

Why **OER**

**Open
Educational
Resources**



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Introduction



Open Educational Resources (OER) are born out of the idea that everyone should have access to quality education and educational resources to support teaching and learning. Most resources you find online and in print are copyright restricted, not open.

OER are like any other educational resource such as textbooks, videos, courses, or lesson plans. There are costs and effort associated with creating and maintaining educational resources, whether they carry an open license or are copyright restricted. But these efforts are mostly made better, more equitable, and sustainable by making your resources open.

At the most basic level there are two significant differences and advantages: OER are **free** and carry **an open license**:

Open Educational Resources (OER) are learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open license, that permit no-cost access, re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution by others¹



The UNESCO 2019 Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER) encourages us to openly share content while critically reflecting on the challenges of how, when and why to share them. It promotes the idea that content that is at least in part publicly funded should be made open to the public. Engaging with OER promotes novel educational practices and ultimately makes education fairer, more inclusive and more equitable.

We would like to thank the **UNESCO UNITWIN Network on Open Education** (unitwin-unoe.org) members for their valuable feedback on previous versions of this text.

For more information please contact: oerrecommendation@unesco.org

¹ UNESCO OER Recommendation (2019): www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-open-educational-resources-oer. Also see <https://www.unesco.org/en/open-educational-resources>

Free or open?

There is an important distinction to be made between **accessible** or "**freely available**"² and **open educational resources**.



Freely available

educational resources are fully copyrighted and simply accessible online for you to browse, view, read or use (as with most things on the Internet). As a rule, any resource that is available but does not carry an open licence or is not in the public domain is copyright restricted.



Open educational resources

are different. They are both free to the user and carry an open licence that offers much more freedom. This may include the right to use, reuse and repurpose.

The role of UNESCO Chairs and University Twinning and Networking Programme (UNITWIN) Networks

This guide supports UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks in aligning their activities with the criteria and expectations outlined in their respective agreements, including commitments to promote open educational resources.³ It seeks to foster a broader adoption of OER and open practices across the Programme and as part of UNESCO's wider mission.



² They are also called "free" resources, which is confusing: many resources and tools that are simply "free" are copyright-restricted and do not provide the freedoms of OERs.

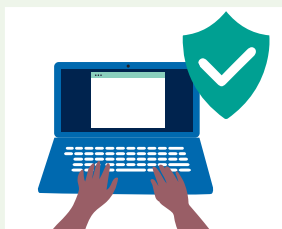
³ Article 11: "The Host Institution shall strongly encourage research produced and published by the Chair to be made available as Open Access in line with the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science, and educational materials as Open Educational Resources in line with the 2019 UNESCO Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER)."



UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks can support OER through the collaborative development and sharing of educational resources, research and training on OER. They can contribute to policy discussions by institutions or Governments; promote regional repositories; support hackathons to create, translate or localize open content; and encourage participation in community-led initiatives.

UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks are important in making OER more widely known and trusted.

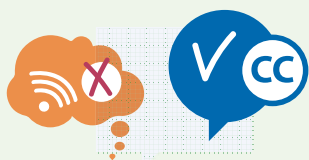
In the following section we address some common worries and misconceptions that academics have about opening up their works, and highlight good reasons for going open.



I want to ensure that my work is used properly and cited correctly

Individuals can misuse, plagiarize or fail to attribute any resource, including those made available on the Internet. It does not matter if the resource carries an open licence or is copyright restricted. Some characteristics of OER can help limit these issues and make it easier to use and cite your work correctly.

When your educational resources are openly licensed, information is included that makes it easier for your work to be correctly cited and attributed. This information is clear, understandable by humans and machine-readable, which means that search engines and repositories can pick up descriptive information automatically. Moreover, open licences clearly communicate what rights and restrictions, such as limits on commercial use, you might wish to place on your work.



I want to keep some control over my works

The Internet has greatly enhanced our ability to share and find educational resources. One of the greatest advantages of OER is that they allow us to use the Internet to promote a culture of collaboration with like-minded colleagues. Openly sharing knowledge and working in cooperation are key principles for educators: we like to share, but we might be cautious of when to do it or what others might do with our work. You might be afraid that open licences will allow anyone to do anything they wish with your work, but that is not the case. In fact, open licences enable authors to retain rights over their work.

Open licences such as Creative Commons work within the copyright laws of your country and are internationally enforceable. This means that you are not giving up all of your rights. Instead, you use your right as an author to choose what can be done with your work by others, and open licences communicate your wishes clearly and publicly. You might give people ample permission to localize and translate your resource, but place restrictions on commercial use, for example. With open licences, you can make it easier for others to use and reuse your work, leading to greater visibility and recognition.



I do not want others to judge the quality of my educational resources

Many educators do not share resources openly out of fear of being judged on the quality of their work. You might feel comfortable using your materials in class or a closed online environment where you can monitor their use, but you might be cautious of making this same material available online for all to see. You might also be cautious of sharing “works in progress”. It is important to note that being a more open educator does not mean that you need to share everything that you create.

There are different ways in which to share all types of resources, and good reasons for doing so. Most often, educators openly share their best work, such as a complete textbook or tried-and-tested course materials, but you can also share slides, draft resources and lesson plans that you feel are of good quality but that have room for improvement and indicate your interest in receiving feedback. This allows others to benefit, while you can gain from the feedback and new versions of your work. A culture of OER fosters empathy and collaboration, not competition or judgment.



I do not want the extra work involved in openly sharing resources

Creating, updating and maintaining educational materials can be time- and resource-intensive. As with traditional materials, you can use quality OER as they are, without putting in any extra work. OER can reduce development costs and increase collaboration.

There are significant advantages to OER. First, they are free, which reduces usage and development costs. Second, adding an open licence is straightforward, whether you are creating a print resource, educational software or any other educational content.⁴ Third, OER are often made available in formats that are easy to edit and modify. Instead of starting from scratch, you can reuse, revise or simply be inspired by open resources. This often saves time and resources by allowing you to build on other people's work and ideas. It also allows communities of educators to work together and build knowledge and resources collaboratively, expanding your networks and connections.



I want to use high-quality resources from reputable sources

Quality content is usually made available through reputable sites or repositories that you can trust have implemented review mechanisms. Whether open or closed, free or paid, you must always assess the quality of content that you find online.

Quality OER are just as good as copyright-restricted resources. OER are often published and/or curated by trustworthy sources. These include higher education institutions, academic societies, civil society groups, governmental bodies or even individual teachers. The belief that OER are of lesser quality simply because they are open is a fallacy; on the contrary, because they are open, they are more likely to be adopted, used and revised by others. This leads to more improvements with revisions, adaptation, localization and feedback.

⁴ See creativecommons.org or opensource.org/licenses for more information.



I am concerned that my resources will be used to train artificial intelligence models

Many academics and teachers are cautious of having their work used as training materials for large language models (LLMs), particularly those created by private “big tech” corporations. Currently, most large language model developers do not make a distinction between copyright-restricted (closed) and open content when training their models; they consider training LLMs on any legally accessed content to be fair use. At present, using an open licence does not affect whether your content will be used to train artificial intelligence.

Making your content open can actually help promote alternative and more ethical LLMs, such as those created through crowdsourcing, which focus on the public interest,⁵ or those trained only on non-protected content (including open licences). Developers are working on mechanisms that help respect authors' rights in large-scale training data. This includes ensuring that sources are correctly cited and that licensing terms, such as Creative Commons, are respected. Since OER carry clear licensing terms, open licences can make it easier for developers of LLMs to correctly cite your content⁶ and respect your rights. This is a rapidly evolving ecosystem, but emerging standards can be deployed on websites and repositories to inform LLM crawlers that you do not want your open content to be used to train large language models.⁷



I need an institutional policy to promote OER

It is important for you to check who owns the rights to the educational resources that you create. In some countries and institutions, the educator or researcher holds the rights to their work; in others, the employer holds these rights.⁸

If you are the owner of your educational resources, then you can share them openly. If you are not, it is worth engaging your peers in discussions about establishing an OER policy or strategy at your organization.⁹ OER policies help create and sustain a culture of openness. Having an open policy and strategy can provide incentives and support for academics and scientists in their journey towards openness. You will probably find like-minded peers and colleagues who are interested in advancing an open strategy.

5 A crowd-sourced example from Slovenia is available at povejmo.si. Artificial intelligence, advanced technologies and their relationship with OER are discussed in the Dubai Declaration on Open Educational Resources (OER): digital public goods and emerging technologies for equitable and inclusive access to knowledge unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392271.locale=en

6 See, for example: huggingface.co/blog/Pclanglais/common-corpus

7 See: rs1standard.org and github.com/creativecommons/cc-signals

8 Copyright law, moral rights, and institutional and organizational rules differ substantially from one country to another.

9 You can begin by browsing the 23 good reasons for open education, unitwin-unoec.org/23-good-reasons-for-open-education, and the Open Education [Policy Game](#) at your institution

Get involved

If you are a teacher or educator, explore the **ICT Competency Framework for Teachers**¹⁰ and the **UNESCO OER Commons hub**. These will help you integrate OER into your teaching and find resources that you can use right away.

If you are a government official, refer to **action area 2 of the 2019 UNESCO Recommendation on Open Educational Resources**.¹¹ It provides concrete policy guidance to help you develop national strategies for OER.

If you want to see best practices, watch the stories of OER champions from Cuba, Madagascar, Malaysia and Morocco.¹²

Finally, join the **UNESCO OER Dynamic Coalition**.¹³ By becoming part of this community, you can share your work, collaborate globally and stay connected to the latest initiatives.

Together, let us make knowledge a digital public good accessible to everyone!



10 <https://www.oercommons.org/hubs/UNESCO>

11 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389032.locale=en>

12 <https://oerdynamiccoalition.org/news/oer-success-stories-cuba-madagascar-malaysia-and-morocco-videos>

13 <https://oerdynamiccoalition.org>



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