

## Open courseware: an introduction

John Eyers on how open-access publishing has led to open-access distance learning courses. Is this the future?



Over the last decade, we have seen a huge increase in the number of distance learning courses in health. The distance course has a number of advantages over courses that require your attendance in a university: the fees are usually cheaper, there are no living or accommodation costs to pay, it can be done at your own pace while you continue working, and you don't have to leave home. Many of the well-known medical schools and universities around the world now have more post-graduate students following a distance learning course than full-time attended courses, especially now that the cost of attending a course – perhaps in another country – is so prohibitively expensive and the number of scholarships available is declining. In the beginning, the course content for these courses was rigidly protected by the universities, but as the open access publishing movement has gathered momentum, some institutions (mostly in the US) have made some of their courses free to all, and the number of these is increasing. These courses are described as *open courseware*, which generally take the form of PowerPoint lectures, videos, full text documents, quizzes, and exercises for self-assessment. A small selection of the most relevant for Africa is described below:

### Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (<http://ocw.jhsph.edu>)

This is probably the most important host of open courseware relevant to Africa, each course having a standard format of Syllabus, Schedule, Lecture materials, Readings, and Assignments. There are courses on: adolescent health; behaviour and health; biostatistics; chronic diseases; global health; HIV/AIDS, infectious disease; maternal/child health; and nutrition. Some examples of courses within these general categories are: *Evaluating therapies in observational studies*; *HAART to heart lessons from HIV/AIDS*; *Epidemiology of infectious disease*; *Preventing infant mortality*; *Malariology*; *Urban health in developing countries*; *Problem-solving for immunisation programmes*. There is also an image library (<http://ocw.jhsph.edu/imageLibrary>), much of which is related

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As a member of HIFA2015 (<http://www.hifa2015.org/>), John Eyers believes one of the biggest challenges for improved health in less-developed countries is ensuring that equal access to appropriate and evidence-based health information is made available to all. John would be delighted to receive comments and suggestions for future articles. Email him on: [johnmeyers@hotmail.com](mailto:johnmeyers@hotmail.com).

to the courses and have mainly statistical graphs and lifecycle diagrams, which can be downloaded to be used in presentations.

### Global Health Education Consortium

(<http://www.globalhealtheducation.org/resources/Pages/default.aspx>)

General topics include: global health; health systems; services; programmes; infectious, parasitic, and communicable diseases; non-communicable diseases; and priority and vulnerable populations. Courses include: *Introduction to community-based medical education in rural Africa*; *Practising emergency medicine in a low resource setting*; *Acute respiratory diseases and pneumonias*; *HIV care and treatment*; and *Cardiovascular disease in the developing world*. There are also courses on: *How to write a research paper and get it published* and *Tips on effective writing*.

### Supercourse – Epidemiology, the Internet and Global Health (<http://www.pitt.edu/~super1>)

A huge repository of nearly 5000 lectures by contributors from 174 countries. Special emphasis is paid to epidemiology and preventive aspects of disease control as well as some particular diseases – cardiovascular, cancer, diabetes, and infectious. However, the list is so large that lectures on most important health conditions in Africa can be found.

### Commonwealth of Learning

(<http://www.col.org/resources/crsMaterials/Pages/OCW-OER.aspx>)

A useful courseware and course materials finder using Google and Yahoo. A number of health-related courses are available in: child health; communicable diseases; drug management and rational use; integrated HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care; and malaria prevention, control, and management. These can be viewed in either Microsoft Word or Open Office (a freely available alternative to MS Office).

There is little doubt that the number of open courseware presentations will increase in the near future as different models of online teaching and learning develop, and it becomes clearer that making them available to all does not threaten the producer universities' income from traditional fee-based courses. I predict that postgraduate and professional development courses for less-developed countries will increase at a faster rate than those aimed at the richer countries. Watch this space!