20210516 OE Global GCRF Pathways

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The Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER) (UNESCO, 2021) emphasizes in its key aims the importance of (i) “developing the capacity of all key education stakeholders to create, access, re-use, re-purpose, adapt, and redistribute OER, as well as to use and apply open licenses in a manner consistent with national copyright legislation and international obligations” and (ii) “fostering and facilitating international cooperation [by] supporting international cooperation between stakeholders”.

Both these aspects were present in a recent open education research collaboration between The African Council for Distance Education and The Open University (UK). Pathways to Learning: new approaches in higher education (OpenLearn, 2020a) hosted two free professional development programmes for university lecturers, instructional designers, technical and professional staff, managers, and heads of department who share responsibility for providing quality distance and online learning.

- A Teacher Educator programme, Skills for 21st Century Learning and Teaching (OpenLearn, 2020b)
- A Tertiary Educator programme, Take Your Teaching Online (OpenLearn, 2020c)

The courses ran over six weeks between 13th July and 20th August, 2020, and was contextualized by a rapid rollout of online learning during the Coronavirus pandemic. The programmes combined a course of study using OER materials with supplementary activities including a total of 12 webinars and interactive events alongside use of new platforms created by The Open University’s Institute of Educational Technology: nQuire (Herodotou et al., 2018) and Our Journey (Coughlan et al., 2019).

Key findings include:
- The pandemic led to a substantial shift in teaching across the African continent and a requirement to better understand and gain experience of online learning. Change is likely to persist post-pandemic, although infrastructure and cultural barriers are reported.
- The project surveys, interviews and the data generated through interactions that occurred in the programmes can be analysed further to explore challenges and opportunities for online and blended learning across the African continent and globally.
- The evaluation data provides evidence that the programmes led to important understanding of course design and confidence in online facilitation for a large majority of those who took part in them.
- There is evidence that the programmes built confidence, particularly through the experiences of these educators themselves learning online with well-designed materials, and engaging with platforms and experts. A pre-post measurement of self-reported confidence levels is more mixed but does show improvement for those who started with low confidence.
- There is evidence that each of the elements and activities were appreciated by some learners. The open courses were seen as most useful alongside some webinars. Community events and forums added substantial value to these.
- The flexibility and choice offered in the programmes led to different behaviours. Many aimed to complete all the available activities despite time pressures and other barriers. Some were unable to attend live events so recordings were appreciated.
Given the courses were free to join and many educators faced barriers and pressures, retention figures were very positive with around 66% of those who took part in the first week of each programme completing the rest of these programmes. Most were positive about the new platforms (nQuire and Our Journey) but reported that they had limited time to use these. A more detailed understanding of different behaviours and the drivers for these could be gained through further analysis of the collected data. This could be analysed according to factors such as the programme, country or roles and areas of expressed interest. Assessment, Open Educational Resources (OER), and understanding of technologies that can be used for online learning and learning design were areas that learners reported as being particularly valuable. There is qualitative evidence of current and expected impact from the programmes on practices and strategies, particularly in the interviews. Individuals felt greater confidence to push for change and wanted to integrate the concepts from the programmes (such as learning design or OER) as part of the shift to greater online and blended approaches. At the same time, barriers existed both in institutional cultures and in practical matters such as power, bandwidth, cost and time. There is good qualitative evidence of current or expected impact from the programmes on practices and strategies, particularly in the interviews.

The evaluation of the Pathways to Learning project provides a great touchstone for reflecting on the kinds of agile, rapid collaboration that can build international capacity for OER projects and the communities that sustain them.

Keywords: open education, OER, OEP, distance education, Africa, collaboration

Resources and References:


