Policy Forum
UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning

Taking the Open Educational Resources (OER) beyond the OER Community:
Policy and Capacity

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Setting the Scene:
Open Educational Resources and the Open Content Movement

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Introduction

President of the General Conference; Ambassador Killion; Assistant Directors-General; Ms. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić; Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a pleasure to join this introductory session and help to set the scene for our discussion of Open Educational Resources and the Open Content movement.

As you have heard, this project for taking OERs beyond the OER community began when the US Delegation made some funds available for it. The Commonwealth of Learning – COL – has a joint work plan with UNESCO. Knowing of our deep practical involvement in OERs, our UNESCO colleagues asked us to participate. We agreed eagerly and demonstrated our enthusiasm by making the largest financial contribution to the project. COL is serious about OERs.

They are the foundation of the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth, a programme that COL facilitates in which 32 countries work together to create OERs for tertiary institutions. The Chair of the Management Committee, Professor Emma Kruse Vaai of Samoa, will talk about that later.

We are working with five African countries and one Caribbean country to create a complete senior secondary curriculum as OERs in print and eLearning formats.

COL is part of the TESSA project, which has produced a huge array of OERs for classroom-focused teacher education. Available in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili, they are being used by hundreds of thousands of African teachers.

Given COL's commitment to OERs I have participated in all four of the project's workshops: in Cape Town, Windhoek, Bamako, and Kochi. COL is very happy with its investment in the project and we suspect that it must be rare for the US Government to get so much value for $50,000!

I confess that because of other commitments I participated less assiduously in the three online discussions on which Stamenka will report in a moment. Those discussions allowed

the core OER community to comment on the emerging thinking, so today's reports reflect views both from beyond and within the OER community.

I pay tribute to our two colleagues, Zeynep Varoglu for UNESCO and Trudi van Wyk for COL who have assured the success of the project.

My good friend and successor as ADG for Education, Dr. Qian Tang, has summarised the splendid role that UNESCO's has played, since the beginning of this century, in naming and developing the phenomenon of OERs. But I shall argue today that UNESCO's task in promoting the wider concept of OERs is only just beginning and that it has an important and exciting task of leadership ahead. That task is to place OERs in the wider context of a vibrant worldwide open content movement.

That is why I am also delighted to share the stage with the ADG for Communications and Information, Mr. Janis Karklins, whose Sector is doing splendid work implementing the notion of open content within UNESCO itself.

My role today is to situate OERs in the context of the challenges that education and higher education confront today.

Education is sailing through stormy economic seas while above us the development of educational technology is flying ahead at supersonic speed. I shall explore the future of OERs today by discussing a dichotomy that is challenging governments and presenting a paradox that is confusing higher education. Both the dichotomy and the paradox are felt more keenly in some parts of the world than others, but they have policy implications everywhere.

A Dichotomy

Proprietary and Open Content

The dichotomy is between proprietary content and open content.

The media and publishing industries are reeling under the impact of technological changes, mostly related to the Internet, that have exploded their traditional business models. Governments do not like to see these important industries in trouble and some are in the process of reviewing their copyright legislation to create new ground rules about making money from intellectual property in the Internet age.

At the same time, as the reports to this policy forum show, the gathering momentum of the OER movement is challenging institutions and governments to make openly available the intellectual products that they themselves have produced.

We shall hear higher education institutions describe the reputational advantages they gain by making good educational material openly available. Their commitment to OERs has given worldwide credibility to the academic and pedagogical quality of their learning materials, which has indirectly generated more revenue for them than they could have achieved by trying to sell the material.

As more and more institutions make material freely available and search engines make it easier and easier to find, the market for selling similar material must shrink. We can imagine the emergence of a new set of university rankings that rate the quality and usefulness of the OERs from different institutions.

To summarise then, the dichotomy between content that is open and content whose use is restricted, is leading some governments into contradictory policies: encouraging open content on the one hand, but, on the other hand, revising copyright legislation to place further restrictions on the fair use of copyrighted material. Dare I say that the US seems to be playing on both tables?

A Paradox

Open and Distance Learning: Encouragement or Hostility?

Let me now turn to the paradox. This related to the development of Open and Distance Learning, or ODL; a form of education that depends critically on the use of learning materials, whether open or proprietary.

ODL has developed very rapidly over recent decades, pulled by the need to increase access to higher education and pushed by the onward march of technology which is making ODL progressively both less expensive and more effective. OERs are part of this onward march of technology. They make it easier for institutions to launch into ODL while at the same time improving the quality of their offerings.

For example, at Athabasca University, Canada's Open University, academics are not allowed to develop new course material unless they can show that they have done a thorough search for suitable material that already exists. The new AsiaeUniversity goes further and claims that it does not need to develop any course from scratch because, having decided the curriculum outline, it can put together excellent courses, perfectly adapted to its needs, by combining quality content freely available on the Internet.

So ODL is booming. Whereas 20 years ago you could attempt to calculate the number of students involved in ODL worldwide that is now impossible. ODL methods are permeating all universities; not only the open universities that specialise in this approach. All we can say is that tens of millions of students are now involved in distance learning.

But this boom has created a backlash. The paradox is that while some are encouraging the spread of ODL, others are trying to limit or suppress it – often within the same government or the same institution.

A most surprising manifestation of the paradox took place this year in Ethiopia. In August the Government placed an outright ban on ODL claiming that 'distance learning education is unnecessary at this stage in the development of the education sector'. It was surprising for two reasons. First, the World Bank had recommended that Ethiopia should encourage the further development of ODL, which had already played an important role in adding 75,000 students and raising Ethiopia's participation rate in higher education from 2% to 5%. Second, in the 1990s Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and most of his cabinet studied successfully for the UK Open University's MBA. I know because I was then the Vice-Chancellor of the UKOU and I went to Addis Ababa to award them their degrees. Zenawi himself obtained distinctions on every course in the programme.

However, I am pleased to report that the story has a happy ending. After robust negotiations with 64 mostly private institutions the ban was lifted in October, but this episode remains a telling example of the ambivalent attitudes to ODL.

Both noble and ignoble motives are behind the opposition to ODL. The noble reasons for hostility are concerns about quality. ODL operates with more consistent quality than classroom teaching, but that quality can be either consistently better or consistently worse than the average of face-to-face teaching. The ignoble motives derive from fears of loss of institutional income as students choose less costly and more convenient modes of study.

How does this relate to OERs and open content?

Because the quality of ODL depends greatly on the quality of the learning materials used, having an abundance of quality open resources available for adoption and adaptation is sure to raise the quality of open and distance learning. It will also raise the quality of classroom education. We observe that campus students already seek OERs to compensate for poor teaching of key concepts.

But the issue goes wider than that. The backlash against ODL is an attempt to resist an unstoppable trend, which is the increasing availability of educational content of all kinds. Any monopoly that teachers might once have had on knowledge is eroding rapidly. Since good educational material on any topic is only a few mouse clicks away, the role of teachers must change. Their function is no longer to display their own distillation of knowledge at the front of the class, but to advise and assist students as they try to find their way in a world of abundant knowledge.

Conclusion: Proposals for Action

I have described a dichotomy and a paradox, both created by the opening up of content, which expose contradictions in government policy. What should we do to promote open content? What are governments to do? What should UNESCO do?

I start with us. Some work is still needed to simplify all aspect of working with OERS. Allyn Radford, who is here from Australia, is leading an international collaborative effort called the The Open Learning Content Editing Console that will provide OER communities with a simple set of tools to author, edit, remix and "publish" OER content in a structured content format.

It aims to promote the adoption of OER, scale up the content available and make it available to the widest possible variety of use. The project builds on previous work and uses existing, appropriately licensed code to reduce cost, limit risk, improve outcomes and increase a broad sense of communal ownership of the resultant works. The software will be openly licensed. I hope that Mr. Radford will get a chance to talk about the project later today.

What should governments do? One simple step would have far-reaching consequences. Governments should insist that all material of educational value developed by them or with public funds should be made freely available for onward use under open licences. I am not just talking about publications earmarked as learning materials, but all publicly funded reports and statements that advance knowledge. The moral and financial cases for this seem incontestable. Such a policy would catch the spirit of transparency and accountability of our times.

Finally I urge that UNESCO, which also creates quantities of valuable educational material with public funds from Member States, should not only adopt a policy of open licences for its own output, but should initiate and lead a worldwide campaign to open up

all useful content. Such a campaign could be a major component of UNESCO's work in all Programme Sectors. It should start by advocacy for open content with other UN and international agencies and continue by urging its Member States to embrace the open content movement and showing them how to do it.

So, Colleagues, I give you a dichotomy, a paradox and three proposals for action. UNESCO coined the term Open Educational Resources eight years ago. It is now time to expand the concept by leading a movement for open content that will create the global intellectual commons that people have dreamed of throughout history. Today the technology is there. All we need is the will. I hope that UNESCO will show the way.