

Q&A

5 things you should know about the...

OER university Network Plan

Scenario

Ibrahim Omowale has worked as a carpenter for twenty years in Nigeria and is now teaching at the local technical college. He wanted to upgrade his qualifications for his new career in vocational education. Due to work and family commitments, he couldn't pursue full-time study. Ibrahim did not have the financial resources to register in the formal system and there were no scholarships available in his home country.

Ibrahim was undecided about his preferred area for degree study but wanted to combine his work experience and interests with the flexibility to move into new subject areas.

Free access to the learning materials for the OER university (OERu) courses provided a "try before you buy" scenario. Ibrahim decided to start with a Diploma of Arts which offered the flexibility to select first-year degree courses across different disciplines. He chose three business related courses combined with a course in International relations and another in communication skills.

Ibrahim did not have affordable Internet connectivity at home but was able to utilise WikiEducator's features to download offline digital versions of the course study guides. During the week, Ibrahim worked off-line preparing portfolio assignments and noting questions. On Saturday mornings, he visited the local cybercafé, uploaded completed assignments to his online e-portfolio, consulted online discussion forums and posted support questions to the "Academic Volunteers International" website selecting the SMS message feedback option for his learner support questions. Taking the free trial examination, Ibrahim felt he was ready to present himself for assessment. Paying the assessment fee, he submitted his e-portfolio to the University of Southern Queensland in Australia and successfully completed the remote challenge examinations and graduated with the Diploma of Arts -- the first step towards a Bachelor of Transdisciplinary Studies.

Ibrahim decided that he wanted to specialise in vocational education and apply for assessment of prior learning. Using the open support materials provided by the OERu website, Ibrahim prepared a portfolio of his prior experience mapped against the graduate profile of a Diploma in Construction Management (second-year degree level). He presented his assessment for prior learning at Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand and decided to continue his OERu learning in the area of Tertiary Teaching, incorporating third-year bachelor-level subjects. Ibrahim's credits for the Diploma of Arts were recognised under the OERu's approved Transnational Qualifications Framework and he decided to use the assessment services from Otago Polytechnic for his prior learning and tertiary teaching subjects. Ibrahim decided to complete his remaining subjects at the local national university through the conventional system and graduated with a Bachelor of Transdisciplinary Studies (Vocational Education).

Ibrahim Omowale is now Head of Department at his technical college and is leading a strategy aimed at enhancing the professional development of staff throughout the region.

Quick facts

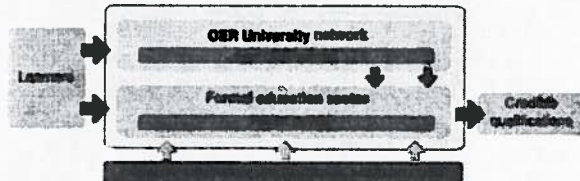
The OER university (OERu):

- aims to widen access and reduce the cost of tertiary study for learners who are **excluded** from the formal education sector;
- is an international **Innovation partnership** of accredited universities, colleges and polytechnics coordinated by the OER Foundation, an independent educational charity;
- **does not confer degrees**, but works in **partnership with accredited educational institutions** who provide assessment and credentialisation services on a fee-for-service basis;
- collaborates with the global WikiEducator network of educators in the formal sector for shared course development;
- is designed to cover the operational cost of institution-based OERu services on a **cost-recovery** basis (or alternate revenue sources).
- will provide pathways for students to achieve **credible credentials** for approved courses based solely on **open education resources (OER)**, that is learning materials that have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others;
- optimises the visibility and impact of the **community service mission** of tertiary education institutions requiring less than 1% of institutional budget allocation of staff time and/or institutional resources.

1. Why is OERu significant?

Existing delivery models cannot address the **growing global demand** for post-secondary education. Many countries do not have the resources to build the number of conventional universities that would be required to meet the future demand for tertiary education.

The OERu is nurturing the development of a sustainable and scalable **OER ecosystem** for the formal sector. The OER university concept aims to create a **parallel learning universe** based solely on OER for **learners excluded from the system** to augment and add value to the formal education sector. These learners may choose to enrol at formal education institutions in the traditional way or participate in free learning provided through the OERu network. **Assessment and credential services** will be provided by participating institutions on a **cost-recovery** basis or may be funded through scholarships or grants from the respective Ministries of Education.



The OER university network will facilitate pathways for OER learners to gain credible credentials from participating institutions who will be formally **accredited Institutions** in their national jurisdictions.

Quality assurance and Institutional accreditation is the **foundation stone** on which this parallel learning universe is based.

The OER university concept must ensure equivalence and parity of esteem for qualifications gained through the OER university network. OER resources and systems used to support the OER university are free for reuse and re-purposing in the formal sector thus contributing to improved efficiencies and **greater return on investment** for participating institutions.

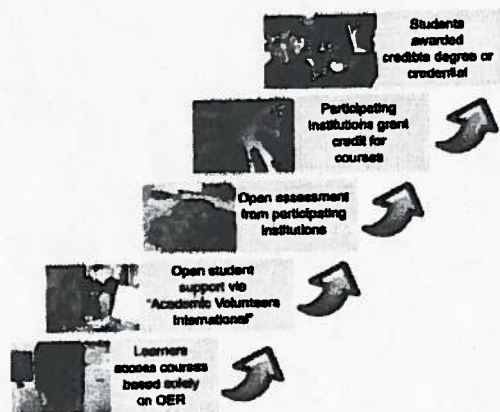
With OER, the marginal cost of replicating digital learning materials is near zero and sharing development costs improves cost efficiencies. The OERu is designed primarily to provide more **affordable access** to post-secondary education for the estimated 100 million learners in the world who are qualified for a seat in tertiary education today, but due to funding issues or lack of tertiary education provision will not be able to gain credible qualifications. The course materials and shared infrastructure of the OERu will also add value to existing tertiary education systems worldwide.

The OERu as a **network of accredited institutions** is able to leverage **significant savings** in the cost and time required for the development and maintenance of OER courses combined with significant efficiency gains when **operating at scale**.

2. How does OERu work?

Individuals are free to learn from digital materials hosted on the open web. The problem is that learners who access digital OERs on the web and acquire knowledge and skills either formally or informally, alone or in groups, cannot readily have their learning assessed and subsequently receive appropriate academic recognition for their efforts.

OERu students will gain **free access to high quality courses** that are designed for independent-study using OER. OERu learners will receive student support through a global network of volunteers and peer support using social software technologies. Students can be **assessed for a fee** by participating institutions and earn a **credible credential**.



The OER university is building a sustainable OER network among **accredited educational institutions** which will provide free learning to **learners excluded** from the formal system with pathways to gain **academic credit** from post-secondary institutions around the world. OERu is founded on the **community service** and outreach missions of tertiary education providers, and develops parallel delivery systems (now possible with the open web and free content licensing of learning materials) to augment existing educational provision.

3. What are the recurrent operational costs?

The OERu is designed to reuse and re-purpose the growing global inventory of free materials and open access publications available for courses.

From an investment-decision perspective, participation in the OERu **does not require new money**, but rather a reallocation of existing staff time to releasing selected development outputs under open content licenses for the OERu network. The OERu model anticipates that no more than 1% of existing budget time would be required for release under open content licenses. The institutional costs of assessment and credentialisation services are recouped on a **cost-recovery basis** from student fees and/or other sources. **Shared infrastructure** and coordination for the OERu collaboration activities are provided by the OER Foundation.

4. What are the benefits?

The OERu is the means by which education at all levels can be more **accessible**, more **affordable** and more **efficient**.

For individuals, OER can facilitate access to the world's best quality learning materials while at the same time demonstrating huge potential for lowering the cost of study through the OERu and open textbook initiatives. The OERu facilitates **international thought leadership** and networking for new models of financial sustainability and growth for institutions. Using OERu approaches, institutions can lower cost and save time required to produce high quality courses with untapped potential to target underserved markets and to diversify curriculum offerings especially for low enrolment courses in a cost-effective way. Governments and whole education systems can improve the return on taxpayer dollars by providing the systemic incentives to support tiered OERu services.

Through WikiEducator, one of the world's largest and most productive educational wiki communities, participating institutions will raise their international profiles. OERu will enable institutions to fulfill their community service mission, engender meaningful participation in mainstream OER programs, and enhance the sustainability of higher education through economic development.

5. How to become an anchor partner?

Prospective OERu partners are invited to join the **OER Foundation** as **silver or gold contributing members** to support the operational costs of the network. The gold-level membership of USD5,000 is recommended as this includes a minimal staff time contribution. Multi-year membership discounts are available and the network facilitates collaborative proposals for donor funding support. Contributing members participate actively in the management and decision-making processes of the OERu.

For more information: Contact Dr Wayne Mackintosh, email: wayne@oerfoundation.org

Recommended links: [OERu report](#) | [OERu homepage](#) | [OERu Logic model](#) | [FAQs](#) | [Inaugural planning meeting](#) | [International media](#) | [OER Foundation](#)



The Open Education Resource (OER) Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that provides leadership, international networking and support for educators and educational institutions to achieve their objectives through Open Education.
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