

Affordable Learning, Lasting Impact: How OER and Partnerships Save Students Money



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Introduction

Open Educational Resources (OER) represent a transformative opportunity for higher education, offering free access to high-quality teaching, learning, and research materials. OER promotes accessibility compliance, equity in accessing content, and innovative pedagogy through open licensing and reduced costs of access. However, while OER are free for students to use, they are not free to create, adopt, or maintain. Sustainable OER initiatives require investment in time, resources, and collaboration between faculty, staff, administrators, and students.

In recognition of the importance of education affordability and the opportunities that OER provide, eCampusOntario oversaw the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities' (MCU) investment of \$70 million in the Virtual Learning Strategy (VLS) from 2020-2024. The VLS increased capacity for OER in Ontario institutions, fostered collaboration across the higher education sector, and included \$35 million for the creation of OER. This investment continues to yield returns with student savings exceeding \$26 million and counting, a growing collection of over 1800 OER, adoptions reported by 18,411 educators, and more than 300,000 learners impacted in Ontario and beyond. Through the VLS investment, Ontario's position as a leader in higher education in Canada continues, and OER remains a key strategic priority.

The Ontario Government's **Strengthening Accountability and Student Supports Act 2024** highlights the need for transparency around education costs for learners, particularly ancillary fees and required materials, emphasizing affordability and aiming to provide students with clearer insights into the expenses tied to their education. In August 2024 the Minister of MCU issued a memorandum to all university and

college presidents regarding the "Directive on the Costs of Educational Material under the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act," in which institutions were asked to encourage their faculty to use OER "to help make education more affordable for students," with a reference to the eCampusOntario Open Library included.

OER offer a powerful means of addressing affordability challenges by reducing or eliminating material costs, making high-quality resources accessible to all students and furthering the goals of transparency and equity across Ontario's postsecondary system. The benefits of OER for both educators and students are significant. There are challenges in making OER a core part of the education system, and there is a **powerful solution—partnerships between student unions and institutions**. Through collaborative efforts, these partnerships can unlock the full potential of OER, making education more affordable and accessible for all. eCampusOntario supports these initiatives by providing access to one of Canada's largest OER collections, powerful authoring tools, professional development opportunities, sector-wide advocacy, and models of practice for implementing partnerships to facilitate OER adoption and use.

Why OER?

Open Educational Resources (OER) are freely accessible teaching, learning, and research materials, released under an open license or in the public domain. These resources can be adapted and shared depending on the license and help break down financial barriers to accessing education.



Benefits of OER

Cost Savings for Students: OER reduce the reliance on costly pay for use resources such as traditionally published textbooks and paid course packs or homework systems, making higher education more affordable. This is especially significant in disciplines where textbook costs can be prohibitively high, helping to reduce financial barriers to learning.

Accessibility and Equity: Since OER are freely available online, they provide easier access to high-quality educational resources regardless of a student's geographic location, socio-economic status, or institution. While acknowledging that the digital divide still poses a significant challenge for some students, OER helps to close equity gaps and ensures that more students have the same opportunities to succeed.

Customizability and Flexibility: Subject to the license applied, educators can adapt OER to fit their specific course needs, updating and modifying content to keep it relevant and aligned with course outcomes. This flexibility encourages faculty to create more personalized, accessible, and effective learning experiences for their students. This can be especially relevant in new and emerging fields; or in situations where professional regulations may have changed.

Promoting Innovation in Teaching: The open nature of OER encourages collaboration and innovation among educators, enabling the sharing of resources and teaching practices across institutions. Faculty can build on each other's work, improving the overall quality of educational materials and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Increased Retention and Success: When faced with competing financial priorities, some students make the decision to forgo purchasing course resources. OER removes the need to make this choice, by eliminating or reducing the cost of educational materials. When students have access to all the required learning resources from the start of a course, they are more likely to stay engaged and succeed academically.

Co-Creation of Knowledge: OER facilitates collaborative creation of educational resources between students and educators, empowering learners to actively contribute to course content. This co-creation process deepens student engagement, enhances critical thinking, and creates more relevant and personalized learning materials, fostering a participatory learning environment.

Challenges with OER

While Open Educational Resources (OER) are free for students to use, they are not free to create, adopt, or maintain. Developing high-quality OER, as well as integrating them into courses, requires significant time, expertise, and resources from educators and staff. Additionally, both faculty and students need ongoing access to support services, professional development, and training to raise awareness of OER and ensure successful adoption and creation. These activities—essential for making OER a sustainable and impactful part of education—demand continuous investment and the development of sustainable funding models to ensure their long-term viability and success.

Meeting the Challenge

One effective solution to addressing the challenges of OER sustainability is fostering partnerships between student unions/associations and institutions. By working together, these key stakeholders can jointly fund and plan initiatives that support the adoption, creation, and promotion of OER in higher education.

Collaborative efforts could include offering OER adoption or creation grants, organizing advocacy events, co-delivering professional development opportunities, co-authoring policy statements, and forming OER guidance committees to oversee these activities. Through these partnerships, institutions and student unions can ensure the long-term success of OER, making education more affordable and accessible for all students.



Funding Models for Affordable Educational Resources

As the operationalization of OER initiatives have grown, institutions across North America have explored a range of models for funding OER at scale with the primary goal of reducing costs for students. The range of models below includes models that are fully aligned with open principles (#1, #4) where resources are free to use to affordability models (#2, #3) where educational resources are offered at significantly lower costs. Whichever model is used, openly licensing the created resources will help institutions and the entire sector continue to benefit from OER.

1. Operational Budget Funding:

In this model, funds are allocated from the general operating budgets of either or both the institution and student union. These resources are directed toward co-developed OER initiatives, such as grants for OER adoption and creation, professional development for faculty, staff, and students, and advocacy events. This approach offers flexibility and is relatively easy to plan and implement. Operating budgets are subject to regular review which means that this model lends itself well to regular updating that can leverage unexpected surpluses and cross-departmental collaborations. Further, this model emphasizes participation in that the institution and student union jointly manage OER activities including the allocation of funding to OER projects. Two prominent Ontario examples of institution and student union partnerships can be found at Brock University and McMaster University. Brock University's partnership with the Brock University Student Union (BUSU) stands as an example of this model. This partnership sees the institution and the student union financially support the Open Education Resources (OER) Grant Program. Through this program, educators can receive between \$500 and \$1500 for adoptions and up to \$6000 for adaptation. In addition to financial

support, the [BUSU](#) also participates in campus-wide OER events, assists in collection of OER data through student surveys, and supports research and advocacy with provincial student organizations (OER Grant Program – Brock University Library). Similarly, [McMaster University](#) partners with the McMaster Student Union to jointly fund OER support grants that provide between \$250 to \$7500 depending on the OER activity which include adoption, adaptation, creation, and peer review.

2. Ancillary Fee Models:

Supporting similar OER activities noted above, this affordability model involves the introduction of a dedicated ancillary fee charged to students each academic year collected in a similar way to other fees such as activity fees and is charged to all students at in the institution. In this case, the fee is specifically earmarked for educational resource creation and supports. As with other fees, this ancillary fee can be opt-in or opt-out with opt-in being the most transparent and student-centred option. The challenge with this approach is the regulatory process required to establish new fees, along with concerns about increasing costs for students. The direct costs of higher education for students remains a contentious issue and a new dedicated ancillary fee may be negatively viewed. These drawbacks can be mitigated through comprehensive awareness campaigns highlighting the long-term benefits of funding educational resource creation, collaborative planning that includes input from institutions and students, and ensuring that the costs are shared equitably between both parties.

3. Low-cost Alternative Textbook initiatives:

Under this affordability model, a textbook fee is charged as part of the tuition for a course and only impacts students registering in that course. This approach charges a small fee, usually in the range of \$10 to \$20, on courses that leverage OER or alternative resources rather than the higher price points associated with commercially created resources. The objective here is to substantially reduce costs for learners and the fee collected is reinvested in OER grant programs. [Kansas State University](#) (KSU) has offered its Open/Alternative Textbook Initiative since 2013 and boasts an 8:1 return on investment. Funding is provided through a combination of public donations and/or a course fee. For every \$1000 invested in the program, students have saved \$8000 with those returns repeated year over year. This model benefits from its ease of implementation as it represents a resource cost and is charged in a similar manner to the purchase of any course materials. The important distinction is that the revenue generated from the fee directly benefits learners and the institution rather than for-profit publishers.

4. Private Sector Donations

Another potential model for funding OER sustainability is through donations from the private sector. Companies, foundations, and philanthropic organizations with an interest in supporting education can provide financial

contributions to help develop, adopt, and maintain OER initiatives. This approach can align with corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals, allowing private organizations to invest in reducing educational costs and improving access for students.

Private sector donations can support a range of activities, including OER creation grants, professional development programs, and advocacy initiatives that promote the use of open resources. In return, donors benefit from visibility within the educational community and the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to student success and affordability.

In the US, a prominent example of this model is the [Hewlett Foundation](#), which has been supporting OER since 2002. Their grant making strategy combines access to free, adaptable educational resources with professional development for educators. By democratizing and personalizing learning, Hewlett's investments have energized classrooms and strengthened pedagogy across the United States.

Closer to home, [Staebler Insurance](#) donated \$100,000 to the University of Waterloo's OER Fellows Grant. This donation provides grants of up to \$5,000 to educators for the development of OER, reducing material costs for students and supporting educators in creating course-specific resources. This partnership demonstrates the



power of private donations to make education more affordable and accessible ([Celebrating a Gift to the University of Waterloo for Open Education Resources — Staebler Insurance](#)).

While this model may require ongoing relationship building and clear demonstration of the impact of donations, it offers a sustainable source of funding that can complement institutional and student union investments, amplifying the long-term impact of OER.

Achieving Success and Impact

Prioritize Open Communication:

A strong foundation begins with clear, open communication where all parties, including both student unions and institutions have an equal voice. Partners must collaborate toward the shared goal of supporting and expanding OER initiatives across the institution.

Collaboratively Develop a Policy Framework:

Establish a policy framework that formalizes the partnership, defines the roles of each partner, and acknowledges the shared goals of expanding OER adoption and creation. This framework should also emphasize the importance of Open Education within the institution, guiding all future activities. For example, Fanshawe College implemented its [Open Education Policy](#) effective September 1, 2024 that sees Open Education recognized in the broader institution policy framework. The institution's policy notes Fanshawe's OER Studio, the impact that OER can have on learner experiences, and the importance of data tracking.

Identify High-Impact Areas for Investment:

Early on, focus on areas where OER investments will yield the greatest impact. High-enrollment courses with significant textbook costs are prime targets, as they demonstrate the largest return on investment through substantial student savings.

Expand the Partnership for Greater Reach:

Amplify the partnership's impact by exploring opportunities to collaborate with other

institutions and their student unions. Expanding the partnership can enhance resource sharing, collective advocacy, and larger-scale OER adoption efforts.

Measure Impact and Track Success:

The key to long-term success is data collection and impact measurement. Establish systems to track statistics such as the number of OER adoptions, student savings, learners impacted, and course sections using OER. Regularly assessing these metrics will help sustain the initiative. Developing central points in your institution to collect OER usage details and data can help ensure a coordinated effort that moves OER from the individual instructor level to an even more impactful institution level. Library and Teaching and Learning Centre staff can help facilitate data collection and share out OER impact from your institution to the higher education sector more broadly through aggregate reporting to eCampusOntario. To date, the Open Library has reported over \$26 million in learn savings and 303,577 learners impact in more than 50,000 course section. These efforts amplify the positive contribution OER make to student affordability, they encourage wider OER use and establish a value proposition that can lead to more OER funding from various sources. Outside of Ontario, we see an example of a scaled sector wide initiative at [Affordable Learning Georgia](#). This program has been tracking and supporting OER at a state level for more than 10-years and reports \$173 million in student savings, 1.3 million students impacted, and more than 600 affordable learning projects support. The ongoing return on investment is tracked through reporting that provides publicly accessible data dashboards that demonstrate the sizable impact from this initiative.

Course Marking:

Institutions should consider clearly making educational materials cost available at the point of registration through "[Course Marking](#)," the practice of marking a course with low-cost, no-cost, or OER designations to indicate the anticipated cost of course materials. Research has demonstrated that students will make enrolment decisions, in part, based upon the anticipated cost of course materials. Clearly marking this in the enrolment system not only drives course registration,

but it is also consistent with the Directive on the Costs of Educational Material under the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act. The additional transparency that Course Marking provides can provide insights into institution and sector wide OER use that supports decision making for students and institutions. This is an ongoing and continually evolving area of work.

Build a Community and Share Success:

Fostering a strong OER community is essential to amplifying the impact of your partnership. Host regular events, workshops, and communities of practice that bring together all stakeholders across the institution, including students, faculty, librarians, student services, teaching and learning centers, and administration. By connecting with everyone, the partnership can create a broad base of support, share successes, and build a network that champions the continued growth and sustainability of OER initiatives. This can open up conversations at institutions for key internal stakeholders to sustain OER work through matching financial funding through staff resourcing (e.g., course release for faculty to create OER). This collective engagement ensures a collaborative approach to making OER a central part of the institution's educational mission. For example, the McMaster Student Union hosted a full day OER event in September 2024 and invited eCampusOntario and others to share information about OER through information tables and presentations.

Ensure Institution Supports are in Place:

Creating an OER can be a complex undertaking that requires professional development, consultation with experts on license selection, access to creation tools, instructional design support, accessibility review, and much more. Institutions should carefully consider the infrastructure it has in place to support these various activities. The funding models discussed here can play an important part in establishing this support system and will help ensure that the voices of educators and students are heard. A key Ontario example is Fanshawe College's [OER Design Studio](#). Through this initiative, OER projects receive support for copyediting, research, copyright compliance, graphic design, multimedia creation, instructional design, and publishing. Sustainability as part of the institution's support network is provided by including the OER Design Studio as part of Fanshawe's Open Education Policy. These design studios can also provide valuable employment opportunities for students to actively participate in OER.



Support from eCampusOntario

eCampusOntario is here to help student unions and institutions foster impactful OER partnerships and activities in a number of ways.



1. Access to a Growing OER Collection:

Our [Open Library](#) collection, which continues to expand through ongoing submissions from Ontario educators, is one of the largest in Canada with over 1800 resources. This free repository amplifies the impact of OER created by our member institutions, making high-quality educational resources available to all.

2. OER Authoring Tools:

We provide powerful OER creation tools such as [Pressbooks](#) and [H5P Studio](#), offering free access to Ontario's postsecondary institutions, empowering educators and students to create engaging and interactive learning materials.

3. Professional Development Opportunities:

Our [Mastering Open Ed](#) microcredential program offers foundational training on OER creation, adoption, licensing, accessibility, and more—equipping educators and students with the skills to thrive in open education.

4. Advice and Support from OER Librarians:

Our team of librarians is here to help educators find OER that meet their needs, make connections with other educators across the province, and provide 1:1 support for using OER creation tools.

5. Sector-Level Impact Reporting:

We track [OER adoption and impact data](#) across the sector, reporting on metrics such as student

savings, adoptions, and learners impacted. Institutions can leverage our reporting process to demonstrate the scaled impact of their OER initiatives.

6. Advocacy and Convening the Sector:

eCampusOntario plays a key role in advocating for OER at the sector level and is the only organization capable of convening the entire higher education sector in Ontario. We bring together diverse stakeholders—educators, institutions, student unions, and policymakers—working towards the cause of Open Education. Through webinars, newsletters, and conferences, we facilitate collaboration, share success stories, and promote best practices to inspire collective action.

7. Scaling Efforts Across the Province

Throughout this report, we have highlighted several key initiatives that are underway in Ontario's Higher Education Sector. These include institution and student union partnerships at Brock University and McMaster University as well as the new policy framework implemented at Fanshawe College, and their OER Design Studio which provides ongoing OER support to educators and learners. eCampusOntario can help scale the OER initiatives by convening the sector and co-designing technologies and approaches in Ontario through strategic initiatives that strengthen long-term sector capacity.

Summary

Open Educational Resources (OER) are a critical tool in addressing education affordability, promoting equity, and fostering innovation across Ontario's higher education sector. However, the sustainability of OER requires ongoing investment, collaboration, and strategic partnerships between institutions and student unions. These partnerships not only unlock the full potential of OER but also align with the objectives of the **Strengthening Accountability and Student Supports Act 2024** and the Minister's directive to encourage the adoption of OER. It is essential that institutions provide the necessary support for OER through the various recommendations outlined in this report, from developing policies and funding models to fostering communities of practice. By doing so, institutions can enhance affordability, increase access to high-quality resources, and support the academic success of students while also aligning with the goals of the directive. eCampusOntario is actively supporting these efforts through resources, tools, and advocacy, helping to build a stronger and more inclusive future for Ontario's postsecondary system.



Resources

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