

OER for Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education: From Commitment to Action



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I have prepared this presentation on ‘OER for Inclusive quality education: from commitment to action’ with my colleagues Dr Sanjaya Mishra and Dr Ishan Abeywardena.

Since we are here in Brazil let us begin by remembering a thinker whose work has made such an impact on how we think about transformative education today. Paulo Friere said that ‘Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.’ These thoughts resonate vibrantly with the OER movement, which is a movement of those who engage in knowledge creation, collaboration and sharing and believe in questioning conventional knowledge. In an ideal OER world, learners are not simply consumers of knowledge, but are also producers of knowledge; where the creation of knowledge is situated in the real world to solve real problems and knowledge is meant be shared freely with others.

I’ll first begin by giving you some background information, then share some of the early findings of the two surveys, followed by a brief account of four regional consultations in Asia, Europe, MENA and Africa and look at the way forward to the 2nd World OER Congress and beyond.

Five years ago COL and UNESCO conducted six regional consultations as part of the joint project on ‘Fostering Governmental Support for OER Internationally’ in which governments were invited to provide information about their policies in relation to OER. The results of that exercise were captured in this publication.

This report on the results of the survey on governments’ OER policies provided the background document of the World OER Congress organised jointly in Paris in June 2012. The report concluded that ‘there appears to be great interest in OER across all regions of the world with several countries embarking on notable OER initiatives’. Sir John Daniel, the former President & CEO of COL led the process.

The Congress resulted in the Paris OER Declaration which makes ten recommendations. Three of them related to fostering awareness about OER, promoting the development of OER in different languages and cultural contexts and using open licenses on content developed with public funds.

Now five years later, it is time to organise the 2nd World OER Congress to take stock of the progress made in the last five years and to make the critical shift from commitment to action.

The road to Ljubljana is passing through six regions of the globe. The first consultation for Asia was held in Kuala Lumpur in early December. After this the meeting for Europe was held in Malta, followed by one in Doha for the MENA region. The consultation for Africa was then held in Mauritius. The meeting for Latin America and the Caribbean is the fifth in the series and is being co-hosted with the University of Campinas. The sixth and final regional consultation for the Pacific will be organised in Auckland at the end of May. The objective is to include as many governments and stakeholders as possible to enlarge the existing circle.

A background paper for the regional consultations was developed by the Task Force and approved by the project Steering Committee with members from UNESCO, Slovenia, Hewlett and COL.

Here is the Task Team in Vancouver—Zeynep Varoglu and Joe Hironaka from UNESCO, Gasper Hrastelj and Davor Orlic from Slovenia, Cable Green from Creative Commons and David Porter of BCIT. This meeting was chaired by Dr Balaji, our Director of IT and KM.

The Steering Committee meeting approved the document. You can see the members in action. Members are Dr Indrajit Banerjee and David Atchoarena of UNESCO and Gasper Hrastelj and Davor Orlic who stood in for Mitja from Slovenia and our VP Dr Bala. Colleagues from Hewlett joined the meeting as Observers.

As you know we have very strong partners—UNESCO, Slovenia and Hewlett—the whole OER movement is based on the spirit of collaboration and complementarity so that there is no duplication of effort.

In 2012, our main objective was to foster governmental support for OER internationally. Today we want to involve many more stakeholders so that OER can be mainstreamed and implemented at all levels. Five years ago, the focus was on promoting policy development but as we know, that is not enough--we need strategies for implementing policies. At that time, the primary objective was to seek governmental commitment. This time we need to move beyond commitment to concrete action so that Member States can accelerate progress towards achieving their education and training goals.

The objectives of these consultations are one, to raise awareness about the importance of OER in achieving SDG4; two, identify strategies to address the barriers that prevent people from mainstreaming OER and three, identify concrete actions that different stakeholders need to undertake to optimise the use of OER. These will then be considered at the 2nd World OER Congress.

The Task Team developed questionnaire surveys to gauge the status of OER today

There was a government survey sent out to member states by COL and UNESCO. The other was a stakeholder survey that was placed online and publicised through social media.

We received 70 responses from member states by the 22nd March and these will continue to be accepted until the 15th June. As you can see Africa has responded well but we need to be more proactive in the MENA and the Latin American and Caribbean regions.

As you know this is a work-in-progress and what we see today is only the tip of the iceberg. Early findings suggest that 41 of the 70 respondents believe that there are OER policies in their countries. The majority believed that there is OER policy at the national level—29 as compared to the list of 25 national and provincial policies listed in the Creative Commons website. This was followed by institutional and then project-related OER policies.

About 57% felt that they were considering policy development at the national level. Clearly all the respondents do not share the same understanding of what an OER policy is and this is an area where more needs to be done.

In response to the question on the OER activities, the majority stated that these were project-based, followed by institutional and governmental initiatives.

Officials believed that OER can provide more flexible learning opportunities for enhanced access. Improvement in learning outcomes and reduction in costs were seen as two other key benefits.

Barriers to the use of OER included: insufficient quality content, lack of capacity, and lack of appropriate policies. Officials also believed that we needed more credible business models for convincing ministers and publishers. Language continues to be a barrier to reaching the unreached.

We received 600 responses from stakeholders at 22nd March. The maximum responses received were from Asia and the Pacific followed by Europe and North America. 57% male and 43% female.

What do we know about the respondents? 46% had over 20 years' experience and the majority of respondents came from teaching, administration and management and research. How can we enlarge and diversify the circle to include younger professionals?

Where did the majority of stakeholders come from? 62% were from colleges and universities—how do we involve the other sectors of education, especially teachers in remote rural schools? As per a study by Harvard and the Asian Development Bank in 2010, only 6.7% of the world's population had a college degree. What about the rest of the world's population? (Jeanne H Ballantine and Floyd M Hammack, *Sociology of Education : A Unique Perspectives for Understanding Schools* (p.15) in Jeanne H Ballantine, Joan Z Spade (eds.) *Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2015). The 2012 survey report had found that 'in Europe and North America, most activities appear to centre around the upper secondary (ISCED 3) level, although this may be a reflection of where government support lies...' (p.8). What is the situation in this region? If OER are to contribute to SDG4, then they must be mainstreamed along the entire spectrum of education—primary, secondary and tertiary as well as non-formal learning. 83% of the respondents were aware of OER. Are we only surveying the converted?

That said, it was surprising to note that there was very scant awareness of some of the well-known international and national repositories. MIT OCW was the best known and used.

The stakeholders believed that using OER would reduce costs and improve the quality of learning. OER were also seen as providing teachers with quality resources that would save their time.

The barriers identified by stakeholders were lack of policy, lack of capacity and changing business models.

Both groups—governments and stakeholders agree that OER can lower costs, and increase access to quality materials. Similarly, both groups were concerned about lack of policies, insufficient capacity and lack of access to quality OER. COL had been recently requested to help Mozambique with the development of OER in five subjects for secondary schools. Since we had developed OER for secondary schools in 20 subjects in Africa and the Caribbean, we looked into the possibility of adopting and adapting content in physics, chemistry and biology and discovered that only 20% could be used and the rest would have been developed to address local requirements.

Where did the governments and stakeholders differ in their priorities? Governments stressed the need for more attention to indigenous languages and culture-specific content. Stakeholders focused on the opportunity for saving time for teachers and that OER enabled continuous quality improvement.

As you know, we've scheduled six regional consultations.

The first of these was held in Kuala Lumpur—48 participants from 20 Asian countries participated in this meeting, including Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Mongolia.

Some of the key practices that emerged were that Bangladesh supplies free textbooks to its school students and are in the process of developing a national OER policy, with COL support. A major project of the Indian government—the National Mission on Education through ICTs uses the CC licence to open up its content. Malaysia has committed to opencourseware in its elearning policy. There are OER repositories in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, and Vietnam.

The Asian group raised concerns about poor connectivity, lack of capacity and unavailability of OER in local languages. They also flagged the need for more attention to developing OER for people with disabilities. While there are many emerging initiatives in Asia, there was no OER policy at the national level.

In Europe 72 participants from 24 countries engaged in the consultation.

While in Asia, most OER initiatives were government-led, in Europe, these were either institutional or project-based. OER were seen as part of a wider ecosystem of opening up education. Advanced technologies were available so that multi-lingual searches were possible. There were many OER initiatives but these were mostly operating in isolation. The need for complementarity and collaboration was stressed.

Participants believed that there was a greater need for political will and national level policies to support the mainstreaming of OER. Teachers were identified as critical to this process. There was a discussion about involving publishers and rethinking business models. The need for quality assurance was also stressed.

In the Middle East and North Africa region, 37 participants from 13 countries deliberated on the status and strategy for OER.

The MENA region is bound by a common language Arabic but has a very uneven development of OER. There were national OER policies in Oman and Bahrain; institutional OER initiatives in Sudan, Morocco, Jordan. But other participants from Djibouti and Mauritania were new to the field. There are initiatives to translate existing OER into Arabic but the point would be to lead in producing fresh content in Arabic.

The main needs identified were more advocacy, capacity-building, national and institutional level policy development and closer regional cooperation.

Forty six participants from 24 African countries shared their knowledge and expertise at the regional meeting in Mauritius.

South Africa and Seychelles have national policies while the open universities of Nigeria and Tanzania have institutional policies. Siyavula, a prominent private initiative in South Africa has created a new business model under which the content is free but the services require payment.

Lack of electricity and connectivity were identified as a major barrier. There was a great deal of discussion on the lack of OER in local languages and suitability for specific cultural contexts. The African representatives wanted more policies at the national and institutional levels.

Based on the key issues, participants in all the regional meetings identified nine types of stakeholders: governments, educational institutions, teachers, learners, librarians, QA agencies, publishers, civil society, associations. They then suggested the actions that each group needs to take so that OER can contribute to inclusive and equitable quality education. We will undertake a similar exercise here.

So what then are the next steps leading to the 2nd World OER Congress and beyond?

COL organised its triennial Pan Commonwealth Forum in Kuala Lumpur last November. One important outcome of this was the KL Declaration adopted by the over 500 policy makers and practitioners present. One recommendation urges stakeholders to ‘mainstream the use of OER by developing strategies and policies at governmental and institutional levels to enhance quality while potentially reducing the cost of education’.

We have one final regional consultation scheduled for the Pacific in Auckland.

Two documents will be prepared for the 2nd World OER Congress. There will be a report on the Surveys of both Governments and Stakeholders which will present an analysis for each region and a global picture on the status of OER. There will also be a synthesis report of the agenda for action recommended for the different categories of stakeholders in the six regions.

As we have seen there has been considerable progress since 2012. There are more OER policies especially at the institutional level. More people are aware of the benefits of OER and the circle of champions and advocates has certainly grown. Even though there is low awareness, there are many more repositories today than there were five years ago. Another difference between 2012 and now is that many more people have access to the internet through their mobile devices and can contribute to global knowledge flows. But OER have not been adopted at the speed and scale envisaged in 2012. What can be the reasons? What can we do accelerate the process?

There is a huge opportunity for both COL and UNESCO to help Member States to take full advantage of the OER movement to effect the paradigm shift required to achieve the targets of SDG 4. We can continue with evidence-based advocacy, capacity building and targeted interventions for reaching the unreached. We will continue to strengthen collaborations.

Both the reports will suggest ways in which we can contribute to promoting the use of OER for inclusive and equitable quality education and how we can collectively move from commitment to action. Over a hundred years ago, Indian poet and Nobel laureate, who is well-known in Latin America having visited poet Victoria Ocampo in Argentina, articulated his vision of the future and wrote of a world—‘where the mind is without fear and the head is held high, Where knowledge is free’. Can OER help us get closer to such a world?

Finally, let me draw your attention to the website for the Regional Consultations, where you can find further details and regular updates.