

Scoping Study on Open Educational Practices at Jharkhand State Open University

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1. Executive Summary

Open distance learning (ODL) refers to a flexible mode of education that allows learners to study remotely, leveraging various technologies for communication and interaction. Open universities (OUs) adopt ODL to provide accessible and flexible educational opportunities to diverse learners. Open educational resources (OER) are freely accessible educational materials that can be used, shared, and modified by educators and learners. While ODL allows open universities to provide flexible and accessible education by accommodating learners' needs and circumstances, OER can offer freely available, high-quality learning materials, reducing financial barriers, and enabling customization. These resources, such as textbooks, videos, and simulations, are made available under open licenses, reducing reliance on proprietary resources. Open education practices (OEP) involve the use of OER along with open pedagogies, methodologies, and technologies to enhance teaching and learning. They complement ODL and OER by encouraging collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the adoption of innovative pedagogies. These practices foster a community of educators, allowing them to collectively enhance the quality of education, share best practices, and continuously improve teaching and learning experiences.

This report documents the scoping study conducted by IT for Change (ITfC) in collaboration with Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) on the open educational practices currently in place at Jharkhand State Open University (JSOU) in Ranchi, Jharkhand. It also suggests some possible strategies for collaboration and support between JSOU and CEMCA.

The study was designed to assess the current state of OEP/OER policies and practices and identify possibilities for collaboration between JSOU and CEMCA for supporting OEP implementation. A member from IT for Change visited Jharkhand State Open University (JSOU) from 9th to 10th June 2023 for conducting the study and interacted with participants including the Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Consultants, (guest) faculty members and administrative staff at the university. Data collection was done through direct interactions.

This report presents a phased plan of action for the collaboration between CEMCA and JSOU to incorporate open educational practices (OEPs) and leverage ICTs to enhance access to quality learning materials. The initial scoping study revealed that the full-fledged operations of JSOU will require the completion of own buildings (and related physical infrastructure) as well as the hiring of permanent faculty for the 8 schools, which may take some time. The recommendations include organising workshops for staff on orientation and appreciation of OEP, enhancing OEP implementation, course design and content development, policy development and ongoing faculty support development. These actions can help create a foundation for OEP integration and facilitate staff engagement in open education practices. These actions aim to establish a supportive environment, foster collaboration, and ensure the university's policies align with its vision of open education.

By leveraging the expertise of CEMCA and implementing the suggested plan of action, JSOU can enhance its educational offerings, and contribute to the broader goal of increasing access to quality education through open educational practices.

2. Objective

This study was aimed at understanding the status of the OEP at the institution, identifying gaps (if any) and informing the way forward. Specifically, it aimed to:

1. Assess the current state of OEP/OER policies and practices. This includes OER policies and practices, competencies of the faculty members on OEP, available infrastructure and management support.
2. Identify areas that need support.
3. Recommend the way forward through an institution-specific road map for supporting OEP implementation and as a part of this, to identify areas of collaboration between the institution and CEMCA.

2.1 Scope of the study

The following areas were covered during the study:

1. The Open Educational policies and practices currently in place at JSOU.
2. Status of OEP implementation and the extent to which the stated objectives have been achieved.
3. Integration of digital technologies in the OEP with respect to:
 - a) faculty professional development
 - b) creating, adapting and publishing OER
 - c) designing and transacting courses
4. Capacity building initiatives by the institution for the faculty on adopting and promoting OEP.
5. Enabling and disabling factors, associated with implementation of OEP, including potential areas of improvement.

3. Agenda

The purpose of this study was to develop an initial understanding of the knowledge of/ awareness towards OEPs, as well as to identify ways to support the university in adopting them. The study included an analysis of institutional policies, technological facilities, and other relevant records. A multi-audience approach was adopted that collected qualitative information and quantitative data from the key stakeholders at the institutions including management, faculty members, support staff and others. Through this process, significant aspects in terms of knowledge, skills, practice and attitudes of the stakeholders, as well as the institutional support were intended to be captured.

3.1 Study activities

The major activities planned under the study were:

1. Some initial research regarding the university (faculty members, staff, infrastructure, programs offered, student strength etc.)
2. Conducting in-person direct interactions with select key informants to gather required data.
3. Analysing the data collected and sharing insights derived from it with the program team.

3.2 Broader itinerary of the study

A member from IT for Change conducted in-person direct interactions on 9th and 10th May. These interactions were scheduled in coordination with the university as per the availability of stakeholders on these dates.

4. Data collection tools for the study

For this study, the previously created *direct interaction tool* was administered for information gathering. During the visit to JSOU, interactions with key stakeholders across senior leadership, management and faculty were conducted, the objectives for which were:

1. to develop an initial understanding of the vision and mission of the university, its background and related particulars.
2. to provide insights into the effectiveness of the OEP initiatives by understanding experiences and perspectives of the stakeholders. Interactions were conducted with the Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Consultants, (guest) faculty members and administrative staff of the university.

5. Key findings

1. JSOU is a nascent entity established in 2022 under a state act. The VC¹ was appointed in July 22 and the Registrar² in June 2022. Apart from these two positions and that of a finance officer, there are no permanent staff at JSOU.

The **Vision** of JSOU is:

- (a) To play a positive role in the development of the state through education, research, training and capacity building
- (b) To give emphasis on skill based vocational courses for promoting employment opportunities and to support opportunities for life-long learning
- (c) To ensure access and equity in higher education.

2. The **Mission** of JSOU is:

- (a) To increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education in Jharkhand.
- (b) To create a state-wide network of Study Centers to reach out to all parts of the state and all segments of the society.
- (c) To create a university-industry interface.
- (d) To promote inclusiveness in higher education and establish University-community linkages.

Increasing GER in Jharkhand

JSOU's key mandate is to significantly increase the GR in the state, which at 17.7% is much lower than national average of 25.8%. JSOU aims to reach out to the marginalized sections, including adivasis living in forests and mountains, youth in urban centres who are unable to access mainstream education, business people, farmers, home makers and all those who have passed SSLC wanting to study further even from their own location, and at their leisure. The fees are kept low, less than Rs. 5,000 to encourage many to register for these courses.

3. The University has appointed guest faculty to transact the 29 courses that are being currently offered across the state. These courses have been developed, using open courses shared by Universities in Orissa (English materials) and Uttar Pradesh (Hindi materials). The courses are run with the help of guest faculty who already have regular jobs in other colleges and Universities and make the time available on the weekends to transact the online courses of JSOU.

1 The VC is a senior academic with deep understanding and experience working with Tribal Languages of Jharkhand. Rolling out courses and creating OER in the languages spoken in the state will be a vital step to increasing enrollment, especially of people from tribal communities, which are lagging behind the most in access to higher education. His guidance to the program would provide the necessary impetus in the area of language learning and learning through language in the collaboration. Making courses available in Tribal languages will provide fillip to GER.

2 The Registrar is a knowledgeable and experienced veteran in the OEP space He has worked at Wawasan Open University which is a pioneer globally in OEP and has been a part of teams that have designed and developed online courses. He is very well placed to guide the collaboration.

4. The implementation of the open distance learning (ODL) programs is as follows:

- (a) Study centres have been established in more than 100 locations across the state (it is the mission of the university to established up to 500 such studies centres across the state), reaching out to remote forest and hilly regions across the state.
- (b) Enrollment is encouraged through ads in local media, use of mass media – TV and social media - instagram, FB, Twitter.
- (c) JSOU has shared course materials in PDF format with students through course faculty.
- (d) The study centres provide the physical space for the learning interactions which happen on weekends.
- (e) The guest faculty appointed by the University conduct online sessions on weekends using online platforms such as Google Meet. JSOU team tracks these sessions through a common WhatsApp group where the links to the online classes are shared every week.
- (f) The first set of Diploma and Certificate courses are being transacted now and examinations are being planned. Some faculty have created WhatsApp group with their course students for sharing information and resources.



5. Currently JSOU functions from a building provided by the Forest department. Proposals for constructing its own building as well as hiring it's own faculty are with the state government. The JSOU statute provides for 16 schools be established and the government has given an in-principle approval for 8 schools. The full fledged operations of JSOU will require the completion of own buildings (and related physical infrastructure) as well as the hiring of permanent faculty for the 8 schools. This may take some time. The University has put in note to the cabinet for hiring staff for 8 schools. However, there is no clarity at this point in time, as to when this proposal will be approved.

6. Pointers for collaboration

While longer term recommendations (like development of university's policy on OEP) can be considered later post the establishment of the physical and the human resources at JSOU, the immediate actions could be considered, in consultation with JSOU³, along the following lines:

1. JSOU is seeking CEMCA's collaboration for organising a *National Conference on OEP and Technology developments in the Education space, National Education Policy 2020, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) etc.* This would bring together leaders and faculty from OUs across the country, to share understanding as well as experiences.
The national level conference is mainly seen as a capacity building event and a networking event. So, the outcomes expected would not only be better understanding of OER, but also better understanding of important policies like the NEP, the SDGs, and integration of Technology in education. They also hope to build networks with other Open Universities across the country, so that they can collaborate on sharing materials etc.
2. Capacity building of faculty and staff members:
CEMCA can organise workshops for JSOU for providing an orientation and appreciation of OEP including OER. Since currently there are no permanent staff other than the top positions, the immediate capacity building therefore is suggested for the guest faculty to get more equipped to handle the courses that they do which will be for the foreseeable future, and regular faculty building programs would be planned later.
3. A Learning Management System (LMS) platform for online courses:
 - a) The website of JSOU is under development and is expected to be available in June 2023. JSOU is keen to develop this site as a one-stop solution for students providing information and transaction support for the entire life cycle – registration, admission, course transaction, assessment and certification. Once the website of JSOU is ready CEMCA can guide JSOU in installing and configuring the Moodle platform (with multiple language interfaces) on the JSOU server.
 - b) JSOU is keen to offer many more courses and is actively interested in developing the content for these courses using OEP. These include courses to learn Tribal and regional languages spoken in the state. CEMCA can guide JSOU by conducting capacity building workshops in designing and developing new courses as well as upgrading the existing courses and contextualizing them based on the requirements of the students, to allow for the benefits of the LMS to be available – such as continuous provision/sharing of content, activities and assessments for student learning. An initial team can be trained to develop the courses on Moodle.
 - c) Two courses, however, are needed immediately – a course to orient the Study Centre coordinators on the program and how they can support student learning and fulfil all requirements; and a second course for the guest faculty on how to strengthen their pedagogy and content practices (a customized program on Technological Pedagogical Content

³ The timing of some of these actions would depend on the faculty being in place, while some others could be planned in parallel to the hiring of faculty, by involving existing staff and guest faculty. The specific schedule of activities can be finalized through discussions between CEMCA and JSOU.

Knowledge or TPACK). These two courses can be the first to be offered on the Moodle LMS, in multiple languages, this process would pilot the platform as well. The design of these courses (on the LMS platform) can be planned immediately and other courses could be considered when regular faculty are in place.

4. Course material development:

- a) The course materials for both old and new courses can be digitised and made available on a resource repository, which could be created using the MediaWiki platform. These resources can be made available from the Wiki resource repository through Moodle courses to students. (The advantage of separating the resource repository and the LMS is that while students for enrolled for the courses will be accessing the same through a login on Moodle, the resources themselves can be made available to the public without needing to be enrolled through the wiki repository. Wiki can be installed for different languages as required).
- b) Workshops with identified faculty to design and develop OER can be planned. The digital format will allow course materials to be available not only in the print but also image, audio, visual, animation and simulation formats, which can enrich the resources and make them more accessible to the students. For skill building, videos demonstrating the activities required to build the skills would be more useful than print resources. This for instance will be required in an initial course for student's technology readiness to access Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).
- c) OER audio and video resources can be accessed and adapted as well, to reduce the time and effort in developing materials from scratch. Material development can also consider the different languages that are spoken in the state (*Hindi, Angika, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Bhumij, Ho, Kharia, Khortha Kudmali/Kurmali, Kurukh, Magahi, Maithili, Mundari, Nagpuri, Odia, Santali, Urdu*) and versions of the material as well as a courses can be offered in the different languages and dialects that are spoken in the state. Translation (sub-titling) and dubbing processes can reduce the effort in providing the course content in multiple languages.

5. All the technology related work can be done using Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) tools so that JSOU can install these on their own server and use for posterity, as well as train its faculty and IT teams on their configuration and use.

7. Conclusion

The collaboration between CEMCA and the university, guided by the recommendations outlined in this report, can help pave the way for integration of open educational practices. While longer term recommendations (like development of university's policy on OEP) can be considered later, post the establishment of the physical and the human resources at JSOU, the immediate actions mentioned can be considered. In time, by leveraging ICTs, audio, video, multimedia, and online technologies, JSOU can increase access to quality learning materials and create an environment that encourages collaboration, innovation, and lifelong learning. Implementing OEPs will position the open university at the forefront of open education initiatives, benefiting both the institution and its stakeholders. Continuous evaluation, feedback mechanisms, and adaptability are essential to ensure that the plan of action remains aligned with the university's evolving needs and goals.

8. Annexure

1. List of participants in the direct interactions:
 - (a) Prof. Dr. T.N. Sahu - Vice-Chancellor, JSOU
 - (b) Prof. Dr. G.K. Singh - Registrar, JSOU
 - (c) Dr. Shiw Vilas Sah - Consultant, JSOU
 - (d) Dr. Mohan Lal Sahu - Specialist, JSOU
 - (e) Dr Umesh Kumar – Study Centre coordinator
 - (f) Ms Surabhi Kacchap – Guest faculty
 - (g) Mr Dinesh Sharma – Guest faculty
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