

Induction Course for Commonwealth Diplomats

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Transforming Learning through Open Educational Resources

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I would now like to take five minutes to tell you about a very important joint approach that COL and UNESCO will be making to your governments. The subject is Open Educational Resources.

Heads of Government set up the Commonwealth of Learning two decades ago because they believed that information and communications technology (ICTs) could help to equalise the distribution of high quality educational opportunities.

The key aspiration contained in the report was that: “...*any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth*”.

That promise was ahead of its time in 1987 but is now being fulfilled. An important way to expand access to education of better quality at lower cost is through materials that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared by anyone.

The term Open Educational Resources was coined for such materials at a meeting on Higher Education in Developing Countries held at UNESCO in 2002. Since then an increasingly vigorous Open Educational Resources (OER) movement has developed in countries all over the world.

Because opening up education, training and learning is at the heart of its mission COL has made a strong commitment to the development, sharing and repurposing of OER. Let me give a few examples.

First, the programme called TESSA, Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, has engaged 700 African academic teacher educators from universities in a dozen countries in authoring and adapting study units for primary teachers. These open educational resources have been adapted to ten country contexts and are available in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili on the TESSA website.

All TESSA study units contain a series of activities that participating teachers can carry out in their classrooms. In 2010, 400,000 teachers on 19 teacher education programmes benefitted from TESSA resources and lessons with a positive impact on learning of the millions of children in their classrooms.

Second, in order to improve quality and access at senior secondary level COL has worked with teachers in six countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia to create a complete senior secondary curriculum as OER. Since these are Open Educational Resources they can be taken off the COL website freely and adapted for use anywhere in the world.

Third, back in 2000 the ministers of education of the Commonwealth's 32 small states decided that they would work together to implement eLearning in their countries since none of them had the critical mass to go it alone. They called this collaborative network the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Since then they have worked together to create eLearning materials, as OER, in a range of practical areas like sustainable agriculture, disaster management, fisheries, port management and entrepreneurship. Again, these materials are freely available for anyone, anywhere to take and adapt.

These examples show that OER are already being created and used in most Commonwealth countries.

So far, however, this has been largely a grassroots movement of teachers and institutions which believe that knowledge is the common wealth of humankind and that we should share it widely rather than lock it away under copyright.

UNESCO and COL will be writing to all governments to alert them to the importance of OER for expanding quality education and, where they have not already done so, to adopt policies that encourage the production and use of OER. The OECD is conducting a similar campaign with its members and we hope to link the two.

Some governments already insist that the data and results from research conducted with public funds should be made openly accessible so that they can be useful to everyone. Similar benefits could be achieved if all educationally useful material prepared with public funds were made available under open licences.

Open licences are not an alternative to or an abandonment of copyright. They are legal tools that make use of existing copyright laws and enable the copyright holder to allow the material to be used in various ways.

There is a range of such open licences of which Creative Commons is the most widespread. The Commonwealth of Learning encourages governments to require that material developed with public funds be made available under the most open licence possible so that it can benefit as many people as possible.

COL and UNESCO are embarking on a year-long project leading to UNESCO's World Conference on Open Educational Resources to be held in Paris on 20-22 June, 2012. We are also linking up to a similar campaign at the OECD.

COL believes that the Open Educational Resources movement has a huge potential to improve education, training and learning all over the Commonwealth and I invite you to alert your authorities to its importance and to review their policies for making educational materials available.