

THE AVU'S BLUEPRINT FOR OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

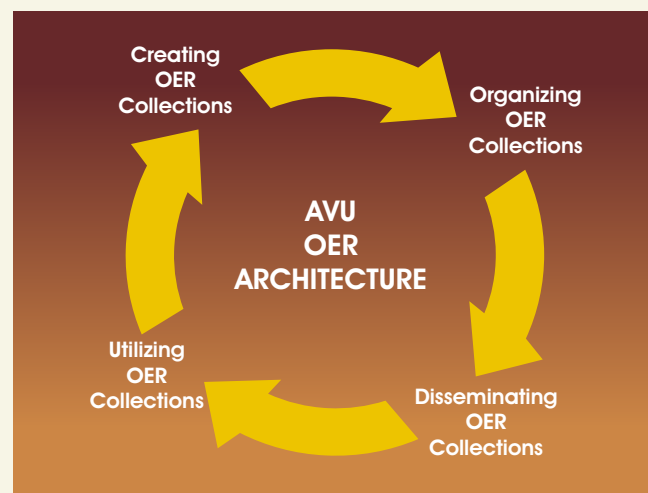
One of the most promising developments in education today is the concept, and growing reality, of Open Educational Resources (OERs). Since the term was first adopted at UNESCO's 2002 Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries, several organizations, educational and otherwise, have ventured into this previously uncharted domain. MIT's OpenCourseWare Initiative alone has given rise to several OER spin-offs. From Universia, an OCW consortium of over 700 Latin American Universities, to China's CORE and Japan's OCW Alliance, through to the AVU's own pilot of the OCW materials on local servers at PIs in East Africa, the aggressive expansion of OERs in the developing world is now a reality that necessitates further reflection.

The scale and scope of existing OERs, and the sheer enormity of information already available, present a considerable challenge to those who stand to gain the most from them: learners and educators residing in the Developing World. Running headlong into a relatively untested OER realm serves neither the learner nor the educator. They risk being submerged in digitized information that may have little or no defined meaning or purpose. It is therefore necessary to configure a conceptual framework within which information and meaning converge to meet the higher-educational demands of those in Africa.

The promise of OERs then, resides not only in the digitized information they represent, but also in the effective use and the methodological approaches and mechanisms that manage and ascribe meaning to them. The AVU believes these challenges are best met through a collaborative partnership that incorporates the four main elements of the OER evolutionary process: *Creation, Organization, Dissemination and Utilization*. The strategic combination of these elements within an AVU OER Architecture will lead to the development of a dynamic, rational and comprehensive Open Education Resource strategy for African higher educational institutions.

The AVU's Open Educational Resources Architecture

As a result of its late entry into the OER movement, Africa enters the arena having little or no experience in the OER evolutionary process and with an, as yet, undefined OER trajectory. Consequently, there may be a tendency for African universities to participate as unequal recipients of content with little control over its appropriateness. By involving African institutions in the entire OER evolutionary process, challenges pertaining to cultural and social relevance are reduced and institutions are enabled to participate actively. The AVU's OER Architecture envisions the expansion of OERs as a dynamic, collaborative process engaging practitioners and students at each stage (see diagram).



Improving the Global Interoperability of OERs

Ultimately, the AVU's intent is to assemble the various OER initiatives under one single OER Architecture aimed at facilitating and expanding the use of OERs in Africa. This strategy is designed to promote the active participation of the AVU's PIs in the development of OERs for both their own use and the use of others globally.

The Partnership for African OERs

The development of the AVU's OER Architecture is a dynamic and collaborative process. In addition to the AVU's Network of PIs across Africa and its current OER partners including the Development Gateway, the Open University (UK), WiderNet, MIT and the Hewlett Foundation, the AVU invites organizations and institutions with similar objectives to collaborate with us as we work to advance Open Educational Resources in Africa.

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The African Virtual University Open, Distance and eLearning Initiative

ODEL

THE OPEN, DISTANCE AND eLEARNING (ODEL) INITIATIVE

was established at the AVU to facilitate the development of programs which enhance the capacity of the AVU Partner Institutions (PIs) to develop, deliver and manage their own ODeL programs. Through the AVU/PI Consortium, the AVU Capacity Enhancement Program, and the activities of the Research and Innovation Facility (including the development of a comprehensive Open Educational Resource Architecture), the ODeL Initiative seeks to provide the structures, resources and expertise to AVU PIs that will enable them to increase access to higher education and training in their respective countries.

THE AVU/PI CONSORTIUM

The AVU has developed a Consortium Model to ODeL program development with its PIs that will facilitate the design, development and implementation of ODeL instruction across Africa while maintaining the quality and integrity of the programs. ODeL program design and development become more manageable, scalable, sustainable and cost effective when they adopt a collaborative and repeatable approach. Through the Consortium Model, the ODeL Initiative works with AVU Partner Institutions that face the challenge of increasing access to their programs with limited resources and limited faculty experience. The Consortium approach has been collaboratively developed with the AVU PIs in order to enhance current levels of expertise thereby providing faculty with appropriate assistance in developing, delivering and managing their ODeL programs.

THE AVU CAPACITY ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM (Phase 1)

The AVU will facilitate a series of capacity enhancement activities to assist participating PIs in developing the requisite ODeL skills. This approach of enhancing capacity for ODeL program development, delivery and management forms part of a paradigm shift undertaken by the AVU that is intended to enable the development of "in country" programs as opposed to reliance on externally brokered programs as was the case in the past.

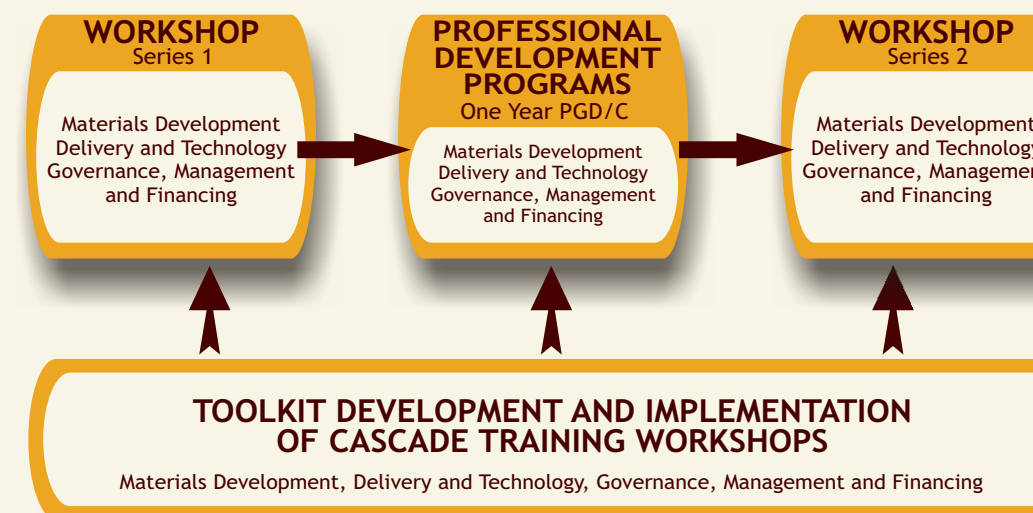
The ACEP Phase 1, to be implemented in 30 AVU PIs across Africa, is undertaken in partnership with:

- The African Development Bank (AfDB)
- The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
- UNDP Somalia

It is devised with a firm emphasis on collaboration with our PIs in order to give them support in:

- Attaining the Millennium Development Goals for education,
- Improving the quality of tertiary education in Africa, and
- Providing the large number of students currently unable to gain a place in their residential university programs due to limited space with access to tertiary education.

The AVU Capacity Enhancement Program (ACEP)



The ACEP adopts a comprehensive and holistic approach to institutional capacity enhancement that includes the following three components:

ODeL Workshops

Initially, two trainees from each participating institution will attend a five day workshop in one of the following three domains:

- Materials development for ODeL programs
- Delivery and technology for ODeL programs
- Governance, management and financing of ODeL programs

This first workshop will serve as an initiation to the respective domains and will help participants to develop the skills and understanding they will require to successfully participate in the year-long professional development programs which follow.

Towards the end of the year-long program, the AVU will run a second series of ODeL workshops designed to ascertain the competence of the participating PIs to develop, deliver and manage ODeL programs. This set of workshops will be mainly aimed at the remediation of any 'gaps' that would otherwise limit the PIs' progress towards developing their own ODeL programs.

ODeL Professional Development Program

From experience, the AVU recognizes that workshops alone are not an effective mechanism to guarantee the development and effective use of a critical mass of skills, understanding and knowledge in ODeL. The one-year ACEP Professional Development program has been devised to provide participants with in depth, up-to-the-minute training which leads to the award of an internationally accredited post-degree certificate in one of the proposed domains (ODeL program development, ODeL program delivery or management of ODeL programs). Moreover, the training received will place those who wish to further their studies at a Masters or Doctoral level in a position to do so.

ODeL Tool Kit

In addition to the above, every participant will receive an ODeL toolkit relevant to their area of study. The toolkits will enable them to develop and support their own ODeL programs, as well as to transfer the knowledge and skills they gain during the ACEP to their colleagues via Cascade Training workshops. The toolkit will combine different types of media (print based, video, CD-ROM, etc.) and will serve as a valuable implementation guide for the trainees and their institutions as they move towards the development of their own ODeL Programs.

Developing Open Content and Collaborative Work

In enhancing ODeL capacity at the targeted Partner Institutions, the aim of the ACEP is to create a critical mass of skilled ODeL professionals, as well as a vibrant community of ODeL practice in Africa. Subsequent to implementation of the Capacity Enhancement Program, it is anticipated that the AVU PIs will be able to create high quality ODeL content that will be shared and updated by the whole community of practice referred to above. These developed programs will be incorporated into the AVU's Open Educational Resource (OER) Architecture to facilitate access, use and reuse by any member of AVU network of institutions. Indeed, the AVU believes that quality ODeL programs supported by dynamic OERs have the potential to revolutionize Open, Distance and eLearning practice.

The AVU's approach of working collaboratively with its network of Partner Institutions to enhance their capacity to develop and use Open, Distance, and eLearning programs has the potential to drastically increase access to higher education across the continent. We believe that it is only through the education of Africa's citizenry that effective development can take place in order to significantly increase the ability of Africans to participate effectively in the Global Knowledge Based Economy that will drive the 21st century.

THE AVU RESEARCH AND INNOVATION FACILITY

The Research and Innovation Facility (the RIF) has been created by the AVU to further the practice of Open, Distance and eLearning (ODeL) in Africa. The objective of this Unit is to facilitate innovation and promote "good practice" wherein the concept of "learning as a continuum" is an integral part.

Research and innovation in ODeL practice is not new to Africa. It has been and continues to be carried out by individuals, networks and institutions on the continent, either as local or regional initiatives or in collaboration with external partners. Unfortunately, the reality is that much of this work remains unpublished or is incorporated into the work of others and used to dictate policy and practice that is not always in keeping with the realities of the places from which it originated. In short, this knowledge remains "invisible."

The RIF will act as a focal point to ameliorate this situation by collecting, organizing, storing and disseminating tacit

and new knowledge on ODeL in Africa, by and for practitioners on the continent and abroad. By enabling these different groups of practitioners to communicate and build upon each other's work, the RIF will facilitate the establishment of distinct and vibrant Communities of Practice.

The Activities of the RIF

The RIF will focus its energy around the generation, co-ordination, organization and dissemination of knowledge in the following ways:

- The establishment and support of cross-discipline Communities of Practice (CoPs) in ODeL.
- The establishment of a Knowledge Management System (KMS) that will support research and innovation for ODeL practice in higher education in Africa.
- The implementation of 'Special Projects' such as the promotion of the innovative use of Open Educational Resources (OERs); Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS); and the use of appropriate ICTs for ODeL in Africa.

ODeL Communities of Practice

While the education sector is supported by a host of regional research networks, few, if any, work on Open, Distance and eLearning. If access to tertiary education is to be enhanced across the continent, allowing it to meet its Millennium Development Goals, then it is vital that African practitioners actively engage in innovative basic and applied research in all of these components. Accordingly, establishment of Africa-based **ODeL Communities of Practice** will be supported by the development of a database of ODeL practitioners on the continent and their publications.

Tapping into the rich resources held by the AVU's network of African and international partners, the **Research and Innovation Portal** will provide a window through which ODeL practitioners may access relevant information, document their own work, explore new research ideas and collaborate across boundaries, forging ever stronger links between their communities of practice on the African continent. This **knowledge repository** will enable direct access to materials, including Open Educational Resources (OERs) and targeted external sites or databases holding pertinent information, via a search engine.

Linked to the Research and Innovation Portal, an **on-line debate forum** and **List Serve** will serve as platforms to enhance the knowledge and development of existing and growing regional and Pan-African research networks. This will also encourage the exploration of ideas by facilitating mediated conversations, comparisons in research and providing opportunities for the development of innovative solutions to the challenges faced by ODeL communities of practice on the

continent.

The **RIF Sabbaticals Program** will invite the participation of African practitioners in the innovative investigation of ODeL practice. Practitioners will be provided with a physical and virtual space of creativity and the latitude for a sustained exploration and interrogation of new ideas for both basic and applied research in ODeL. During their sabbatical, RIF Fellows will also moderate the on-line debate forum for fellow ODeL Practitioners. In this way, the RIF Sabbaticals will support the activities of the ODeL community of practice.

The RIF will promote the publication of new and existing research by African practitioners of ODeL by documenting the body of knowledge produced by ODeL communities of practice in **regular publications**, including a print and on-line refereed journal, conference proceedings and occasional monographs. This knowledge will also be disseminated through a **bi-annual conference** that will provide a forum for the face to face exchange of ideas between ODeL practitioners based on the continent and abroad.

Elements of the AVU's OER Architecture

The AVU is in the process of developing and implementing a comprehensive OER strategy with the purpose of further articulating each element in the OER Architecture (see overleaf). The intent is to utilize the strengths of both the AVU's PIs and its OER partners so as to establish a holistic and coordinated approach to expanding OERs in Africa.

Increasing the OER capacity of African Institutions requires that the processes and the elements which comprise the overall OER Architecture be thoughtfully considered.

The AVU OER strategy will consider:

Creation:

- Developing capacity to create OERs "from scratch"
- CoPs: structured communities of 'users and producers'
- Interoperability and compliance
- Iterative processes for OER creation
- Localization and Contextualization of OER content

Organization:

- Governance and Management schemes
- Storage/Portal mechanism
- Tagging & metadata systems
- Repository development
- Institutional development
- Developing a knowledge sharing culture

Dissemination:

- Sensitization
- Delivery methods for remote and local access to OERs
- Packaging and Marketing
- Scalability of delivery
- Decentralization vs. centralization or a combination of both

Utilization:

- Mechanisms for accessing and updating OER repositories
- Using/Re-using content
- Re-authoring/Re-purposing of content
- Quality Assurance mechanisms
- Accreditation of materials
- Sustainability / business modeling