

# INTRODUCING OER FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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## ABSTRACT

African higher education institutions increasingly have to deal with the dual challenges of a greater demand for access to education and declining subsidies, while at the same time striving to continue to provide quality education. Institutions are, therefore, constantly striving to upgrade their learning resources. The adaptation and use of open education resources (OERs) may assist these institutions in the redesign of their curriculum needs, while it may also help enhance the quality of learning resources. It may also be possible for African institutions to adapt and use the OERs published by other African institutions to facilitate this process. This presentation focuses on the lessons learned to date in the process of providing support to such institutions to enable them to harness the potential of OERs in revisiting their curriculum offerings, particularly in the area of teacher development.

**KEY TERMS:** Teacher education, open education resources, educational technology, education network

## RESEARCH-IN-PROGRESS PROPOSAL

Higher education institutions in Africa are facing the challenge of dealing with a changing environment: the need to increase enrolments and throughput, often in the face of static or declining state subsidies, while simultaneously trying to ensure that teaching remains at the cutting edge of the discipline, which implies the need for the constant, and often very costly, updating of learning resources. One way to help address this challenge is to make greater use of OERs. This initiative seeks to support African universities in the adaptation and use of OERs for teacher development.

The assumptions that underpin this initiative are:

- A structured engagement with OERs provides opportunities to contribute to an improvement in the quality of higher education provision: the processes of finding, evaluating and adapting OERs necessarily entail and create opportunities for revisiting underpinning educational assumptions and

practices; the processes of quality assurance, copyright clearance and publication open up teaching to public scrutiny, prompting a more considered engagement at the outset and allowing for constructive critical feedback;

- It is possible to source and adapt OERs to meet the specific curriculum needs of African institutions;
- It is possible for institutions to clarify their internal policy and process frameworks to establish conditions that would enable them to publish new/adapted OERs for further adaptation and use by other institutions;
- It is possible for African institutions, in particular, to adapt and use OERs published by other African institutions;
- All of the above can be done in ways that do not add to, but could potentially reduce, the time and other resources needed to service curriculum needs, while simultaneously helping to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning resources that are adapted and used.

The results of this initiative are expected to be courses, developed and published as OERs by African institutions, which incorporate OERs from elsewhere including, hopefully, other African institutions, and which would model teaching approaches that stimulate active student engagement and deep learning. Concurrent with the practical work, the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide), through its OER Africa initiative, is documenting the processes and results in a hermeneutic action-research cycle in order to tease out key lessons of experience for similar initiatives in the future. This presentation focuses on lessons to date from this process.

## **INITIAL ENGAGEMENTS**

Two institutions were selected to implement the strategy during a pilot phase of this initiative. The first institution is the National In-Service Teachers College (NISTCOL) in Zambia. NISTCOL, soon to be known as Chalimbana University, has 12 affiliated contact-based colleges offering contact support to its distance education teacher-students. The second institution is the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania. The selection of UDSM includes its affiliate Mkwawa University College of Education (MUCE) in Iringa, Tanzania. Traditionally these institutions have made use of a contact and print-based model. However, they are in the process of expanding into the provision of technology-supported learning, using the open source Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), as the growth in student numbers means that, increasingly, students cannot be accommodated in already full lecture halls, library facilities and other campus-based resources.

Saide, through its OER Africa initiative, has entered into memoranda of agreement with both of these institutions and seeks to support both the individual needs of each of these institutions, separately, while also seeking to encourage collaboration between them.

Specifically, the partnership with these institutions seeks to:

- promote the creation, sharing and free exchange of high quality OER materials for teaching and learning (for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes).
- create capacity for access to evaluating, adapting, using and sharing of quality educational resource materials.
- promote the creation and use of a sustainable OER support infrastructure.
- promote the creation and sustainability of OER networks and communities.
- promote appropriate application of relevant educational technologies.

The first interaction with these institutions was in 2011 when a capacity-building workshop was organised by the UDSM's Centre for Virtual Learning (CVL). It was held at the Mkwawa University College of Education (MUCE) campus in Iringa. The workshop aimed to provide a contextual basis for OERs and explored the characteristics of quality learning resources. Participants were exposed to finding, evaluating and adapting OERs to meet existing curriculum needs.

A key focus of this engagement with the OER concept at UDSM was to explore ways in which an informed engagement with OERs could support the curriculum renewal process that were already underway. An important departure point for the workshop was that working with OERs should not form a separate project in its own right, but should rather complement and support activities that are already in motion. The workshop built upon an earlier engagement with the CVL by Saide in support of the migration of UDSM teaching and learning resources into the Moodle VLE. The result of the workshop was a process for the development and review of courses and materials.

A similar capacity-building workshop was held at NISTCOL. The first two days of the workshop comprised a wide-ranging overview of the field of learner support in open and distance learning (ODL) provision. This enabled participants to identify and prioritise the proposed content for the learner support short course that was to be developed as part of a wider professional development for ODL initiative, which it is hoped will also be published as an OER in due course. The remaining two days of the workshop were facilitated by Saide's OER Africa initiative, and explored the nature of OERs, open licensing possibilities and issues to do with finding, evaluating and adapting OERs as well as some of the policy implications thereof.

Participants in the workshop were able to get hands-on experience of searching for and evaluating OERs related to their respective immediate needs – whether as part of the teacher education or the ODeL programme initiatives. A variety of strategies were followed and lessons learned, both in searching for appropriate content and in organising the search process (individually, in pairs and in teams).

## **FURTHER ENGAGEMENTS**

The next engagement with UDSM was a follow-up capacity-building workshop, in March 2012, at the Mkwawa University College of Education (MUCE) campus in Iringa, Tanzania. The aim of the workshop was to build capacity so that the Education academics at these colleges are able to design e-learning material that incorporates the use of OERs. Specific focus was paid to the review of course design elements, namely learning and assessment strategies and activities.

Participants were again provided with the opportunity to search for and incorporate OERs into their courses as well as implement the course design elements that were discussed. The outcome of the workshop was an implementation plan for the development, review and publication of pilot courses.

The focus of the next capacity-building workshop, held at the NISTCOL in March 2012, was to build on the lessons learned at the workshop in Iringa, Tanzania, earlier in the month, that is, e-Learning material development for integrating OERs. The context was the necessity created by the institution's transforming status, from college to university, which provided the opportunity to revisit the kind and level of programmes offered by the institution. Participants focused on the nature and value of OERs and how it would require a rethinking of teacher education, assessment and learning activities, as well as practical sessions involving the creation of course activities in Moodle. The outcome of the workshop was an implementation plan for the development, review and publication of the University's Education Leadership and Management programme from diploma to degree level.

The presentation will focus on what has been learned from this process with respect to helping institutions to harness the potential of OERs in revisiting their curriculum offerings. We have found that our engagement with institutions at this practical level has opened the door for discussions at a deep philosophical and pedagogical level, drawing on the substantial bodies of literature on ODL provision, e-learning provision and the establishment and maintenance of communities of learning and practice.