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# UNESCO chair in open education resources for Glenda Cox

Senior lecturer in the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT) Dr Glenda Cox is the new holder of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Chair in Open Education and Social Justice at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

Associate Professor Cheryl Hodgkinson-Williams previously held the chair but has since retired from UCT. Dr Cox is the principal investigator in the Digital Open Textbooks for Development (DOT4D) project. She will hold the chair for four years.

UNESCO describes open educational resources (OER) as teaching, learning and research materials in any medium – digital or otherwise – that are in the public domain or have been released under an open licence. This allows no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution with no or limited restrictions.

The UNESCO Chairs Programme is a network of chairs that serves as a think tank and bridge-builder between academia, civil society and local communities, as well as researchers and policymakers. The programme is designed to enhance capacity in higher education by facilitating international inter-university cooperation and networking, knowledge sharing and collaboration.

The chair will create exposure for UCT to new audiences through the UNESCO education networks. UCT is one of approximately 800 member institutions across 116 countries. The university is leading the way in open education in Africa, said Cox.

"With its focus on reusing and sharing educational materials to reach the most vulnerable students, the social justice impact and potential of open education on teaching and learning is huge," said Cox. This is especially relevant in the under-resourced Global South where there is vast potential to improve access to material, enhance its quality – and reduce the costs of education.

As such, the chair fits squarely within the aims of UCT's Vision 2030 and its massive transformative purpose of unleashing human potential to create a fair and just society.

Social justice is the core of DOT4D's work, Cox said. And although the chair doesn't come with a specific mandate, Cox plans to create one around open education resources such as

open textbooks. This is an initiative that has the support of the office of Associate Professor Lis Lange, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning.

The international collaborative aspect is equally vital to UCT's work in the area, said Cox.

"Having the UNESCO Chair in Open Education for Social Justice is an extra leap," she said. "It's important recognition when you're building a network." The DOT4D team has created some "fantastic" resources, available on their website, said Cox.

But creating open-source material comes at a cost. The chair doesn't come with a purse, and Cox is hoping the two new posts created on her team for 2022 – essential to research and development – will be underwritten by UCT or external funders.

The time to scale up their work is ripe, she said. Developments in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have magnified the need for open education material.

"If there has been any upside to COVID-19, it's that many more people have used open education resources – and become aware of them," Cox noted. "Suddenly, people woke up. At CILT we ran scores of remote teaching workshops [for academic staff]. There were many questions about copyright and intellectual property; people became aware of creative commons licensing."

This awareness must be escalated. Cox sees this as one of her major challenges in the Global South. "For example, the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT) in the Unites States reported an increase of 1.75 million hits on their open courseware during lockdown – and that the number is increasing. A large proportion of that is from Africa, which is really interesting, because MIT resources are not always applicable to the Global South."

This presents an opportune time for local open education resource developers.

"We must maintain the momentum by creating local open material in South Africa and in Africa; materials that are relevant to us. It's about cultural representation and political framing and it's part of the social justice argument," said Cox.

And while the cost aspect has been at the forefront of arguments for open textbooks, the social justice aspect is also enhanced by new collaborations between authors and their students, creating opportunities to transform curricula and develop multilingual materials.

"By getting that cultural representation, students have a voice in their own curriculum and in their own texts; and that means something to them. They can see themselves in that text; it's not a foreign text. So, it's a very powerful option. It's all the aspects we want for social justice."

"There's definitely a break in tradition and a disruption of traditional practices around the open textbook," she added.

As this is new territory for many UCT academics and textbook authors, Cox is keen to share author journeys. Sharing stories, experiences and ideas is part of the developmental process.

Cox has also dispelled the notion that open educational material is inferior. "Our resources are excellent quality, despite being free."

*Story by Helen Swingler*



Dr Glenda Cox                                           Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

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