# Home

# *OER Africa* Institutional Engagement Grant

# Lessons Emerging in Year 2 of a 3 Year Process

## Introduction

Since inception in 2008, *OER Africa* has sought to respond to the challenges faced by educators in Africa’s universities by working with them to collaboratively develop and implement open educational resource (OER) processes to redress specific teaching and learning insufficiencies. These processes have been tailor-made to fit the realities of the contexts within which they are to be applied, including inadequate bandwidth, a shortage of skills to develop and adapt relevant and appropriate teaching and learning materials, insufficient funding and over-stretched human resources. Strategies implemented to this end have included OER sensitization and advocacy, proof of OER concept pilot projects, policy work, materials development and adaptation, course design, and action research.

Initially, *OER Africa* adopted an expansive partnership strategy to advance this agenda. However,as its focus for its current work supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, *OER* Africa identified a need to deepen the knowledge base required to take OER in African universities to the next level – that is, the mainstreaming of engagement with OER to improve pedagogical practice. It decided to do this by supporting a small selection of universities which are committedto transforming teaching and learning practices, in the context of the information society, through Action Research and Critical Practice, to build evidencethat OER practices can both lead to and support transformation, and can be successfully mainstreamed and institutionalized.

Thus, over a three year period, from 2014 to 2017, *OER Africa* is working with four[[1]](#footnote-1) universities: the African Nazarene University (ANU), the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), the University of the Free State (UFS), and the University of Pretoria’s Faculty of Veterinary Science (known as Onderstepoort). We are supporting these institutions to implement pedagogical changes using OER: our objective is to identify key supporting and inhibiting factors to sustaining such changes. Our approach is informed by an understanding that supporting significant institutional change requires sustained engagement and support over an extended period and that, while some critical success factors will be generic, others will be institutionally specific.

**Institutional Table of Comparative Implementation Strategies**

The following table is a summary taken from the formative and illuminative mid-term evaluation of this grant, conducted by Prof Ken Harley in May / June 2016. It is *Table 2. Diversity across HEIs and the two regions: East Africa and South Africa* in his report and can be found on p. 7 of the same report (available separately).

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue**  | **East Africa: ANU and OUT** | **South Africa: OP and UFS** |
| **Project strategy for embedding and disseminating the OER model** | Embedding at ‘whole’ institutional level, one private (ANU), one public (OUT); Dissemination from here to other institutions. | *OP*: Embedding in a high status faculty: from there to whole institution and beyond*UFS*: Embedding and dissemination through institution’s CTL (dedicated to improving teaching and learning) |
| **Starting point in HEIs** | Project brought an entirely new initiative | Project concepts being grafted onto existing initiatives. |
| **Mode of delivery** | *ANU*: contact university moving to distance/blended delivery *OUT*: distance education moving from correspondence to digital and online | *Both:* Traditionally *c*ontact, interested in blended approaches using technology. |
| **Institutional interest in OER** | *ANU:* To have cost-effective materials for ODL *OUT*: OER to reach students at all centres; provision of affordable materials*Both:* Need for basic provision of learning materials. | *OP*: Has expertise to share; OER can help build on their status as leaders in their field; *UFS*: Focus on courses and processes to enhance student learning (OER licensing follows).*Both*: more expansive needs |
| **The two means of achieving aim of pedagogic transformation** | OER and policy development: concurrent | OER and policy development: more sequential than concurrent. |
| **Networking infrastructure** | Wi-Fi signal variable  | Wi-Fi more easily accessible to staff and students on and off campus. |
| **Project support** | Geographic distance from Saide means project support is timetabled far in advance of IL visits. Often lengthy gaps between visits are inevitable. | Proximity of ILs – greater opportunity for more informal hands-on support according to needs as these arise |
| **Implications of project support but no funding** | More pressing issues of remuneration for module writers | Remuneration for extra workload generated by project appears less pressing |

## What are we learning?

At the onset, we anticipated an iterative action research process, enabling organizational change, and leading to key identifiable actions and outputs. We envisaged that these actions and outputs would be acted upon, reviewed, and revised through ongoing discussion and debate with the relevant stakeholders.

***What have we learned about Participatory Action Research?***

Whilst evidence exists in all of the institutions of wider participation in the formulation of a research agenda within institutions, the greatest successes in conducting research into OER have been registered by engaging with *individual* academics who are primarily interested in the research to produce publications or as part of postgraduate studies.

* Beyond Faculties of Education, a culture of systematic research and critical reflection on pedagogical practices is not the norm, even in cases – as at University of Pretoria – where there are special-purpose funding vehicles (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning grants) in place to support that research. Faculties tend to recognize and reward research within their particular discipline.
* Engagement with pedagogical research is, however, embraced (i) when it is connected to distance education (possibly because it aligns with broader research interests on ODL and resource-based learning in ODL institutions) and (ii) by staff working in support units that help academics to improve teaching and learning practices and/or introduce pedagogical innovations of different kinds (as completing such research projects will further their academic careers)

Interestingly, it appears that concepts of sharing and sourcing content digitally are increasingly part of the lived experience of staff and students alike. More groups of academics and university academic support staff are expressing interest in both sharing under open licences and integrating OER into courses, while resistance to engaging in such discussions in either institutional or faculty-level fora has declined significantly since *OER Africa* first began its work.

***What have we learned about Transforming Pedagogy?***

There is a growing focus on harnessing OER to improve quality of teaching and learning materials during course design and development projects. Although some quality concerns remain, generalized negative perceptions of OER as ‘poor quality’ because they are freely available are reducing quite rapidly, as is the time taken to persuade people of the merits of running searches to find existing content to integrate into courses. Of course, part of this imperative is also to seek to contain the costs of course materials design and/or to save time spent on content development, but it is equally clear that there is a growing sense that judicious use of OER can help to improve the quality of courses. It is a core part of the rationale for developing the capacity of Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) support staff to harness OER during course design activities that they undertake with academics at UFS. It is also the case that when academics know their material is going to be made open for everyone to see, they tend to be more careful about its design.

Typically, OER is being harnessed to support traditional pedagogies, even in cases where it forms part of a broader shift to e-learning – with an emphasis on harnessing OER to improve quality. . It appears that that even these subtle shifts or changes are being embedded in practice and may lead to more significant improvements, rather than immediate transformation of pedagogy. Such a pedagogical shift is reflected in OP’s use of OER to support a move to a block teaching method in its flagship veterinary sciences degree programme. ANU had begun to introduce use of OER to develop distance education modules as part of an institutional expansion of that teaching and learning mode.

However, efforts to introduce innovation, even when initially successful, are often slowly strangled by the weight of tradition and scale of bureaucracy. In addition, the time required to complete work, especially pertaining to course design and development is often not available to university staff in African universities. Their ability to focus on activities of the kind being prioritized in the *OER Africa* partnerships are constrained by multiple competing demands on their time. The extent of academic administration now required in most universities occupies a significant (and possibly growing) portion of academics’ workload. Equally, it demonstrates that, at least structurally, there is relatively little weight attached to activities focused on improving teaching and learning, even where there is apparently strong in-principle commitment to it.

Once one goes past a small group of knowledgeable people, in-depth understanding of OER and its potential implications for teaching and learning drops rapidly. Evidence of this can be seen in the number of workshops held that still incorporate a specific focus on taking university staff through these basic issues. As a consequence, project support activities will continue to provide basic OER advocacy. In addition, however ILs will also continue to support institutions in their identification of feasible strategies to continue building on positive changes in teaching and learning, towards the ultimate long-term goal of pedagogical transformation.

***How have partner institutions incorporated into policy, accumulating understanding about how OER practices can support transformation of teaching and learning?***

The project focus on IP policies has had the most visible success, with all institutions acknowledging the importance of having IP policies that cover issues of open licensing. This has often been a catalyst for wider discussions on IP and copyright, as IP issues are neither understood at most universities nor guided by clear policy frameworks. The latter has been particularly surprising to find at the ODL institutions, given the centrality of IP in the form of teaching and learning materials to their pedagogical and business models. Nevertheless, policy development and/or review processes are underway at all institutions and largely appear on track to deliver sustained results in the form of adopted policies by the end of the project.

However, at all institutions, there is still much discussion about incentives for academics to participate in OER practices and materials development for their course. This suggests that there is still a misalignment between OER practices and institutional priorities and HR policies. This problem is much bigger than OER, as it reflects the relatively weak status of teaching and learning as a core university function in relation to research and university administration: OER practices are perceived as ‘additional work’ rather than as a strategy to achieve professional objectives more effectively.

1. The University of South Africa (Unisa) was also one of the original partner institutions, but was replaced by the UFS in the second half of 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)