

# What Openness Means to the Commonwealth of Learning



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Professor Asha Kanwar  
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning

Greetings to you on the occasion of the International Open Education Week 2016. It is that time of year for us to collectively reflect on our various efforts to promote Open Education in a very uneven world. At the Commonwealth of Learning, we believe that learning is our common wealth and for that reason it must be open and shared. Commonwealth Heads of the Government established COL in 1987 to create and widen access to opportunities for learning, by promoting co-operation between educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth, making use of the potential offered by distance education and technologies.

COL's mandate is to increase access to quality education and to promote a collaborative culture among Commonwealth institutions. COL created free content on teacher training well before the term OER was coined. COL was the first intergovernmental organisation to adopt an OER policy in 2011. And COL played a leadership role in organising the World OER Congress, with UNESCO and the Hewlett Foundation in 2012. We strongly believe that the Open Education Resources (OER) movement is an important milestone in democratising education in the 21st century.

What does 'open education' mean to us? Let me highlight four key aspects.

1. First, openness is a way of increasing access to learning opportunities. Promoting openness means increasing access to education for those who need it the most: such as the underprivileged and the marginalized, and we have been supporting this through the Open University systems.
2. Second, openness is about flexibility and freedom. The flexibility in entry requirements and the duration of study, empowers learners to achieve their objectives in their own time while not compromising the quality of their education. This freedom complements the flexibility by breaking down the confines of time, geography and medium whereby learners have the opportunity to study according to their circumstance. COL promotes openness in formal, non-formal and informal learning.
3. Third, openness should lead to open courses and curricula. A system cannot be truly open if the learners are strapped for choice in terms of what to study. An open system allows learners to mix and match courses to create their own personalised learning experience. . Openness is about avoiding duplication and the OER movement provides the opportunity to reuse and adapt materials without having to reinvent the wheel. COL materials are published under open licences and an increasing number of our partners are doing likewise.
4. Finally, we at COL believe that openness is about continuous improvement. The true claim to "openness" can only be justified when an institution is constantly looking for ways to improve its policies and practices to provide the best service to its students.

In short, we believe that openness is all about creating a lifelong learning society which is the key to sustainable development. No one can do this alone. Let us join hands to achieve this worthy goal.