

The African Health OER Network: Advancing health education in Africa through open educational resources

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Introduction

Open educational resources (OER) are learning materials that are freely available and openly licensed so that they can be used, copied, adapted, integrated, and shared.¹ OER has the potential to advance the delivery of health education by increasing the availability of relevant learning materials, reducing the cost of accessing educational materials, and stimulating the active engagement of teaching staff and students in creating learning resources. Inspired by these potential benefits of OER, in mid-2009, over 40 faculty and staff representing 11 health science institutions from across Africa came together to discuss the formation of a network to share openly licensed health educational materials developed by and targeted toward their African colleagues. At the meeting, participants jointly developed a Vision for Health OER Network in Africa,² which envisions a network of African institutions that would harness OER to share knowledge, address curriculum gaps, and build communities of practice around health care education.

Following the meeting, OER Africa, an initiative of the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide), a consortium of African health institutions, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), University of Ghana, University of the Western Cape, University of Cape Town and University of Michigan submitted a successful 2-year grant proposal to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in late 2009, which launched the African Health OER Network.

This report provides a summary of the African Health OER Network, focusing on the value proposition for the Network, our target audience, services offered, content developed by participants, participant motivations for creating OER, and a call to join the Network.

Value proposition for the African Health OER Network

The Network provides participants and institutions the following benefits:

- Global visibility for faculty and the university: Participation represents an opportunity for faculty to showcase their expertise on an international level. The Network has built relationships with well-known global OER repositories such as Connexions, OER Commons and MedEdPORTAL.
- Integration into a community of educators: Participants in the Network join a community of health educators. Furthermore, OER Africa has partnerships with universities across the continent and can introduce members to other relevant continental and global networks.
- Assistance in finding relevant OER: OER Africa is currently developing an OER request facility, which will create an opportunity to request materials that you have a specific need for, as well as to respond to specific requests for content should this material be available.

Target audience

Participation in the African Health OER Network is open to all. The Network includes individuals, health faculty, non-governmental organisations, project teams, associations and consortia, among others. There is no obligation to sign or contribute financially to the Network, but all participating individuals and organisations are encouraged to contribute OER as well and to add their electronic signatures to a declaration of support for the vision statement.³ As of this writing, 73 individuals and 14 organisations have added their signatures to the declaration. Our objective is to systematically draw in more African and, eventually, global participants to create, adapt, share, and use OER to the benefit of health education in Africa, while developing models of collaboration and sustainability that can be replicated in other regions of the world.

Contributing institutions currently include OER Africa, University of Michigan, KNUST, University of Ghana, University of Cape Town, University of the Western Cape, University of Malawi, University of Botswana, and the Health Education and Training in Africa (HEAT) Project of the Open University and University of Nairobi.

Services

Depending on need, Network participants provide the following services to each other and new joiners:

- training and workshops
- mentoring and consulting
- reference services for finding OER on a given health topic
- reviewing content for copyright, privacy, and endorsement considerations⁴
- content production and distribution
- content evaluation and assessment.

Content developed

Motivated by the lack of relevant existing materials and crowded ward rounds at the university hospital, a professor from the University of Ghana created an interactive OER for caesarean section procedures. The learning module comprises narrated surgery videos including the seven main steps of the procedure, interactive case studies, and a self-assessment quiz. This module has already been shared with students at the University of Ghana.

Another professor from the University of Cape Town, frustrated by the 'horribly expensive' cost of textbooks, designed a comprehensive web-based course on occupational health. Educators and learners on three continents now use this open course.

Thus far, participants have created and shared 24 new OER modules, which are available on the OER Africa website.⁵ Disciplines currently represented include internal medicine, obstetrics and gynaecology, basic sciences and laboratory medicine, behavioural sciences, occupational therapy, public health, otorhinolaryngology and family medicine.

Participant motivations

Faculty involved in OER production at our partner institutions reaffirm the positive benefits of using OER, for example:

African universities struggle to have access to information. If we have information, why do we not also share it as part of a pool of universities? Using OER, our institutions are prepared to exchange information for the purpose of improved learning. (Peter Donkor, Provost of the College of Health Sciences, KNUST.)

You ought to maximise the use of your resources. If you are in a country and there are things unique to your country, then create OER. I really don't believe in every single institution creating a full set of OER [modules]... I think people should do as best as they can to collaborate. (Nii Armah Adu-Aryee, General Surgeon and Clinical Instructor, University of Ghana.)

Join the African Health OER Network

Participation is open to all health sciences academics and professionals. With your help, we aim to build the Network to include additional educators and institutions to increase development and circulation of health-related educational materials.

We invite you to sign the declaration and to use the Network to share and access teaching materials. We encourage you to experiment with creating open content⁶ and to share it with us at healthoer@oerafrica.org.

References

1. <http://www.oerafrica.org/understandingoer/UnderstandingOER/WhatisOER/tabid/1097/Default.aspx>
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