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## **Flexible paths to assessment for OER learners: A comparative study**

Dianne Conrad

**Athabasca University**  
[dianneconrad@athabascau.ca](mailto:dianneconrad@athabascau.ca)

Rory McGreal

**Athabasca University**  
[rory@athabascau.ca](mailto:rory@athabascau.ca)

**Abstract:** This paper highlights the preliminary findings of a one-year research project (2011) that investigated the fit of recognizing prior learning (RPL) practice and related assessment and transfer protocols to projected OER use, especially by the Open Educational Resource University (OERu), a newly-formed consortium of like-minded institutions located worldwide. Across a study that included 31 post secondary institutions from 10 countries, findings indicated both consistencies and inconsistencies in the treatment of RPL. While most institutions reflected the intent of honoring learners' prior learning, achieved informally or non-formally, institutions were bound by internal policy and structure in terms of protocols. The relationship of transfer credit opportunities to engaging with learners in preparing RPL documents for assessment was also varied. Broad disparities in fee information made it difficult to determine what the actual costs of various protocols would be for learners. OERu will continue to search for innovative approaches to providing universal and collaborative education, globally, to non-traditional learners.

**Keywords:** Open Educational Resources, OER, Open Educational Resource University, OERu, assessment, recognition of prior learning, RPL, access, credentialisation, policy

## Introduction

The opportunities for innovation in the developing Open Education Resource (OER) world are endless. Recently, established institutions such as Stanford, Harvard, and MIT have brought attention and new weight to the OER initiative by offering "massive open online courses" (MOOCs) and signing onto collaborative ventures such as Coursera that are designed to provide open access to broad audiences at reduced cost. Concomitant with and equally important to offering openly accessible learning is the consideration of how to acknowledge, assess and recognize what has been learned, in ways that are acceptable to learners, institutions, and, ultimately, employers.

This paper highlights the preliminary findings of an ongoing research project that investigated the fit of RPL practice and related assessment and transfer protocols for envisioned use of informal and non-formal learners toward assessment and accreditation in OER practice. Non-formal learners are those who attend "other organised, systematic educational activity" (Selman, Selman, Dampier, & Cooke, 1998) which is offered outside of traditional, credential-offering institutions. Informal learning, on the other hand, is "unorganized, unsystematic, at times perhaps even unintentional (Selman et al), and is often also referred to as experiential or happenstance learning.

Targeting practices in various countries around the world, researchers sought to determine the nature and scope of a variety of institutional RPL approaches. The project aimed to identify scalable solutions for post-secondary institutions to help non-traditional students gain academic credit. An understanding of how different institutions are approaching the recognition of non-formal and informal learning will provide change agents within universities with new knowledge on how to extend and expand their learning missions by creating flexible pathways to facilitate the credentialisation of students who may be non-traditional given their demographic, learning mobility, and dependence on open educational resources accessed through digital learning.

## The Open Educational Resource University (OERu)

Among major initiatives in the global push to further the OER agenda has been the creation of a consortium of institutions under the umbrella of the Open Educational Resource University (OERu), described more fully below.

The OERu is an initiative of the Open Educational Resource Foundation, based in New Zealand, which has brought together a consortium of 13 public post-secondary institutions<sup>1</sup> (OER Foundation, 2011). The goal of the consortium is to provide informal and non-formal learners with flexible pathways to formal assessment and accreditation using Open Educational Resources. These free learning opportunities for students anywhere in the world will be based on scalable pedagogies and will be enhanced with systems of volunteers (Mackintosh, McGreal, & Taylor, 2011). As each institution's internal policies and procedures will be maintained and respected, it is both critical and useful to understand the breadth of those systems.

In order to provide maximum access to learning, in fulfillment of its mandate, OERu acknowledges that learners' prior learning is a valuable commodity both in its own right, as a rich source of knowledge, but also in what that prior learning brings to learners' paths as they continue forward in their quest for self-fulfillment, status, and recognition through credentialisation. Recognizing learners' prior experiential learning (RPL), already an innovative practice in many tertiary or post-secondary educational institutions, presents both opportunity and challenge to OER practitioners. Existing RPL practices are usually deeply embedded within individual institutional policy and practice. In

some cases, such practices are labor-intensive and not particularly cost-effective or scalable. The definition of RPL practices and the relationship of various types of assessments to each other are also often unique to institutions and are understood to be disparate and even a source of contention within the field. As noted elsewhere in this paper, even the terminology used in naming the process of recognizing prior and experiential learning is a disputed topic in the field.

## **Conceptual and theoretical issues around prior learning**

The recognition of prior learning is practised globally as a means of honoring and building on mature learners' past experiential learning. UNESCO provides this short and effective definition of RPL: "The formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience" (Viăsceanu, *et al.*, 2004). Grounded in ancient philosophies, Western educators can look back to a more recent history in the work of Lindeman (1926) and Dewey (1938), who presented sound pedagogical rationales for recognizing adults' experiential learning: "The beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have ... this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning" (Dewey, 1938).

There are many ways in which to address adults' prior learning and a number of sectors where these processes are applied. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion of RPL's relationship to learning and knowledge will concern its use in post secondary educational settings.

Adults' prior learning histories are generally classified according to their origins, that is, according to whether the learning has been obtained formally, at recognized institutions, non-formally, or informally, resulting from situations or environments outside formal institutions (Selman *et al.*, 1998). Credentials obtained from study at recognized institutions are usually considered for transfer credit or qualification recognition at other formal institutions. Transfer agreements among institutions exist to standardize the movement of credit from one institution to another, usually simplifying, for learners, accessibility to post-secondary credentials within established jurisdictions.

Non-formal learning acquired by learners through training, workplace offerings, from non-accredited institutions, or simply through informal learning from life's lessons, however, is generally not accepted for transfer by accredited institutions. It is this type of learning that provides the material for the demonstration of prior learning that is generally referred to as prior learning assessment (RPL).<sup>2</sup> The process of demonstrating prior learning can take many forms at university level, although examinations and portfolio compilations are among the most popular. Performance demonstrations of skill-based learning are much less frequent in universities than, for example, in college situations where trades and hands-on training programs are more likely to be found.

Within institutional use, policy should guide RPL activities and quality assurance measures should safeguard its process. The American Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has long-established academic and administrative standards describing acceptable RPL practice.

## **The research study: Prior learning and OERu**

How should learners' prior learning best be acknowledged and addressed by OERu when its collaborative consortium concept would imply honoring each of its members' treatments of prior learning processes? To answer this question, researchers proposed to investigate the variety of ways in which prior learning protocols were enshrined and enacted in a representative sample of

post-secondary institutions. Given the notion of "openness" and accessibility, researchers deemed it important that the study constitute a global reach. Research was conducted in 2011. Specifically, these questions guided the research:

1. What are the different approaches to RPL being used by these institutions?
2. Which approaches are the most cost-effective or prohibitive in the OERu context?
3. Which approaches can effectively preserve quality assessment?

Data were gathered by investigating institutional websites and searching policy documents.<sup>3</sup>

Researchers purposively selected 31 institutions from 10 countries in order to examine the policies and protocols addressing prior learning issues. Institutions were chosen based their stated interest in OER and OERu, their geographical location, and their reputations as RPL practitioners. (See Annex A.) Additionally, three related associations/consortia were studied to provide comparative and baseline information: Canada's BC Campus, CAEL (US), and Australia's Office of the Australian Framework Council (AFQ).

## **Findings: Adventures in inconsistency**

Findings to date illustrate an interesting mixture of consistencies and inconsistencies, most of which are not surprising to those acquainted with practice and theory in the area of RPL. In a field of practice sometimes defined by overarching frameworks (Australia, UK) and sometimes not (Canada, US), implementation of procedures is often guided by local institutional structure and/or politics. This disparity seems most prevalent in the logistics of cost where, not surprisingly, data were most difficult to obtain. Delivery modes sampled included both face-to-face and distance, although a majority of institutions did not indicate format. Emerging themes are discussed below.

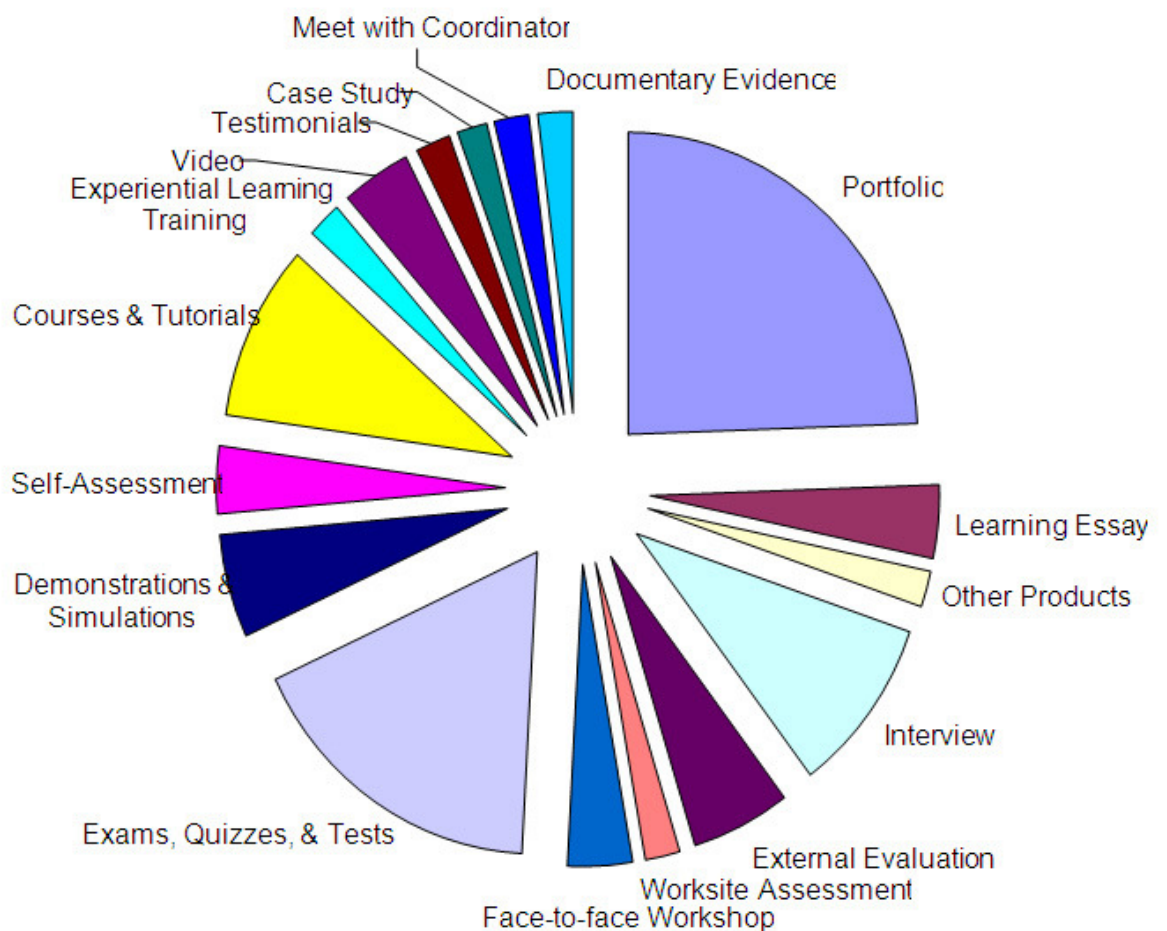
**Perceptions of the nature of prior learning.** Fairly universally, from North America to Malaysia, from Australia and New Zealand to South Africa and the UK, the treatment of prior learning is usually divided according to that which is acquired formally, via accredited institutions, and that which is acquired non-formally, informally or experientially, very much along the lines of Selman et al's defining criteria (1998). The underpinning rationale to incorporating RPL into post-secondary level assessment - ascertained by the study's investigation of handbooks, definition, and policy - involved issues of fairness, access, and economy. Still, the practice is far from universally accepted or applied. Of the 31 institutions, only 22 practiced RPL (71%) while 17 (55%) permitted the transfer of credit. However, only 16 (52%) practiced both protocols. Among the institutions studied, there was a range of assessment protocols in use.

**Types of assessment protocols** . It is difficult to find commonality among protocols in the area of credit transfer and the assessment of experiential or informal learning. Treatments vary widely and the names by which processes are referred to also vary. Credit transfer, for example, is often separate and handled discretely from RPL in some institutions but not in others. Also differing widely within institutions is the combination of processes that are conducted. In our own institution, for example, credit transfer - the acceptance of formally-acquired learning from other recognized institutions - is necessarily completed *before* the assessment of informal prior learning can occur. This protocol is based on our institutional philosophy that holds that learning should only be recognized once; learning recognized through transfer credit should not, therefore, be put forward for RPL. Capella University, Eastern Michigan State,

and Empire State College, all in the US, have policies very similar to that of AU. At AU, credit transfer is handled by a department within the Office of the Registrar while RPL resides in its own unit. At the University of Leicester, on the other hand, both systems are classified as credit transfer. Within that broad classification, however, reside two sub-categories: APCL refers to Accredited Prior Certificated Learning while APEL refers to Accredited Prior Experiential Learning and procedures differ for each sub-category. That Leicester's categories were not replicated in any of the study's North American institutions speaks to the uniqueness and variety of RPL systems in use.

Assessment instruments differ widely, the difference sometimes determined by delivery format. At Athabasca University (AU), for example, all assessment is conducted at a distance by email, telephone, or written communications. Empire State College in New York State, however, also a distance institution, conducts face-to-face interviews made possible by their many locations within the state. Among the 31 institutions sampled, by far the most-used assessment protocol was the *learning* portfolio, portfolios that are designed to demonstrate and highlight learners' knowledge in structured formats. This was followed by exams, quizzes, and tests; interviews, courses and tutorials, demonstrations, self-assessment, external evaluations, learning essays, face-to-face workshops, and a variety of other tools. It is common for institutions to use one, more than one, and/or a combination of assessment methods. The use of assessment protocols is illustrated in Figure 1, below.

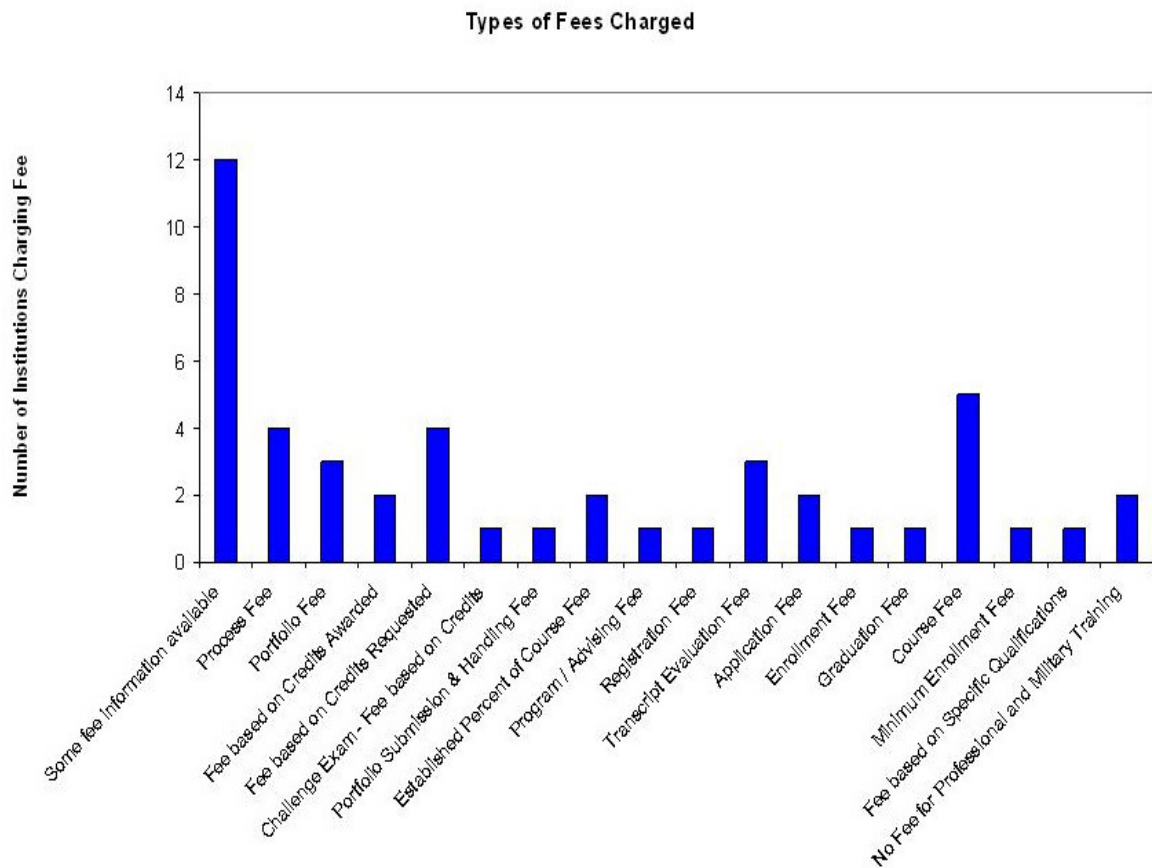
Figure 1: RPL Products in Use, All Delivery Modes



**Fees.** Only 12 of the institutions sampled provided fee information on their websites. Fees varied by label and type; more than one fee might apply in any one case; many fees are contingent on other fees. Within some institutions, fees

are applied, per service, up to a maximum amount. Fee information displayed in Figure 2, below, indicate categories of fees that *might* be related to or affect RPL assessment fees. Given the variety in fee types and structures, it is difficult to establish any firm commonality across systems.

Figure 2: Types of Fees Charged



### Discussion: The understandable, the irrefutable, and the possible

Universally, the discussions that accompany the consideration, implementation, or use of RPL within institutions are remarkably similar. Topics include both benefits and challenges, as decision-makers weigh out the two sides of the coin toward deciding "what to do." The American Shoreline Community College, in considering three possible avenues along which to proceed in moving forward with RPL, rejected the possibility of prolonging their system of disparate and "silo-ed" assessment vehicles and moved forward instead with a combined proposal of working with learners on an individual basis and/or implementing a portfolio approach (SCC, 2004). Likewise, the Malaysian Open University (MOU), in outlining the necessary paradigm shift that underlies implementation of RPL, for the oft-cited reasons of economy and access for learners, listed the concerns voiced by many other institutions, including our own at AU: the need to support learners and to maintain assessment rigour; the constraints of internal structures and policy; demands for quality assurance and effective pedagogy. In making clear the philosophical underpinnings of RPL and distinguishing it from other processes, MOU clarifies the differences between "open entry" and RPL, noting their relationship to each other but emphasizing the necessary experiential knowledge base that must underpin successful RPL (Singh, 2006).

What seems to be indisputable, and what will affect OERu's accommodation of RPL most cogently, is the fairly universal recognition of RPL as requiring labour-

intensive and rigorous assessment. Universities and colleges practicing RPL outline assessment protocols that consistently include learner-advisor/coach/mentor/facilitator interaction during preparation for assessment, whether that assessment be via portfolio (the most common method), interview, demonstration, workshop or course engagement, or by other methods. Institutions' handbooks reiterated their commitment to assisting learners through the demanding process of demonstrating their prior learning. In many cases, institutions' published information and handbooks clearly articulated many of the pedagogical issues underlying RPL: issues of fairness, of access, equality, culture, voice, assessor credibility, and learners' writing ability. Supporting RPL learners in their attempts to meet institutional academic standards was identified by several institutions as a very important issue. This is achieved in many ways - through careful advising, through coaching, through mentoring, through peer-mentoring, through the assignment of academic faculty to RPL initiatives, as at Empire State College.

From the literature, we also know that resistance within institutions to RPL practice, on the part of faculty, requires extra attention and quality assurance efforts in order to maintain the potential for a high level of achievement by RPL learners. Power and politics have long been recognized as factors within RPL practice (Harris, 2000; Peters, 2006).

The political reality of an institution frames, to a large degree, the possibilities that are open to an innovative strategy such as RPL and, by extension, RPL's inclusion as an assessment strategy in OER practice. In Canada, for example, firm data from OECD reports outlining the country's potential lack of manpower in the immediate future has not provided sufficient motivation for traditional universities to adopt RPL (Conrad, 2008; OECD, 2007). For traditional universities - in fact, even for those institutions already comfortable with their adoption of RPL practice - embarking on a collaborative venture such as the OERu consortium opens the door to more internal decision-making and re-evaluation of mission and probability. A recent question forwarded to consortium members by a member institution probed these important issues: "What process confirms that OERu members will credential this course? and, "What information has been distributed concerning obtaining the OERu credential?" (Private correspondence, 2012)

Against the backdrop of many types of diversity and institutional prerogative as regards policy and systems, the implementation of prior learning assessment protocols offers the potential for a wide range of applications and interpretations. As Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997) point out, "it offers a contestable and ambiguous terrain where different socio-economic and cultural assumptions and strategies can be differentially articulated. [However], as a field of tension, it can be exploited by different groups, each emphasizing certain dimensions over others" (p105). Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997), in this way, presage the discourse furthered by Harris (2000) and Peters (2006) in their subsequent work on power and politics in the application of RPL within the institution. This broad landscape of diversity - of voice, of culture, of access, and of philosophy - serves to underscore the difficulty facing consortia such as OERu in their efforts to establish standardizing policy and functionality across a range of participating institutions.

## **Concluding remarks**

The research presented here regarding the potential for open assessment practices was undertaken to help determine, ultimately, how potential OER practices will impact and benefit learners. In order to know this, a preliminary analysis determined that a wide variety of tools and procedures was used within the many institutions examined around the world. Complementary research, and

continuous communication, is currently going on among OERu partners in order to determine ways to think about possible cross-crediting of OERu courses and ways in which systems of recognizing prior learning can take their place in assessment protocols and policy.

This study's new data are relevant to the development of these OER processes, useful generally to the growing field of research and fundamentally useful to the growth and integrity of OERu, whose vision includes an understanding that present higher education systems are not sustainable and not scalable for universal education. OERu seeks to find new, more cost-effective learning systems while ensuring a high-quality learning experience. This study's data hopes to contribute knowledge that will assist in the development of public and/or institutional policy in the areas of assessment, credit transfer, and the articulation of credentials.

Note: Research for this study was funded by Canada's Social Services and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Since the time of writing, the number of OER institutions has increased to 18.

<sup>2</sup> While this paper uses the acronym RPL, some of the other names used for describing the recognition of prior learning are: APEL (Accreditation of Prior [and] Experiential Learning), PLA (Prior Learning Assessment), PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition), APL (Assessment of Prior Learning), RDA (Reconnaissance des Acquis), or EVC (Erkennen van elders of informeel Verworven Competenties) (Michelson & Mandell, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> RPL data are difficult, within many institutions, to obtain or clearly distinguish. Within the field, it is understood that many institutions practice RPL in informal ways that result in a variety of practices within the same institution. Fees, especially, are very hard to distinguish and even harder to compare, as their structures (ie, per course, per maximum limit, per assessment) vary widely.

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## Annex A

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|---|--|
| <p><b>Canada</b></p> <p>Athabasca University<br/>Thompson Rivers University<br/>College of the Rockies<br/>BC Campus*</p>   | <p><b>Australia</b></p> <p>University of Southern Queensland<br/>University of Wollongong<br/>The Office of the Australian<br/>Qualifications Framework Council<br/>(AFQ)*</p> |
| <p><b>UK</b></p> <p>Leicester University<br/>Open University</p>  | <p><b>New Zealand</b></p> <p>Nelson Marlborough Institute of<br/>Technology<br/>Otago Polytechnic<br/>Northtec<br/>Massey University</p>                                       |
| <p><b>USA</b></p> <p>Empire State College (SUNY)<br/>Southern New Hampshire University<br/>UMassonline (University of<br/>Massachusetts)<br/>Eastern Michigan University<br/>Shoreline Community College<br/>University of Memphis<br/>Capella University<br/>Kaplan University<br/>Western Governors' University<br/>Council for Adult and Experiential<br/>Learning (CAEL)*</p> | <p><b>Germany</b></p> <p>University of Duisburg-Essen</p>  |
| <p><b>India</b></p> <p>Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open<br/>University (BAOU)<br/>Indira Gandhi National Open University<br/>(IGNOU)<br/>University of Delhi</p>   | <p><b>Netherlands</b></p> <p>Open Universiteit</p>   |
| <p><b>Republic of South Africa</b></p> <p>University of South Africa<br/>University of Cape Town<br/>University of Pretoria</p>   | <p><b>Malaysia</b></p> <p>Wawasan Open University<br/>Open University Malaysia</p>   |

\*Framework organizations