

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Adoption and Impact of OER in the Global South**

C. HODGKINSON-WILLIAMS and P. B. ARINTO (EDS.)

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*Adoption and Impact of OER in the Global South* takes the reader around the world to learn about developments in open educational resources (OER) from a range of emerging world perspectives. Contributions emanate from South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, offering the reader coverage of more than half the world's population.

To readers of this review, the promise of OER is well understood, yet not fully realized. Cost benefits, ease of contextualization, professional empowerment and efficiencies gained for users and creators of OER, posit tremendous potential for use in education systems in the Global South beset by resource constraints. Yet, herein lies an important conundrum. How do you create a vision for OER use that relies on capacity building, investment, and expertise in contexts where resources are scarce, infrastructure is poor, and technological access is uneven?

The book's main thesis is that wider adoption of OER will lower inequalities and improve access to education. This is framed in the broader context of adopting Open Educational Practices (OEP) (p. 31), which expands on Wiley's 5Rs of Re-use, Re-purpose, Re-mix, Re-distribute and Re-work, as it relates to OER (2014), to include the adoption of open pedagogies, open mechanisms of collaboration, and open technologies. The proposition of OER or OEP adoption, however, encounters challenges in each chapter, with authors drawing one or several of the following conclusions: use of OER is sporadic and superficial (limited largely to re-use), policy on OER lacks teeth, infrastructure is inadequate (i.e., bandwidth, electricity), teachers lack training (e.g., copyright, sourcing OER), English OER dominates, translation is laborious, and initiatives are driven by the Global North.

Challenges notwithstanding, the editors, and the compilation of authors deserve tremendous credit for pulling this edited volume together. At 592 pages and 16 chapters, readers will find a diverse and detailed collection of initiatives enabled by dedicated researchers and motivated research participants.

Twelve of the chapters are oriented as case studies, with each including impressive reference lists from scholars who have co-published across cultural and national contexts, a point that is noteworthy, given that a cornerstone of OER is to create, share and re-distribute knowledge for public consumption. Absent is coverage of other countries of the Global South located in Pacific Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Caribbean regions. One can infer, however, that some of the



findings and challenges found in the current volume will resonate with these other regions of the Global South.

The section on South America covers Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia and examines OER policy, teacher education and learner outcomes. Chapter 4 presents the results of a survey on OER policies in the aforementioned three countries. It provides an overview of major OER initiatives in the region, including SciELO (Scientific Electronic Company Online), Redalyc (Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina y el Caribe, España y Portugal), and la Referencia (Federate Network of Institutional Repositories of Scientific Publications)<sup>i</sup> (p.127), all of which focus on using open access journal articles. There is also Columbia's REDA (the National Strategy for Digital Open Educational Resources or Recursos Educativos Digitales Abiertos<sup>ii</sup>), aimed at creating a national OER system that will be comprised of courses and other learning materials (p. 128). Although these resources have been initiated, the authors identify the need for greater adoption of OER, cost-benefit analyses, and capacity building among educational institutions. Chapter 5 presents findings from interviews of nearly 50 teacher participants who worked in teams to create OER for use in the Colombian schools where they were employed. A major finding was that the merits of OER as a pedagogical tool were realized more from the production of resources, particularly in collaboration with other teachers, rather than from using OER as a free resource only. Chapter 6 examines students' performance in a mathematics course using an experimental method in Chile. Using the basic question, "What is the effect of OER use on first-year HE students' mathematics course performance?" the authors tested a control group that used conventional materials against a test group using OER. The findings were inconclusive, and the sample was small at 65 students. The research design, however, is laudable. If statistically significant findings on positive learning outcomes from using OER can be demonstrated, officials and policymakers will have justifiable reason to take action.

The section on Sub-Saharan Africa covers South Africa, Mauritius, Tanzania, and Uganda. The topics examined on OER are cost-benefits, teacher engagement, institutional adoption, and curricular adaptation in MOOCs. Chapter 7 is on cost-effectiveness, guided by the central question, "Do OER represent a cost reduction with regards to educational resource acquisition in basic education in South Africa?" (p. 233). Using secondary resources, the findings reveal that, "insufficient information is currently available to track any OER spend or to ascertain any possible costs savings that the adoption of OER might bring," (p. 245). The authors conclude that more work is needed, emphasizing the need to overcome "data-shortage challenges." (p. 246). Chapter 8 presents findings from a study involving 36 teachers (20 male; 16 female) who were interviewed to ascertain their perceptions of using OER in Uganda, Tanzania and Mauritius. While there were a few champions of OER, the authors concluded that most teachers lacked confidence to fully engage with using OER (p. 278). Chapter 9 aims to uncover cultural barriers that may persist in the adoption of OER among faculty at three universities in South Africa (p. 291). The authors conclude that in the participating institutions, "we found culture to be an agnostic element in OER activity" (p. 333) with OER strategies not being fully "operational." (p. 331). Given the variance in lecturers' interests, abilities, and resources, the authors argue that institutional guidance is imperative for larger adoption of OER, framed around adequate support, planning, and sustainability. In Chapter 10 the authors look at the design of four MOOCs at the University of Cape Town probing the designers' perceptions on three dimensions of open educational practices: legal, pedagogical and financial. The legal dimension considers how well designers of

MOOCs understand copyright. The pedagogical dimension raises issues of diversity and how well designers consider differentiating pedagogical approaches to cater to large learning populations. The financial dimension of OEP addresses cost-recovery. From interviews with the designers, the authors found that openness or use of OER was not a major consideration in the design of a MOOC. Of the three OEP dimensions, it was found that educators exuded the most enthusiasm for open pedagogies with a focus on learner-centred approaches.

The section on South and Southeast Asia covers Mongolia, India, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. It should be noted that Mongolia belongs to the East Asian region, but as the lone representative from the region in the book, it has been located in the section on South and Southeast Asia. This final collection of case studies examines national challenges to using OER, teacher engagement, pedagogical implications, and collaborative adoption of OER. Chapter 11 focuses on the strategies and practices in using OER among teachers working in higher education institutions, government and non-government organizations in Mongolia. The chapter is distinctive in the book in that it highlights how broader socio-cultural and political realities shape the uptake of OER practices in a particular country. If donor funding diminishes, for example, there is little prospect for growth of OER, let alone sustainability. Part of the problem in Mongolia, the authors acknowledge, is that “a culture of OER engagement has not yet emerged,” (p. 417), emphasized with the point that the free use of OER, “may not mean much when educators are already obtaining and using desired materials for free” (p. 419). One of the more salient findings was from respondents noting that, “they would be far more responsive to national and/or institutional-level incentive policies that reward and recognize engagement with OER.” (p. 418). The authors conclude that large-scale research is needed, rather than solely conducting research assessing a small collection of educators’ experiences using OER, which reoccurs in this edited volume.

Chapter 12 focuses on teacher attitudes and motivations in their engagement with OER relative to teaching and learning, quality issues and barriers. The study employs a mixed methods design and uses educator participants located in four distinct institutional settings (i.e., large private, open, dual-mode, and semi-urban). The main finding is that educators had a stronger affinity towards using OER rather than creating OER (p. 437). The authors posit that this stems from inexperience, and an institutional culture of indifference toward using OER (pp. 452-453). Chapter 13 focuses on the impact of OER on pedagogy among student-teachers in Sri Lanka. Using a design-based research approach, the authors ran surveys and interviews with 230 participants using an iterative approach to understand and manipulate OER. Findings revealed that 10 percent of participants were aware of OER at the pre-intervention stage of the research. At the latter stages of the intervention, however, participants were creating dozens of OER and organizing workshops. While the authors conclude that “careful design of OER integration is crucial for its adoption by teachers,” (p. 491), the larger issue is sustainability. The number of active participants tapered off as the intervention progressed, demonstrating the challenges of using OER, particularly when the motivations are exclusively intrinsic. It would be of value to gauge the research participants’ ongoing use of OER to ascertain the long-term impact of the initiative.

In summary, the book offers a comprehensive guide to research implementations of OER from a range of perspectives in the Global South. The predominant research method is qualitative, with several chapters using mixed or quantitative methods. Where quantitative methods are used, only a few

chapters offer inferential statistics but the sample sizes are too small to make generalizations. Herein lies the book's main shortcoming, and, in fact, a larger shortcoming among proponents of OER and the research they pursue - generalizability. The book presents no definitive studies on widespread adoption. Does OER improve learning outcomes? Is OER cost-effective? Have sound national and institutional policies been crafted that have demonstrated significant uptake by institutions of learning? While OER has the promise to be cost-effective, adaptable, contextualizable, open, and so on (see BC Campus, for example: <https://open.bccampus.ca/>), evidence is lacking that OER has scalable impact. How many more small sample studies on teacher attitudes towards OER, particularly when such participants have previously had limited exposure, are needed? A fair point is that the studies in this volume have merit in the sense that they demonstrate an interest in OER while building support locally from which policymakers can draw on empirical evidence to expand, or test, on a larger scale. This raises another cross-cutting theme in the book, which is a lack of institutional or national support, despite the existence of policies or guidelines. Without a comprehensive approach organized around policy, resources, capacity building, sustainability and goal setting, much of the future work will lack tangible outcomes and impact.

The editors emphasize that OER is a mechanism to achieve social inclusion but need to consider how this will be achieved through widespread adoption, with the potential to have far reaching outcomes and impact. Their recommendations are summarized under the headings of Advocacy, Policy, Practice, and Future Research. The editors conclude by stating, "it is in the realms of individual and community participation and empowerment that future OER interventions hold their greatest promise and will yield their largest gains." (p. 589). In fact, it is more probable that the promise and gains of future OER interventions lie with policymakers supported with financial backing, sound planning, and a vision for sustainability.

#### **Reviewed by:**

**Kirk Perris**, Adviser, Education, Commonwealth of Learning. Email: [kperris@col.org](mailto:kperris@col.org)

#### **Reference**

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<sup>i</sup> <http://scielo.org>; [www.redalyc.org](http://www.redalyc.org); <http://www.lareferencia.info/joomla/en/>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.unitecnologica.edu.co/newsletter/educacionadistancia/2014/boletin004/noti\\_apliaciones/001-reda/index.html](http://www.unitecnologica.edu.co/newsletter/educacionadistancia/2014/boletin004/noti_apliaciones/001-reda/index.html)