

Bryant Harrison
21F.034
WSIS Position Paper

Support for Opencoursewares and Open Source Technologies

Technology is rapidly growing and developing and as a result improving the lives of millions of people across the world. However, growing equally fast is the disparity between those who are able to use these technologies and those who are not. The digital divide is a serious problem with social, economic, and political ramifications for those who are not part of the technological revolution that many are benefiting from today. The United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) should support efforts that seek to provide developing nations that do not have the resources or access to technologies with media to participate in the global movement toward a more digital and connected society.

Opencoursewares are effective ways to include the technologically disenfranchised populations of the world.

Opencoursewares are a low cost, practical, and effective way to provide much needed educational materials for people across the world. They are free materials that can be obtained digitally through the Internet. Many people do not have the money or opportunity to attend a university, so providing access to materials will help others learn and stay on the cutting edge of today's technologies, theories, and at a low cost to the person. Those who are fortunate enough to attend universities in the developing world may still not have access to current materials or such a wide range of materials. Providing access to these materials to students training abroad in the developing world will level the educational playing field and allow the students to compete for jobs and take a more significant role in academia and the global economy.

OpenCourseware is directly related to the UN's principles and values. The concepts behind openCoursewares are deeply integrated in the UN Millennium Declaration and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One of the fundamental values that the UN considered "essential to international relations" was equality; in addition, development is an unalienable right for nations and individuals (UN Millennium Declaration I.6). OpenCoursewares are one way of ensuring that anyone can have access to educational materials and have the opportunity to learn. The UN also seeks to extract the positive benefits of globalization, such as including developing nations in the global economy, and not just exploiting them for cheap labor. Certainly, openCoursewares are a medium for globalization as they involve the exchange of information across the world. The benefits of OCW are directly in-line with what the UN is looking for in its globalization efforts- the ability to give all nations a common and equitable stake in the future (UN Millennium Declaration I.5). The UN took the responsibility for managing the economic and social development of nations by declaring that it "must play a central role"(UN Millennium Declaration I.6). So it is only fitting that WSIS should support the openCourseware idea, since a formal adoption of openCoursewares would put the UN in the central role of facilitating and encourage the economic and social development of nations through the openCourseware technology. Perhaps the most blatant reason WSIS should support openCoursewares lies in III.20 of the UN Millennium Declaration: "We resolve further to ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies...are available to all." Giving free access to educational materials is certainly a way to ensure that the benefits of new technologies can be felt by people across the world. Language supporting openCoursewares can also be seen in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26 declares that "everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the

elementary and fundamental stages.” It continues to state “technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.” OpenCourseWare actually exceeds the expectations of this declaration by making education accessible to *all* people, not just to those who have achieved some level of merit.

The member nations have a lot to gain from supporting OpenCourseWare. Besides upholding the obligations that member nations have according to the UN Millennium Declaration and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there are other benefits that could result. Billions of people do not have sufficient access to educational materials and are not connected to the rest of the world, as people of the developed world are. There are countless people in the technologically disenfranchised population that lives in every nation that has the potential of being the next Einstein, but they will never have the opportunity to reach their full potential due to a lack of education and collaboration with others. Supporting OpenCourseWare could allow each person to blossom and be a major contributor to society. Also, supporting technologies in developing countries could facilitate collaboration between a member nation and a developing nation that may not have occurred otherwise. Again, this could lead to increased brainpower on both sides which could benefit both nations. In addition to the economic benefit of the developing nation being more integrated into the global economy, a contributing nation would be able to trade and work more closely with the developing nations which typically operate at lower costs. This would lead to significant positive economic benefits for both parties, as the contributing nation cuts costs, while creating well-paying jobs in the developing nation. Finally, no country is free of the digital divide problem, so all countries have populations that could greatly benefit from access to free educational materials.

Opencoursewares address many problems that effect people across the world. Many do not have access to information, especially at a low cost, and opencourseware would be a crucial alternative for them. The World Summit on the Information Society should seriously consider adopting the idea of opencoursewares as it is directly tied to the mission and background of the UN and WSIS.