

Open Educational Resources in Canada 2020

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Abstract

COVID 19 has had a wide impact on education internationally and specifically in Canada, with nearly all institutions now transitioning to online education, with many learning for the first time about Open Educational Resources (OER). Understanding what is happening with OER in the different regions of our country is one step in creating awareness and promoting national networks for sharing resources, serving to address local educational needs. Educators can assemble, adopt, adapt, design, and develop OER-based courses that can cost-effectively address the needs of Canadian students. This paper describes OER-related initiatives and implementations across Canada that can serve as examples to educators and administrators, who because of COVID 19, are offering online courses for the first time.

Introduction

While there was previous activity in Canada in support of open and free courses, it was the 2012 UNESCO Paris Declaration on OER (UNESCO, 2012) that stimulated significant open educational resources (OER) initiatives in Canada. The Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) in 2013 supported OER to enhance learning and accessibility. The ministers were also influenced by the United States government's support for opening access to publicly funded publications. The international OERu consortium has also been active in Canada, with members in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario. Creative Commons in the USA and the Open Education Consortium (now renamed Open Education Global - OEG) also participated in discussions, promoting OER in the western provinces. OEG also held an international conference on OER in Alberta in 2015, where the Alberta OER initiative (Alberta OER, n. d.) was first announced. Previously, Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan had signed The Memorandum of Understanding on Open Educational Resources (Alberta Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education, British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, & Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, 2014). They declared a wish to collaborate on the development of common OER within their respective advanced education sectors. They also recognized the benefits of sharing existing OER with a focus on mutual areas of interest.

BCcampus has been the Canadian leader in promoting the use of OER, and now houses a repository of more than 300 OER textbooks (BCcampus, n. d.). Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU)

in Vancouver has also been a leader with its establishment of the Zed-Cred programme (since renamed Zero Textbook Cost or ZTC), made up of full OER programmes in which there are no textbook fees (BCcampus, 2017).

With awareness of OER growing at Athabasca University, the Graduate Students' Association wrote a report on OER (Coffin, 2012), which was used by student groups to lobby the Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education (Government of Alberta, n. d.) for OER support. This lobbying, along with that supported by the UNESCO/Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Chair in OER, convinced the ministry officials to support a symposium for higher education leaders on OER. Invited speakers included the UNESCO/COL Chair, student representatives, as well as Creative Commons and BCcampus personnel. This symposium was followed with the Department's support for the \$3 million Alberta OER initiative, which was a three-year government funded programme designed to assist with reducing the costs of post-secondary education for students, while providing students and faculty members with the flexibility they need, offering updated, relevant content for learning (Alberta, n. d.).

The University of Saskatchewan (USask) has also begun implementing OER. USask has provided funding to faculty for the creation and implementation of OER (University of Saskatchewan, 2020). Likewise, in the Maritimes, the University of Prince Edward Island has also begun implementing OER by providing faculty with grants (University of Prince Edward Island Robertson Library, 2020).

Contact North/Contact Nord (n. d.) in Ontario led the support for OER in that province, sponsoring a series of webinars and on-campus workshops on OER. They hosted the 27th ICDE World Conference in Toronto in 2017, with an emphasis on open learning (International Council for Open and Distance Education, 2017). Prior to the conference, Maxim Jean-Louis, CEO of Contact North, was in contact with the Ontario Minister of Higher Education as they were initiating the founding of eCampus Ontario (eCampus Ontario, n. d.). Later, they hired Dr David Porter, the founder of BCcampus as CEO of the eCampus, with a clear message of support for OER. Dr Porter had been advising the Ministry and organizations in Ontario based on his BCcampus experiences. Since then, eCampus Ontario has proven success in several OER initiatives. The Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University has also been an Ontario OER leader, being the first Ontario university to join the OERu (Ryerson University Chang School of Continuing Education, n. d.).

There has been very little OER activity in Quebec. Although, an OER declaration was released by the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie at a meeting in Moncton in 2013 (Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, n. d). This created some interest in Quebec, but with no specific government or institutional commitments, although some organizations like THOT - CURSUS (THOT-CURSUS, n. d.) were adding Ressources éducatives libres (REL) to their repositories. Concordia University, an anglophone institution in Quebec also began a grant program for supporting OER initiatives by faculty (Concordia, 2020).

OER Policies

To date, there are no policies on OER in any province/territory, nor in any institution in Canada. Moreover, OER were not worthy of mention in a major report on post-secondary education in Canada released in August 2018 (Usher, 2018). Since then there have been two reports on online learning in Canada that do refer to significant growth in OER implementations in many Canadian institutions (Canadian Digital Learning Research Association, 2018 & 2019).

Although not a policy, reference should be made to the University of British Columbia's *Guide to Reappointment Promotion and Tenure Procedures*, where evidence of inclusion of content in *open repositories/resources* has become part of the criteria for promotion in the Education Leadership stream (UBC, 2020). Also, the Registry of Open Access Repositories reports on 23 institutions and organizations in Canada that have open access policies, beginning with Athabasca University (AU) in 2006 (Registry of Open Access Repositories, n. d.).

Whilst there are no policy commitments by any government in Canada, several provincial governments have provided funding for OER initiatives. The British Columbia (BC) government was the first to do so and is continuing to provide ongoing financial support to BCcampus to finance OER initiatives at higher education institutions within the province. The Zed-Cred or ZTC programme, led by Kwantlen Polytechnic University, supports OER to create full degrees for students with no cost for textbooks (BCcampus, 2017). The Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development created eCampus Ontario in 2016, which financially supports OER initiatives (eCampus Ontario, n. d.). This support has been ongoing. The Alberta (AB) Ministry of Advanced Education in 2014 supported a major OER initiative with a \$3 million grant. This initiative led to more than 30 OER projects and has brought savings to students and institutions of millions of dollars. The province of Manitoba (MB) also opened a limited open textbook initiative with Campus Manitoba. It consists of reviewing and adapting BCcampus open texts for local use.

OER mandates are not a requirement in any jurisdiction in Canada. However, OER produced under grant-supported OER initiatives in BC, Alberta, and Ontario must be licensed as Creative Commons - Attribution enabling online sharing of OER that have been created. Further, *crown copyright* generally allows for the free educational use of content, and the ability of educational institutions to freely use government publications.

Educational materials produced by the provinces and the federal government are restrictively licensed using crown copyright. This generally (but not always) allows for the free educational use of content, but the different provinces have their own versions, which although similar, are not the same. Several federal government departments have removed *non-commercial* restrictions so there is a trend towards more openness allowing government documents to be freely used by both public and private sector organizations. The relevant federal legislation is the Copyright Act, Section 12 (Justice, 1985), which applies to all works "prepared or published by or under the direction or control of Her Majesty or any government department." This is called crown copyright and is perpetual.

To date, the principal mechanism for the sharing of OER, at least as textbooks or courses would be BCcampus Open Ed, which is a repository for storing these OER. Alberta, Manitoba, and eCampus Ontario have agreed to share their OER textbooks etc. and/or partner with BCcampus on improving and enhancing this repository. The Open Textbook Library of eCampus Ontario is also partnering with BCcampus and Manitoba on developing systems and cooperating processes for reviewing and adopting online textbooks.

An issue of major importance in promoting OER is that of raising awareness among students and faculty in Canada. Even after more than 15 years of activity, OER are still not commonly known in institutions and governments. There is thus an obvious need for more campaigns to raise awareness that could include local, provincial, and national conferences focusing on OER issues.

A side issue, but which seems to be having some effect on OER acceptance in Canada, is the

large and liberal interpretation of fair dealing by the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC, 2012), combined with the addition of *education* as one of the uses for which fair dealing applies in the Copyright Modernization Act (CMA, 2012). Because of these changes, faculty, and institutions at all levels of education are now able to make reasonable use of substantial portions of copyright-restricted content. There is a wide range of restrictively licensed educational content in various forms such as print, online text, video, podcasts, games, etc. that are reasonably accessible to students without the need for special permissions. These users do not check for an open licence and simply make educational use of whatever content is accessible and so do not see the urgency of adopting openly licensed content.

OER Use and Adoption in Canada

Canada has several initiatives supporting OER use and adoption. These are described briefly below:

OpenEd: <https://open.bccampus.ca/>

An initiative of BCcampus, this BC Open Textbook project is a repository of more than 300 openly licensed textbooks. The initiative is funded by the BC government.

ABOER: <http://albertaoer.com/>

In the Alberta OER initiative involving higher education institutions in Alberta, the Ministry of Advanced Education provided \$3 million for OER initiatives in post-secondary institutions. There were more than 30 OER textbooks created.

Open Textbook Initiative (Manitoba): <https://openedmb.ca/>

This initiative at Campus Manitoba aims to adapt open textbooks from the BC OpenEd repository for use in Manitoba institutions. To date they have adapted more than 10 texts. The initiative is funded by the Manitoba government.

Open Publishing Infrastructure: <https://www.ecampusontario.ca/open-education-resources/>

This is a joint eCampus Ontario/Ryerson University initiative to build an open source infrastructure supporting the creation of open textbooks. This project has supported the creation, adoption, and adaptation of OER textbooks and has been funded by the Ontario government.

OERu (Canadian partners): <https://oeru.org/>

Canadian partners at OERu are Athabasca University, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Thompson Rivers University, Chang School at Ryerson University, Contact North, and BCcampus. OERu is an international initiative with more than 30 partners on five continents. Its goal is to provide OER pathways as courses leading to official credentials free of charge. Students pay only for the assessment services if they want official credit for their achievement. The first-year online initiative is now underway. More than ten thousand students in over 60 countries have participated. The initiative is funded by the OER Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, and participants.

Commonwealth Education Hub: <https://www.thecommonwealth-educationhub.net/oer/>

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), based in Vancouver, is an international association supporting distance education in the Commonwealth countries. It has partnered with UNESCO in

promoting OER internationally in support of the UNESCO Strategic Development Goals, particularly, SDG4: Education for All. COL also provides aid in open education policy creation by governments and institutions as well as information on implementing OER initiatives. It is funded by the countries of the Commonwealth of Nations.

UNESCO/ICDE Chair in OER: <https://unescochair.athabascau.ca/team/chairholder>

This Chair, held by AU, is tasked with researching, supporting, and promoting OER institutionally, nationally, and internationally, particularly in developing countries. It is part of an international network of more than 20 Chairs responsible for open education research and promotion. Prof. R. McGreal at AU is the current Chairholder. In Canada, this position has been funded by UNESCO, the Alberta government, AU, and the Hewlett Foundation.

International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning (IRRODL):
<http://irrodl.org/>

This is a scholarly journal including articles about OER and Open learning issues that is co-edited by the UNESCO/ICDE Chair and is part of AUPress. This was the first open access journal in Canada and it is listed in all the major scholarly indexes. Many articles on OER related issues have been published. The initiative is funded by AU, Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and UNESCO.

OER Knowledge Cloud: <http://oerknowledgecloud.org/>

This is a repository of research articles and reports about OER. It is an ongoing initiative of the UNESCO/COL/ICDE Chair and IRRODL. There are now more than 2,600 items in the database. This initiative is funded by AU and UNESCO.

Blended and Online Learning and Teaching (BOLT):
<http://cde.athabascau.ca/programs/pd/bolt/>

This is an initiative of AU aimed at promoting OER for teacher training and for use in elementary and secondary schools. One conference for teachers has been held.

Inclusive Design Research Centre: <https://idrc.ocadu.ca/>

This initiative at Ontario College of Art & Design University (OCAD) University supports Open research and development focusing on inclusiveness, addressing issues such as web site and document accessibility and using OER to offer content in alternative formats. It focuses on all levels of education and is funded by various funding agencies including the Hewlett Foundation.

Associate Vice Provost for Open Education: <http://jhangiani.socialpsychology.org/>

At Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), Dr R. S. Jhangiani has been appointed to this position to support and promote OER in his institution and provincially. This initiative is funded by KPU.

Zed-Cred (ZTC – Zero Textbook Cost) Degrees: - <https://bccampus.ca/2018/03/06/zed-creds-are-zooming-ahead-in-b-c/>

This BCcampus ZTC initiative is the Canadian version of the U.S. Zee Degree programme, where institutions offer a full degree with no textbook costs for students. More than 800 ZTC courses leading to different diplomas are now available at KPU. It is funded by BCcampus and KPU.

Creative Commons Global Network Strategy:

The Director of this international organization was formerly based in Toronto. It has created the most widely used open licences. It covers all levels of education and is funded by the Hewlett Foundation and private donations.

Open Education Global (formerly the Open Education Consortium): <https://www.oeglobal.org>

The Director of this international organization is based in Vancouver. It is the leading organization supporting OER. It grew out of the original MIT open courseware initiative and supports all levels of education. It is funded by the Hewlett Foundation and other sponsors.

It is difficult to determine whether OER is increasing or decreasing investment in the design and development of educational resources. This varies considerably among institutions and even among individual faculty within institutions. For example, in AU there have been OER course development projects with provincial grants of more than \$50K, so these can be classed as increased investment. On the other hand, some faculty have adopted OER courses or textbooks whole, at no cost, and thus have saved significant development time – so decreased investment.

In another example, and as noticed in several implementations, increasing investment in design and development becomes integral to the introduction of OER, which can be, and usually is, cost-effective because not only are they free of the price of the content, but also free of costs associated with negotiating licences and clearing copyright by contacting publishers or authors. Of course, there are associated costs that exist whether one chooses OER or commercial content or not. These include ICT infrastructure, bandwidth, training, and authoring/adapting/assembling content.

In many cases, OER can also eliminate the duplication of efforts, taking full advantage of commonly available curricula, by incorporating content developed and paid for elsewhere. The ability to change OER is important for educators who wish to adapt or update the content. This can lead to significantly enhancing the quality of the curricula on an ongoing basis, ensuring the design of more effective learning environments. OER can be seen as an investment in higher quality more collaborative learning, because they can be used, reused, adapted etc. at will by teachers, learners, and course designers. OER can make it easy for learners to change, augment, or remove the content and this can form the basis for learners to construct knowledge through collaboration.

Overall, across the country, there is an imbalance between OER efforts using and adapting existing materials compared to producing new material. OER efforts tend to focus on creating new materials rather than adapting or adopting existing OER, and this needs to be addressed. However, as more faculty are becoming aware of the existence of OER in accessible repositories like that of BCcampus, adoption/adaptation is beginning to become more common. There seems to be a reluctance among many Canadian faculty to adopt U.S.-based courses. In many humanities and social science courses, faculty in Canada have a different orientation than those in the USA. These faculty, in the absence of Canadian content, prefer to create their own resources. Thus, activities tend to focus more on local production rather than adoption, adaptation, or assembly, but this seems to be changing to a more balanced approach.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, one major problem for OER growth in Canada continues to be the lack of awareness. When faculty become aware of the existence of OER there is rarely any resistance, and the idea of OER has grown in acceptance and is supported when faculty and administrators become aware of it. Notably, with the COVID 19 crisis, awareness of OER has grown considerably. This new interest in OER is translating into concrete actions on OER implementation in many institutions.

Most faculty tend to not spend much of their time on creating or adapting lesson content, but are more research focused. They quite commonly want a full package of content for teaching, for example a textbook, with online exercises and examination questions. Some OER do now consist of these full packages, but there are not many. Most OER consist of lessons or modules that must be adapted to fit into course curricula. The majority of educators at all levels (teachers, faculty, administrators, superintendents, ministry cadre, etc., as well as students) are beginning to learn more about OER and how they can benefit education while introducing substantial cost-savings. A national campaign (or even several provincial campaigns) to disseminate information about OER among the relevant stakeholders, including parents would go a long way in growing support for further pan-Canadian collaborations in using, assembling, and implementing OER.

This growing OER awareness can also focus on international initiatives in Canada such as that of the OERu, which is offering pathways to learning along with credible accreditation from participating Canadian and international universities and colleges. The *OERu First Year Online programme* offers learners the possibility of free access to first year courses from the home, based on OER, and leading to officially recognized credentials at public accredited institutions. Learners everywhere need to know that they can take full advantage of such opportunities.

Author's Note:

This paper is a condensed and updated adaptation of a UNESCO country report (Canada), originally published in In S. Knyazeva (Ed.). (2019). *Understanding the impact of OER: Achievements and challenges*. Retrieved from <https://iite.unesco.org/publications/understanding-the-impact-of-our-achievements-and-challenges/>

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