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Book Review: (*Open*) Educational Resources Around the World: An International Comparison

Editors: Victoria I. Marín, Laura N. Peters, and Olaf Zawacki-Richter (EdTechBooks.org, 2022, pp. 1–603)
https://edtechbooks.org/oer_around_the_world

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The open educational resources (OER) movement is almost two decades old. It started with MIT’s announcement in 2001 that it would upload course content on the internet as “MIT OpenCourseWare,” accessible to the world for free, with a UNESCO forum in 2002 coining the term “open educational resources” for this generous sharing. Since that time, governments, educational institutions, subject-matter experts, and not-for-profit organisations across the globe have shown a great deal of interest in this endeavour. A UNESCO General Conference that includes 193 countries from around the world adopted the “Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER)” in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic further boosted the creation, adoption, and sharing of educational resources. The term OER has become ubiquitous. Interest in OER has led to the development of best practices in using them.

(Open) Educational Resources around the World addresses the question of how OER has fared within the educational ecosystem. Members of the Centre for Open Educational Research, created in 2018, contributed to this project—entitled “Digital educational architectures: Open learning resources in distributed learning infrastructures – EduArc Research”—funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The volume contains country reports, working papers, and status reports from countries such as Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Japan, South Korea, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, and the United States. The authors have applied the 3M framework (macro, meso, and micro) to study issues related to OER with specific reference to (i) national policies and frameworks for the design of a cross-university (national) infrastructure to disseminate OER (macro-level); (ii) the provision of OER in higher education institutions, for example, technical and support infrastructure, professional development, and quality assurance (meso level); and (iii) the creation and use of OER in higher education teaching and learning and the sharing between faculty members (micro-level).

The volume is divided into three parts. The first (“Context”) sets the tone of the discussion in four chapters. Chapter 1 (“Introduction”) provides details of the project that forms the foundation of this book and introduces the main concepts authors deal with in their respective chapters. For example, it addresses the authors’ use of the term “(O)ER” to denote both open and non-open educational resources as well as with reference only to resources that are OER. Chapter 2 (“Understanding (O)ER”) defines the concept of OER from different perspectives and discusses the different available forms and levels of OER. Chapter 3

(“Digital Transformation in the World”) touches upon the different aspects of digital transformation such as ICT infrastructure, readiness, and availability/access happening in the countries under report. Context and culture are important catalysts for digital transformation. Chapter 4 (“Higher Education Systems and Institutions in Their Contexts”) discusses the higher education context as the starting point for the reported countries. China has been reported to be the largest country in terms of both population and number of university students; however, the United States houses the largest number of higher education institutions. The countries have been placed on a spectrum from the “Private Higher Education System” to the “Public Higher Education System.”

Part two of book (“The Country Studies”) presents studies from select countries across the world in eight chapters. The chapters present the discussion at three levels: macro, meso, and micro.

Chapter 1 (“The Case of Australia”), by Melissa Bond, presents the digital transformation trajectory of Australia. Most universities in Australia use institutional repositories funded by the Australian Research Repositories Online to the World (ARROW) project to “manage and disseminate research outputs and learning resources.” The chapter provides a comprehensive account of the status of IT infrastructure. At the macro level, it presents a policy perspective at the national level. At the meso level, it presents insights on initiatives taken at the state and the institutional levels. Finally, at the micro level, the author discusses the initiatives taken by the institutions, and knowledge and awareness of OER at the level of stakeholders. The chapter concludes that changes in the OER ecosystem at the meso and micro levels are predominant.

Chapter 2 (“Digital Transformation in Canada”), by Dianne Conrad and George Veletsianos, examines the digital transformation process in Canada. Library organisations in Canada are at the forefront of digital transformation. Some institutions maintain their own OER repositories. As part of decentralisation practices, each province and territory take care of its educational systems, resulting in a fragmented and individualised effort to promote OER at the institutional level. Key factors impacting digital transformation in Canada are timely funding and political persuasion.

In Chapter 3 (“China’s Approach to Digital Transformation of Higher Education”), Junhong Xiao and Jingjing Zhang discuss the process of digital transformation in China. The country has adopted a national strategy to digitalise education. This approach is visible in digital transformation at the macro, meso, and micro levels. The authors caution that in a top-down approach, the higher-level policies should be flawless, otherwise they could be expensive and disastrous. The major areas of digital transformation in China are “digital infrastructure construction, staff capacity building, technology-enhanced learning and teaching, and developing and sharing of high-quality educational resources” (p.116). The authors suggest that “providing funding, incentive or subsidy; strengthening leadership and coordination; creating a favourable innovative atmosphere; and promoting international cooperation” (p.118) have been quite helpful in the successful implementation of digitalisation policies.

Chapter 4 (“Open Educational Resources within the Digital Transformation of German Higher Education”), by Svenja Bedenlier and Victoria I. Marín, examines the German higher education system. The country is yet to see effective use of OER at the pedagogical level in higher education. The authors see incentivisation, support, and knowledge transfer as the prime issues in bringing the OER initiatives to the forefront at the

micro level. They argue there is a need “to integrate the institutional perspective more strongly between the state and national policies and the individual instructors” (p. 208).

Chapter 5 (“The Case of Japan and Korea”), by Insung Jung, presents the case of the digital transformation of higher education in Japan and Korea. In Japan, OER initiatives have not attracted educational institutions at large, primarily because individual institutions are responsible for their digital initiatives and thus need to support the infrastructure, resources, and services without funding from the government. In contrast, in Korea, initial financial support from the government has allowed educational institutions to establish a centre for teaching and learning on their premises to support OER initiatives. As part of the national initiative, educational institutions collaborated with international organisations—such as the World Bank’s Open Learning Campus, Creative Commons, and prominent MOOC providers—to boost digital transformation initiatives in Korea. The author considers three factors to be important for the smooth and efficient digital transformation of higher education in a country: “1) the development and implementation of the government’s policy and action strategy in digital transformation, 2) the existence and effective operation of supporting agencies at the national level, and 3) the provision of competitive funding and incentives to universities for their high accomplishment in digital transformation” (p.268).

Chapter 6 (“Analysis of Higher Education (HE) Systems’ Approach in South Africa”), by Paul Prinsloo and Jennifer Roberts, presents the case of distributed learning infrastructure in South Africa. The authors suggest that the main focus of the national policies of South Africa is the “transformation of the higher education landscape.” This new educational philosophy is expected to result in the development of “new economic, social and political structures” in the country. Some prominent challenges higher education will have to address in the country include the “increasingly competitive higher education landscape, funding constraints, competing narratives about graduate attributes, the growing phenomena of the casualisation of faculty, and the disruptive role of technology” (p. 275).

In Chapter 7 (“The Case of Spain”), Victoria I. Marín describes the digital transformation process at Spanish universities as quite advanced. While libraries are important agents of digital transformation at the university level, duplication in the creation of digital educational resources is a common factor. Some educational institutions maintain their educational repositories. At times, OER used by the institutions and students is not integrated into any mainstream system that could facilitate sharing of resources. The process of integration of resources could be comparatively easy since the Spanish universities follow international standards for the creation of OER and its metadata. Heavy teaching workloads, lack of incentives, and non-permanent faculty are some of the constraints hindering the promotion of OER at the institutional level.

Chapter 8 (“Digital Transformation and Openness in the Turkish Higher Education System”), by Aras Bozkurt, Yasar Kondakci, and Cengiz Hakan Aydin, discusses the extent of usage of OER and openness in education in Turkey. A negative public perception of educational resources is one of the biggest challenges hindering the promotion of OER and open educational practices. Despite this, at the government level, the higher education system has seen much progress in the direction of digital transformation. However, at the macro level, the authors point to a “need for an overarching policy to enrich OER and ensure the effective use of OER.” Without this, “OER is not recognized as an item for assessment within the framework of quality assurance.” Perhaps the philosophy of openness is not appropriately understood by scholars in Turkey.

“Building the skills of the academic leaders, academics, and students to build key skills to operate under digitalisation and openness would be an important step towards widening the use of OER” (p. 432).

Part three (“International Comparison”) compares the initiatives and status of the creation and use of OER internationally in four chapters. The first three present a comparison of digital transformation at the macro, meso, and micro levels, and the final chapter in this section concludes the discussion on international comparison.

Chapter 1 (“Macro Level: The Situation at the National or Federal Level”) covers the comparison at national and state levels. The three indicators selected by the authors—for this and all the chapters in this section—are infrastructure, quality, policy, and change. They observe that “countries with a highly decentralized HE system do not have (O)ER infrastructures or have underdeveloped infrastructures at the macro level” (p.446). On the other hand, many countries with a “rather centralized HE system have national infrastructures, but most of them are not specifically targeted at HE or (O)ER” (p.447). Chapter 2 (“Meso Level: The Situation at the Institutional Level”) focuses on developments at the institutional level. The authors use illustrations and examples for clarity and comprehension and observe that institutional libraries have played a vital role as agents in institutional change. Chapter 3 (“Micro Level: The Situation at the Level of Teaching and Learning”) looks at the pedagogical aspects at the grassroots level. It finds that in some countries, faculty have raised the concern of copyright while taking up OER practices—showing that the perception of the faculty is crucial in promoting their participation in OER initiatives. Chapter 4 (“Conclusions of the International Comparison”) presents the concluding remarks from the editors, who emphasize that without understanding the dynamics of culture and differences in contexts, it will not be possible to “understand national and institutional (O)ER infrastructure and the associated support elements. “While many common aspects to digital transformation exist, each country demonstrates different dynamics at the macro, meso, and micro levels, and there is a need to deeply understand the connections and relations among them.

The different chapters in the book provide the status of digital transformation that has taken place in different countries. The book also provides an overall understanding of the issues related to OER and digitalisation at the macro, meso, and micro levels. The authors not only discuss what has been done and how it has been achieved, but also flag the constraints and challenges in educational digitalisation in higher education. This contribution will help to guide practitioners, administrators, and researchers and will provide a solid overview of developments in OER at different levels to those interested in this trajectory.

