

Q&A

5 things you should know about the ...

OER universitas



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 of the OER universitas (OERu) network 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

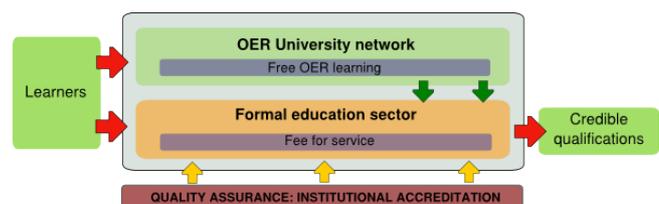
The **OERu**:

- aims to widen access to affordable tertiary study for **learners** who are **excluded** from the formal education sector;
- 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;
- is an **international innovation partnership** of accredited universities, colleges, polytechnics and teaching agencies from five continents coordinated by the **OER Foundation**, an independent educational charity;
- is a designated project of the UNESCO – Commonwealth of Learning OER chair network
- **does not confer degrees**, but works in **partnership with accredited educational institutions** who provide assessment and credentialing 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).
- 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 OERu concept aims to create a **parallel learning universe** whereby partner institutions assemble courses from existing OER to provide free learning opportunities 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 OER university network. **Assessment and credentialing services** are 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 are 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 OERu concept must ensure equivalence and parity of esteem for qualifications gained through the OERu network. OER resources and systems used to support the OERu are free for reuse and re-purposing in the formal sector thus contributing to improved efficiencies and **greater return on investment** for participating institutions.

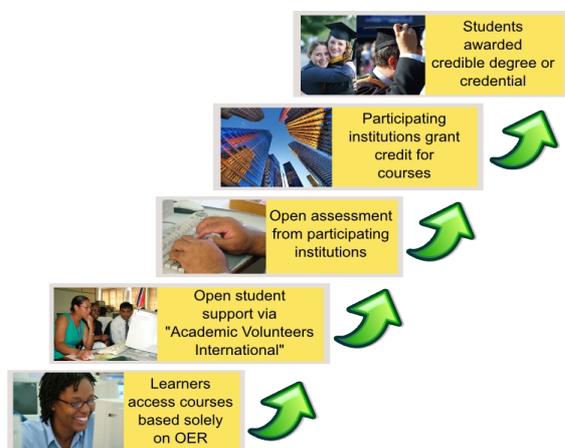
With OER, the marginal cost of replicating digital learning materials is near zero and sharing development costs improves cost efficiencies. The OERu is designed primarily to provide more **affordable access** to post-secondary education for the estimated 100 million learners in the world who will qualify for a seat in tertiary education, 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 learners 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 OERu is building a sustainable and scalable OER network among **accredited educational institutions**. 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.

4. What is the business model?

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 assemble two courses using existing OER and open access materials.

The OER Foundation's central infrastructure costs, for developing and hosting free courses, are funded from institutional membership fees. Learners pay assessment fees to OERu partners to cover recurrent operational costs for credentialing services. As a non-profit organisation, any surplus revenue is invested back into charitable activities for the benefit of the network. For example, the commissioned development of new OERu courses.

Participating institutions are required to join the **OER Foundation as silver or gold contributing members** to support the operational costs of the Foundation. The gold-level membership of USD4,000 per annum (after multi-year discount) is recommended as this includes a minimal staff time contribution. Contributing members participate in the open management and decision-making processes for the OERu.

Member institutions participate in the OERu Council of Chief Executive Officers. The Council oversees strategic planning for the OERu and functions as an assembly of senior leaders called together for consultation on strategic higher education futures in the open education arena.

5. 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 open education 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.

Based on our research, the top three reasons why organisations join the OERu network are:

1. to participate in an international network of "like-minded" institutions
2. to participate in the philanthropic mission of widening access to more affordable education, especially for learners excluded from the formal higher education sector
3. to retain a competitive advantage as open education approaches become more mainstream.

Recommended links:

[OERu website](#) | [Prospective partners](#) | [FAQs](#) | [International media](#)

For more information:

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

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