

Taking OER beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity

Background Note

The 2009 World Conference on Higher Education: The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research For Societal Change and Development (UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 8 July 2009) noted that ODL approaches and ICT present opportunities to widen access to quality education, particularly when Open Educational Resources can be readily shared by many countries and higher education institutions (Communiqué, 8 July 2009).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) launched an initiative: *Taking OER beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity* in order to expand understanding of OER by educational decision makers and quality assurance experts so as to promote their wider use.

Despite the progress generated within the OER community, which has indeed contributed to the wider use of OER, the OER concept is still not widely known and understood, especially by policy makers and institutional managers. Moreover, it is probable that the flow of OER is currently occurring mainly in one direction – from the north to the south. Despite some emerging initiatives OER are still a marginal and donor-driven phenomenon in most of the developing world. This presents the danger that a potentially important development is perceived as a manifestation of neo-colonialism before it has had a chance to embed itself in Africa and other developing countries.

Objectives of the Initiative

The objectives of the initiative are to:

1. Ensure greater support for the use of OER creation and use both in developing and developed countries by educational decision makers (governmental and institutional)
2. Enhance the capacity of educational practitioners in developing countries to create and use OER.

The initiative focuses in the first instance on higher education institutions (universities) in Africa, Asia and the Pacific and is being implemented in partnership between UNESCO and COL as part of a Joint Work Plan Agreement between the two organisations. It will build on the results of the previous and ongoing initiatives of the two organisations.

The basic premise of the initiative is that OER will not be able to help countries reach their educational goals unless awareness of their potential can rapidly be expanded beyond the communities of interest that they have already attracted.

The initiative is financed thanks to extra-budgetary funds provided by the Government of the United States, regular programme funds from the Division of Higher Education, UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning. It is part of UNESCO's inter-sectoral activities in the field of ICT and Education.

Activities

The activities of this initiative are: 4 capacity building workshops; 3 online forums and a policy forum. In addition, to support the activities of this initiative, an OER Dossier has been developed to serve as a resource for the capacity building workshops and policy forums.

OER Dossier

A solid dossier was developed presenting evidence that the use and adaptation of existing OER raises the quality of teaching and/or reduces costs.

The dossier aims to:

- Define the concept of OER;
- Give an overview of ongoing initiatives in the creation and implementation of OER worldwide;
- Provide an OER economic value proposition with potential for educational transformation;
- Outline some emerging challenges to the creation and implementation of OER; and
- Give an overview of Open Licences.

Based on this dossier and the outcomes of the Capacity Building Workshops, the main stakeholders in the initiative: UNESCO and COL, in cooperation with OER Africa (and others), will devise an interactive work plan to implement initiative activities and present it to the Policy Forum in December 2010.

OER Capacity Building Workshops

COL and UNESCO have hosted 4 Open Educational Resources (OER) Capacity Building Workshops as part of this COL-UNESCO Initiative.

The theme of all the workshops is **'Taking OER beyond the OER Community: Towards Quality in Higher Education'**.

The workshops aim to bring together higher education leadership as well as experts in quality assurance and representatives of quality assurance agencies from both developing and developed countries to:

- understand OER and acknowledge them as a legitimate and promising option for higher education;
- discuss how OER can impact on a higher education institution's development;
- understand how OER impact on quality in higher education institutions; and
- discuss how quality assurance agencies can include OER in their approaches to audits and accreditation.

They also gave practical examples of where OER have been used in the developed and developing world.

Overview of workshops

1. Cape Town, South Africa: 28 April 2010

The first OER workshop targeted Heads of Commonwealth Universities and followed the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) Conference of Executive Heads that took place from 25-27 April 2010. The intent of the workshop was to alert university leaders to the potential of OER to facilitate the expansion of quality higher education and to receive feedback from them on policy issues relating to the use of OER in universities. The workshop brought together some 40 leaders of both traditional and open universities.

2. Windhoek, Namibia: 3 May 2010

The second OER workshop coincided with the 2010 Biennial Members' Forum of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE) that took place on 4-6 May 2010. The workshop brought together 44 experts in quality assurance and representatives from quality assurance agencies from both developing and developed countries.

3. Bamako, Mali: 4 October 2010

The third OER workshop coincided with the Fourth International Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa (ICQAHEA – 2010) and the Capacity Building (Training) Workshops on Institutional Accreditation (ICQAHEA – 2010) organized by UNESCO Bamako. The workshop brought together some 40 higher education stakeholders from mainly francophone countries in Africa.

4. Kochi, India: 23 November 2010

The fourth OER workshop aimed to bring together University leaders and managers in Asia and the Pacific and took place on 23 November 2010 in Kochi, India. This workshop coincided with the 6th Pan Commonwealth Forum that took place from 24-28 November 2010. Some 30 higher education institution representatives and experts, mainly from open universities, took part in the workshop.

The capacity building workshops have identified a number of key issues that require further discussion. These include the following:

1. Advocacy and promotion of OER
2. Capacity building for the OER process
3. Quality assurance mechanisms and standardisation
4. Sustainability, specifically funding and technological issues
5. Issues around "Where does one begin?" and "Which subject area does one start with?"
6. Copyright, licensing and the publishing industry
7. Incentivising faculty members and changing the nature of assessment for tenure
8. Accessibility and ICT skills
9. Funding

Online Discussion Forums

As part of the unfolding process, three online discussion forums were held. These forums, which had objectives similar to the aims of the four workshops, addressed the above issues by broadening the discussion and extending it beyond the workshops themselves.

Rationale for the Forums

Raising awareness, on the one hand, and promoting informed discussion and debate, on the other, can contribute to promoting informed decision making on the part of stakeholders in higher education. There is, however, a greater need to open the debate to a larger body of stakeholders around the globe so as to have the best possible inputs.

The three forums took place from September - November 2010 and were organised in sessions of a week each, each week focusing on a different broad theme.

The themes discussed were:

- Taking OER beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity
- What works, what does not and under what conditions?
- Copyright and the development and re-use of OER.

Policy Forum

The initiative concluded with the Policy Forum that takes place on 1 December 2010 in Paris, France. The theme of the Policy Forum is '**Maximizing the Impact of Public Investment through Open Education Resources**'.

Objectives

The objectives of this Policy Forum are to:

- Establish a common understanding of Open Educational Resources (OER,) and their potential to promote access to quality higher education in developing countries;
- Explore how OER can maximize the impact of investment on education
- Discuss the role of OER in advancing the Millennium Development Goals
- Review progress made in the UNESCO-COL initiative 'Taking OER beyond the OER Community'
- Discuss and propose a way forward for UNESCO and other relevant agencies to harness OER for the greatest benefit of education and explore related issues, in particular Open Licensing and their adoption in intergovernmental organizations' policies

For More Information

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