



African Virtual University
Université Virtuelle Africaine
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AVU POLICY BRIEF

AN OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICAN VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Research & Practice in Open, Distance & eLearning

Policy Brief Number 2016-44

Make what is hers mine: Cultural Appropriation and contextualization of OERs

Issue at hand

It is well recognized that African educational institutions are facing enormous pressure to increase access to education and training. The cost of accommodating an increasing number of students in educational institutions is also high. Affordable and quality solutions are what are required. While many governments have recently agreed to work towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially the Education-oriented SDG4, the cost of supporting access to quality learning materials may make it difficult to meet these goals within the required time frame.

Some scholars came together under the aegis of UNESCO to specifically address this issue. They were part of the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement focused especially on the licenses protecting learning materials (including courses, modules, audio/visual materials as well as textbooks to name a few). There was global consensus on how licenses can be reviewed so that these learning objects are easily available for re-using and re-purposing without offending copyrights. This movement slowly gathered momentum until the Paris OER Declaration of 2012 gave it unprecedented prominence as well as a legitimate place in the effort towards sustainable development. In fact, OERs are seen as having the potential of answering many of access and quality challenges that are barriers to the SDGs. OERs potentially can provide governments, institutions, and individuals with access to some of the best instructional materials available globally. It follows that these materials can be adapted to fit contextual and cultural requirements. However, what are the means through which they can be culturally contextualized?

Policy recommendation: (1) Carry out OER advocacy and sensitization at national level; (2) Encourage the widespread use and production of OERs; (3) Develop a culturally and contextually- sensitive OER policy to institutionalize use and production at all levels of education: primary, secondary and tertiary; (4) Incentivize production of OERs (e.g. one OER can equate with a publication or can be recognized towards promotion exercises, and (5) Develop linkages with OER movements in other countries.

What are OERs?

The Paris Declaration defines OERs as follows:

“teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions. Open licensing is built within the existing framework of intellectual property rights as defined by relevant international conventions and respects the authorship of the work.” (UNESCO/COL Paris OER Declaration, 2012)

OERs are educational materials whose licenses enable them to be free and freely available without requesting copyright permission. However other less stringent conditions apply. They can be adapted to higher education as well as primary and secondary educational levels. They can also be used for learning in formal and non-formal settings. OERs are learning objects that can be reused and repurposed to suit different needs and could be available in any medium, print, audio, video, and digital.

OERs and cultural contextualization

The Paris Declaration recognizes upfront that OERs have to be culturally sensitive and responsive. The production of OERs initially originated in Eurocentric or American centric environments. To make them accessible to other countries as well as to encourage other countries to become OER producers, the Paris Declaration invites Governments to:

Encourage the development and adaptation of OER in a variety of languages and cultural contexts. Favour the production and use of OER in local languages and diverse cultural contexts to ensure their relevance and accessibility. Intergovernmental organizations should encourage the sharing of OER across languages and cultures, respecting indigenous knowledge and rights.

Cultural contextualization of OERs is seen to contribute to the access advantages attached to the use of OERs. With more and more people being connected to the internet, more people have access to learning products. However special care must be taken so that meaning in those materials is not perverted or lost. Hence efforts must be put into unpacking learning content and rendering them available to individuals or organizations in their particular contexts and

cultures. Translation of these materials through easily available Open Source Software can be very helpful in this endeavor. With voice-over options in different languages including the vernacular, OERs can help bring knowledge to those groups that were hitherto barred from access to learning resources. For instance, China Open Resources for Education (CORE) has translated MIT OCW materials into Chinese (Kanwar, 2015). During the UNESCO Djibouti Conference (2-4 May 2017), and especially the session on ICT in Higher Education, there were several presentations on how OER materials were being translated to include culturally sensitive elements. One competency-based program was an OER based course for drivers and machine operators in the Mauritian branch of Colas, a construction company based in France. The branch, called Transinvest Construction Limited had developed this program using OERs that were instructional designed into its corpus and planned to offer it on the Open Source Software, Moodle. Such examples are rife nowadays. OERs have become a global movement that is increasingly encouraging sharing of, and even a multi-directional flow of knowledge (Kanwar, 2015).

Benefits of OERs and leads for cultural contextualization

Cost. Open licensing will democratize access to public goods. Thus, when a public university publishes its learning programmes under the open licensing approach, more people can have access to it, re-use it and re-purpose it. This will extend the shelf-life of the educational product which can also be seen as a public good. When it is and with it being scaled up, the cost of production will go down. Extending copyrights for wider use without compromising the moral and intellectual rights of the creators is a sensitive task that has to be relevant to specific contexts (Kanwar, 2015). Textbooks, audio and video educational materials that are produced under open licenses will contribute to significant cost cut. When accessed online, OERs have zero cost. For instance, Kanwar (2015) reports that in the USA, under the Utah Open Textbooks project, the cost of printed textbooks has come down to \$5, which becomes zero if accessed online. Likewise, she mentions that the government of South Africa has decided that they will opt for OER textbooks. Necessarily when these resources are made accessible, they will require adaptation and cultural contextualization by potential institutional users to offer optimal benefits.

Quality. The OER wave first started at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Open Courseware (OCW) initiative, in which teachers placed their lecture notes online for free use. The ensuing peer review provided an unexpected benefit –the quality of the material produced was positively impacted upon. In fact, when learning objects are in the public domain, they are more susceptible to public scrutiny. Thus, learning objects that become available through OER licenses are generally peer-reviewed quality products. However, regulatory organizations responsible for quality assurance should ensure that available OERs *locally* undergo appropriate quality assurance exercises to ascertain degree of fitness for purpose.

Time. Those organizations and individuals that have embraced this movement can easily save time in the production of their own instructional materials. By readily having access to quality materials, they save time and do not have to duplicate the effort of producing materials. Usually, they can harvest OERs in parts or in whole and construct their own contextually and culturally relevant course materials. They can carry out the appropriate adaptation so that the OER reflects local specificities and students can identify with them.

Collaboration. The OER movement is based on sharing. An important initiative is the Commonwealth of Learning is the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) which is a consortium of education practitioners that develop programs on a collaborative basis but commit to recognizing them when they are delivered by any university belonging to the VUSSC. This collaborative effort is a successful example of how without duplicating effort, participating countries can have access to quality materials that they can adopt and adapt as necessary. During peer review, cultural contextualization or domestication is carried out under conditions that ensure quality assurance. Such collaboration should stand the test of time.

References

UNESCO (2012). Paris Open Educational Resources Declaration. Retrieved 02.06.17, http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/WPFD2009/English_Declaration.html

Kanwar, A. (2015) *Open Education Resources (OER): What, Why, How?* Speech presented during OER Workshop Papua New Guinea, President and CEO, Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada.

For more information, please visit AVU's Website: <http://www.avu.org/avuwweb/en/>

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Published in the framework of the AVU Multinational Project Part II,

funded by the African Development Bank

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