

Opening Remarks

19 February 2018



Roundtable on Open Textbooks for the Commonwealth
Integrated Partners Forum
20th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers
Nadi, Fiji

Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Honourable Ministers, Colleagues, Friends

It is an honour for the Commonwealth of Learning to organize this round table on ‘Open Textbooks for the Commonwealth’. COL has been engaged in developing open content even before the term Open Educational Resources or OER was first coined in 2002. Ever since, COL has played a leadership role globally in promoting OER. More recently we supported the second World OER Congress held in Slovenia last September at which some of you including the Hon Minister David Collins were present.

COL organized six regional consultations around the world in the lead up to this Congress. Two common themes emerged—one: that there was a very uneven development of OER within each region. Some countries have already developed policies and are implementing them while others were still in the initial introductory stages. The second commonality was that in spite of major efforts over the last five years, the need for advocacy and capacity was still a key priority.

As we know, we live in a very unequal world. A poor widow in Kenya told my colleague that the worst feeling a mother could get next to hunger was the inability to buy a textbook when her child needed it for her school. In Cameroon in 2012 a dozen students in Grade 2 were sharing one textbook for reading, and fourteen students had access to only one math textbook. Using OER can certainly reduce costs and put a textbook in the hands of each child. A recent COL study on OER use in Antigua and Barbuda indicated that each student saved 64 ECD per semester per course when OER textbooks were used. Further, use of OER also improved student performance by 5.5%.

OER emerged as a technology driven solution to address issues of costs and quality. But OER are also based on values that will help us advance the theme of this CCEM ‘Sustainability and resilience: can education deliver?’ For COL, the key values to building sustainable and resilient societies are: equity and inclusion, collaboration and respect for diversity.

First, equity and inclusion: Involving people at the grassroots is key to the sustainability of OER as a people’s movement. Bee-keepers in the remote forests of Uganda have learnt honey-gathering techniques using OER developed by experts who communicate with them through their basic mobile phones. Several countries, are initiating specific projects to make OER accessible for people with disabilities, but much more needs to be done.

Second, collaboration: More speed and scale in OER development can be achieved by working together. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth have developed several OER courses based on the needs of the small states. These are now being offered by 23 institutions in 14 Commonwealth countries, a shining example of Commonwealth cooperation.

Third, respect for diversity: Linguistic and cultural diversity continue to be a challenge within the OER movement, which is predominantly in English. As a European report points out “Poor people must be able to express and communicate locally relevant knowledge in local languages if they are to shape the decisions that affect their livelihoods. Local content development is closely tied to human development, and the ultimate goal of this is the empowerment of local communities.” (ENRD, 2010, p.3). Farmers in India share their knowledge and expertise freely on a website developed by them in their own language Tamil—and what’s more, they release the content using a Creative Commons licence. As more stakeholders share knowledge in the vernacular, the global knowledge base is enriched and enlarged.

The Commonwealth of Learning believes that knowledge is our common wealth and that OER have tremendous potential for promoting equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all leading to more resilient and sustainable societies. Over a century ago, the Bengali poet and first Indian Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, articulated his vision of the future when he spoke 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? Given that we have much of the Commonwealth represented here today, we’re off to a great start.