

# Continuous Professional Development of Teachers in Higher Education through Open Educational Resources: An Exploration

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**Abstract:** *The rapid change in the domain of knowledge has changed the nature and spirit of teaching in higher education. It demands teachers of higher education to be updated and to strive for their continuous professional development to do justice with the profession. The contextual realities of the higher education rest lots of responsibilities on the teachers for their own professional development under the constraints of time and space (limiting the continuous professional development opportunities). The constraints of time and space have started becoming weak with the advent of technology in general and Open Educational Resources in particular which can mediate and provide continuous learning experiences to the teachers. OER platforms provide for a two-way treatment of the knowledge by the beneficiaries i.e. the can also contribute to the domain of knowledge along with its access. Thus, there is a lot of scope for getting benefited by experiential and hence the stable learning. With this backdrop, an initiative is planned to study the nature and pattern in usage of open educational resources of the teachers working in Central University of Jammu. It can be treated as a case which focuses on exploring the professional development needs of the teachers of Central University of Jammu which can be considered as unique due to their geographical location and association with a State having special Constitutional status. Under the reflection the needs so explored, an attempt is made to propose a functional plan for enriching the teachers' experiences with the open educational resources as an outcome of the study.*

**Key Words:** Education, Learning, Resources, OER.

## 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND BACKGROUND

The constraints of time and space have started becoming weak with the advent of technology and it has changed the nature of education and consequently the nature of teaching-learning. Open Educational Resources (OER) can also be seen as a potent addition in the technological boons to education. Open Educational Resources have primarily been devised to enrich the teaching-learning process through provision of resource assistance to the teachers. These resources are collaboratively developed and designed in the periphery of the teaching field and shared via technology across the fraternity of the practioners (teachers).

The concept of Open Educational Resources (OER) came in existence during a UNESCO Forum on *Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries* held in 2002 and the defined as: concept was further developed as:

*'Technology-enabled, open provision of educational resources for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes.'* They are typically made freely available over the Web or the Internet. Their principle use is by teachers and educational institutions to support course development, but they can also be used directly by students. Open Educational Resources include learning objects such as lecture material, references and readings, simulations, experiments and demonstrations, as well as syllabuses, curricula, and teachers' guides. (Wiley 2006)

Open Educational Resources (OER) certainly have an economic value proposition with potential for educational transformation. The pedagogical and the digital dimensions of OER together accord a powerful transformative potential to OER. The concept is pedagogically instilled in using resources as an integral method of communication of curriculum. However, it is the ease with which digitized content can be shared via the Internet unleashes the potentials of resource-based learning without imposing extra-ordinary financial pressures on educational systems. However, it is important to highlight the 'licence' as the key differentiator between an OER and any other educational resource. An OER is simply an educational resource that incorporates a licence that facilitates reuse and potentially adaptation without first requesting permission from the copyright holder. However, OER cannot be taken as synonymous of online learning or e-learning.

While the concept of OER has a legal dimension, its implications are foremost *economic* as:

- It requires educational institutions and educators to create different services (given the rapidly transforming market for traditional educational content).
- It abandons a free-market approach to education in favour of collaborating to build and share knowledge.

Thus, OER has tremendous potential to contribute in improving the quality and effectiveness of education through generation of three key possibilities:

- *Increased availability of high quality, relevant, need-targeted learning materials can contribute to more productive students and educators.* Because OER removes restrictions around copying resources, it holds potential for reducing the cost of accessing educational materials.
- *The allowance for adaptation of materials provides a mechanism for making students active participants in educational processes by facilitating their learning by doing and creating.* Content licences that encourage activity and creation by students through reuse and adaptation of that content can make a significant contribution to creating more effective learning environments.
- *OER has the potential to build capacity by providing institutions and educators with access, at low or no cost, to the means of production with regard to high quality materials.* This includes building institutions' and educators' competence in producing educational materials and completing the necessary instructional design to integrate such materials into high quality programmes of learning.

However, it is to be understood that content is only one piece of the educational complex, and that effective use of educational content demands, among other requirements, good educators to facilitate the process. Thus, provision of good content alone cannot ensure the quality in education. Quality in education can only be determined by bringing openness into the system that acknowledges the following as prerequisites:

- Investment in designing effective educational environments is critically important to good education.
- A key to productive systems is to build on common intellectual capital, rather than duplicating similar efforts.
- All things being equal, collaboration will improve quality.
- As education is a contextualized practice, adaptation of the material imported should be facilitated and encouraged.

OER platforms provide for a two-way treatment of the knowledge by the beneficiaries i.e. the can also contribute to the domain of knowledge along with its access. Thus, there is a lot of scope for getting benefited by experiential and hence the stable learning. With this backdrop, an initiative has been planned to study the nature and pattern in usage of open educational resources of the teachers working in Central University of Jammu. The response of the academia at Central University of Jammu to Open Educational Resources for their continuous professional development and to enrich the teaching-learning process has been recorded for the purpose. It is a case which focuses on exploring the professional development needs of the teachers of Central University of Jammu which can be considered as unique due to their geographical location and association with a State having special Constitutional status. Under the reflection the needs so explored, an attempt is made to propose a functional plan for enriching the teachers' experiences with the open educational resources as an outcome of the study.

## **2. DESIGN OF THE STUDY:**

The study has been conducted with the following objectives:

- To explore the level of academic needs of the teachers in higher education in terms of expected facilitation through technology (dependency on open resources available on web).
- To assess the attitude of the teachers in higher education towards the use of open educational resources for their academic and professional well-being.
- To identify the nature and pattern in use of open educational resources amongst the teachers in higher education.

### **2.1 Sample Description:**

The study has been conducted on a sample of 22 teachers teaching post-graduate courses in Central University of Jammu selected purposively for the study. At least two teachers from each of the PG Departments (except management) have been selected as respondents to avoid manipulation and explore the original notion the collection of data has been done through informal interviews over the following themes floated as the leads to the talk with the teachers:

- Information, knowledge and understanding of Open Educational Resources (OER).
- Perceived potential and importance of Open Educational Resources (OER) in academic and professional well-being of the teachers in the light of their needs for continuous professional development.
- Teachers' attitude towards OER and their experiences with OER.

### **2.2 Delimitation**

- The study has been geographically delimited to the Jammu region.
- The study has been delimited to the teachers teaching PG courses in Central University of Jammu.

### 3. ANALYTICAL REFLECTIONS:

The probing on the three open themes – (a) Extent of information and understanding of OER (b) Perceived potential and importance of OER in education and professional development and (c) Attitude towards and experiences with OER – the responses obtained constituted a vivid spectrum of reflective zone which has been consolidated in terms of the objectives of the study and presented as under:

#### 3.1 Reflections over the need to use OER as academic and professional development tool:

The core of the needs to use Open Educational Resources by the teachers of the Central University of Jammu (as per the response obtained) lies in its institutional characteristics. Being a young University (just 5 years old) it has lots of pressure to meet the demands for additional educational opportunities in the region. The University also needs to establish itself as a 'brand' distinct from the other institution of higher learning in the region to fulfill its promise of quality in higher education. Thus, the teachers of the University, mainly working in PG Departments are expected to continuously enrich their knowledge and practices to guarantee the aspired quality. They are expected to deliver their best and prove their mettle. Being a young Institution, the University obviously facing a resource crunch (in terms of human, financial and library resources) and therefore, most of the time it cannot and doesn't allow its academic staff to go 'off-site' on programmes for professional development. It doesn't leave any other options before the academic staff except depending upon the OER for the facilitation of teaching-learning process as well as for their continuous professional development. Hence, as far as the need to use OER as academic and professional development tool is concerned, teachers' reflections indicate inclination and clustering towards the high end. Moreover, it is the internet and web which ensures and maintains the connection of the teachers with rest of the nation and the world.

#### 3.2 Attitude towards the Open Educational Resources

The teachers' reflected positive attitude towards the Open Educational Resources as such. They exhibited belief in the potential of OER. They looked OER as resource hub or platform through which they can grow professionally. However, it is important to highlight here that the extent of clarity over the concept of OER had its clear impact on the attitude of the teachers towards OER along with the nature and pattern in the usage of OER by them. The ambiguity in the understanding of the concept of OER resulted in an outright reduction of the teachers at the level of a 'consumer' of the resources developed and shared by others. They were largely lacking in adaptation skills to contextualize the learning resources even. Also, the attitude of teachers towards OER could be seen as the outcome of the level of their ICT skills. The positivity in the attitude towards OER was seen highly co-related with the efficiency in the ICT skills of a teacher i.e. higher the efficiency lead to high levels of positivity in the attitude of teachers towards OER and vice-versa. The feeling of possessiveness towards the resource developed and fear of getting published or popularized in someone else's name emerged as potential threat to the formation of knowledge consortia and collaborations over which the OER excel.

#### 3.3 Nature and Pattern in Use of Open Educational Resources (OER):

As evident from the discussion made above, due to lack of the conceptual clarity over OER, erroneous patterns in utilizations of OER by the teachers were reported. The teachers lacked in clarity how Open Educational Resources are different from Open Education and Resource Based Learning. They even mixed it with Open Access Publishing. Lack of clear understanding of licensing associated with the OER could pose a serious threat on their professional career. The possibilities for getting lend into problems related with professional ethics and violation of rules cannot be denied.

Their access to OER is also seemed to be limited as the teachers reported the use of basic search engines such as 'google' for searching the requisite material without understanding its technological limitations. They were not fully aware about the specialized search engines for OER such as GLOBE, Folksemantics, DiscoverEdlabs, Creative Commons, Open Courseware Consortium etc. Locating a suitable repository and OER directories were again emerged as a constraint in effective usage of OER for academic and professional well-being of the teachers as it underpinned their access to quality resources.

As far as the sharing of open educational resources with others was concerned, teachers exhibited again limited contributions primarily due to reason that Central University of Jammu doesn't have any institutional repository of its own. Departments have allotted micro-sites within the main web-site of the institution. However, the size of web-space devised for micro site doesn't allow much of material to be its part. Again, the micro-sites could not be accessed by the teachers independently which also constrained their reciprocal contributions. It further gets blink due to the lack of requisite knowledge and skills amongst the teachers in selecting and building the open repositories online. Teachers, though use social platforms such as twitter, facebook, youtube etc. but not for teaching-learning resource contribution. These platforms were reported to be used largely for infotainment (at the max). Moreover, there are no specific incentives or mechanisms to acknowledge the contribution of faculty members in OER.

In the light of the discussion made above it can be said that though the teachers in higher education have both need and willingness to use (and create) Open Educational Resources (OER) but lack of knowledge and skills restrict

the teachers' effectiveness and efficiency in its utilization of OER. Thus there is an urgent need to work on the knowledge and skill domain of the teachers in higher education so that the potential of Open educational resources could be harnessed to the extent possible. Specific incentives and mechanisms should also be devised to acknowledge and promote faculty contributions to open educational resources.

#### 4. SUGGESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Central University of Jammu (and consequently the other institutions of higher learning of its genesis) should undertake a sustained institutional or systemic effort to invest in creating more effective teaching and learning environments for their students. This will entail investment in developing and improving curricula, ongoing programme and course design, planning of contact sessions with students, development and procurement of quality teaching and learning materials, design of effective assessment activities and so on.
- The commitment to OER implies increased investment in teaching and learning, but promises to increase the efficiency and productivity of those investments by harnessing new ways of developing better programmes, courses and materials.
- It's a high time for the University to review its institutional policies pertaining to intellectual property (by ensuring that they support open licensing models) and staff remuneration and incentives (by ensuring that time spent on course design and development and other related activities is appropriately rewarded through salary increases and promotions, as part of broader policies covering staff remuneration and incentives).

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