted that active engagement in the learning process encourages students to learn more successfully. Kuh (2002) emphasizes the fact that who the student is or which Higher Education Institution s/he attends is less important than what the student does, which is the foundation of a meaningful learning experience contributing to academic performance.

These two responses also point to the folly of relying on traditional teaching methods in a 21st century classroom environment. Active learning which OER promote includes many avenues of education and allows students to become lively participants who can direct their own learning in contrast to the formal lecture that creates a passive approach to learning (Boyer, 2002).

Challenges UNISWA has faced in the course of developing an OER policy

It is encouraging to know that UNISWA is not the first one to begin the use of OER. There are other world respected institutions which have adopted the use of OER and have formulated policies to enable the adoption of OER. Although their reasons for embedding the use of OER are similar to those UNISWA has, but the challenges UNISWA has faced with in the course of developing her institutional OER policy may be different.

Informants were not keen to comment on the extent to which OER are used at UNISWA but they gave a hint on the challenges UNISWA is likely to face in her attempt to develop an OER policy. According to one respondent, one of the challenges the UNISWA is likely to face, is that of internet connection. In his words he said, 'I guess the biggest challenge is the availability of the network and its speed. If available, it is slow to respond to the user's needs...' (Vilane, 2016). Email interview. This suggests that the Bandwidth of the network has to be increased to cope with the demand of the users. Attesting to this, Andy Lane argues that;

Wider availability of OERs is, however, of no benefit to those who have few or no means of accessing it. The challenge here is providing a public wide infrastructure (whether publicly or privately funded) of information and communication networks that everyone can access and derive services from—if, of course, they can privately afford the PC or cell phone that can link to those networks (Lane, 2006).

Another challenge encountered by UNISWA in the course of developing its OER policy is lack of a comprehensive understanding of OER despite the fact that awareness has been created. This is probably because OER is a new phenomenon at UNISWA. So some members of the UNISWA community are not keen to participate in this new crusade. Since the awareness campaigns were organized by the Institute of Distance Education (IDE), some people think that the OER movement at UNISWA is an IDE baby. Due to these challenges, the UNISWA institutional OER policy has not been finalized yet.

Conclusion

It could be argued that OER, by their nature, support the paradigm shift which put responsibility for learning on the students themselves and exhorts lecturers to train students to find the answers to their enquiries on their own. By so doing, it promotes discovery learning and further shifts the learning activity from the lecturers to the students. Further, it has been argued that OER not only promote a learner-centred learning process, but they also allow learners access to a wide range of quality education resources while at the same time promoting inclusion of the less privileged groups by providing access to freely available resources. Considering all this, one is compelled to resonate the words of one of the informants who claimed that the adoption of the use of OER at UNISWA is long overdue considering the financial problems less-privileged Swazi youth and self-sponsored learners encounter.

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