Open Educational Resources

CILT POSITION PAPER

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Introduction to Open Educational Resources: Overview and definition

This document provides a brief overview of Open Educational Resources (OER) and recommendations for their adoption in higher education institutions set against the current trends internationally. The specific OER affordances are highlighted as well as their associated costs and particular cost reduction possibilities. OER adoptions in various contexts in South Africa are provided to showcase the initial benefits and challenges identified so far.

OER can be briefly defined as: teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and/or re-purposing by others. The most frequently used intellectual property rights mechanisms used to indicate the permissions for the creation and reuse of OER are Creative Commons (CC) licenses. These indicate the original authors’ permissions for reuse (copying), revision (customisation, including translation) and remixing (or combination with other materials), which allow for the legal redistribution and retention of the original or adapted materials.
Current trends internationally

OER have been made available through a range of OER global initiatives, repositories and portals (e.g. MIT’s Open Courseware, Open University’s OpenLearn, Stanford’s iTunes U, Oxford University’s OpenSpires, Washington State’s Open Course Library, OERCommons). As an indication of the expectation of the potential benefit of OER to widen access to quality education and make it more affordable, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) released the Paris OER Declaration at the World OER Congress in June 2012, following earlier calls for opening up education, for example, the Cape Town Open Education Declaration. Funding allocated to OER development in the United States and more recent priorities identified by the European Commission (2012) provides evidence of the OER principles in practice.

Affordances

OER exhibits a number of affordances, the most important of which are the:

- adaptability or customisability of existing educational materials
- flexibility of selection, reuse, revision and/or remixing
- visibility, findability/discoverability and searchability of materials
- collaboration on the development of materials
- productivity of the materials development process
- accountability of the materials developers who will be attributed for the materials
- scrutiny of OER that hopefully encourages the quality of the materials
- shareability or spreadability of materials on a global scale
- scalability of reach to anyone with Internet connectivity and a device that allows for reading, watching, responding and/or adapting materials.

Costs: Licensing, infrastructure, personnel

As OER requires a freely available CC license there are no additional licensing costs for creating OER. In terms of infrastructure it would be ideal if the higher education institution concerned was able to host their academics’ OER on an institutional repository (a central location in which data is stored and managed, e.g. OpenUCT) or even within the institutional Learning Management System (LMS), as long as the permission is set to ‘public’. If the institution does not have its own repository or suitable LMS, there are global open repositories to which academics can contribute their OER (e.g. MERLOT, OpenStax CNX). Whether academics contribute to their own
institutional repository or to an open repository, a Google search is likely to find the resource relatively easily.

The platforms for curating and distributing OER include regionally based repositories (e.g. OER Africa), institutionally based repositories (e.g. DSpace at OpenUCT), institutional websites (e.g. Physics Department website at the University of Cape Town), open repositories (e.g. OpenStax) and/or cloud-based services (e.g. You Tube, SlideShare). Many of these repositories, websites or cloud-based platforms are indexed and aggregated by OER portals (e.g. MERLOT) providing a mechanism for publicising OER.

In terms of personnel, someone who is familiar with the CC licenses should advise academics on the appropriate choice of license for specific materials, as these can differ according to topic (e.g. medical procedure) or to the type of material (e.g. music, video). This person does not need to be a qualified lawyer, but rather someone who has an interest in intellectual property rights and a good understanding of the Guidelines for CC in South Africa and who is able to develop relationships with the CC Regional Coordinator for Africa, the CC Legal Lead and Public Lead in South Africa, as well as with the department at the particular higher education tasked with contracting and checking intellectual property. The person should have knowledge of metadata standards (tagging to increase discoverability) and strategies to deal with embedded copyright (copyrighted images included in teaching materials). This support is variable and often depends on the importance placed on OER contribution by top management at an institution. Sharing experiences of strategies that are successful, as well as strategies that are unsuccessful will help to drive the “open movement” in South Africa forward.

Developing OER does not need specific software, although it is good practice to save the resources so that they are readable and editable, if the licence specifies that derivatives are allowed in open software (e.g. OpenOffice).

**Application in different contexts in SA**

In South Africa there are a growing number of OER initiatives, repositories and/or portals, such as OpenUCT, UNISA Open, African Veterinary Information Portal (AfriVIP). A number of higher education institutions have OER policies and/or strategies which are often linked to open access policies (e.g. the University of Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand, UNISA).

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1 Metadata refers to a set of data that describes and gives information about other data.
For example, at the University of Cape Town (UCT), lecturers can produce their own OER individually or work with colleagues in the institution to design, create and curate (store and make visible through accurate metadata) OER on the institutional website, open repositories and/or cloud-based services. UCT academics hold copyright of their teaching materials but this is not the case at other institutions in South Africa. At UNISA a set of guidelines and procedures have been put in place to manage academics’ contribution of their teaching materials as OER.

**Recommendations**

Although most of the research on the adoption and impact of OER has to date been conducted in countries in the Global North, initial indications of the benefits of OER suggest that:

- **Higher education institutions** should consider OER as a way to reduce student out-of-pocket costs, improve the quality of curriculum development, publicise their institutional intellectual capacity to a global audience and make research more accessible to the general public.

- **Academics** should consider disseminating their original teaching materials to a worldwide audience, in order to increase visibility of their work while still receiving attribution. Academics should also consider OER as a way to customise teaching materials to suit their specific curriculum and the context, including legal translations and the incorporation of context-specific examples or illustrations.

- **Scholars, career guidance teachers and parents** should consider using OER as a way of understanding higher education subjects and career opportunities to optimise the subject choice selection for the first year of tertiary studies.

- **Students** should consider using OER as a way to reduce their out-of-pocket costs for expensive textbooks and to download and legally retain digital copies or low-cost hardcopies of educational materials.

- **Student funding agencies** should consider OER as a way to reduce the funding distributed for expensive textbooks.
• Graduates should consider OER as a way of keeping up to date with the latest developments in the field to improve the currency of their knowledge and skills thereby enhancing their employability.

• Commercial enterprises, government departments and non-governmental organisations should consider the development of OER in partnership with higher education institutions as a way of providing good quality in-service training that can be used in higher education programmes as well.

Resources for further reading


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Citation


This work has been slightly adapted from the original which originally appeared in the HESA series: Kilfoil, W.R. (Ed.). (2015). Moving beyond the hype: a contextualized view of learning with technology in higher education. Higher Education South Africa - HESA licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY)creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0

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