

# The 2016 *OER Africa* Convening:

## Report of Proceedings

### Overview

The 2016 *OER Africa* Convening was held on 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2016, in Nairobi, Kenya. Representatives from institutions participating in the current *OER Africa* Institutional Engagement grant, identified experts from around the world, and members of the *OER Africa* team came together to explore the two key themes of pedagogical transformation and participatory action research. The Convening also provided institutional partners, time to consolidate lessons learned to date and integrate them into the planning for the remainder of the grant.

The convening format comprised a combination of interventions by experts, presentations and reflections on project activities, and plenary/group engagements of different kinds designed to stimulate critical conversation and lead to deeper insights that might then feed back into grant implementation.

A brief overview of the expert presentations is tabulated below.

| Presentation   | Primary Themes   |
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| 1) <i>Overview of OER Africa Institutional Engagement Grant</i><br>Catherine Ngugi, <i>OER Africa</i>                                  | Introduced participants to <i>OER Africa</i> , its mission, its history, and some of its achievements.<br>Provided an overview of the context of higher education in Africa as a background to explaining the logic behind the current <i>OER Africa</i> grant and its activities.   |
| 2) <i>Key Note: Higher Education in Africa: The Need for Pedagogical Transformation</i><br>Prof. Ahmed Bawa, Universities South Africa | Explored the in-built conservatism of universities in relation to the ongoing ruptures in societies across the continent.<br>Reflected on the imperative that education is at the heart of the transformation and a key way to challenge social inequality.<br>Noted that if the university is to successfully tackle the challenges of socioeconomic inequality and the need to building societies that are more socially just, we must address the (needs of) the students we have – and not those we wish we had. (Slides / video clips available). |
| 3) <i>Key Note: Exploring “Open Pedagogy”</i><br>Prof. David Wiley, Lumen Learning   | Focused on the importance of students ‘doing things’ as central to effective education and the ways in which open licensing (‘Free Plus the 5R Permissions’) enables/supports this.<br>Explored various practical examples of how openness makes new, more effective pedagogies possible in ways that cannot be achieved without ‘open pedagogy’.<br>(Slides / video clips available).   |
| 4) <i>Key Note: Action research as</i>   | Introduced participants to a profiling tool and methodology  |

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| <p><i>innovative means to self-study:<br/>A quest for 'thinking out of my box'!</i><br/>Prof. Pieter du Toit,<br/>University of Pretoria</p> | <p>developed at University of Pretoria that helps to characterize different cognitive preferences of individuals and what this demonstrates about the research preferences of different types of students/academics across disciplines.<br/>Explored understandings of Action Research and Participatory Action Research and their potential value in university research, within the context of the presented profiling tool/methodology.<br/>(Slides / video clips available).</p> |
| <p>5) <i>Reflections on the OER Africa PAR Agenda to date</i><br/>Neil Butcher, <i>OER Africa</i></p>  | <p>Provided an overview of key lessons emerging from work done in the current <i>OER Africa</i> Grant, noting that there is evidence growing interest in open licensing and establishing supportive policy environments for open licensing, but still limited understanding of the concept of OER beyond its 'champions' and several institutional impediments to harnessing OER practices to support pedagogical transformation.</p>  |

The presentations set a context for a workshop that used a wide range of methods to encourage and stimulate discussion and debate. These included:

- 1) Institutional presentations to enable institutional participants to share their experiences and learn lessons from one another.
- 2) Dedicated institutional working group sessions, aimed at exploring the two key themes of the Convening Workshop and discussing how the issues being discussed in the Workshop might influence their future plans.
- 3) A stylized debate session with the proposition that 'Pedagogical Transformation is not a priority in African universities given the host of logistical, resourcing, and capacity challenges we face in higher education (HE) in Africa', intended to stimulate discussion on how practical it is to focus on pedagogical transformation in African universities.
- 4) Group discussion on the concept of Participatory Action Research and its relative applicability in researching the -effectiveness of pedagogical transformation efforts.
- 5) Plenary discussion sessions to explore emerging concepts and issues arising from the presentations and other sessions.
- 6) A panel session to reflect on the outcomes of the Convening Workshop.

Discussions during the course of the two days were vibrant, with all participants contributing valuable observations and insights, but with many also remarking on the value of a dedicated space to explore issues of common concern. Though the discussion was too wide-ranging and detailed to do justice in a brief workshop report, below is a summary of key observations made throughout the course of the two days:

## Pedagogical Transformation

The workshop reflected, both explicitly and implicitly, on the meaning of 'pedagogical transformation'. It was noted that pedagogical transformation may have different meanings in different contexts, and that it should not be limited to focusing only on very recent educational innovations made possible by technology or concepts like open licensing. It was also noted that different pedagogies are required for different educational objectives and across different disciplines. Thus, the definition of 'good' or 'effective' pedagogy may also need to be contextually specific. In many cases, pedagogical transformation may simply be limited to effecting improvements in basic pedagogical practices in order to ensure the effectiveness of a particular course or programme in teaching its core curriculum.

Viewed in isolation, many such changes may not be defined as especially 'transformative', but when viewed comparatively in relation to the pedagogical practices before this change, the transformation might be significant. However, participants also discussed at length the limitations of 'business as usual' at universities, noting that many long-standing educational practices have been rendered redundant by the very rapid change occurring within our societies. It was acknowledged that much of this change is driven by technology, but also that various technological innovations in pedagogy hold significant potential for solving some of the problems facing academics in their course provision.

There was much discussion and debate about the challenges of implementing pedagogical transformations of different kinds at African universities, given capacity and funding constraints, the strong emphasis in many institutions on research over teaching and learning, administrative and management problems, ever-increasing administrative bureaucracy burdens, and the pressure on staff caused by large numbers of enrolled students in many courses and programmes. Notwithstanding this, workshop participants affirmed that ongoing pedagogical transformation remains a key priority for African universities, both to improve the quality of the educational experience for students and to ensure that higher education programmes remain relevant to rapidly changing societies and economies.

Given the above, the keynote presentation made by David Wiley resonated particularly with participants in relation to the concept of pedagogical transformation, as it provided concrete examples of how creative use of the affordances of open licences can support a transformative pedagogy. These examples demonstrated how a relatively simple concept like open licensing can be harnessed to design and implement creative, engaging learning environments for students that will contribute meaningfully to developing the kinds of '21<sup>st</sup> century skills' that are increasingly requirements for success after graduation.

## Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The concept of PAR and how it might be integrated with activities harnessing OER practices to support pedagogical transformation was a major consideration of the convening proceedings. All participants recognized value in PAR methods and considered that it is important to continuously research the effectiveness of pedagogical transformation activities; participants were clear that such research was the only way to understand whether or not implemented changes actually lead to an improved educational experience for students.

In regard to the above, a key issue raised is that research into teaching and learning is, for many academics (and especially those in disciplines outside education), not especially compelling as it does little to advance their careers. Academics noted that, in most universities, research tends to be a somewhat individualized process. This is because, a key rationale for undertaking research is to advance personal careers rather than to contribute to an institutional research agenda (and the latter often do not exist in relation to pedagogical transformation efforts). Thus, although there have been some positive developments, it has proven difficult to implement a systematic PAR agenda around teaching and learning at all partner universities.

Given how important it is to be able to understand the impact of pedagogical transformation on the educational experience for students, a renewed commitment to engage further with PAR was made, and this fed into institutional planning sessions at the workshop. Indeed, the Convening provided an excellent space for university participants to interact, both internally and across institutions. The participants noted how valuable it was to them to have dedicated time away from day-to-day institutional pressures to plan the way forward. Each institution came up with concrete plans on at least some aspect of their engagement with *OER Africa*. A brief summary of these plans is presented below.

## **Institutional Plans around PAR and Pedagogical Transformation**

### **African Nazarene University (ANU)**

It was observed that there had been limited progress on the ANU research agenda previously agreed. Seven key focus areas were identified:

- 1) Ascertaining who is using OER at ANU and how. It was observed that a casual inspection of materials uploaded to eNaz illustrates great diversity: no or few materials uploaded; notes, summaries, handouts only uploaded; and extensive uploading of digital resources from the Internet - but not always clear these are OER (also including copyrighted materials).
- 2) Evidence of impact of OER integration/changed pedagogy. We would hope that, after we have worked on a course or set of materials to improve it, student retention and pass rates would improve, students' performance would improve, and student and staff satisfaction would increase. It is not yet clear the extent to which the current continuing professional development (CPD) programme is contributing to this kind of understanding.
- 3) Formal research in the form of post-graduate studies, articles published, case studies written, papers delivered that relate to OER and/or improved pedagogy.
- 4) Student take-up and satisfaction with OER. It is understood that this is central to Eric Osoro's study, but, since he is paying for his own studies, it is an individual rather than an institutional output.
- 5) Library holdings/capacity/curating of OER (this is a new area that might usefully be written up and linked to OpenANU).
- 6) A write up of the CPD programme would be something worth sharing; and in time a meta-analysis of trends across the various studies.
- 7) Research into trends in student demographics will be important for future planning.

### **Onderstepoort (OP)**

The Convening institutional planning meetings turned out to be very useful as it was the first time a new leadership team had assembled since the previous OP project liaison had departed. The planning identified ways that PAR could be used to ascertain the role of OER might play in transforming Veterinary Science 2<sup>nd</sup> year teaching. Previously, a traditional approach had recently been replaced by block teaching and this was seen as an opportunity to investigate the transformative impact of OER. While a research agenda had already been devised, the research was struggling to find a champion under the new leadership. During the planning such a strategy was devised and leads identified.

### **Open University of Tanzania (OUT)**

Thinking has been consolidated during the Convening around the way forward with regard to the OUT project goals.

- Following the pilot course conversion to OER experience, revise the process to include pedagogical transformation; increased liaison with quality assurance (QA) directorate.

- Build a case study around the Digital Fluency course development process from concept to publishing.
- Institutional repository: Propagate Institutional Awareness and feedback/input via:
  - Development of a video clip on the institutional repository and its function and purpose and launch it formally at OUT;
  - Development of guidelines on how to use library services (identify stakeholders);
  - Analytics of the use of the repository to inform open access provision.
- Generate Monitoring and Evaluation research project on:
  - Awareness and capacity building on OER at OUT;
  - Implementation and impact of OER policy and activities at OUT.
- Cross cutting recommendation: OER Africa could publish a book on various activities / projects of the various institutions to share achievements and challenges experienced during this grant period.

## **University of the Free State (UFS)**

Planning discussions focused on the current UFS Student Success Portal and its envisaged transformation into an open platform that can be accessed by students from all universities. Planning focused on: how to migrate the current portal from its present home in Blackboard onto an open platform and ensure that it can be openly licensed; working with faculty Teaching and Learning managers to embed its use into existing modules and programmes; and how to design and implement a PAR projects into the implementation of the portal in order to measure its impact and effectiveness.

## **Some conclusions:**

The focus of the *OER Africa 2016 Convening* was directed towards the work of the current grant which is highly exploratory in nature. It comprises a three-year process of deepening the understanding of *OER Africa* and its partners around how transformed pedagogies can positively impact the student experience in Africa's universities. OER and improved access to and use of ICTs as tools for Teaching and Learning, affords numerous and complex opportunities for improved pedagogies. Equally, they provide an opportunity to digitise and embed poor practices and maintain or indeed worsen the status quo. An important aspect of the 2016 Convening was, accordingly, to remind ourselves that the work of Teaching and Learning in Africa's universities is of global as well as local importance.

According to the African Development Bank,<sup>1</sup> with almost 200 million people aged between 15 and 24, Africa has the youngest population in the world. It is a population that faces extreme challenges in the workplace, either because suitable jobs do not exist or, because of a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/article/youth-employment-in-africa-under-the-spotlight-14584/>

skills mismatch between graduates of higher education and the needs of the market and indeed of the academy. For these reasons, how those of us operating within Africa's higher education systems do our work – however constrained our circumstances – has the potential to impact, for better or for worse, the socio-economic future of not just the communities or the countries within which we operate, but that of the entire continent. This was the very serious message underlying Prof. Ahmed Bawa's key note and a point not lost on any of the participants.

In his address to the 2016 Convening, Prof. David Wiley of Lumen Learning made reference to the importance of learner support and demonstrated how OER had facilitated some of his students to first believe that they could succeed; and then to work at succeeding; and then to achieve success. For David, this *is* the job of higher education. It is a job that rests on understanding who our students are – what those particular individual students need in order to succeed in higher education – and which of those needs are within our hands to address through our own knowledge, through the provision of relevant materials and through the practice of appropriate pedagogies.

Finally, as noted by one participant, in this fast-changing world, it is not only students who require the best possible support to ensure they have a good chance of not merely access to education but educational and social success; it is also faculty. Few academics outside of faculties of education receive systematic training and support in teaching their own disciplines. As we continue to work on our institutional projects which focus on the kinds of pedagogical transformations that can improve student outcomes, it would behove us to also consider how best to institutionalise the kinds of policies and practices that will support faculty to continually innovate not only in their research but also in their teaching.