

The Economics of OERu

Creating a sustainable future for higher education

Around the world, fiscal sustainability is a consistent concern for teaching and non-teaching academic institutions. While profitability may not be the primary driver, most institutions understand the significance of the rising costs of day-to-day operations, and that, in many cases, these increases are being passed along to students and learners.

Dr. Wayne Mackintosh, Open Education Resource Foundation Director and UNESCO/ICDE Chair in OER, explains that “over the last decade, in most industrialized countries of the world, the cost of education to learners has consistently surpassed the inflation index. Clearly, such systems are not sustainable in the long term.”

Open Educational Resources (OER) can be an effective way to mitigate the increasing costs of learning, especially when they’re used to assemble online courses. The Open Education Resource universitas (OERu) was established to connect learners around the world with no-cost resources they can use to improve their education, with pathways to recognised qualifications.

“There’s nothing but opportunity in store for OER – the disruption in higher education that we’re facing now will fuel opportunities for more and more faculty and students to be aware of what’s possible in the open space,” highlights Mary Burgess, Executive Director for BCcampus and member of the OER Foundation Board. “An open movement that builds upon, and is iterative in terms of content improvement, brings innovation and improves the quality of learning for the students and the faculty.”

Professor Clive Mulholland, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Highlands and Islands, shares that “from an administrative perspective, educators reduce costs to the institution by using OER as a foundation, and building their curricula around these programs that have already been developed. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel.”

The Business of Learning

“The [OERu open business model](#) outlines the benefits of the collaborative use of open source technologies and Creative Commons licensing,” explains Emeritus Professor Jim Taylor, member of the Board of the Open Education Resource Foundation, and Honorary Fellow of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), “empowering learners to make an effective transition to higher education, thereby enabling institutions to meet community service targets, enhance cost efficiency, and build sustainability.”

“OER is the means by which education at all levels can be more accessible, more affordable, and more efficient.”

~Phil Ker, CEO Otago Polytechnic

For Dr. David Porter, Chief Executive Officer at eCampus Ontario and member of the OER Foundation Board, there's a tremendous opportunity for institutions to use the 'give away the razor, sell the blades' approach to achieve revenue through the OER model: "Sharing OER courses for free through OERu enables learners to get started on a credential pathway," shared Dr. Porter, "but the bigger play is to develop a new channel to market for the institutions' other programs and courses, which leads to exposure at the global level and helps attract students from a wider catchment area."

The Value of OERu

The OERu provides a low-risk vehicle to gain authentic experience in the use of open source cloud services and open source development practices from leading practitioners in the field. For example, the lead software engineer for OERu is the president of the [New Zealand Open Source Software Society](#).

By offering OER courses, assembled by recognized institutions from around the world and delivered online to learners interested in self-improvement, the OERu is facilitating a first-class, accessible education to everyone, no matter where they live, their background, or their financial position.


The OERu innovation network has recently launched its Outreach Partnership Programme, whereby qualifying institutions in the developing world can become an OERu Participating Partner for free. The Outreach Partnership Programme seeks to widen access to open online learning materials for post-secondary learners for whom conventional higher education is out of reach, for financial or access reasons.

"Institutions possessing a social good mission can harness the resources available through OERu to help learners in communities wherever they may be," asserts Phil Ker, CEO of Otago Polytechnic. "Innovative institutions can go beyond the regional boundaries traditional tertiary leaders look to, and make a difference beyond their borders."

The OERu is entering the next phase of its development, scaling its operations up to support more learners, implementing a first year of study with stackable micro-credentials with pathways to achieve academic credit towards university qualifications.

Becoming an OERu partner connects innovative institutions with a global network – over 30 partners from five continents and a dozen countries – at minimal cost and nominal risk, with a massive and positive impact for learners and educators around the world.

"Many educators believe in expanding affordable access to higher education, but what may be difficult for institutions to deliver individually becomes possible through active participation in the OER universitas (OERu) international innovation partnership." ~ Emeritus Professor Jim Taylor.



"OERu is filled with people who 'get it', which makes it easier to move past inherent biases. We're working together to achieve something that's valuable to education on a global scale."

~Dr. Alan Davis, President and Vice-Chancellor, Kwantlen Polytechnic University