

FAIR COMMENT



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Moving in a promising direction – SDG 4 and open educational resources

Opening equitable access to lifelong education for all has been an important commitment across the Commonwealth for many years. Two recent developments have been heartening.

The first is the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which has moved international goals about education beyond a narrow concern for numbers in schooling for young people to an inclusive vision of enabling and valuing different forms of quality learning for all. The second is the steady maturing of the open educational resources (OER) community. These two developments came together at the 2nd World OER Congress.

The Congress built on the declaration of the 2012 World OER Congress, which identified the value of OER for widening access, increasing cost-efficiency and improving the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. In particular, the 2012 declaration urged states to encourage the development and adaptation of OER in a variety of languages and cultural contexts to ensure relevance and epistemological access. It included an important clause recommending that governments ensure all learning resources developed with public money be made available as OER.

There is evidence that this declaration is beginning to yield results, with promising examples of OER initiatives contributing significantly to SDG 4. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, we see the availability of OER courses for the professional development of teachers which support them to move away from chalk-and-talk to activity-based learning. Such courses are designed and/or adapted for the various contexts we find on the African continent, capturing local knowledge, reflecting local contexts and having relevance to students' lives.

And we have an example of an open publishing model, African Storybook (<http://www.africanstorybook.org/>), which is using technology to get enough storybooks to every African child learning to read, in a language familiar to them and with content that speaks to their interests and experience. Importantly, we have seen how the initiative has unleashed the agency of educators

and librarians in creating, translating or adapting stories suitable for their own contexts, and made affordable print storybooks accessible. At the World Congress, similar examples from across the globe were cited.

Much of this exciting OER work has been done with funds from international donors. For the power of OER to be unleashed, governments must commit to allocating (1) a proportion of their education budgets to the development of contextually relevant OER and (2) an annually increasing proportion of the funds for developing learning resources to creating openly licensed materials. The declaration from the 2nd World Congress made strong pronouncements in this regard.

It also emphasised that the contribution of OER will only be educationally effective if it is underpinned by sound pedagogical practices. This emphasis was in response to several inputs prior to the Congress. In particular, Saide's OER Africa Initiative warned the Congress that "as we have seen in the aftermath of early enthusiasm for online learning, use of technology tends only to magnify the effects of the underlying pedagogical practices into which it is integrated. In the same way, our experience is that harnessing of OER in a context of poor pedagogical practice simply has the effect of magnifying that poor practice, rather than solving it."

OER Africa is now working to be more rigorous in its understanding of how OER can contribute in a range of educational improvement areas: achieving effective learning design for programmes or courses; learning from well-designed educational resources; including multiple voices or perspectives; demonstrating the contested nature of knowledge; creating opportunities for knowledge construction; providing regular, specific and constructive feedback from educators and peers; and applying knowledge, including work-integrated learning.

All in all, the environment for the beneficial use of OER is becoming increasingly enabling. So we, as educators, need to exploit this development purposely towards affordable education which empowers both teachers and learners.