Sir John Daniel*
11 September 2011
Issue: 188

Open educational resources (OER) have the potential to increase access to education while cutting costs and improving quality. They are, therefore, an important element of the Commonwealth of Learning's mission of 'Learning for Development'. International guidelines for OER in higher education have been drafted, and comments are being invited.

OER are teaching, learning and research materials in any medium that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open licence that permits their free use and, in some instances, re-purposing by others. They can include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, research articles, videos, tests, software and any other tools, materials or techniques used to support access to knowledge.

OER is not synonymous with online learning or e-learning. Rather, many OER - while shareable in a digital format - are also printable. Given the bandwidth and connectivity challenges common in some developing countries, a high percentage of resources are shared as printable resources, rather than being designed solely for use in online learning.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) would like to see all countries make educationally useful material that has been developed with public funds freely available for use and adaptation under open licences.

This single important step could vastly improve access to education in both developing and developed countries alike. Many countries and public universities are on board already.

Envisioned by Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2000 and facilitated by COL, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth produces and shares e-courses in skills-related areas within a new Transnational Qualifications Framework and links them together in a common portal.

Hundreds of teachers and officials have also acquired advanced ICT skills and are collaborating online in course development and delivery through this 32-country network.

In Africa the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa programme, Tessa, is a consortium of 12 African universities, the UK Open University and international organisations including COL that has produced a huge range of OER for teacher education.

These resources are available in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili, are widely used - currently through 20 programmes in 12 countries - and have proven to be beneficial to

hundreds of thousands of teachers.

The UK Open University, Canada's Athabasca University, Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand, the University of Southern Queensland and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are among several major open and conventional universities throughout the world that have recently confirmed their commitment to sharing and using OER.

COL has also been working with UNESCO and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation on initiatives designed to expand the understanding of OER by educational decision-makers and to promote their wider use.

COL and UNESCO are encouraging governments and higher education institutions in all regions of the world to accept the principle of open access to educational materials that have been produced with public funds.

We need to put national policies in place that support the development and re-use of OER, develop skills and capacity in OER and improve national technology infrastructures.

Toward this goal, one of the resources that COL and UNESCO have developed are international *Guidelines for Open Educational Resources in Higher Education* intended to help key stakeholder groups (governments, higher education institutions, teaching staff, student bodies, quality assurance and accreditation bodies, and academic recognition bodies) as they assess the implications of OER for their future policies and actions.

The draft guidelines have been developed through a broad consultative process and we are now extending that consultation further by inviting comments from other interested parties.

Some excerpts from the introduction to the guidelines:

"In the knowledge-driven global economy, higher education systems play major roles in the pursuit of social development and knowledge and in supporting national economic competitiveness. However, they face immense challenges to meet rising enrolment demand worldwide. The percentage of the age cohort enrolled in tertiary education grew from 19% in 2000 to 26% in 2007, but this growth is uneven and is not accompanied by equivalent increases in human or financial resources to enable universities to accommodate the greater demand...

"Open content licences have emerged in an effort to protect authors' rights in environments where content (particularly when digitised) can easily be copied and shared on the internet without permission. Open licences seek to ensure that copying and sharing happens within a structured legal framework that is more flexible than the automatic all-rights reserved status of copyright. OER are part of this process, and allow for more flexibility in the use, re-use, and adaptation of materials, for local contexts and learning environments, while allowing authors to have their work acknowledged...

"Educational institutions can make these investments as part of their processes of improving the quality of their teaching and learning. Peers can share materials and enrich the curriculum for students, while institutions using and adapting OER will find this a very cost-effective way to invest in materials design and development."

An extension to the OER movement is current advocacy for an international system that would see students finding their own content as OER; getting tutoring from a global network of volunteers; being assessed, for a fee, by a participating institution; and earning a credible credential.

Such a system would reduce the cost of higher education dramatically and clearly has echoes of the University of London external system that innovated radically 150 years ago when it declared that all that mattered was performance in examinations, not how knowledge was acquired. That programme has produced five Nobel Laureates.

Open educational resources, combined with effective use of technology, offer the potential to enable the greatest increase in access to education that the world has ever seen.

* Sir John Daniel has been President of the Commonwealth of Learning since 2004. He is a former UNESCO assistant director-general for education, a former vice-chancellor of the UK Open University and has also led universities in Canada.

* The [Commonwealth of Learning](#) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.