

OPENING SPEECH
WCOER, 18 September, 2017
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Your Excellency, Honourable Ministers, Colleagues, Friends

It is an honour for the Commonwealth of Learning to be in partnership with UNESCO and the Government of Slovenia for the second World OER Congress. Especially since COL and UNESCO organized the first World OER Congress five years ago in Paris, and this time Slovenia is a key partner. We are very privileged to have the leadership of the Hon Maya Makovec Brencic, Minister of Education Science and Sport from the very beginning. We are also very grateful to our dear colleagues in UNESCO, Slovenia and the Hewlett Foundation for their strong support and valuable contributions.

COL organized six regional consultations around the world in the lead up to this Congress. Two common themes emerged—one: that there was a very uneven development of OER within each region. Some countries had already developed policies and were implementing them while others were still in the initial introductory stages. The second commonality was that in spite of major efforts over the last five years, the need for advocacy and capacity was still considered key priorities.

As we know, we live in a very unequal world. A poor widow in Kenya with four children told my colleague last year that the worst feeling a mother could get next to hunger was the inability to buy a textbook when her child needed it for her school. In Cameroon in 2012 a dozen students in Grade 2 were sharing one textbook for reading, and fourteen students had access to only one math textbook. Using OER can certainly reduce costs and put a textbook in the hands of each child. A recent COL study on OER use in Antigua and Barbuda indicated that each student saved 64 ECD per semester per course when OER textbooks were used. Further, use of OER also improved student performance by 5.5%.

OER emerged as a technology driven solution to address issues of costs and quality. But the lesson we have learned is not to view OER as a product but as a process that involves and empowers stakeholders into becoming active producers rather than simple consumers of content. OER are based on three clear values that will help us advance the theme of this Congress: equity and inclusion, collaboration and respect for diversity.

First, equity and inclusion: Involving people at the grassroots is key to the sustainability of OER as a people's movement. Bee-keepers in the remote forests of Uganda have learnt honey-gathering techniques using OER developed by experts who communicate with them through their basic mobile phones. Several countries, including our host Slovenia, have initiated specific projects to make OER accessible for people with disabilities.

Second, collaboration and partnership: More speed and scale in OER development can be achieved by working together. Participants from nineteen Commonwealth countries came together in the Maldives to develop a course on Sustainable Agriculture. They worked hard for three weeks to create a programme relevant to the needs of small states. The content, based on OER drawn from the global commons, was adopted by the National University of Samoa, and the first cohort of graduates is already in full-time employment within the country. Not only was the programme developed in record time because of this collaboration, it also resulted in long-term partnerships and cooperation.

Third, respect for diversity: Linguistic and cultural diversity continue to be a challenge within the OER movement, which is predominantly in English. As a European report points out “Poor people must be able to express and communicate locally relevant knowledge in local languages if they are to shape the decisions that affect their livelihoods. Local content development is closely tied to human development, and the ultimate goal of this is the empowerment of local communities.” (ENRD, 2010, p.3). Farmers in India share their knowledge and expertise freely on a website developed by them in their own language Tamil—and what's more, they release the content using a Creative Commons licence. As more stakeholders share knowledge in the vernacular, the global knowledge base is enriched and enlarged.

The Commonwealth of Learning believes that knowledge is our common wealth and that OER have tremendous potential for promoting equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all. Over a century ago, on the eve of World War One, the Bengali poet and first Indian Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, articulated his vision of the future when he spoke of a world —‘where the mind is without fear and the head is held high, Where knowledge is free’. Can OER help us get closer to such a world? Given that we have much of the globe represented here today, we're off to a great start.