

Institutional OER Policies: Literature Review and Environmental Assessment

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CARL Open Education Working Group

Nicole Askin (University of Manitoba)

Lindsey MacCallum (Mount St. Vincent University)

Ann Smith (Acadia University)

Tatiana Zaraiskaya (University of New Brunswick)

www.carl-abrc.ca

Contents

Introduction.....	2
Institutional Incentive Programs.....	2
Recommendations.....	2
Policy Creation	4
Recommendations.....	5
Key Policy Considerations and Components.....	6
Recommendations.....	7
Survey of OER Policies	7
Additional Resources.....	7

Introduction

The use of open educational resources (OER) has been demonstrated to contribute to improved student satisfaction, cost savings, and educational outcomes. At the same time, however, creating and using OER can be burdensome for faculty due to concerns about workload balance and lack of support ([Annand & Jensen, 2017](#)). Efforts have been made to understand the main barriers preventing faculty members from using OER in their daily teaching practices. According to surveys conducted by [BCcampus](#) and [Ontario Council of University Libraries](#) in 2015 and 2017, respectively, these include a lack of time, institutional barriers, and a lack of incentives and recognition for OER publications relative to other types. Using the results of [the 2015 survey](#), a list of recommendations was developed to increase the adoption of OER, including providing release time to faculty “to create, adapt, and/or adopt OER,” including OER creation/adaptation in the tenure and promotion process, and developing institutional policies “to help raise awareness, dispel myths, and to encourage members of the university community to adopt open educational practices.” A 2020 [Environmental Scan of Open Education Service and Support in Canada](#) (CARL) further identified that while many Canadian institutions support OER, the most common means of support is educational (for example, the provision of an instructional page on OER). The education and training provided to faculty are essential for increasing their awareness of OER; however, this support does not actively encourage the creation and use of OER.

Based on findings from a literature review and an environmental scan, this report summarizes what is known about the policy development process, highlighting key sections to consider when creating OER policies, examples of existing policies from Canada and elsewhere, and lessons learned from practitioners involved in the creation of OER policies. Because many institutions have grant programs, but few have institutional policies encouraging the creation and use of OERs, the focus of this document is on starting the process of OER policy development and providing advice and resources to institutions considering implementing such policy.

Institutional Incentive Programs

We first conducted a literature review of institutional OER incentive programs using English-language literature indexed in ERIC, Emerald Insight, LISTA, and LISS, as well as materials indexed via Lens.org and Google/Google Scholar. Using keyword search terms related to the concepts of OER, institutions, and incentives, we identified over 80 such programs described in the literature, most from North American universities (although this sampling was biased due to the exclusion of non-English literature).

Among the programs identified, a large number were financial, such as grants or stipends for university faculty and instructors, and many sought to promote OER creation or adoption and identified cost reductions for students as a key driver. Non-financial incentives were more varied in their approaches; examples included professional development training opportunities, faculty co-review sprints for OER development, and recognition awards.

We then conducted an environmental assessment of Canadian institutional incentive programs, analyzing 45 such programs. Consistent with what was found in the literature review, most of these were offered by universities (some of which had more than one program). None of the institutions were in the territories. Almost all were grant programs targeting faculty and instructors to adopt, adapt, or create OER for their courses. Two noteworthy examples are highlighted below.

An example of a well-structured financial incentive program is the [University of British Columbia Vancouver Campus OER Fund](#). This program comprises two funding options: an OER Implementation Grant, which offers up to \$25,000 “to support the adoption, adaptation, creation, and/or integration of OER into credit-based courses”, and an OER Rapid Innovation Grant, which provides up to \$2000 “for a wide range of activities and events that seek to engage the UBC community in increasing awareness and capacity for supporting and sustaining” the use of OER. Both funds identify principles and priorities, provide examples of activities funded, along with detailed documentation for eligibility, criteria, and cost estimates. Of note is the inclusion of sustainability as a consideration for successful proposals, ensuring continued impact after the funding period. An unusual example is the [Open Education Time Investment Grant](#) offered by BCCampus. This grant “recognize[s] that one of the barriers to growing open education at an institution is time”, so specifically allots funding to cover the dedicated time required for someone to devote to an open education project. It specifically targets faculty and staff working in the BC Interior and Northern regions. The funding can be used for the development or adaptation of OER, but also covers such activities as awareness campaigns and other initiatives to develop or improve OER practices at an institution.

Recommendations: Institutional Incentive Programs

- Although OER grant programs are a well-established model for providing incentives for faculty to engage in the creation, adaptation, and adoption of OER, more work in this area should be done to ensure that these programs are sustainable in the post-funding period.

- Developing more incentive programs would be beneficial to complement grant programs – specifically to address the problem of lack of time needed to engage in OER development.

OER Policy Creation

The creation and implementation of policy is key to advancing the OER agenda. According to [Skidmore](#) (2019), institutional policy is both a grassroots and administrative tool with “the ability to reflect and support...culture...by establishing and codifying procedures that will sustain particular visions....More to the point, [it] can be extremely effective in motivating a campus community to act.” Skidmore argues that targeted institutional policies can open the door to use of OER, particularly in the area identified as the biggest barrier: lack of professional recognition.

Using an approach similar to the one described above, we also conducted a review of the literature on institutional OER policies but discussion of the creation and implementation of such policies is limited. [Stevens, Bradbury, and Hutley](#) (2017) describe a year-long process of creating a policy on OER development and use and share accompanying guidelines on practical application of the policy. [Sutton and Geuther](#) (2020) share the experience of an OER task force in developing an operational definition of OER and a roadmap for its creation and adoption. [Abeywardena](#) (2017) recounts the development of an OER mainstreaming framework that includes adoption of an institutional OER policy, recognition of OER activity in human-resources policies, and development of a system for encouraging OER use. UNESCO’s 2019 [*Guidelines on the Development of Open Educational Resources Policies*](#) also provides some broad guidance on OER policy creation. It recommends designing a policy, formulating a vision statement, defining the framework, completing a gap analysis, building a master plan, determining an implementation strategy, and launching the policy. [College Libraries Ontario’s](#) (last updated 2023) module for library and staff on how to impact OER policy at Ontario colleges suggests starting with a review of policy categories and external public policies such as [UNESCO’s Education 2030](#), discussing the issue with stakeholders, and engaging with decision-makers. Based on experience at Glasgow Caledonian University, [Kelt](#) (2015) presents the following eight-step process for developing an institutional OER policy:

1. Establish reasons to create an OER policy, based on needs assessment;
2. Decide who should lead on policy creation;

3. Scan for existing policies (the Glasgow Caledonian policy was adapted from an earlier Leeds University policy which was available under a Creative Commons license);
4. Adapt for your institution and consult with stakeholders, perhaps represented by a working group;
5. Find or create other necessary institutional policies, such as those related to intellectual property and copyright;
6. Establish route for adoption and get a senior management sponsor;
7. Run past lawyers (if required); and
8. Guide through final approval.

Finally, the [*CARL Institutional Open Access Policy Toolkit*](#) (2020) also offers guidelines for policy implementation. These include identifying critical preparatory steps, identifying campus champions, focusing on institutional relevance, surfacing meaningful benefits, adopting a faculty-driven process, accounting for disciplinary perspectives, considering change management principles, understanding institutional climate, continuing momentum, and taking the long view in developing policy.

Recommendations: Policy Creation

The use of institutional policies has potential benefit for increasing the level of real and perceived institutional engagement in OER, thereby incentivizing faculty engagement in OER creation and use. Because the process of policy development can be lengthy, the following steps should be considered:

- Understand the institutional context. This may involve reviewing existing institutional policies, consulting with stakeholders, or conducting a needs assessment.
- Identify collaborators. Local champions can assist with policy development, the process of having a policy agreed to by institutional decision-makers, and promotion and implementation of a new policy.
- Provide clarity on guiding principles and terms and principles. Policies should be based on a common understanding of what is meant by OER, the motivations for pursuing OER, and how OER fit into institutional context.
- Consider potential models. Both policy templates and freely licensed full policies can both be applied to a local context.
- Engage your community. Involving faculty in drafting and giving feedback increases policy validity and buy-in.

- Prepare for launch and implementation. Additional documentation such as guidelines or FAQ may help faculty understand new policies.

Key Policy Considerations and Components

Our literature review surfaced several documents that provide useful information on key policy considerations and components. The [OER Policy Review and Development Toolkit](#) (Mays, 2012) outlines policy changes that may be necessary in order to make effective use of OER. These include clarity on intellectual property rights, including how copyright is applied to works created during employment/study; human resource guidelines, outlining implications for staff retention, development, and promotion; information and communications technology guidelines, describing appropriate software/hardware use and provision of version control/backup systems; and materials development and quality assurance guidelines. The 2021 [Commonwealth of Learning Institutional OER Policy Template](#) provides a ready-to-use means of drafting a policy and includes definitions of OER and other relevant terms; a policy declaration; a set of objectives; detailed policy statements; a section on scope and applicability; a discussion of copyrights and licenses; a quality assurance and review process; a liability disclaimer; and a responsibility statement. The [OER Policy Development Tool](#) (Coolidge & DeMarte, 2016) seeks to address the noted gap in formal policies by facilitating the creation of an institutional OER policy. It is based on several assumptions, namely that institutional OER policies signify leadership support, create a safe environment for faculty to use OER, and support sustainability of OER programs. Components of the tool, taken from samples around the world, include

- a statement of purpose outlining why OER is important;
- a policy statement, indicating how and by whom OER are used;
- a licensing statement, describing how intellectual property rules are applied to OER and what licensing is recommended or required;
- a procedure and responsibility statement outlining who does what to support OER programs;
- a training and professional development statement outlining recommended or required continuing education;
- a technical format statement describing how OER are to be shared; and
- a quality assurance statement outlining how OER should be assessed.

Finally, BC Open Education Librarians' 2016 [Library Strategic Planning for Open Education Resources](#) describes “generic items that could be incorporated into any library’s policies, procedures, or strategic planning documents” including a definition of OER, a discussion of specific benefits, and objectives and first steps to support OER activities.

Recommendations: Policy Components

Institutional policy development should not be limited to standalone OER policies but should also consider broader policy landscapes, including but not limited to institutional strategic planning, intellectual property policies, and tenure and promotion guidelines. Components to consider in an OER policy include

- a statement of purpose, motivating the creation of an OER policy;
- definitions of key terms, including OER, to provide a common understanding;
- policy scope and responsibilities, outlining to whom the policy applies and their roles;
- a central policy statement outlining how OER are created, adapted and used within the institution;
- information about copyright and licensing, including how OER created or adapted by faculty can be shared and licensed;
- technical documentation, e.g. in what formats OER should be shared;
- quality assurance details discussing the assessment of OER; and
- information on staff development to support OER.

Survey of OER Policies

We took a broad approach to our survey of resources at Canadian institutions and included discussions of OER in larger policy documents as well as strategic plans from national, regional, and student organizations, universities, and colleges. We identified 35 sample documents for analysis within this extended scope. There may be additional examples in internal policies that were not captured by our search process.

The following institutions include OER in their business or strategic plans: [Georgian College](#), [Sheridan College](#), [Douglas College](#), [Lambton College](#), [Saskatchewan Polytechnic](#), [Seneca College](#), [UBC](#), the [University of Ottawa](#), and [Kwantlen Polytechnic University](#). OER were also mentioned in library strategic plans at [York University](#), [McMaster University](#), [Red River College](#), and [Dalhousie University](#). In both of these types of plans, OER are most often presented as a means to improve access and affordability for students and/or as an example of flexible, technology-enhanced curricula. The University of Ottawa mentions the development of OER in French to

promote their identity as “uniquely Francophone and bilingual.” Kwantlen’s plan sets a goal of “becom[ing] an international leader in Open Education research and practices.”

Some institutions have developed or are in the process of developing plans specific to OER. These include the [University of Saskatchewan](#), [Douglas College](#), [Southern Alberta Institute of Technology](#) (SAIT), [Kwantlen Polytechnic University](#), and [Centennial College Community Services department](#). Both the Saskatchewan and the SAIT plans identify specific areas of focus, including increasing adoption, supporting OER creation, developing open pedagogical practices, sharing and collaboration, and ensuring sustainability. Building on its strategic planning goal, the Kwantlen plan articulates strategic and operational goals outlining how it intends to become a world leader in OER.

Several national, regional, and provincial organizations are actively involved in supporting OER and including it in their strategic planning processes. [CARL’s Strategic Framework – May 2019 to May 2022](#) includes OER under the umbrella of Advance Open Scholarship. eCampus Ontario’s [Strategic Plan 2018-2021](#) includes goals for creating an OER “Centre of Excellence” and creating an Open Fellows program. In its [2021-23 Strategic Plan](#), CAAL-CBPA articulates a number of OER-related priorities, including financial sustainability, developing incentive programs and an awareness campaign, and implementing a policy and procedural framework.

Student associations have also been active advocates for adopting OER as a means of improving affordability for students. As a result, several student unions have developed policies supporting the use of OER at their institutions. Examples include the [Kwantlen Student Association](#), the [University of Calgary Students’ Union](#), the [Students’ Society of McGill University](#), the [University of Lethbridge Students’ Union](#), the [University of Prince Edward \(UPEI\) Island Student Union](#), the [Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association](#), and University of Western Ontario (UWO) University Students’ Council [[University Students’ Council Standing Policy on Teaching Quality at Western University](#); [University Students’ Council Standing Policy on Open Education Resources \(OER\)](#)]. These policies are for the most part expressions of support for OER based on perceived benefits, most notably affordability and accessibility for students, but also teaching quality, environmental sustainability, and opportunity for students to actively participate in OER creation. Several policies include discussion of external advocacy; for example, the Students’ Society of McGill University supports the implementation of a provincial bilingual OER database. Many propose specific institutional changes: the UPEI Student Union recommends that all first-year courses should use OER; the UWO University Students’ Council suggests the recruitment of an open educational resources coordinator; and the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association supports “explicit mention of OER development as a positive indication” in the university’s tenure and promotion policy.

Policy papers on OER have also been published by provincial and national student groups. The [Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance](#) (2017) issued a number of recommendations around OER, including the inclusion of educational information in faculty orientations, developing a quality assurance and assessment process via

eCampus Ontario, and creating a provincial incentive program alongside broader financial and infrastructure support for OER. The [Canadian Alliance of Student Associations](#) (n.d.) recommended that the Tri-Agency create a pilot grant for OER development and creation of an online repository.

We found two examples of OER in publicly available promotion and tenure documentation: one [institutional policy](#), from UBC, and one [departmental policy](#), from Thompson Rivers University (TRU). At UBC, contributions to open education resources are included as evidence of educational leadership for faculty in that stream; at TRU, development and dissemination of OER in a candidate's teaching dossier is viewed as evidence of Scholarship of Teaching Activities.

We found three full OER policies from [British Columbia Institute of Technology \(BCIT\)](#), [Southern Alberta Institute of Technology](#), and [Nova Scotia Community College](#). The BCIT example is intended as a best practice and guide for using OER within BCIT's *Learning and Teaching Framework*. It outlines the support available to faculty, including funding opportunities, library and Learning and Teaching Centre assistance, the institution's Open Education Working Group, and resources available provincially through BCcampus. It also reviews intellectual property considerations for OER, including recommending a Creative Commons license, as well as responsibilities for faculty who use OER, and includes recommended technical formats for OER. The SAIT policy is more formal in nature and is available open access under a Creative Commons license, allowing for potential use as a model. It includes a series of relevant definitions and governing principles and describes roles and responsibilities for training and support, selection of OER, creation of new OER, and maintenance. The policy from Nova Scotia Community College, the newest of the three, is stewarded by the Senior Advisor for Educational Equity – the purpose statement emphasizes the institution's commitment to equitable access and outcomes. It outlines the requirements for selecting and using OER and the roles and responsibilities of different campus groups in supporting open education. It also includes references to several supporting policies, such as those on intellectual property and use of copyright materials, as well as a related OER Procedures document, but these are not openly available. An additional example of OER in a course material adoption policy that encourages faculty to use OER to ensure affordability for students from [Coast Mountain College](#) was also identified.

Examples of policies from outside of Canada include:

- [Penn State Open Availability and Open Licensing of Instructional and Other Materials](#): This short document encourages faculty and researchers to make instructional and research materials openly available.
- [Tidewater Community College \(Virginia\) Policy on Use of Open Educational Resources](#): This example is notable for its extensive procedural documentation, which covers such subjects as professional development, quality standards, licensing, and specific requirements around zero-cost courses.
- [Glasgow Caledonian Open Educational Resources Policy](#): The development of this policy is described by [Kelt](#) (2015); because the policy is under a Creative Commons license, it can readily be adopted as a model.

- [Utah Valley University Guidelines and Criteria for Retention, Tenure, and Promotion](#): This model is interesting because it captures OER not just as scholarly media or creative works but considers it as evidence of inclusive teaching within its Teaching Excellence framework.
- [University of Edinburgh Open Educational Resources Policy](#): This example is under a Creative Commons license and includes a number of procedural recommendations.
- [Coventry University Policy on Open Educational Practices](#): This Creative Commons-licensed policy includes discussion of the intellectual property of students participating in open pedagogical practice.
- [TU Delft OER Policy](#): This Creative Commons-licensed policy “puts the TU Delft on a trajectory towards a teaching practice in which the use of Open Educational Resources is the norm, not the exception.”
- [American University Tenure, Promotion, and Reappointment Guidelines Updates](#): This resource is not in itself a policy but is included because it supports updating of faculty tenure and promotion guidelines for all academic units at the institution, and, as part of that process, recommends that teaching evaluation guidelines address OER. Thus, this resource could be used as a model for institutions with a more decentralized tenure and promotion policy structure, where requirements/criteria are determined at the unit level.

Additional Resources

- The SPARC project [Connect OER](#) includes a directory of OER policies and other OER-related activities across North America.
- The [OER World Map](#) includes a registry of OER policies as part of its larger [Open Education Policy Hub](#).
- The Driving OER Sustainability for Student Success (DOERS3) collaborative developed an [OER Contributions Matrix](#) to help faculty report OER-related work in tenure and promotion applications. They argue that this approach could “help faculty and staff and administrators change the culture of their institutions.”