Mythbusting Open Educational Resources (OER)

There are many myths surrounding Open Educational Resources (OER) and their use currently circulating in the academic and academic publishing spheres. We've gathered together some of the more persistent ones to examine in more detail:

MYTH #1: BEYOND SAVING THEM MONEY, OER DON'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO STUDENTS

A growing body of research says otherwise, and in a landmark study by Colvard, Watson, and Park (2018), students using OER at the University of Georgia achieved significantly higher grades and lower DFW (Drop, Fail, Withdraw) rates, with the greatest benefits observed among Pell-eligible and historically underserved students. Hilton's (2020) synthesis of 36 studies involving over 121,000 students found that learners using OER performed as well or better than those using commercial textbooks, and both students and faculty reported overwhelmingly positive perceptions of OER. More recently, Tlili et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of 25 studies and confirmed that OER and Open Educational Practices (OEP) have a statistically significant positive effect on learning achievement. These findings show that OER are not just cost-saving alternatives; they are effective tools that enhance student success and promote educational equity.

But let's not underrate the benefits of students saving money either. In 2023, 47% of active HE units had a prescribed or supplementary textbook, and this could have potentially cost the CQU student body up to $13.7 million dollars. At a time when financial barriers to higher education access for Australian students loom large, this is not something that can be shrugged off easily.

MYTH #2: OPEN MEANS FREE, AND FREE MEANS LOW QUALITY

While OER are typically free to access, the concept of "open" goes far beyond cost. It refers to the permissions granted through open licensing, which allow educators to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute content. This means that teaching materials can be adapted to suit specific learning outcomes, cultural contexts, and student needs. In contrast to traditional resources, which often come with restrictive copyright and licensing terms, OER empower educators to take control of their content. This flexibility is particularly valuable in dynamic learning environments where responsiveness to student diversity and curriculum changes is essential.

To address the second part of this myth, the assumption that cost correlates with quality is misleading. Many OER are developed by subject matter experts and undergo rigorous peer review processes. In fact, studies have shown that students perform as well or better when using OER compared to traditional textbooks. The open model also allows for continuous improvement—errors can be corrected, content can be updated, and materials can be refined collaboratively. Rather than being static, OER evolve with the needs of educators and learners, which can result in more relevant and pedagogically sound resources.

MYTH #3: USING OER RESTRICTS ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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The opposite may be true: OER have the potential to enhance academic freedom by giving educators the ability to modify and personalise their teaching materials. Rather than being bound by the structure and content of commercial textbooks, instructors can tailor resources to reflect their pedagogical approach, incorporate local or Indigenous perspectives, and respond to emerging issues in their discipline. Open licensing supports autonomy and creativity, allowing academics to design learning experiences that are more engaging and relevant to their students.

MYTH #4: IT'S HARD TO FIND OER AND THERE'S NOTHING AVAILABLE IN MY DISCIPLINE

While some disciplines may have fewer openly licensed resources than others, the landscape is rapidly changing. Many fields now have extensive OER collections, and even where gaps exist, educators can adapt existing materials to suit their needs. The collaborative nature of OER means that new resources are constantly being developed and shared. The myth of scarcity often stems from unfamiliarity with available tools and repositories.

Discoverability of OER has improved significantly in recent years. There are now numerous search tools, curated repositories, and discipline-specific collections that make locating OER much easier. Librarians and academic support staff often play a key role in guiding educators through the process and you can find more information in our OER info-sheet or reach out to the CQU Library team with any questions or concerns you may have.

MYTH #5: OER ARE LIMITED BY THEIR DIGITAL FORMAT AND THEIR LACK OF SUPPORT MATERIALS

Although many OER are distributed digitally, they are not limited to online formats. Open licenses permit conversion into print, audio, video, Braille, and other accessible formats. Some platforms such as OpenStax provide their textbooks in print format for a nominal fee.

Further, many OER collections now include a wide range of ancillary materials, such as test banks, slide decks, and interactive activities. Educators are also free to create and share their own supplementary resources, which can be tailored to specific course objectives. The open model encourages collaboration and sharing, meaning that teaching aids can be co-developed and improved over time. This myth often arises from comparing OER to commercial packages, without recognising the potential for customisation and community-driven support.

MYTH #6: YOU NEED TO BE AN EXPERT IN COPYRIGHT TO USE OER

While understanding licensing is important, educators don't need to be legal experts to use OER effectively. There are user-friendly tools and resources that simplify the process of selecting, attributing, and combining open materials. Starting small—such as using openly licensed images or remixing a single chapter—can build confidence and familiarity. The learning curve is manageable, and support is readily available. Please reach out to our friendly Library team for any queries you might have on OER licensing.

MYTH #7: OER ADOPTION REQUIRES REPLACING YOUR ENTIRE TEXTBOOK OR IS TOO MUCH EFFORT

Adopting OER doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing decision. Educators can begin by supplementing existing materials with open resources, replacing outdated or irrelevant sections, or providing additional readings for exploration. Even small steps toward openness can enhance student engagement, reduce costs, and improve learning outcomes. The flexibility of OER allows for gradual integration, making it a practical option for educators at any stage of their teaching journey.

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