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THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA'S INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND STRATEGIES TOWARDS THE USE OF OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Dr. Janaka Liyanagama, Prof. Upali Vidanapathirana

Abstract

This paper examines the policy initiatives taken by the Open University of Sri Lanka during the past three years to popularize the development, re-use and adaptation of Open Educational Resources (OER). The paper has used the published and unpublished records and materials to unearth the status-quo pertaining to the use of OER at the OUSL and notes the underlying reasons for its unenergetic performance. The OER initiatives, accordingly, has made a limited headway only in the re-use and adaptation of OER materials by some faculty members while the transformation of the existing materials into OER format has not made a headway. The paper explains the underlying reasons for this limited success and outlines how and why the OER options have not been optimally utilized at the OUSL.

Key words

OER, OUSL, OER policy, strategy

Introduction

Teaching and learning process in the university system is at a cross road; given the highly competitive economic environment in which knowledge is acknowledged to be the main driver of progress, universities globally must be equipped with new and relevant knowledge that is in demand. The speed of knowledge doubling has increased and much of this new knowledge is freely accessible to teachers and students through international Web portals. Universities can no longer teach 'what the teachers know' or use "yesterday's knowledge". Therefore it is imperative that suitable institutional policies and strategies are put in place within the university system to encourage the development, usage and adaptation of such knowledge and encourage new discoveries within the university or elsewhere by the other institutes. Sharing what is already produced is mutually beneficial.

This paper uses the UNESCO definition of OER referred as 'teaching, learning and research materials in any medium that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permit their free use and in some instances repurposing by others' (UNESCO, 2002). This enables users to reuse, combine and modify any original work while allowing authors to have their work acknowledge (Creative Commons, 2011).

As the only national University in Sri Lanka that is solely dedicated to the Open Distance Learning (ODL) mode of knowledge development and delivery, the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) views these developments in the knowledge development process quite promising. From its inception in 1980, the

OUSL has been mandated to espouse and promote the internationally valued concepts of lifelong learning and university education for all within Sri Lanka. It is because of this laudable expectation that the mission of the OUSL underscores the need to widen access to educational opportunities with a view to enhance social equity while ensuring cost effectiveness and the quality of study programmes. These laudable expectations are enshrined in the excellence, equity and efficiency goals which are part of the vision of the OUSL (Corporate Plan 2011).

Objectives and methodological issues
The Objective of this paper is to delineate how the OUSL responded to the opportunities created by the OER during the past three years and what factors contributed and or constrained the OUSL's effort to take part in the OER movement. The academic community at the OUSL was noted to be as conservative as academia in the other conventional universities in Sri Lanka, new ideas such as OER being generally resisted. This resistance demanded a carefully crafted policy framework aided by a corporate strategy to promote the concept and practice of OER at the OUSL.

The methodology was based on published and unpublished materials and also materials gathered through discussions and interviews with those involved in the decision making process of the University in addition to practitioners involved with OER initiatives. Published materials included the Corporate Plan, Action Plans, Annual Reports of the University, News Letters, etc., while unpublished materials included the evaluations of the ADB missions, COL-RIM evaluators, minutes of statutory bodies etc., which provided a useful repository of unprocessed information.

The policy framework, implementation and issues
The Corporate Plan of the OUSL (2011-2016) in its mission emphasizes the need 'to enhance access to high quality, affordable, and relevant education…'. Although this mission statement does not specifically make reference to OER, it is pertinent to note that OER is generally acknowledged to greatly facilitate achieving the twin objectives of quality and affordability. The assurance of quality parameters of OER are related to making informed choices by the academia responsible for the development of new ODL study materials and /or re-use and adaptation of relevant materials currently available in the public domain.

The plan has been explicit in relation to its vision of achieving the status of 'the premier ODL institution in Asia through excellence, efficiency and equity in life long learning'. The Plan has outlined nine interconnected policy goals that are associated with improving and assuring quality of inputs, processes and outcomes. For instance some of the general aspirations pertaining to achieving excellence include, inter-alia,
- Revise all current study programmes by 2016 to enhance relevance and quality,

- Develop new programmes of study in diverse fields to enhance relevance and quality,
- Transform all programmes to blended /online mode by 2016,
- Make competence in English, ICT, social integration and soft skills compulsory in all programmes by 2016 to enhance employability of graduates.

The plan has been more explicit when it stated that the university undertook to ensure that 'all course materials at the Foundation Level shall be in the form of open educational resources (OER)'. This was a controversial statement given the general mood of resistance among some academics to anything novel.

 When both implicit and explicit policy initiatives are taken in tandem the OUSL has created an enabling environment for the progress of OER movement within university. On the whole, academics are compelled to commit themselves to maintain the quality and relevance of its study programmes. This necessitates that they need to regularly revise curricula, teaching benchmarks and study materials. The challenge for the OUSL is that it needs to keep pace with the changing speed of knowledge generation and refinement.

This challenge must be viewed in the light of quality and affordability goals of the corporate plan. It is a daunting task to continuously and consistently improve content as well as presentation quality of ODL materials. This requires a very substantial investment in terms of person hours and funding. The initial cost of production of ODL materials is prohibitively costly. OER becomes very handy in this context. It was heartening to note that the academic community has accepted in principle, that the Open Educational Resources (OER) can be utilized fully or partially on a continuous basis to help implement revision and also to motivate academia to continuously improve its study programmes, and course materials. The OUSL has experienced the efficacy of the strategy of encouraging the academia to make use of OER currently available.

Most of the existing teaching materials being in the form of printed text, conversion to OER format proved to be a difficult task. It involves significant financial investments. This added with the risk of difficulties in quality being maintained, the University decided to concentrate on the pre-university courses at the foundation levels on experimental basis before taking on other courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Although there is a general agreement that such course of action would have its own benefits on the assurance of quality of its study programmes the academic staff members show an element of passive resistance to this action programme.

Why adaptation is preferred?
There were a number of reasons why adaptation and re-use were preferred by the academic staff involved in the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. There was a general agreement that materials chosen were of better quality and

changes, if any, were necessary to make them merely culture friendly. Second consideration was 'why re-invent when there is a wheel that is working'. There was also the advantage that some of these materials are already in circulation and was found to be acceptable among the student community. There may be other reasons such as comparative ease of re-use than writing them afresh.

Why development of OER is resisted?
The main reason was noted to be that the development of OER materials in house challenges the comfort zones of academics when they are not fully committed to update and upgrade their texts. In this sense OER is high risk endeavor. The OUSL course materials in their current format are provided to a limited group of registered students. Quality assurance of these materials is expected to be ensured through course-teams, editors, development testing process; corrections or changes, are conveyed to students at the face to face sessions, through email, internet or normal mail, as the numbers are known and limited. Reprints are done by-annually and revisions are conducted once in five years. In this way there is a danger that students are exposed to relatively old knowledge in cases where the teacher-student commitment to knowledge up-dating is absent. However, in general, ODL materials provided by the OUSL are observed to be superior than what is purveyed by the conventional system where lecture notes are not printed and hence not subject to outside scrutiny.

Nonetheless, when the materials are made available in the OER format, even inadvertent errors or mistakes in relation to content, facts and figures cannot be allowed because no remedial measures can be taken to rectify them once they are released to public domain. Therefore more stringent quality assurance mechanisms are necessary to produce error free, high-quality material. This is why some academics are reluctant to accept the OER challenge.

Action plan
The strategy of the University to start with conversion of its Foundation Level courses into OER format was premeditated. Firstly, the course developers are to be exposed to a kind of hands-on training to the transformation process. Secondly, as this material in general is elementary introducing suitable changes to make presentations more reader friendly is easy. Thirdly, updating and revisions may be less demanding and hence transformation of this material into OER format also is not as difficult as in the case of more advanced study programmes. More than anything else it is easy to convince the new and young staff to change than the old. Thus the OUSL has made the foundation courses to be became the guinea-pigs of the transformation process.

The OUSL action plan to implement the policy framework outlined above is as follows:
   a) establishment of OER cells at faculty levels to encourage the transformation of the foundation level courses

Alongside with the QA process these cells work voluntarily to learn and implement OER transformation at faculty levels. This activity although is at its rudimentary levels can be enhanced by providing leadership and guidance.

b) Identifying OER champions at faculty levels

This is an important activity because there is always some resistance to any new initiatives and also when the establishment code which provides administrative guidelines and the UGC circulars are silent on OER type of initiatives on work norms developed for promotional and career development guidelines. Unfortunately, as a national university the OUSL too is under the strict surveillance concerning the UGC guidelines some of which are anti-ODL in spirit. Therefore it is important to have explicit policy initiatives approved by the governing body on both (a) and (b).

c) Introduction of an incentive mechanism to motivate those staff members making extra-effort to carry out OER transformation

Arising from (a) and (b) above, when the career progress of the OUSL staff is governed by the UGC guidelines there is no recognition whatsoever for work carried out by the academia on initiatives such as OER. The UGC is meant for the administration of the conventional university system which is based on the residential or semi-residential mode of university education with a strong face-to-face link. Naturally OER is alien to the UGC.

d) Train academic staff members interested in OER

Fortunately this is matter for the OUSL's governing council.

e) Encourage research initiatives to examine the processes, problems and prospects of OER

This activity too can be handled by the governing council of OUSL.

The OUSL has already taken several additional initiatives geared towards publishing its materials in OER form. In the first place, a Document Management System (DMS) was developed as part of the Open University Management Information System (OMIS). Action has been taken to upload soft copies of all OUSL course materials to the DMS. Initially, access to this repository will be restricted to the OUSL academic staff. In the second stage, this will be opened to OUSL registered students. In the final stage, the materials will be made available to the outside world free of charge as OER materials.

The OUSL Library has already published the past examination papers of all four faculties in pdf format on the OUSL web, where anyone interested can have access to this facility. Also, the OUSL Library is in the process of developing a repository of research output, where copies of research publications of all its academics are uploaded and maintained. This will also be made available to all, once the initial developments are completed.

Conclusions
While OUSL has taken some positive initiatives and laid most of the groundwork necessary for the utilization of OER, much more needs to be done to ensure successful and effective deployment. Timely procurement of required services, developing the necessary skilled personnel by ongoing training and timely implementation of necessary infrastructure, procedures etc. are matters that need to be attended to without delay. The future of OUSL is at stake for OER has made higher education borderless and other institutions are posing a threat to its survival by making optimum use of its benefits.

As it stands now OUSL's own initiatives are below required levels and are yet to bear fruit enabling effective penetration of the market. The speed of growth and momentum are well below the levels necessary to remain competitive in the Higher Education market-place which is changing at a phenomenal pace. The time has come for OUSL to reconsider its level of commitment to OER initiatives. More dynamic actions will have to be taken by OUSL following a well-considered decision to remain fully committed to ODL methodology.

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