UNLOCKING OPEN ACCESS: A LOOK AT OER MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION (HEI) LIBRARIES

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Abstract

This study examines academic library practices related to Open Educational Resources (OERs). A mixed-methods approach utilizing a researcher-made questionnaire and thematic analysis explored librarian perceptions and existing OER management strategies. Findings reveal that while librarians demonstrate moderate awareness of OERs, patron utilization remains low for resources such as course materials and digitized library collections. The results suggest a correlation between librarian familiarity and patron engagement with OERs. The study concludes by highlighting the need for capacity building initiatives to enhance librarian knowledge and skills in handling, storing, organizing, and marketing OERs. Effectively managed OERs can improve accessibility and ultimately lead to greater student adoption.

Keywords: *Higher education institution (HEI) libraries, management practices, open educational resources (OERs)*

Libraries have historically served as central hubs for information and resources in various formats, catering to the needs of students, educators, administrators, and non-teaching personnel (American Library Association [ALA], 2018). These resources support instruction, research, and recreational pursuits.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many libraries to adapt or temporarily close their doors, following government protocols to curb the spread of the virus (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2020). This unprecedented situation also ignited creativity among librarians, prompting them to develop innovative programs and services to maintain user engagement (Ferguson et al., 2021). The "new normal" has presented libraries with unique opportunities for partnerships, service transformations, and program delivery through virtual or online platforms (Wang & Sun, 2023).

Shifting Resource Landscape and the Rise of OERs

Traditionally, libraries have maintained a balance between print and non-print resources. However, the current environment emphasizes the acquisition and subscription of electronic resources, subject to budgetary constraints (McGuigan et al., 2022). Unfortunately, some libraries struggle to meet this demand due to limited or non-existent budgets (IFLA, 2023). This is where Open Educational Resources (OERs) emerge as a valuable solution.

In is publication, "Open Educational Resources and Libraries: A Briefing" (2023), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) highlights three key points about OERs:

Free and Accessible Knowledge: OERs refers to teaching, learning, and research resources that are freely accessible or carry minimal restrictions, ensuring that they provide open access to knowledge.

Lifelong Learning Support: OERs facilitate lifelong and informal learning by offering diverse knowledge sources.

Librarian Involvement: Librarians play a crucial role in making OERs a reality by ensuring their accessibility, promoting their utilization, and encouraging their creation and dissemination.

UNESCO notes that OERs cover "full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge" that are situated in the public domain or released in one open license to offer cost-free access and reuse to others.

The Need for Capacity Building

According to UNESCO, academic staff, including librarians and support staff, plays a critical role in quality teaching and learning. To support the same, librarians need to familiarize themselves with OERs. With the growing demand for OERs, libraries and librarians require proper training and resources for handling and managing these resources, maximizing their impact and utilization.

Recognizing this need, the current study investigates the perceptions and practices of academic librarians regarding OER management. The ultimate goal is to develop a capacity building plan that empowers librarians to effectively integrate OERs into their services.

Research Objectives

Open Educational Resources (OERs) offer tremendous potential to expand access to knowledge and learning materials. However, effective utilization of OERs within academic libraries requires a well-developed management strategy. This study aims to investigate the current practices employed by academic libraries in handling and managing OERs.

1. **Librarian Perceptions of OERs**. This research will explore how librarians in the higher education institutions (HEIs) perceive OERs in terms of:
a. Familiarity. How familiar are librarians with OERs and their potential benefits?
b. Utilization. How do librarians view the current utilization of OERs by students and faculty?
c. Purpose. What are the perceived purposes and applications of OERs within the academic library setting?
2. **OER Management Practices**. This study will examine how HEI libraries manage OERs, focusing on the following aspects:
a. Handling and Storage: How are OERs acquired, stored, and maintained within the library?

b. Organization: How are OERs categorized, cataloged, and made accessible to users?
c. Marketing: How are OERs promoted and disseminated to students and faculty?
3. **Challenges in OER Management**. This research will identify and analyze the challenges experienced by HEI libraries in managing OERs.

Literature Review

Open Educational Resources (OERs) have emerged as valuable tools for educators and learners in the digital learning landscape. The most widely accepted definition of OERs describes them as "digitized materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research" (Atkins, Brown & Hammond, 2007). This encompasses a broad range of resources, including learning content, software tools for content development and distribution, and implementation resources such as open licenses (UNESCO, 2019).

Benefits and Importance of OERs

OERs offer a multitude of benefits for both educators and learners. Schön (2012) highlights their potential as a key component of policies promoting education and lifelong learning in the knowledge economy. Research by Lin (2019) emphasizes the cost-saving advantages of OERs compared to traditional textbooks. Additionally, OERs can be more dynamic and current, allowing for continuous improvement and adaptation to meet evolving learning needs (Basilaia & Kvavsadze, 2022).

The Role of Librarians in Managing OERs

The effective utilization of OERs within libraries requires a well-developed management strategy. Librarians, with their expertise in information curation and organization, are well-positioned to handle and manage these resources (McGill et al., 2021). Mardis (2015) identifies a specific skillset needed for librarians to develop the expertise required to find, assess, curate, and advocate for valuable OERs.

Building Capacity for OER Management

To fully unlock the potential of OERs, libraries and librarians require ongoing capacity building initiatives. To maximize the benefits of OERs, libraries and librarians need continuous development opportunities. UNESCO (2021) outlines several approaches to achieve this, including: (1) Enhancing OER expertise; (2) Creating and publishing OERs; (3) Adapting and contextualizing existing OERs; (4) Encouraging collaborative efforts; (5) Building internal support; (6) Harnessing collaborative networks; (7) Engaging students as active participants; (8) Disseminating information about OERs through publications; (9) Providing feedback on existing OERs; and (10) Staying current on intellectual property rights (IPR), copyright, and privacy policies.

User Perceptions of OERs

Successful OER implementation hinges on user (student and teacher) perceptions. Studies by Allen & Seaman (2016) and Petrides et al. (2011) indicate positive user perceptions of OERs. Educators and learners value their accessibility, affordability, high quality, and ability to cater to diverse learning styles.

OERs offer tremendous potential to expand access to quality learning materials and promote educational equity. Libraries are essential for effectively managing and advocating for OERs, with librarians leveraging their expertise to curate, organize, and advocate for these valuable resources. By actively building capacity and fostering positive user perceptions, libraries can unlock the full potential of OERs and empower learners in the digital age.

Method
Research Design

This study utilized a data-driven approach (quantitative research design) specifically focused on describing current practices (descriptive method). As McCombes (2020) suggests, descriptive research allows researchers to paint a detailed picture (provide an accurate and systematic description) of a particular group (population), situation, or phenomenon. Here, the researcher explored the current perspectives of librarians in higher education institutions (HEIs) on a specific type of educational resource. Employing a qualitative research method, the investigation aimed to identify patterns in how librarians handle and manage these resources.

Participants

The researcher chose to include all members of the target population in the study. This approach, given the manageable size of the group, allowed for a thorough understanding of the participants' characteristics.

Research Instrument

A survey was designed to collect information about librarians' views and practices related to Open Educational Resources (OERs). The survey was divided into four sections:

Demographics (Part I): This section collected information about the respondents' professional experience, OER experience (both personal and within their library), and the library's OER collection (duration of existence and resource formats).

Perceptions of OERs (Part II): This section explored participants' familiarity with OERs, their perceptions of patron utilization, and the perceived purposes of OERs within their institutions.

OER Management Practices (Part III): This section focused on how librarians handle and store OERs, organize them for accessibility, and market them to potential users.

Challenges in OER Management (Part IV): This section aimed to identify the difficulties faced by librarians in handling and managing OERs.

To ensure the questionnaire's clarity and effectiveness, expert validation was conducted. Four researchers with experience in library science and OERs were invited to assess the instrument's applicability. These experts included individuals with backgrounds in library administration, archival practices, electronic resources, and library science education.

A two-stage validation process was employed. The initial draft was reviewed by a group comprising the retired library administrator and archivist/librarian. Their feedback informed revisions incorporated into the instrument. The revised version was then reviewed by the remaining two experts (e.g., electronic resources product specialist and library science educator).

Internal Consistency

The survey was checked to make sure the questions all measured the same thing consistently. A score of 0.977 indicates this was achieved very well.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher electronically distributed the survey to all 14 members of the target population using Google Forms.

Statistical Treatment of Data

The data were organized, analyzed statistically, and interpreted using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentage distributions, means, and standard deviations.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles concerning informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality. All participants were informed about the study and voluntarily chose to participate.

Results

Participants' Demographic Profile

A high proportion of participants (86%, n=12) possessed extensive experience in library and information science (LIS), having worked in the field for more than 10 years, while only 14% (2 out of 14) have 1-3 years of experience.

The survey revealed that a majority of participants (12 out of 14) have accessed Open Educational Resources (OERs) before. However, 2 out of 14 participants reported no prior experience accessing OERs.

The survey results on library OER collections revealed a mix of adoption stages. Over a third (36%) of libraries had OER collections for less than a year, and a fifth (21%) did not have one at all.

The survey identified the following as the top three OER resource types held by libraries: (1) Open textbooks; (2) Course materials (modules); and (3) Visual media (this includes graphics, charts, tables, and photographs).

The survey results highlight a potential staffing gap in OER management. Fifty percent (7 out of 14) of participants reported that their libraries lack a designated staff person responsible for handling and maintaining the OER collection.

Participants' Perceptions of Open Educational Resources (OERs)

Staffing for OER Management. The survey results highlight a potential staffing gap in OER management. Fifty percent (7 out of 14) of participants reported that their libraries lack a designated staff person responsible for handling and maintaining the OER collection.

Perceptions of OER Utilization by Patrons. The survey suggests that patron utilization of OERs may be low. The average score on a 1-to-whatever scale you used (e.g., 5) for perceived utilization was 2.33, with a standard deviation of 1.02. This indicates room for potential growth in promoting OER usage.

Perceptions of OER Purpose. In contrast, librarians expressed strong agreement regarding the value proposition of OERs. On a 1-to-whatever scale you used (e.g., 5), participants rated OERs highly for being convenient (3.40, SD = 0.48), cost-effective (3.40, SD = 0.48), and efficient (3.40, SD = 0.48). Additionally, they viewed OERs as strategically aligned with educational goals (3.30, SD = 0.45) and encouraging collaborative efforts and the development of new approaches (3.30, SD = 0.45).

Participants' Management of Open Educational Resources (OERs)

Handling and Storage Practices. Thematic analysis of participant responses revealed several key practices related to handling and storing OERs. These included:

- **Collaboration**: Participants emphasized the importance of collaboration (P8) for effective OER management.
- **Content Curation**: Several participants (P5, P7, P9) highlighted the importance of content curation practices.
- **Policy Formulation**: The need for clear policies (P3) regarding OER management was identified.
- **Copyright Considerations**: Copyright concerns (P12) emerged as a factor in handling OERs.
- **Software Challenges**: Unavailability (P1, P5, P6, P7, P10, P14) and managing appropriate software (P2, P12) were identified as challenges.
- **Program Evaluation**: The need for program evaluation to ensure continuous improvement (P1, P2, P3, P5, P8, P9, P11) was noted.
  Organization Practices. Thematic analysis also identified key practices related to organizing OER collections. These included:
- **Subject-Based Arrangement**: Participants widely reported organizing OERs by subject (P1, P2, P5, P13) for easier access.
- **Regular Updates**: Maintaining up-to-date collections through periodical updating (P2, P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, P13) was seen as crucial.
- **Practical Cataloging**: Participants emphasized the use of practical cataloging methods (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P14) that facilitate user discovery.
  Marketing Practices. Thematic analysis revealed participant emphasis on promoting OER awareness and utilization through a combination of strategies:
- **Mass Marketing**: This includes broader efforts to reach potential users outside the library (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P9, P11, P13).
- **Internal Communication**: Strategies to raise awareness and encourage OER use within the library itself were also highlighted (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P13, P14).
  Challenges in Handling and Managing OERs. Thematic analysis identified capacity building (P1, P2, P5, P6, P7, P10, P12, P13, P14) as a key challenge for librarians in effectively handling and managing OERs. This suggests a need for training and development opportunities to address knowledge gaps and enhance skillsets.

Discussion

This discussion centers on the findings regarding librarians' management practices for Open Educational Resources (OERs) within the Central Luzon Digital Library Consortium. The research aimed to understand librarians' perceptions and practices related to OERs, and the results offer valuable insights for improving OER utilization.

Key Findings on OER Management

- *Limited Use*: The study revealed that librarian use of OERs was relatively low. This may be attributed to a lack of exposure or familiarity with these resources.

- *Challenges in Handling and Storage*: Librarians identified capacity building as a key challenge. Training and development opportunities are needed to address knowledge gaps and enhance skillsets for effective OER management.
- *Current Practices*: Librarians primarily focus on providing lists and links to OERs for user access, typically through library websites. While some have digital preservation policies, there's a need for training in data curation and software management to optimize handling and storage.
- *Limited Cataloging*: OERs are often maintained in separate records but not formally classified within library catalogs, potentially hindering user discovery.

Optimizing OER Management
The findings suggest several areas for improvement in OER management practices:
- *Enhanced Training*: Librarians require training in OER curation, including selecting, organizing, annotating, and sharing relevant resources. This will empower them to create valuable collections that meet user needs.
- *Improved Cataloging*: Standardized cataloging practices would enhance discoverability of OERs within library catalogs, making them more accessible to users.
- *Strategic Marketing*: While librarians currently promote OERs through internal channels, exploring broader marketing strategies could raise awareness among potential users beyond the library.

This aligns with current research on the role of libraries in the OER ecosystem. Studies by the University of Torronto (2020) and Oxford (2020) highlight the multifaceted role librarians play in OERs, encompassing description, classification, management, preservation, dissemination, promotion, and even creation. The findings presented here contribute to this ongoing conversation by specifically examining the practices employed by librarians within a library consortium. By identifying areas for improvement, this research offers valuable insights that can inform training initiatives and ultimately enhance the user experience with OERs.

Conclusion
This study investigated librarians' perceptions and practices related to Open Educational Resources (OERs) within the Central Luzon Digital Library Consortium. The findings revealed that librarians have a moderate level of familiarity with OERs, and their utilization of these resources is currently low. Several factors may contribute to this, including limited exposure and a lack of training in OER management best practices.

The study also identified areas for improvement in librarians' OER management practices. These include:

- **Limited use of OERs**: Librarians themselves may not be fully utilizing OERs, potentially hindering their ability to effectively promote them to patrons.
- **Challenges in handling and storage**: A lack of training in data curation and software management can make it difficult to effectively handle and store OERs for long-term access.
- **Limited discoverability**: OERs are often not formally cataloged, making it challenging for users to find them within library catalogs.

Recommendations
Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance librarians' OER management practices and promote user engagement with OERs:

- **Develop OER Management Training Programs**: Librarians require training in OER curation, including selecting, organizing, and promoting these resources. This will empower them to create valuable OER collections and provide effective guidance to users.
- **Implement Standardized Cataloging Practices**: Standardized cataloging of OERs within library catalogs will ensure their discoverability and make them more accessible to users.
- **Expand OER Marketing Strategies**: While librarians currently promote OERs internally, exploring broader marketing strategies can raise awareness among potential users beyond the library. This could involve collaborating with faculty or student groups to integrate OERs into learning materials or curriculums.

- **Promote User Education**: User education initiatives can empower students and faculty to understand the value proposition of OERs and develop the skills necessary to effectively access, evaluate, and utilize these resources.

By implementing these recommendations, libraries can empower librarians to become champions for OERs, ultimately leading to increased utilization and a richer learning experience for patrons.

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