PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

WELCOME ADDRESS: CoL/UNESCO REGIONAL OER WORKSHOP

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

KGORONG BUILDING

21 February 2012

- Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen

WELCOME

It is a signal honour to welcome such an eminent gathering of members of state, officials, higher education practitioners and specialists to this important CoL/UNESCO Regional OER Policy Forum: one of six Regional Policy Forums in the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Arab States. The University of South Africa is doubly honoured to be your host, and as the Principal and Vice Chancellor, I am delighted to bid you a warm Unisa welcome as well.

Looking about me I see many familiar faces: faces of peers and colleagues whose knowledge and expertise in the field of higher education and more particularly, ODeL and the OER movement, are broadly acknowledged, and I think I can assert quite comfortably – unrivalled - nationally continentally and internationally. Your presence here today endows the OER movement with *gravitas* and attests to its quite

explosive growth in higher education globally, and to the growing assertion of the OER voice as a viable option for the enhancement of higher education delivery.

<mark>This policy forum aims to: profile OER activities in the region; obtain further details about government OER policies or intentions to complement the mail survey and, seek input to the Declaration that will be presented to the World OER Congress to be held in France, in June 2012.</mark>

Given Unisa's status as the largest provider of ODL nationally and on the Continent, and a key OER participant, it would be remiss of me not to suggest that the gravitas and experience that I have just mentioned should be invested equally, in ensuring a balanced and feasible outcome for this Forum, that reflects the best interest of this region *above* the best interest of the OER movement *per se*. I believe that you will find that the careful balance of being at cutting edge higher education practice while remaining cognizant of what is feasible and doable in the best interest of those whom we serve – our students – informs much of Unisa's response to, and participation in, the OER movement.

It is in fact quite sobering to realise that the term "OER' was officially coined a mere 10 years ago in 2002.[1] It is equally disconcerting to note just how many people still remain uncertain as to what OER's really are! UNESCO/CoL's *Basic Guide to Open Education Resources* asserts [that]

> In its simplest form, the concept of Open Educational Resources (OER) describes any educational resources (including curriculum maps, course materials, textbooks, streaming videos, multimedia applications, podcasts, and any other materials that have been designed for use in teaching and learning) that are openly available for use by educators and students, without an accompanying need to pay royalties or licence fees.[2]

---

[1] The 10th anniversary of the 2002 UNESCO Forum coined the term OER.

[2] A Basic Guide to Open Educational Resources (OER)*Prepared by Neil Butcher Edited by Asha Kanwar (COL) and Stamenka Uvalic´-Trumbic´ (UNESCO)*

The speed with which the movement has taken root and grown is symptomatic of a plethora of global dynamics – socio-economic and political – that are shaking to the very core, our current world order. And higher education is being similarly impacted.

The key driver of these transitions is technology. And depending on which side of the fence - or ubiquitous "digital divide" you are sitting, your experience could be enriching and growth-enhancing, or daunting and another step into the higher education wilderness.

Leveraging ICTs for education delivery is nothing new, nor is the altruistic intention to widen access to include those previously excluded - mainly from the developing world. ICTs have indeed broken Sir John Daniels' oft quoted exclusionary "iron triangle" of access, cost and quality. The huge rise in global enrolment ratios and the concomitant development of ODL and more recently ODeL, attest to that.

OERs have now been added to the mix. Pereira (2007: 42) asserts that leveraging ICTs to *eliminate the access gap to high-quality education in the developing world*[3] is a core motivation for the OER movement. A significant amount of progress has been recorded. Panke states that in the last decade, the concept has gained an undeniable momentum. In their report on OER achievements and challenges, Atkins, Brown & Hammond (2007) estimate a total of 68 million OER grants between 2002 and 2006. In 2010, the Horizon Report, which identifies emerging technologies likely to have a large impact on teaching and learning, described "Open Content" as a key trend, expected to reach mainstream within the next twelve months. In the fall of 2010, UNESCO initiated an international online discussion on OER-related topics. The "European Consultative group on Open Educational Practices" currently develops a roadmap towards quality management in OER (OPAL, 2010)[4].

But there is a lot of confusing and conflicting hype around OERs. Let us be honest about that. For example, in their article entitled: Dramatically Bringing Down the Cost of Education with OER: *How Open Education Resources Unlock the Door to Free Learning[5],* Wiley, Green and Soares, some of OER's main proponents, assert:

> We are in the midst of a revolution in education. For the first time in human history we have the tools to enable everyone to attain all the education they desire. And the best of all this education is available at almost no cost. The key to this sea change in learning is Open Educational Resources...

And more recently we read: *2017: RIP, OER: Iterating towards openness, pragmatism over zeal[6]* which asserts that emerging technologies will ultimately offer better value than OERs, possibly rendering them redundant.

Unfortunately sweeping statements like this are not supported by fact and a sober and well researched assessment will reveal that too often, potential is conflated with reality – to the detriment of the movement I would suggest. In Africa we understand reality. In truth, it seems that the inherent promise of OER's is challenged every step of the way by the practical realities of its implementation. Where international debates and wrangles centre around licensing, funding, free access to textbooks and journal articles, amongst others, developing nations must additionally overcome the challenges of how to benefit from OER's with limited, or non-existent technological infrastructure and access to the internet, and a student body whose profile is at yet poorly defined and who at face value, are poorly equipped to navigate the relative sophistication of the world of OERs and self learning where they are fortunate enough to have access to the internet and where they can afford the associated cost.

---

[5] Dramatically Bringing Down the Cost of Education with OER: *How Open Education Resources Unlock the Door to Free Learning* By Davis Wiley. Cable Green, Louis Soares. February 7, 2012
[6] Posted in badges, learning analytics, open content, open education, politics, research, sustainability, textbooks, by David Lipman. http://opencontent.org/blog/archives/2177

Furthermore, as developing nations we are constrained to compare the developed/developing world uptake of OERs. We are compelled to question the neo-colonialism inherent in the OER movement, given its western genesis. We are most importantly, compelled to answer *for ourselves* the moral dilemma that we face in utilising free, well constructed courseware from the west (for example) when we are called upon as Africans, to generate our own new knowledge supported our own African expression and explication of that knowledge for teaching purposes.

If we aim to maximise the value inherent in OER's then at the very least our approach should be informed, pragmatic, and cognisant of the contexts within which we provide education. This may mean that a sustained and incremental approach to the use or sharing of OERs will offer the most beneficial results over the medium to long term. This is the approach that we have adopted at Unisa, and which appears to be delivering some positive benefits. Allow me to share some of these with you.

Unisa's approach to OERS is heavily influenced by two considerations. The first is its vision "The African University in the service of humanity. Giving expression to this vision has entailed, amongst others, sharing and making accessible its considerable resources and capacities across the continent of Africa. As a founding member of the African Council on Distance Education [ACDE] Unisa has been animated by the idea of building a continental vehicle for collaboration, sharing of educational resources to avoid duplication, and joint degrees - all in the spirit of openness that has been the hallmark of open distance education.

The second is its commitment to social justice. Unisa provides access to quality educational opportunities to the marginalised in our society – ranging from the geographically remote and the poor, to mature students across the length and breadth of the country. In addition, more than 20 000 students from the continent outside South Africa are enrolled for Unisa degrees. This illustrates our institutional commitment to providing access beyond our borders.

There is no doubt that OERs hold much promise to advance both the university's vision as well as its social justice commitment. As the continent generally labours to increase access to educational opportunities in pursuit of the goal of Education for All, a progressive outlook on access to educational resources is clearly in our interests. Having access to repositories of these resources to adapt, add to, translate, redevelop and render culturally and educationally relevant without starting with a blank slate is clearly advantageous. When copyright is lifted on valuable works, and these become available in the public domain, the benefits are self-evident, especially in the developing world, where scarce resources too often mean that we cannot pay the exorbitant fees necessary for commercialized knowledge resources. There is also undoubtedly a justice in educational resources that have been funded by the public purse being made available freely, rather than being placed in closed and inaccessible repositories except for a hefty fee.

At Unisa, we are also alert to other benefits of OERs. When more developers apply their minds to a particular resource, each add the value of their own intellectual contribution. With diverse perspectives from multiple vantage points and socio-economic and cultural contexts, the end result can only be richer. Resources developed in this way develop organically and in time – with the promise of globally nuanced and locally relevant materials.

Our recent and emerging investments in OERs include the following:
- An institutional repository – hosted and overseen by our library, this has in excess of 60 000 digitized items, and which is growing at a prolific pace. It is the largest such repository on the continent and is acknowledged as a world leader
- Three courses are already operating as OER
- We have commissioned a comprehensive report on the status of OER globally, nationally and institutionally with a view to developing a clear policy position and long term strategy

- We are expanding our network in OERs while we add and contribute to the global discourse on OERs. We hosted Professor George Siemens from Athabasca University in 2011. Professor Rory McGreal, OER Chair at Athabasca University is scheduled to visit Unisa in April 2012. Very importantly, we have submitted a bid to host an OER Chair through COL/UNESCO at Unisa.

- Unisa is a founding member of the OERTEN initiative and is contributing two open courses to the OER University initiative, which have been selected for the top ten. As part of our demonstrable commitment, Unisa has a dedicated OER liaison officer.

- Most recently, our Publications Committee initiated a groundbreaking policy change where all new publications automatically have a clause that should an author be agreeable, simultaneously with the printing of a book or once it is out of print, it will go into the open access institutional repository. We are also in the process of approaching all authors on our back catalogue of out of print books to seek their permission to place this vast resource into the institutional repository. Finally in this regard, we are in discussions with the HathiTrust to affiliate Unisa. The costs of these are currently being analyzed.

- Our Chance to Advance programme, which is a community engagement initiative, is underscored by an OER ethos. Knowledge and educational resources are made available to the community at nominal or no cost. Having started modestly in one province, it has been expanded to three provinces this year. Within the next four years, it is planned to be expanded to every province in the country.

- Finally, a leading edge initiative in curriculum transformation at Unisa is the development of signature courses in each of our six Colleges responsible for undergraduate education. What is distinctive about each course is that it will give expression to the University's commitment that each student will emerge from Unisa with a distinctive set of skills and understanding. Moreover, the courses are being developed from scratch for full online delivery. They will be important prototypes for transforming Unisa into a

fully-fledged ODeL institution over an estimated 5-10 years . We are currently contemplating making these courses available as OERs.

- And at a national policy level, considerable attention has been given to intellectual property produced by the national science system. Policy from this is yet to crystallize.

Other initiatives on the Continent that I am aware of, and which most surely deserve mention at this Forum, include the The African Virtual University's (AVU) Open Education Resources repository, OER@AVU, which is an opportunity for African educators to share open educational resources with each other, and the world. High quality resources can serve to inspire teachers, be directly used by students, and be improved upon, or localized by others. The AVU has seeded the repository with 219 high-quality modules, written by educators from many countries in Africa, but the repository depends on our contributions and participation.

Over the last five years the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) has been spearheading the process of preparation of OER by inviting lecturers from public and private universities to team up with OUT staff, with funding from OUT, and using the facilities at OUT regional centres without necessarily telling them that they are producing OERs and at times even without even signing any contracts with them. However, at the end of the day, the materials produced belong to OUT as genuine OERs but the lecturers who participated in writing them are also allowed to use the same for teaching in their universities. The only requirement is for them to avoid using the materials for commercial purposes. OUT is planning to spread this to all other areas. As part of the ACDE TCC fraternity, OUT embraces the collaboration in producing African OERs. OUT believes that one of the most critical issues necessary for the success of OERs in Africa, is to increase the awareness of the stakeholders.

I can also report that in the Sudan there is also a deliberate focus of OERs. Alneelain University and the Open University of Sudan have begun building OER awareness among staff. The two institutions conducted a joint workshop on OER. Two experts from OER Africa were invited to conduct a two-day workshop on OER. One of the main outcomes of the workshop was the establishment of a national OER committee

and similar ones at the university level.   Alneelain University has also established similar bodies at faculty level and a prominent professor in education has been appointed to lead training efforts at the university level. The training material is approved and disseminated to all faculties.

I am aware that there are a number of other exciting initiatives in this region that will be discussed at the forum and so I don't want to pre-empt them. Suffice it to say OER's are on the map in this region.

Ladies and gentlemen, what OER's are undeniably doing, is blurring the distinction between formal and informal learning and testing time honoured higher education traditions and practices including accreditation, quality and relevance. That in itself, is of undeniable value and we welcome it. But the road ahead is far from clear and we cannot merely think in the here and now. We must also be forward looking and we must plan accordingly.

I anticipate that the Unesco/CoL initiative that we are at today will give a significant boost to the OER movement, and galvanize governments to clarify where they stand. I am of the view that a clearer national policy environment on the matter will go a long way to assisting and supporting Unisa and other institutions in mapping the pathway boldly into the future, in consonance with the guidelines provided by multilateral organizations such as UNESCO and CoL.