Harnessing Open Educational Resources in Teacher Education in Zimbabwe: The Case Study of Zimbabwe Open University.

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Introduction

• As economic hardships continue to pierce their sting into every sector of life in Africa, the need to learn while earning is rocking the hearts of many. This paper seeks to assess the importance of harnessing Open Educational Resources (OER) in teacher education with special reference to Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The paper will start by giving the background of the study and then move on to the definition of OER. After this the paper will give a history of OER and thereafter look at the importance or benefits of using OER in teacher education. The paper will end by giving recommendations on the use of OER.
Objectives

• Examine the importance of OER in teacher education
• Assess the extend to which ZOU is using OER
• Examine the role played by ZOU in teacher education

Methodology

• Documentary analysis, focus group interviews and personal observations were found appropriate for this study. The methods allowed the researcher to investigate the importance of harnessing OER in teacher education in Zimbabwe. The study examined the staff and students’ perspectives and understanding of OER in ODL materials at ZOU.
Significance of the study

• This study becomes vital in so far as it contributes to policy makers in higher education on the shift of teaching approaches from teacher-centred to learner-centred learning.
• It provides information about the effectiveness of using OER in teacher education in Zimbabwe
• The study helped the researcher by navigating through the importance of a fast growing method of information dissemination in a country experiencing economic hardships.

Background of the study

• The educational system in Zimbabwe after independence has been helping people to acquire competences, knowledge and skills they needed as individuals in the political, economic, social and cultural life.
• As economic hardships were continuously affecting all circles of life in the country, learning within the conventional institutions was becoming almost impossible.
• Upon realising that the traditional learning opportunities are no longer adequate to equip teachers and learners with the competences to become critical and discerning people,
**Background cont’d**

ZOU was established in 1999 to harness new paradigms in teacher educational systems.

- The major aim of ZOU was to provide learners with affordable learning opportunities.
- At its inception, ZOU had only one faculty but now due to economic hardships it has four faculties which are all in full swing in so far as the use of OER is concerned.
- Currently the university has 11 Regional centres countrywide.
- It is in light of this background that this paper intends to assess the importance of OER in teacher education in Zimbabwe as they are fostered by ZOU.

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**Defining of OER**

- There is no universally and authoritatively accredited definition of OER. However, attempts have been made to come up with different definitions of OER.
- The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation defined OER as:

> the teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. OER include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge
Definition cont’d

• The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defined OER as:
  *digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students, and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning, and research. This includes learning content, software tools to develop, use, and distribute content, and implementation resources such as open license.*

• The working definition of OER in this paper is that Open Educational Resources (OER) are materials for teaching and learning, software-based tools and services, and licences that allow open development and reuse of content, tools and services.

Harnessing OER in teacher education at ZOU

• There are a number of OER models that are being fostered by ZOU in its teaching and learning methodologies. To cater for foreign-based students in the region, continent and Diaspora, ZOU established ZOU Online in 2009. The Unit was tasked to download all ZOU modules then send them online to all students in the 11 Regional Centres who would access the content online and in ZOU libraries.
Harnessing OER cont’d

- To quote ZOU website:
  
  *ZOU is a global power house in the field of virtual education. The university is everywhere, radiating from the circuits of your computer, promising educational betterment at the touch of a button.*

- ZOU has the best online distance learning facilities and provides quality education to thousands of students within the country, regionally, and abroad ([www.zou.ac.zw](http://www.zou.ac.zw)).

- The other OER models used by ZOU include the production of modules, tapes, radio, television, compact disks, you tube facilities, tutorial letters and hand outs that were and are made readily available to students upon registration.

Benefits of using OER

- The benefits of OER include reducing social inequalities, fostering social inclusion, and improving teacher education in Zimbabwe.

- Additionally, when used in didactically sound ways, software-based tools, services and multimedia allow innovative educational practices to emerge. eg, new educational opportunities may arise in a digitally enhanced collaboration between teachers and learners.

- From a pedagogical perspective, OER promote self-directed learning and there is much potential for collaborative knowledge development which abandon the teacher-centred paradigm of education.
Benefits of OER cont’d

• OER originator benefit from student or user feedback and open peer review. Further, he or she gains reputation and recognition
• ZOU staff benefit from availability of quality peer reviewed materials which enhance their knowledge and skills on how to produce content on OER
• The institution itself (ZOU) get recognition and enhanced reputation for their output
• have capacity to support greater numbers of students and share ideas and resources with other institutions.

Benefits of OER cont’d

• Other institutions make use of ZOU modules, taps and compact discs thereby putting ZOU at a better map in so far as education is concerned.
• The other benefit of OER is that they help people to acquire the competences, knowledge and skills needed to participate successfully within the political, economic, social and cultural realms of societies.
• OER create digital competences for the knowledge society beyond ICT through making available tools and content that allows learners to develop their critical thinking and creativity.
Benefits of OER cont’d

- OER enriches learners with quite a vast pool of information which they will use for the smooth running of the society at large and organisations in particular.
- OER effectively equip students with the competences and skills for personal and professional achievements.
- As expressed by ZOU students, OER offer a broader range of subjects and topics to chose from and allow for more flexibility in choosing material for teaching and learning, that is content that can be easily modified and integrated in course material.

Challenges faced by ZOU in harnessing OER

- Despite the attractiveness of OER, it has a number of challenges. Some of these are lack of awareness of copyright issues, quality assurance and sustainability of OER initiatives.
- Some authors might not want to lose their rights even if they allow use of their materials.
- Some users might not be able to judge on “quality and relevance” of OER materials.
- On sustainability, there is competition for funding, some funds cease after some years. There is, therefore, need to find funding that will sustain OER initiatives in the long-run.
Challenges cont’d

• The problem of lack of copyright awareness might also be a serious issue at ZOU if some module writers fail to acknowledge sources from which they obtain some material for the modules.
• At ZOU, there is need to train staff in the technical aspects and use of software packages in OER.
• Staff should be convinced of the benefits of OER and ascertain whether or not the materials they are using can be remixed.

Recommendations

ZOU should:
• provide training opportunities to academics, writers and students
• maintain standards and review modules to include current global trends across the board using OER authentic materials peer reviewed by experts
• contract writers with genuine qualifications and experience of preparing ODL materials using OER for the benefit of the user
• Encourage student involvement in the creation, maintenance, and upgrading of OER
• make higher education-based OER materials available in multiple languages on a variety range
Conclusion

• It is true that there have been changes in higher education that have come about because of the availability of the Internet and the development of ICT let alone OER in Zimbabwe. These changes, particularly regarding the teaching and learning mission, are pervasive than in conventional universities. This paper has examined the importance or benefits of harnessing OER in teacher education by ZOU. The paper managed to define OER, gave a brief history OER and provided the challenges and recommendations on the use of OER.