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Less of a choice but a necessity: A Case for OER Institutional and National Policies

Issue at-hand

In a context where textbooks and printed teaching and learning materials are still scarce and cost a fortune when they are available due to the fact that they are procured using hard currencies such as the dollar and the euro, the advent of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and their accessibility via Internet could be a bonanza for Africa, both economically and educationally.

The Concept of OERs is defined as *“any educational resources (including curriculum maps, course materials, textbooks, streaming videos, multimedia applications, podcasts, and any other materials that have been designed for use in teaching and learning) that are openly available for use by educators and students, without an accompanying need to pay royalties or license fees”* (Butcher, 2011).

The attractiveness of OERs is primarily economic as the prohibitive cost of teaching and learning materials has held Africa back in the provision of quality education at all levels. In tertiary institutions, for instance, libraries are poorly stocked with relevant material both students and their instructors can use to make learning effective and meaningful. In a few countries, there are universities without proper libraries (e.g. Mali) where virtual libraries are the only hope for bridging the textbooks divide between less endowed universities and their rich counterparts in the developed world. Therefore, what is at stake here is the opportunity for expanding opportunities for quality education at all levels in Africa.

However, and with very few exceptions, initiatives to develop institutional, national, sub-regional and regional OER policies are still very limited in number and scope. For example, at the national level only a few countries like Kenya have national and institutional policies in

place (UNESCO, 2015). The institutional policies, however, are mainly limited to higher education institutions even if Kenya has sub-sector specific and thematic OER programs and strategies in secondary education, agriculture, and non-formal education (NFE) driven by international and regional actors. Among the initiatives, the AVU teacher education OER modules that cover 12 universities in Africa and which are aimed at training math and science teachers can be cited as among the most prominent. Secondly, the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) initiative which seeks to improve the quality of classroom practice and access to teacher education resources across Sub-Saharan Africa has made impact on OERs development at the basic and secondary education levels. It operates a network of school teachers and teacher educators across the continent and provide them access to a wide range of OERs. Lastly, there is the OER Africa initiative established by the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide) that sets out to support higher education institutions across Africa in the development and use of Open OER to enhance teaching and learning.

However, these initiatives are still not enough; other strategies are needed to expand the institutionalization of OERs in education in Africa as the way out of the paucity of teaching and learning materials that mars education quality.

Policy Recommendation: Promoting Experience Sharing Workshops as a viable research strategy for exploring existing potential, understanding opportunities and challenges, and identifying resources for promoting OERs in Africa

In a paper presented at the 2015 AVU International Conference entitled “*Empirical-based Analytical Insights on the Position, Challenges and Potential for promoting OER in ODEL Institutions in Africa*”, Muganda (2015) makes the case that experience sharing workshops are a viable research strategy for exploring existing potential, understanding opportunities and challenges, and identifying resources for promoting OERs in Africa. This assertion is based on research findings from a workshop on OER experience-sharing at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). The workshop was moderated by *OER Africa* and brought together twenty-eight (28) academic staff drawn from academic units of the OUT. Twenty-three (23) of whom had experiences with OER projects.

Through a questionnaire, focus group discussions, presentations, panel and parallel discussions, the perceptions and knowledge of participants of OERs were teased out on the following issues: (i) OER development and production, (iii) OER integration and use, and (iv) OER hosting and dissemination.

On the issue of OER Institutional Practice, the results of an exercise carried out in 2014 within OUT revealed the following:

1. That some OUT Staff were not aware of the existence of OERs;
2. There is limited capacity (Knowledge, skills, competences) in development, integration and use of OERs;
3. That there is no comprehensive policy which is directly addressing OER issues;
4. That OUT staff are willing to develop, integrate and use OERs

With regard to the OERs creation, 10 participants had experiences in development and production of OERs from the planning up to production stage. Based on their experience, they indicated that skills and competencies in ICT, planning, collaboration, institutional support, funding, capacity building, workshop/ meeting, meeting with stakeholders are key issues to address for an OER institutional policy. One of the key prerequisite is basic ICT skills and competences for participation in OER development. Institutional support was required to provide time, budgetary requirements and recognition of the staff's involvement in OER materials production. Capacity building should be part of a policy of continuous [professional development in writing OERs.

Another important aspect to note in the development of OERS is quality assurance. To ensure good quality of produced OERs, internationally recognized standards and norms should be considered and adhered to. This can be done through internal and external reviews and editing. Collaboration at international, national and institutional levels is necessary as OER development is a collaborative activity.

With regard to OER integration and use, issues of capacity building in terms of synchronizing the curriculum were raised. Expertise in how to adopt and adapt what is required from produced OERs into the existing or new program is needed. It was also revealed that OERs produced in Africa such as the AVU modules are used more in Asia and Brazil than Africa. This is partly due to known barriers such as *limited bandwidth, internet connectivity, electricity, awareness and information literacy / digital fluency as well as the limited number of possible users in Africa.*

With regard to OER hosting and dissemination, the study reveals that the OERs are readily available on different websites and portals. The issues of licensing, plagiarism, information literacy training for students and staff are important to consider and address.

Recommendations

Even though the recommendations made by Muganda are specific to OUT, they are relevant to other institutions and governments in Africa. For instance, OUT is requested to:

- *develop an OER policy to guide procedures and OER practices and*
- *organize on a regular basis awareness and sensitization workshops on OERs production and use of OERs*
- *build the capacity to its staff members on production, integration and use of OERs.*
- *encourage lecturers and instructors to incorporate and recommend OERs to their students.*
- *collaborate with other institutions within and outside Tanzania [Africa] in production, integration and use of OERs.*
- *publish, publicize and market OERs*

Governments should however focus on national infrastructure such as Internet bandwidth expansion and regulatory frameworks conducive for producing and accessing OERs are available.

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