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Creating a Culture of Shared Knowledge in the Arab World: The Role of Open
Educational Resources

Policy and Strategy
Roundtable
30th January, 2012

Report

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Creating a Culture of Shared Knowledge in the Arab World: The Role of Open Educational Resources

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The evolution of education



Dr Mansoor Al Awar
Chancellor

Following a thorough examination of the issues relating to education in the Arab World discussed at the Roundtable, we step away with insights and lessons that are needed now more than ever. As far as the Open Educational Resources (OERs) are concerned, we still face a number of important questions. There is still scepticism about the value of OERs, particularly in the Arab World. Why is it so? We still come across evidence of institutions using OERs in a superficial manner. Why is it happening like that? There is still doubt lingering about the positioning of OERs on the global landscape of education. What are we considering and what should our strategy be? In the light of these interesting questions, this Roundtable offers great ideas for future action.

The policy makers in the Arab World are at a pivotal moment in history, where questions about the relevance and impact of OERs are on the centre stage. I have no doubt in my mind that this comprehensive Roundtable report provides a foundation of useful knowledge as we face challenging times and critical decisions regarding the fate and future of e-Learning and OERs.

There is a growing body of knowledge relating to the Open Educational resources (OERs). However, this Roundtable report focusing on the role of OERs in the Arab World merits special attention for several reasons. First, the participants in the Roundtable were the world's most distinguished scholars and practitioners in the area of e-Learning. Unlike many other scholars, the participants revealed useful knowledge in sifting through ideas and arguments. They pondered and considered both sides of the issues and argued with logic and evidence. Second, the discussants at the Roundtable were able to respond to the fears and concerns of the policy makers. Finally, while most of the other reports on OERs have tended to focus on one or few aspects of the issue, this report expounds on all of those aspects in a coherent manner.

Foreword

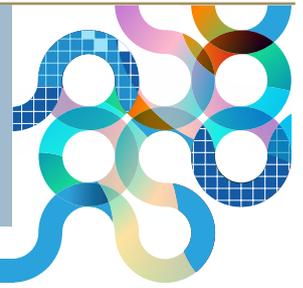


Interestingly, this report has not fallen prey to the ‘best of all possible policy options’ fallacy. It highlights the merits and demerits of policy tracks relating to OERs, particularly in the Arab World. And, it lays out a policy blueprint for developing OERs in the Arab World.

The passionate arguments for the OERs have come through a comprehensive and valuable portrayal of the history of responding to the challenges of modern education in the Arab World. Hamdan Bin Mohammed e-University’s pioneering and historic role in creating awareness about e-Learning in the UAE and indeed elsewhere in the Arab World is worth remembering as we debate and discuss OERs in the context of education. This Roundtable report is a manifestation of the university’s mission to facilitate policy-oriented discussions in the Arab World.

With the emergence of Hamdan Bin Mohammed e-University (HBMeU) as a pioneer of several initiatives including this Roundtable, and a powerful change agent in the area of education, it is quite likely that the strategies relating to the OERs will get great impetus through this report. Surely, HBMeU would play a leading role to leverage the outstanding opportunity for creating and promoting OERs in the Arab World.

Executive Summary



The OERs have received scant attention in both the academic and institutional settings in the Arab World. This is rather surprising and disappointing, since educators and policy makers agree that the ultimate goal of any educational policy is to spread knowledge efficiently far and wide. The deliberations at the Roundtable suggest that the potential of OERs for spreading education in the Arab World is remarkable. Moreover, the deliberations produced clear answers to the 2 thematic questions posed for the Roundtable. Regardless of differences in country characteristics or policy intervention characteristics in the Arab World, the contexts discussed at the Roundtable reveal common conclusions that OERs can be effective in spreading education and improving prospects for a consortium-based approach related to e-Learning.

The challenge for experts now is to build upon the common knowledge base created by the Roundtable. The group discussions at the Roundtable indicate some mixed arguments especially with respect to the attitudes towards e-Learning and OERs. The discussants at the Roundtable argued that the Arab World needs more OERs evaluation research, perhaps not of the kind done in the West. Rather, it would be helpful to identify how the OERs creation process might differ across different cultures and policy regimes.

Wherever OERs occur, the goals are similar—to create and spread knowledge, to provide access to cost-effective education, to improve attitudes about e-Learning, and to develop skills for creating OERs. In the Arab World, these goals can of course be achieved if educational institutions (under the influence of a non-traditional education policy) initiate the development of strategies for creating more positive OERs-driven conditions, which in turn may enhance the commitment of academics and administrators to connect with OERs.

Creating OERs through an international consortium would be an educational opportunity for the institutions' maturation into the academic world. It would be a cultural, social, and intellectual experience for the Arab country institutions. This Roundtable just scratched the surface of a wide array of issues relating to the OERs, leaving much more to be explored. Although experts at the Roundtable were aware of the inherent risks of suddenly getting into the OERs, they were more interested in the value that the consortium experience would bring to the Arab World. Policy makers must be made aware of the value and impact that the consortia can bring to the Arab nations through the OERs.

The Roundtable discussions have shown that OERs can flourish in a high-tech and internationalised educational environments. Although a growing trend exists elsewhere in the world, the OERs activity is still in its infancy in the Arab World, since the policy interventions in education appear to be skewed towards traditional formats of education. The participants in the Roundtable unanimously argued that it was time for exploring other policy directions and bringing innovation in the educational system through the OERs.

Connect the dots

All of us involved in innovation in e-Learning today in a way shape or form one of Steve Job's digital 'dots'!

Introduction



Dr Narimane Hadj-Hamou,
Assistant Chancellor
for Learning
and Academic
Development

There is a growing tide of interest in the Open Educational Resources (OERs) that encourage the creation of open and free educational materials. The innovative idea behind the OERs is to create an opportunity, at least in theory, for all to benefit from the educational materials available in the public domain. By creating OERs, educational institutions can of course make the academic resources available especially for those learners who are unable to gain knowledge due to certain restrictions stemming from copyright and market-driven motives. The emerging OER movement has certainly engaged academics, policy makers and others in interesting debates and discussions in various parts of the world. In fact, the OERs have created a technology-driven opportunity paradigm in education and introduced initiatives that aim to make a difference in the lives of millions of people all over the world.

What are OERs?

The term, OER was first introduced at a conference hosted by UNESCO in 2000 and was promoted in the context of providing free access to educational resources throughout the globe. Currently, the oft-quoted definition of OERs is as follows.

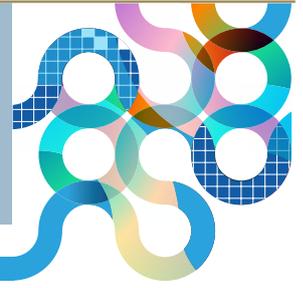
“Digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research” (OECD, 2007).

It is noteworthy that “resources” are not limited to content but include 3 key areas as follows.

- Learning content including full courses, courseware, content modules, learning objects library collections and journals;
- Tools including software to support the development, use, reuse and delivery of learning content, including searching and organisation of content, content and learning management systems, content development tools, and online learning communities, and
- Implementation resources including intellectual property licenses to promote open publishing of materials, design principles of best practice and localise content. (OECD, 2007)

“OERs are teaching, learning and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials or techniques used to support access to knowledge.” (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2008)

The emergence of OERs has brought into sharper focus the concept of ‘openness’, which is based on the idea that useful knowledge should be disseminated freely through the Internet for the benefit of all sections of the society. The key aspects of openness are free availability of knowledge-related resources and almost no barriers (technical, legal



and financial) to the use of the educational resources anywhere in the world.

Basic definitions and the *raison d'être* of OER activities suggest that they cannot be accomplished by a single individual or department. Teams, collaborative work groups and consortia must buy into a vision of the outcomes anticipated from OER programs and must work together to accomplish those objectives. A large number of institutions are observing great returns from educational technologies and OER programs, which enable communication and collaboration among institutions and learners around the world.

The Spread of OERs

According to OECD, there are more than 3000 open access courses currently available from nearly 300 universities worldwide. In the US, thousands of courses have been made available by institutions such as MIT OpenCourseWare and Rice University's Connexions project (<http://ocw.mit.edu/> , <http://cnx.rice.edu/>). In China, nearly 750 courses have been made available by 222 members of the China Open Resources for Education (CORE) consortium. (http://www.core.org.cn/cn/jpkc/index_en.html). In Japan, more than 400 courses have been made available by 19 member universities of the Japanese OCW Consortium from its 19 member universities. (<http://www.jocw.jp/>) In France, 800 educational resources from around 100 teaching units have been made available by 11 member universities of the ParisTech OCW project (<http://graduateschool.paristech.org/>). These offerings include lecture notes, problem sets, case studies, research tips, syllabi, reading lists, tools and simulations as well as video and audio lectures. The Open University, UK has also made great contributions to the OERs. The OpenLearn initiative (<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/>) launched by the Open University, UK has made some selected materials available for free use by anyone accessing the web site and to develop communities of learners and scholars around the content using a range of distance learning tools and strategies.

The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) has helped establish OER Asia-- an online forum to share information, ideas, research studies, knowledge resources, guidelines and toolkits on OER best practice in the Asian continent. The Wawasan Open University is hosting OER Asia. The initiative is of strategic importance in view of the fact that nearly 4 billion people live in Asia and there is a pressing need for providing easy access to education.

The oft-quoted TESSA project has brought together teachers and educators from all over Africa. It offers useful OERs in four languages to support school-based teacher education and training. It is certainly a success story and can easily be replicated in the Arab World.

The Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO have been playing a positive role by contributing great ideas and arguments for popularising the use of OERs all over the world (Daniel, Sir John 2010). In view of available evidence, one can be reasonably optimistic about the spread of OERs in various parts of the world.

Several institutions in the world have started placing learning materials in the public domain through the Internet that can lead to sharing of knowledge far and wide at almost no cost. Of course, this kind of innovation in the education sector can help the doors to higher education stay open for all sections of society. Therefore, an overarching objective of this Roundtable was to explore, discuss and evaluate the growing potential of OERs to promote the concept of knowledge-sharing in the Arab World. Against the backdrop of this objective, the Roundtable addressed the following thematic questions.

Thematic Question 1

Can the Open Educational Resources (OERs) provide a unique innovation-based proposition for the stakeholders in education?

This question brought into sharper focus the following questions in the Roundtable discussions.

1. Can OERs provide unprecedented free access to lifelong learning resources?
2. Can OERs lead to internationalisation of education, thus bridging quality gaps in educational systems across nations of the Arab World?
3. Do OERs have the potential to provide better avenues for innovation in education and training systems?
4. What are the concerns related to OERs in the Arab World?
5. What are the possible policy responses to those concerns?

Thematic Question 2

Should Arab states adopt a consortium approach to create OERs in the Arab World?

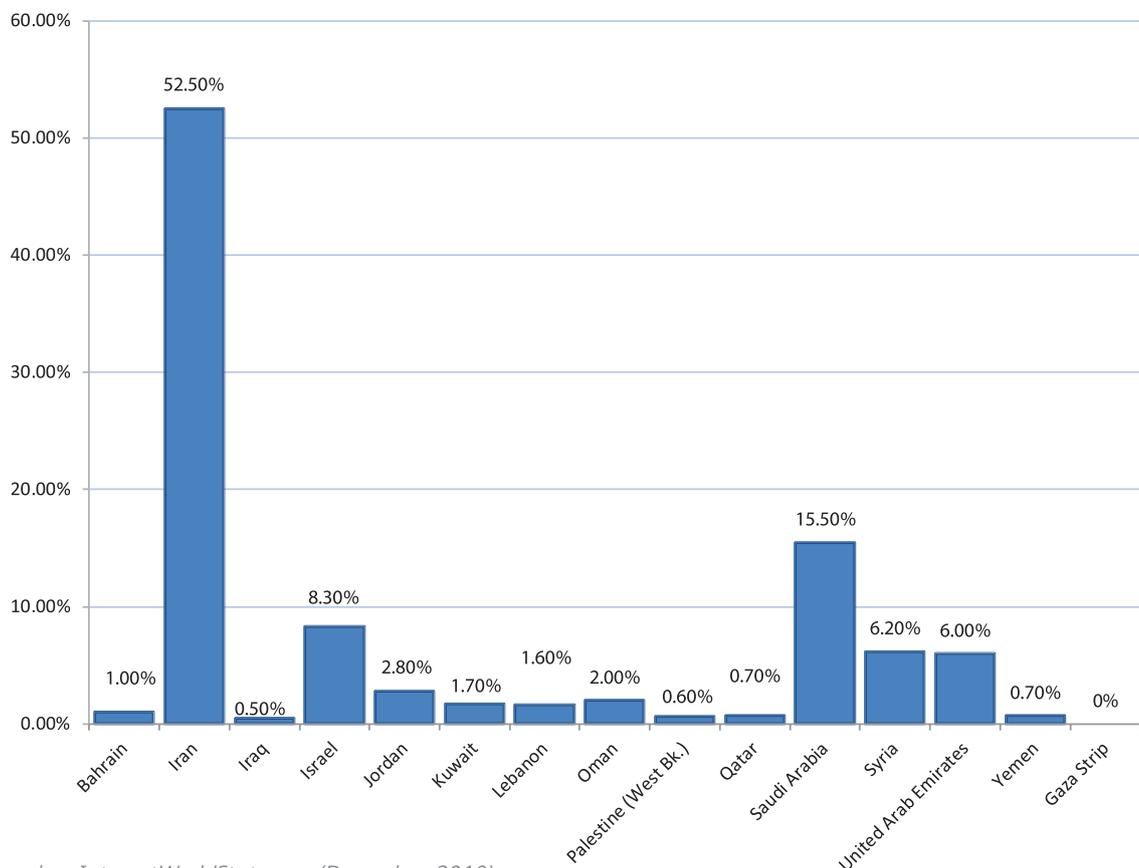
Many Arab states have so far had a narrow focus on education but with some noticeable quality assurance problems and issues. Has the time come to broaden the focus of education and adopt a consortium approach to integrate innovations such as OERs in the education system? How will the consortium approach fit into the policy tracks designed by the governments in the Arab World? And finally, is it the time for policy makers in the Arab World collectively to pursue the Arabization of education strategy through a consortium approach? These were all interesting questions for the Roundtable.

OERs: A Unique Proposition for the Arab World?

The policy makers, academics and other interest groups have argued in favor of open education to achieve the avowed objective of spreading valuable education. The HBMeU Roundtable 2011, for instance, made a policy recommendation to promote e-Learning in the Arab World to complement the traditional format of education. It is realistically possible in view of the fact that recent years have witnessed emergence of open learning programs by using the Internet. This kind of trend may be attributed mainly to the emergence of very useful e-Learning technologies and changes in learners' needs for flexible educational programs in various parts of the world including the Arab World. Although the population of learners enrolled in traditional classroom sessions in various parts of the Arab World continues to outweigh its counterpart population in electronic programs, the interest in the Internet-based programs has been considerable.

The use of the Internet has been gaining ground in the Arab World (Figure 1). It is believed that institutions of higher learning cannot afford to neglect open and distance-learning formats in order to grow and stay profitable in the current decade (HBMeU Roundtable 2011). Harvard Professor Michael Porter argued that, while the Internet has helped distance education to expand far and wide, it has only changed the front end of the industry process. According to him, deploying the Internet and other ICTs within distance education has expanded the size of the market, not only allowing access to wider markets but also bringing many more institutions into competition with one another, thus increasing the potential of efficiency (Porter, 2001). This kind of development has brought in its wake globalization of opportunities in the area of education. In this context, the OER argument has gained considerable currency.

Figure 1: Middle East Internet Usage and Population Statistics



Source: Based on InternetWorldStats.com (December, 2010)

Challenging Traditional Approaches

Traditional approaches in the area of higher education are based on assumptions inappropriate for opening up education for all in the Arab World. When they are applied to contemporary issues, there can be negative side-effects. First, their frameworks and instruments assume that the problems associated with higher education are not complex, so their relevance is limited. Second, by ignoring certain features of policy implementation to address lifelong learning, key aspects of the problem might be hidden from the formal tools and frameworks used for managing traditional educational programs. Third, where educational policy reforms are tied to inappropriate assumptions there may be undesirable outcomes. Therefore, there is considerable sense in exploring a non-traditional approach to higher education in the Arab World.

A review of literature indicates that the OER approach is different from the traditional system of education (Table 1). The traditional system of education, although established following several years of trial and error, is typically closed as it is anchored in regulatory framework of one institution or one country. The OER approach, on the other hand, is dynamic and spans institutional and national boundaries. Moreover, it can be a logical outcome of a consortium established to achieve strategic objectives. Unlike traditional educational systems, the OER approach can accelerate the pace of internationalization of education, thereby bridging quality gaps across institutions and countries. It can also be convincingly argued that the OER approach paves the way for a very efficient use of distance education technologies.

Traditional System	OER Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Campus-based, closed• One system conditions environment• National Quality Assurance mechanism• Individualized instruction process• Stylized use of technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spans boundaries• Dynamic and broad in terms of horizons• Multinational Quality Assurance mechanism• Group or consortium-based instruction process• Dynamic use of technology

Source: Based on T. Liyoshi and MSV Kumar (Eds, 2008), *Opening Up Education: The Collective Advancement of Education through Open Technology, Open Content and Open Knowledge*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press.

The Consortium Approach

There is evidence suggesting that a consortium can prove invaluable in the context of OERs. The OpenCourseWare Consortium (<http://www.ocwconsortium.org/>), a collaborative venture of more than 100 higher education institutions and associated organisations from around the world has created open educational content using a shared model. According to the consortium arrangement, member institutions must be prepared and able to publish, under the institution's name, materials from at least ten courses in a format in line with the definition of open courseware. Interestingly, OpenCourseWare Consortium framework encourages and facilitates institutions to forge partnership for sharing resources with others and to develop a common quality assurance framework for all consortium members.

The Best Practice OER Models

Basically, three best-practice models related to OERs have emerged in higher education: the MIT model, the USU model, and the Rice model (Wiley 2006 a).

The MIT model is based on centralization and is well-coordinated in terms of delivery of services. The main objective of this project is to publish each and every course in the university catalogue in a defined period of time. This project has attracted donor attention and commitment.

The USU model is rather hybrid, relying on centralisation as well as decentralisation of tasks. The goal of USU is to publish as many of the courses in the USU course catalogue as possible and feasible. The project has been enjoying great support from the faculty and volunteers.

The Rice model is based on decentralization and volunteers offer all sorts of services and materials. The Rice Connexions seeks to promote collaborative development of learning resources by authors from all parts of the world.

Implementing OERs in the Arab World: Concerns and Responses

Of course, there are alternatives to the traditional educational policy implementation 'toolkit'. Actors charged with implementing policies and programmes against the backdrop of the issues facing higher education in the Arab World need to take responsibility for choosing an appropriate approach, and there are emerging insights from OERs to help them address those concerns (eg. access, efficiency, quality assurance, Arabization, etc.) in

a strategic manner. Far from being irrelevant when tackling higher education issues, evidence from a synthesis of experience across a very broad range of institutions in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia suggests that knowledge becomes one of the most crucial resources for effective design and implementation, and the ways in which policy draws on available knowledge becomes a central determinant of success. The difference is that policy-makers must shape OER programs in a way that recognizes the concerns and possible responses on the road map.

The LAD division of HBMeU organized a focus group discussion in October, 2011 focusing on the potential of OERs in addressing the knowledge-sharing needs of the Arab states. During the discussion, some concerns as well as the possible responses to address those concerns were highlighted as follows.

Is the OER Strategy Sustainable in the Arab World?

Indeed, the question of sustainability is of great importance in the Arab World. According to Wiley (2006), “the sustainability of OER initiatives must be considered in two parts: the sustainable production of OER and the sustainable sharing of resources. The sustainability of any OER initiative is influenced by the size of the operation (small or large), the type of provider (institution or community) and the level of integration of users in the production process (co-production or producer-consumer model)”. Policy makers in the Arab World have the following options to uphold sustainability of OER initiatives.

- Encourage institutions, rather than individual faculty to participate in OER projects
- Establish membership-based consortia to share costs and academic expertise.
- Specify roles for the body of learners in adopting OERs.
- Engage communities through social media to spread the use of OERs.
- Create formal funding channels for creating and spreading OERs
- Create quality assurance mechanisms for OERs
- Reform the regulatory framework for higher education to accommodate OERs
- Compensate the subject matter experts for their contributions to OERs

Who will collaborate and how?

Evidence from the three basic OER models suggests that policy makers in the Arab countries need to collaborate and facilitate action to spread education. This can be done in the following ways:

- Engaging local institutions: Policy makers may need to work with and through local institutions to anchor interventions in Arab country realities. For enhancing the use of OERs in higher education, this may work best through co-management and policy sharing.

- Building adaptive capacity: Capacity-building is crucial to enable actors to capitalize on any autonomy for providing open and boundary-less access to educational resources. Support for adaptive capacity and consortia is crucial to promote the use of OERs.
- Removing the barriers: Many types of barriers and systemic issues prevent actors from adapting to emerging OERs opportunities, such as the barriers to enabling new national and regional legislation to open up education.
- Supporting consortium-type governance: Policymakers need a networked approach to governance, appropriate structures are needed to hold institutions accountable, and of course participatory processes are crucial.
- Leadership and facilitation: Even where the capacity to act is shared, leadership is a critical variable. In the context of OERs, leadership must be facilitative and enabling, working through attraction rather than dictation, and communicating a vision of change around which new educational paradigms can emerge.
- Incremental intervention: where the Ministry needs to intervene, this should be handled incrementally, starting from existing networks and taking an evolutionary approach that provides decentralised action and supports emerging OERs strategy, rather than implementing idealistic frameworks mechanically.

How to address licensing and copyright issues?

- If open educational resources are going to be freely shared through a well-planned licensing procedure to facilitate use, revision, translation, improvement and sharing by anyone, licensing and copyright procedures ought to be established. This is indeed a huge challenge for policy makers.
- How can resources be published in formats that facilitate application and editing, and that are suitable for a diversity of technical platforms? It is again a serious concern.

How far technology can go in creating a new paradigm?

The current era is characterised by the rapid proliferation of educational technologies. Surely, a new higher education paradigm will appear in the Arab World when a culture of shared learning will be created in tandem with creating technology-based services. Technical innovations will naturally facilitate the spread of OERs. However, there will be a need to simplify the learner experience across the entire spectrum of OER activities, from access to use to reuse and ultimately to innovation. Policy makers need to appreciate that the OER movement is about evolving architecture for enhanced content creation and effective use of the architecture for efficiently accessing digital content anywhere in the world.

Can Arab states break free from tradition?

For the Arab states, OERs are an opportunity as well as a challenge to break free from tradition and embrace change for creating a culture of shared knowledge. Given the scarcity of IT and sophisticated managerial skills in the Arab World, the experience of the education sector in getting value out of OER programs is invaluable. Lessons of experience from a cross-section of OER programs suggest that the innovation is paying off. The case in point is the TESSA project. Why are these projects doing well? The successful projects possess characteristics that allow them to fruitfully deploy distance education technologies effectively. Some of the factors explaining the success are as follows:

- support from government organizations,
- promotion of an information/knowledge sharing culture by management,
- widespread enthusiasm within the organization about the benefits of contributing to OERs,
- performance measures linked to contribution to the OERs,
- sophisticated strategic planning processes,
- effective management of change,
- philosophy of life-long learning,
- culture of research and innovation,
- internationalization of education,
- consortium arrangements,
- robust technology infrastructure, and
- production of OERs so that they can be used successfully.

Is the academic community able and willing to create high quality open digital resources?

It is common knowledge that academics (in general) in the Arab World rely almost exclusively on educational resources published in other parts of the world. The research base in the Arab states is rather weak compared to the developed and fast-developing countries. This kind of state of affairs would pose a challenge when it comes to producing OERs in the Arab World. Moreover, in the absence of a robust culture of writing and publishing in the Arab World, the quality assurance of OERs (whenever they are developed) would pose a thought-provoking challenge to the policy makers.

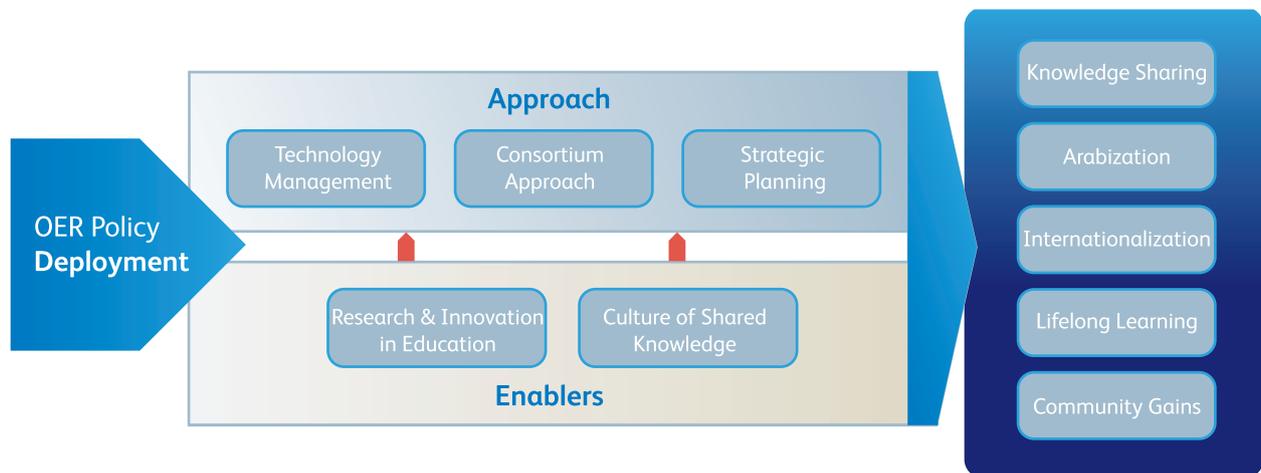
Admittedly, there is no simple answer for this. Perhaps, a consortium approach involving authors of OERs from various parts of the world would serve a useful purpose, at least in the short run.

Who will fund the OERs?

Another concern in the context of the OERs relates to funding. There are two viewpoints on this, occupying either end of the spectrum. First, it is believed that OERs creation should fall within the purview of the government policy. Second, it is thought that, instead of relying on the government for innovation leads, the educational institutions should be proactive in creating OERs and help shape government policy in that direction. While it is critical to appreciate the positive impact of government funding for OERs in the Arab World, it is also important to recognise that other interest groups including the private sector can of course contribute useful resources to enhance the ability of educational institutions to spread the benefits of OERs in the communities.

In the final analysis, it must be remembered that a successful paradigm shift involving OERs in higher education in the Arab World would be possible only if a clear road map was prepared for deploying policy (Figure 2). Deploying any OERs policy requires a well-thought-out approach that might be anchored in technology management strategy, consortia or strategic planning framework. True, the approaches chosen for OERs policy deployment get facilitated by the creation of a culture of shared knowledge and the existence of research and innovation in education. Indeed, the results of an effective OERs policy deployment occur normally in the form of knowledge sharing, Arabization of knowledge, internationalization, life-long learning, and community gains.

Figure 2. A Conceptual Roadmap for Deploying OERs in the Arab World



Contributions from the Panel

Professor Frits Pannekoek (Chair)
Professor Denise Kirkpatrick
Professor Carmel McNaught
Professor Alain Senteni



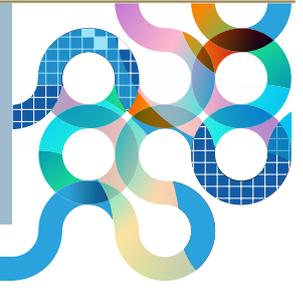
The contributions from the distinguished panel members were remarkable. Professor Alain Senteni, the session moderator extended a warm welcome to the eminent participants in the Roundtable drawn from all over the world and appreciated the opportunity to deliberate on a wide array of issues relating to the OERs in the Arab World. He hoped, the outcomes of the roundtable would guide the users of the OERs. He strongly supported the reforms adopted by the Arab countries to make education accessible to everyone at reasonable cost.

Professor Fritz Pannekoek, the Roundtable chair expounded on the strategic significance of the OERs in various parts of the world, including the Arab countries. To achieve learning for all, the Arab nations must channel their efforts in education in two strategic directions: reforming education system at the macro level and building a high-quality OERs base at the micro level, he argued. Indeed, investment in OERs would go a long way in reforming the educational systems, particularly in the Arab World, he said. In addition to reflecting his ideas on OERs, he shared his experiences with the participants in the Roundtable and urged the policy makers to consider and practice the innovation-side of education, whose tenets were more context-specific, less abstract, more strategic and quite rewarding.

According to Professor Kirkpatrick, moving from print to the digital environment had a profound effect on access, usage and distribution of information knowledge. The phenomenon of the Internet with its wider dissemination of information is not yet fully understood, he explained. We are trying to understand this impact on post-secondary learning and the value of learning, he further explained. ‘What knowledge should be free and what should it look like? How do people learn in this massive information age and what is the role of universities in such an environment? Is it to nurture learning or provide credentials for those who ascertain a certain level?’ These were interesting questions posed by him.

Professor Kirkpatrick focused on OERs and explained that they are currently critical in higher education as they have the potential for (a) substantive educational transformation contributing to community development, efficient course development and design, (b) keeping pace with vast growing knowledge in a range of disciplines, and (c) contributing the quality frameworks that are regularly evaluated and reviewed. She highlighted the need for institutional multi-level strategies which include incentives for those developing RLOs. She argued that there was a pressing need for designing a comprehensive quality assurance framework and addressing copyright issues, particularly in the Arab countries.

Professor Kirkpatrick highlighted that the use, access, review, reuse and readapted use of materials require new thinking about knowledge management and knowledge construction as change is needed within the mindset of academics and institutions alike. OERs can be effectively used, produced and managed and have the potential to continuously develop skills and keep current with content and disciplinary knowledge, thus expanding OER publications and growing a collaborative social networking to share and support relevant and contextualised content.



Professor McNaught started her presentation by agreeing with the chair that the academic work has laid a good foundation for discussing a wide range of issues relating to the OERs. She was sympathetic to the panel’s advocacy of policy reforms to pave way for the OERs to flourish in the Arab World. She was interested in devising a policy framework that would fare better in the area of education. During her presentation, she was able to impart greater realism to her ideas and make them more palatable to those policy makers who were prepared to challenge conventional wisdom and were considering to design and launch OERs. Establishing a sound OERs policy can of course help a country carve education policy reforms aimed at providing measurable, affordable and achievable gains to its communities in this digital age, she argued. There is a difference between establishing consortia and having them actually work. While the consortia members can share useful experience and initiate concerted action, one has to look at the ground realities in the member countries. Surely, for any OERs strategy to succeed, it would require trained staff, adequate research and development funds, government support, and effective quality assurance mechanism, she argued.

Professor McNaught recollected that great societies have historically shown an ability to initiate and implement policy reforms in the area of education to respond to the changing environmental conditions. The proliferation of e-Learning technologies in our time surely calls for adjustment in the behaviour of policy makers—for instance, by planning more OERs and moving away from ethno-centric mindset, she argued.

The distinguished members of the panel highlighted the following policy issues related to the OERs.

- Challenges facing policy makers in the development and dissemination of OERs;
- Engaging institutions in the development and proliferation of OERs;
- Primary schools are more likely to use OERs than institutions of higher education;
- Designing licensing procedures for OERs;
- Maintaining quality and interactivity, and developing skills for meeting the specific needs of diverse learners;
- Keeping innovation as a key in OER development and production;
- Providing a better quality learner experience;
- Ensuring that OERs provide additional and current resources to support curricula;
- Integrating OERs into curriculum versus supplementing them into curricula;
- Providing continues investment in training with various tools for the development of OERs;
- Managing risk, and
- Collaboration versus competition (enabling institutions to develop identities through collaboration, cooperation and competition.

It was highlighted that OERs can develop and grow knowledge as a transactional commodity. The adaptation and customisation of OERs rather than reusing them is important in building knowledge from cultural and contextual perspectives, the panel agreed.

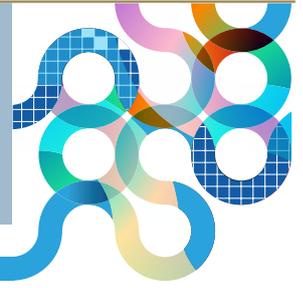
Roundtable Outcomes

The Roundtable provided a unique opportunity for eminent and accomplished scholars and practitioners drawn from various parts of the world to share their ideas and experiences, and provide insights that could be used for developing effective policies in the Arab World. The format of the Roundtable was carefully designed to facilitate a constructive and supportive discussion among the distinguished participants in the Roundtable. The analytical underpinnings of the discussion at the Roundtable centred on two thematic questions: Can the OERs provide a unique innovation-based proposition for the stakeholders in education? and should Arab states adopt a consortium approach to create OERs in the Arab World? The key insights arising from the group discussions at the Roundtable include new strategies that both respond to the challenge of developing OERs and shape a blueprint for launching them in the Arab World.

Three groups were formed to address the thematic questions. The groups' responses to the thematic question 1 are summarized as follows.

It was unanimously agreed by the groups that the OERs can of course provide an innovation-based proposition for stakeholders in education. In this context, the following recommendations were made.

- OERs call for a change of culture taking into account issues related to adaptation, representation, learners' abilities, attitude, and change of practices.
- In the context of the OERs strategy, it would require for policy makers to adopt both top-down and bottom-up approaches for designing and implementing change.
- The success of OERs, would depend, to a great extent, on gradual progression of innovative ideas, long-term planning process and patience on the part of policy makers.
- The guidelines for the use of OERs must be clearly designed taking into consideration issues such as language, copyright issues, ethics, mindset of stakeholders.
- A shared vision is required to promote the OERs in the Arab countries.
- A model similar to the one developed by UNESCO must be developed and applied.
- The capacity of institutions to create OERs must be enhanced through incentives.
- Content must relate to the cultural context.
- Arabization of learning objects should be decentralised.
- Collaboration with experienced institutions is required.
- Academics should be encouraged to be more positive vis-a-vis the new learning tools.
- Peer evaluation of OERs must be encouraged.
- OERs must be in line with the curricula.



- OERs must be made to produce desirable learning outcomes.
- A strategy is required to bring about change in attitudes towards e-Learning.
- OERs must be culture-specific.
- Incentives must be developed for the faculty to develop OERs.
- The intellectual property rights related to OERs must be protected through policies and legal requirements.
- A strong endowment must be created by policy makers to promote a shared vision for OERs.
- OERs must be kept in a national repository.
- OERs must be place pride of place in policy making.

With reference to Quality Assurance, the participants made the following recommendations.

- Follow best practice
- Establish QA at all levels: faculty, institution, and government
- Differentiate between QA of learning objects development and the use of learning objects



- Establish QA criteria
- Link QA to learning outcomes
- Enhance the quality of Open Learning Objects; it could lead to quality control
- Create diversity in OERs and governance as they are important in ensuring quality assurance
- Create a shared vision of best practice approaches
- Review and evaluate OERs on a continuous basis
- Provide incentives for quality products;
- Promote academic contributions to ensure QA and recognise and reward those contributions
- Design key quality indicators (KQIs) to achieve the goals of QA

The groups addressed the question of enhancing the capacity of educational institutions to create OERs in the Arab states. Their recommendations are as follows.

- Create centres of excellence for OERs in the Arab world
- Create value chains for OERs
- Encourage competition for producing and launching OERs
- Use appropriate resources to add value
- Providing free and open access to all resources created to enhance capacity
- Combine resources from different stakeholders
- Create innovation and collaboration within the educational sector

The groups unanimously agreed (in response to thematic question 2) that a consortium approach would be invaluable in creating OERs in the Arab World. Their recommendations are summarised as follows.

- Define the functional boundaries for consortium members
- The government must support the creation of national repository system for OERs created by consortium members
- Encourage the consortium members to design a common Quality Assurance framework for the OERs
- Centralise the production of content in the Arab World through consortium approach

With reference to the question about integrating the local education system into the innovation-driven global trends in education through the OERs, the groups made the following recommendations.

- Strengthen the Middle East e-Learning Association (MEEA) network
- Promote collaborative research relating to OERs
- Collaborative research can protect languages and cultivate diverse cultural approaches
- Consistent and continuous development and usage of OERs is required to develop international networks
- Change the mindset of academics to promote OERs
- Peer review and peer evaluation of work need to be important elements in a consortium approach
- Recognize competencies in the policy framework

Can OERs prove more attractive than traditional learning resources in the Arab countries? The groups responded as follows.

- The traditional learning resources have great physical facilities compared with e-Learning institutions
- OERs need 'fancy' premises
- A paradigm shift is needed from institutionalism to constructivism
- Academics and other stakeholders need to recommend actions to governments about OERs
- In the long term, OERs can prove more attractive as they are more culturally sensitive
- OERs have the potential to provide an opportunity for wider understanding of the OERs to the outside world

A flexible educational institution is a more creative institution. Here lies the space for the OERs to flourish.



Participants' Responses to Key Questions

It has been an HBMeU Roundtable tradition to address key questions to the participants. This year, the Dean of Scientific Research and Doctoral Studies finalized the questions after careful discussions with a focus group including experts in e-learning. These questions were posed to the participants in the Roundtable through an electronic voting device.

A 5-point Likert scale, with A representing 'strongly agree', B representing 'agree', C representing 'neutral', D representing 'disagree' and E representing 'strongly disagree' was used to measure responses pertaining to questions 1 through 6 (Figures 3 through 8). For the second set of questions starting from question 7, a 5-point Likert scale, with A representing 'of utmost importance', B representing 'very important', C representing 'of moderate importance', D representing 'of little importance' and E representing 'of very little or no importance' was used to measure responses. The responses are presented in Figures 3 through 13. Figure 3 clearly indicates that 56% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement that OERs can only be created if online education is promoted and recognised officially in the Arab World. It is, therefore, important for policy makers to take steps officially to recognise online education. Indeed, OERs are needed by the Arab countries to spread education (Figure 4). It is popularly perceived that educational institutions operating in the Arab World generally lack capacity to create knowledge. The responses presented in Figure 5 confirm this perception as 33% of the respondents strongly agreed and 34% of the respondents agreed with the statement. Interestingly, 67% of the respondents remained neutral (Figure 6) to the rather provocative statement relating to a policy bias existing in the Arab countries. On the question relating to Quality Assurance, 64% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement that it is difficult to apply to OERs (Figure 7). Surely, this kind of response has great implications for policy. Figure 8 presents responses related to the question of defining priority areas for OERs. 46% of the respondents agreed with the statement that Arab states should define priority subject areas for launching OERs. The figure suggests that the OERs can be effective if targeted at the specific needs of the countries in the Arab World. 44% of the respondents thought it was of utmost importance for the Arab states to design a clear strategy for promoting the OERs in the education sector (Figure 9). Since colleges, research institutes and universities can play an important role in creating OERs, 41% of the respondents thought it was of utmost importance to increase the budget for OERs in such institutions (Figure 10). The Roundtable focused attention on the question of creating consortia for the OERs. Figure 11 shows that 37% of the respondents thought it was of utmost importance and 36% of the voters thought it was important to create consortia for the OERs. 70% of the respondents thought it was of utmost importance to operationalise knowledge through the creation of OERs in the world (Figure 12). This can be done, inter alia, by writing case studies based on field realities. The final statement pertained to the issue of Quality Assurance. 64% of the respondents thought it was of utmost importance to create mechanisms for the quality assurance of OERs (Figure 13). This kind of overwhelming response clearly highlights the need for addressing quality assurance issues in policy making relating to the OERs.

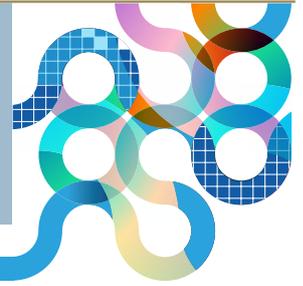


Figure 3. OERs can only be created if online education is promoted and recognized officially in the Arab World

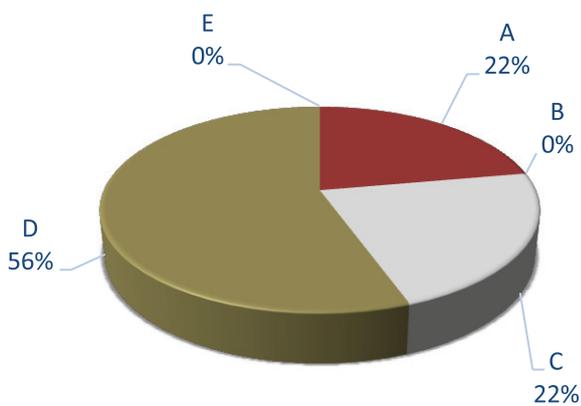


Figure 4. The Arab countries need OERs for spreading education

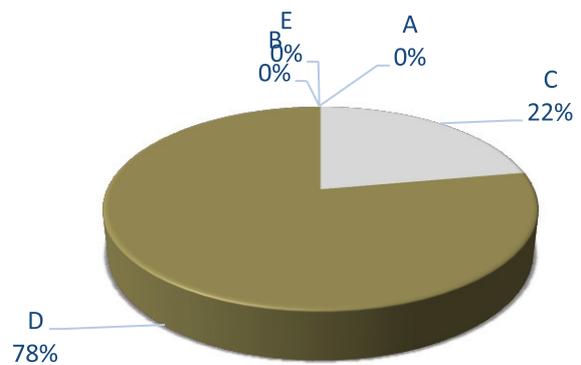


Figure 5. A large number of Arab states cannot create OERs due to lack of knowledge-creating capacity in colleges and universities

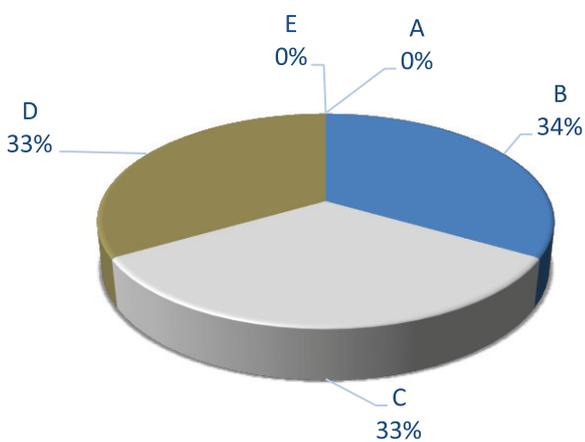


Figure 6. In Arab countries, OERs cannot flourish due to biased policies against online education

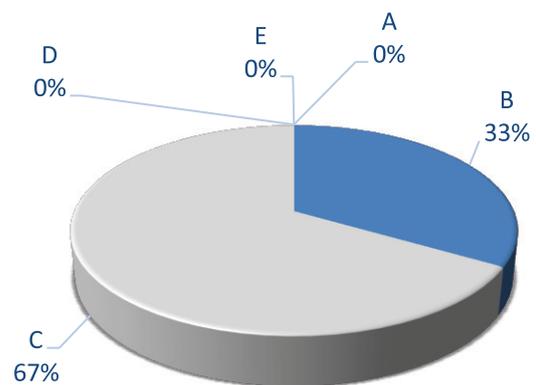


Figure 7. Quality Assurance is difficult to apply to OERs

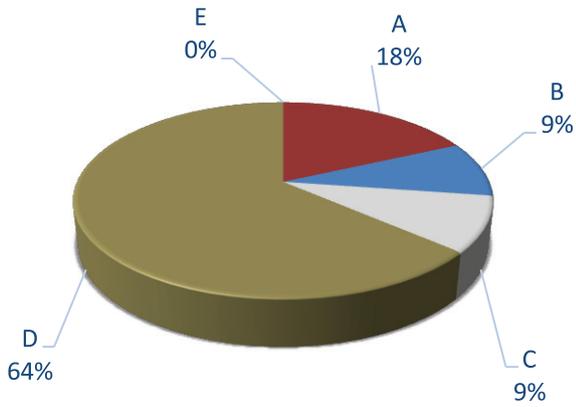


Figure 8. The Arab states should define priority subject areas where OERs can be created

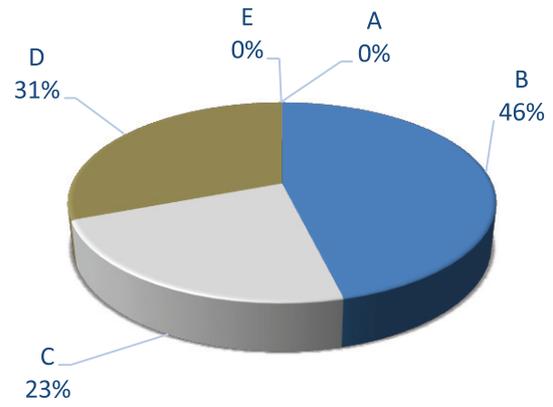


Figure 9. Design a strategy to promote the use of OERs in the education sector

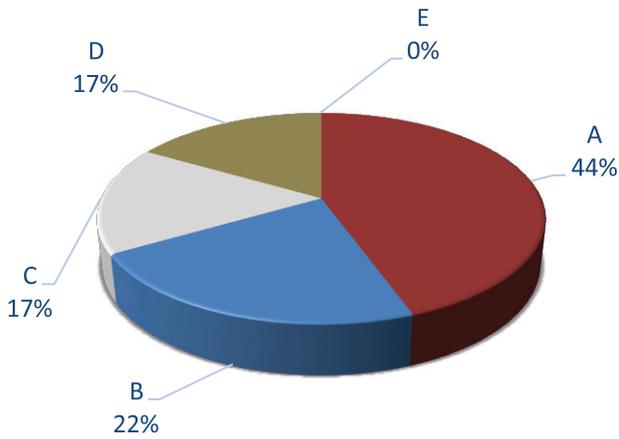


Figure 10. Increase budget for OERs in colleges, universities and research institutions

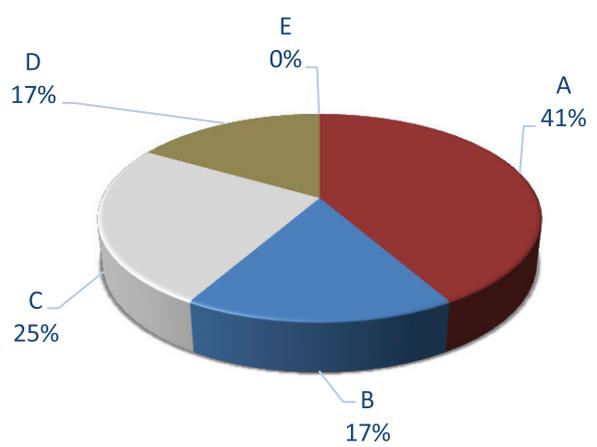


Figure 11. Create international networks and consortia to produce OERs

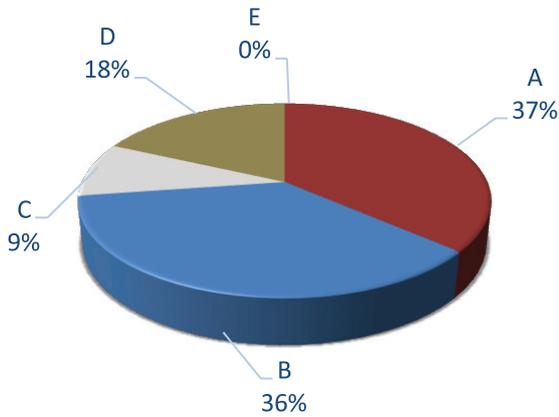


Figure 12. Contextualize knowledge through OERs created in the Arab states

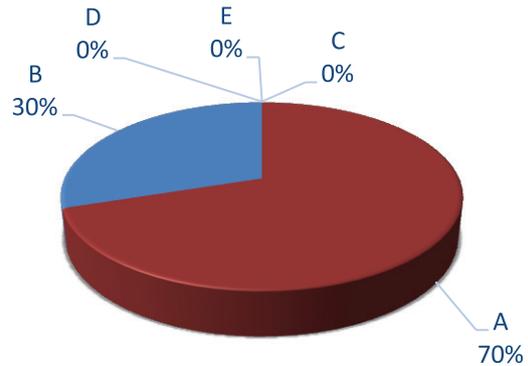
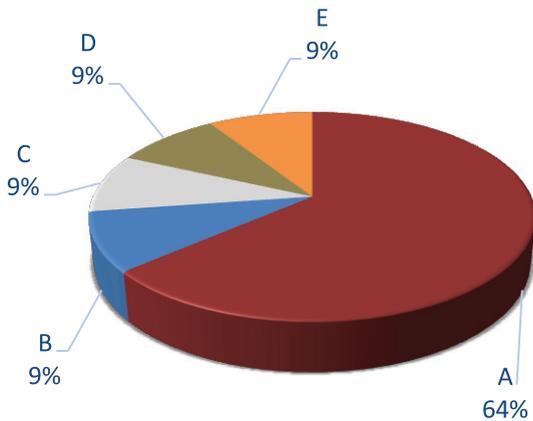


Figure 13. Create mechanisms for Quality Assurance of OERs



The responses of experts to the key questions underscore a need for policy makers' attention to the evolutionary processes that underlines OER growth trajectory in the Arab World. Such processes of course entail that policy tracks have consequences for established mechanisms (most notably quality assurance mechanism) in the area of education. In other words, a failure to initiate a change process may have implications and extend beyond missed opportunities related to the OERs. The inherently dynamic nature of OERs, which change over time with the changing educational needs of the countries, also requires specific policy attention.

The Way Forward

There was a broad consensus that policy makers in the Arab world ought to consider developing OERs in order to respond to the challenges of education. Of course, the recommendations made by the participants in the Roundtable tie in with the global push for OERs. Access to education, which is a basic human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is also of strategic significance. The development of human mind and talent is invaluable for achieving the socio-economic objectives in any country of the world.

In adopting the objective of learning for all through the development of OERs, the policy makers can elevate the education policy and link it to development strategy. Interestingly, the latest results stemming from the OERs (highlighted earlier in the introduction to this report) reinforce the lesson that the countries that are successful overall in promoting learning are those that have successfully introduced and implemented innovation in the education system. Therefore, innovation in the form of OERs has the potential to transform education in the Arab World.

The Roundtable made it clear that OERs have taken off in several countries and there are promising conceptual, technological and policy tools available to decision makers for integrating OERs into sustainable education policies and strategies. Arguably, the existence of these tools should help dispel concerns and doubts that developing OERs might divert attention and resources that are needed to deal with the more immediate issues, such as quality assurance and internationalization of education in the Arab world.

The consortium approach supported by the Roundtable would go a long way in helping partner countries build the national capacity to manage OERs, implement quality assurance and equity standards, measure OERs' performance against national education goals, and support evidence-based policy making and innovations.

It seems likely that OERs will play an integral role in education policy transformation in several Arab countries. Although, OERs do not offer a complete panacea—as yet, a robust beginning in the form of ICT-driven innovation would prompt optimism. The ingredients for innovation have come to exist in the areas related to OERs, and the Arab governments should design policy tracks in which they can foster such innovations.

Without doubt, resources are needed to support OERs. Improved coordination across the Arab countries and greater alignment of OERs-related policies with national efforts and priorities will be critical in future. As the Arab nations try to accelerate the pace of growth and socio-economic development, education is bound to emerge as a top priority in policy making. OERs would, therefore, need to reach those unable to gain access to useful educational resources.

There was virtual unanimity among experts at the Roundtable that policy discussion focusing on the OERs should transcend traditional boundaries involving academic disciplines, industry, government, NGOs, multilateral organizations, community leaders and other stakeholders. This kind of discussion is desirable because issues and solutions in the area of education cut across interest groups and domains.



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