Open Schooling: Communicating the Basics

Workshop to Develop
an
OPEN SCHOOLING HANDBOOK

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Opening Remarks by
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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to join you for this workshop. I thank you all for giving of your time to be here. You are all busy and distinguished people. But I can assure you that your time will be well spent because the output of this week is of great importance.

I learned just how important last week when I gave a talk at the World Bank. I had prepared it with Frances Ferreira and Asha Kanwar under the title *Life after Universal Primary: Scaling Schooling for the Secondary Surge.* Professor Kanwar likes alliteration!

That presentation, and the Rumble/Koul study that I reported on, arose directly out of my visit to the World Bank a year earlier. When World Bank officials visited COL in the autumn of 2006 they commented that our work on open schooling might be particularly interesting to the World Bank. Mohan Menon and I went down to Washington and presented it too them last January.

The general conclusion of that discussion was that open schooling has potential for addressing the challenge of increasing access to secondary education now that Universal Primary Education is on the way to being achieved. However, although policy makers and ministries of education are beginning to wake up to the prospect of a tidal wave of youngsters seeking secondary schooling, they are woefully ignorant of open schooling. Your handbook will help to dispel that ignorance.

Coping with the rapid increase in demand for access to secondary schooling after UPE is a real problem for countries that are still struggling to create the infrastructure for primary education.

Last year World Bank colleagues agreed that open schooling might be part of the answer but told us that before the World Bank can invest in a new approach there has to be a solid body of research data about its effectiveness and efficiency. It is a fact that far less evaluation and research has been done on open schooling than on open and distance learning in tertiary education. So when we came away from last year's meeting COL decided it would make a start on the research agenda.

We zeroed in on two open schools in rather different environments, the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) in India and the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), and commissioned research on their costs and effectiveness. The work was done by two well-known experts on cost studies, Badri Koul and Greville Rumble, who were already very familiar with the contexts in India and Namibia respectively.

Their 250-page report is available on the COL website at www.col.org/resources/publications/Pages/detail.aspx?PID=261 and you have a brochure that summarises it.

Last week at the World Bank I made a presentation that weaved the key results of this research into a general presentation on open schooling. The response was very positive and I received two further invitations for COL to present the importance of open schooling at meetings of policy makers later this year.

The fact that we are making progress in bringing the tremendous potential of open schooling to the attention of development agencies and national policy makers means that we must get our act together. This guide that you are preparing will be a great contribution to that. Research is important but a guide to good practice is even more vital. You are some of the world's foremost experts on open schooling and we at COL consider it a privilege to provide the forum where you can pool your wisdom and make it available to others in the form of handbook.

What I want to do today, as a way of opening your workshop, is to give you much the same presentation that I gave to the World Bank, but adding comments inspired by that experience.

I have entitled these remarks *Open Schooling: Communicating the Basics.*There were 20 people from the World Bank's Education Sector at my talk and we had a forty-minute question and discussion period at the end. This helped me to understand what people need to know about open schooling in order to take it seriously as a policy option.

So my plan is to set the context of the secondary surge, define open schooling, outline its development, summarise the results of the studies in India and Namibia and draw some conclusions about policy. Much of this will be familiar ground to experts like you but going through it again will enable me to flag some important issues.

The context: the secondary surge

I start with the context. Twenty years down the road three quarters of the world's population will be in Asia, Africa and the Middle-East. All these regions have struggled to provide education to their people.

Already half of the world's population is under 20 and there are two billion teenagers in the developing world. This young population, if given adequate education and training, can become a huge human resource asset. Many African countries have launched major initiatives to introduce free primary education. But what happens when students graduate from elementary school? Can the existing secondary schools absorb the large numbers?

Of the 118% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the primary level in Uganda, only 41 % survive to the last primary grade. (Global Education Digest, 2006, UIS) Of these only 16% can be absorbed in the secondary school system. When Kenya introduced free primary education in 2003, 1.5 million out-of-school children entered the 18,000 schools, which were bursting at the seams (www.aegis.com/news/afp/2006/AF060427.html). While 73% survive elementary education, the GER at the secondary level is 48%. What are the options for the rest? Far too few of them are receiving a secondary education.

While the world average for secondary school enrolment is 65%, the GER in SSA is 30%, which is up from 19% in 1990/91. (*At the Crossroads: Choices for secondary education and training in SSA*, World Bank: Africa Human Development Department, 2007, p.4) Access remains inequitable, especially in rural areas, with girls being particularly disadvantaged. As governments stretch their resources to make progress towards Universal Primary Education by 2015, it is unlikely that expansion of traditional secondary provision will be a key priority. And even if one new secondary school were to be built every month for the next ten years, the increased demand will not be met. What choices do policy makers have?

In its report 'At the Crossroads' the World Bank proposes a strategy that is

...parsimonious in resource use, recognizes the bottom-up sequential nature of education development, is closely aligned with national development priorities, anticipates labour market demand, strengthens school autonomy, ensures effective central direction and support, and builds public-private partnerships.... (p.28)

The World Bank itself has undertaken analytical studies to underpin national policy and planning in support of secondary education through its instruments such as the Country Assistance Strategies and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. The growing sector of private provision is seen as a potential solution. Distance and open learning is seem as 'alternative pathways to learning and certification' (p.20) but while open schooling is mentioned, it is not projected as a major option.

COL's position is that the private provision of conventional secondary education in classrooms, however useful, is unlikely to reach the more disadvantaged. But we do think it would be very helpful if private providers were to take an interest in providing open schooling at scale, which they should be good at.

I have begun a dialogue about this with Svava Bjarnason of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), which is the World Bank's arm for encouraging private sector investment in public goods. Her first question was whether there were any significant private providers of open schooling already. Please tell me afterwards whether you know of any and what your view of them is.

One important factor in planning open schooling is that we cannot forget about secondary education after youngsters reach their late teens. As well as the challenge of educating teenagers there is the task of providing useful education and training to young and not so young adults who missed the opportunity for it when they were younger.

There are plenty of them because the drop-out at successive stages of the educational process is alarming. These figures from Africa show some pretty dismal survival rates to the last primary grade and low gross enrolment rates in secondary in the sub-Saharan region. This cohort study shows the same thing. 93 out of a hundred children enter primary school but only 12 complete senior secondary educations.

In discussing all these contextual issues with World Bank colleagues the key question that emerged was: who is open schooling really for?

Some of the sub-questions were: first, is this really an alternative to secondary schooling for most children if the main age range in the open schools in Namibia is 15-15? Second, is this an alternative choice or the only choice for those who enrol in open schools? Third, are youngsters in open schools an elite - not in the sense that they are rich, because most are not - but because they are unusually talented, not least in having unusual motivation and capacity for self organisation.

People at the World Bank, in development agencies and in governments generally, tend to have very conservative habits when they think about schooling. If we are to convince them to take open schooling seriously we need to be clear about what it can do and also what it cannot do.

What is open schooling?

So much for the context: what can open schooling do to help meet the challenge? First, what exactly is open schooling? When I read your handbook I shall have a complete answer, but here is what I told our colleagues at the World Bank.

The features of open schooling are: the physical separation of learner from the teacher for much of the time; the use of unconventional teaching methodologies and information and communications technologies (ICTs); and in general a flexible approach. We call it open schooling rather than open and distance schooling because openness and flexibility are more important features than physical separation.

In the context that I have just described open schooling is a response to the rapidly increasing demand for secondary education, both as an end itself and as a route to tertiary education, because it can be conducted at scale and cost-effectively. Its flexibility also makes it suitable for young adults who need further schooling but either cannot, or do not wish to return to the conventional classroom.

How is open schooling conducted? It uses self-instructional materials and, indeed, the preparation of such materials also furnishes an asset to the conventional school system, which in developing countries is usually short of learning materials. Students get local personal support at study centres, which at secondary school level are relatively more important than they might be in distance education at tertiary level.

Organising the networks of study centres provides opportunities for partnerships with other state networks or with NGOs with a special interest in children and young adults. Finally, there is the opportunity to operate at scale and to use new information and communication technologies as they become locally available.

When I spoke at the World Bank most of the questions after my talk were about the study centres. How often do the learners go there? What do they do there? What kind of staff works in them?

These questions pressed me to the limit of my knowledge of the day-to-day reality of open schooling, Next time I am in India or Namibia I shall ask to visit one or more open school study centres and see for myself. Meanwhile, if I have to speak on open schooling before that happens, I shall be able to rely on your handbook to improve my knowledge. I am sure that you will address these questions head on.

The development of open schooling

Before moving on to the examples of India and Namibia, let me remind you briefly about how open schooling developed. First, this is not a new phenomenon. Open schooling by correspondence goes back a hundred years in the industrialised world and nearly 50 years in Africa.

This also applies to the use of technology. School radio began 75 years ago in Britain, the Australian School of the Air is half a century old and projects using technology for schooling in Africa have a similar history. Some of these projects aim to enrich the classroom experience rather than create a substitute for it, but as I noted, flexibility and complementarity with the conventional system are an important feature of open schooling. Note also that some open schools operate at very considerable scale which is, of course, an element of cost-effectiveness where it can be achieved.

There are various organisational models of open schools - and sometimes one evolves into another, as in the case of Namibia and India. Some are independent, some are branches of open universities, some are run by central ministries of education and some by school boards. This is another element of flexibility for policy makers.

A study of two open schools

Let me turn now to the COL study, which looked at the open schools in India and Namibia. I express our warm thanks to the heads of NIOS in India and NAMCOL in Namibia for their generous collaboration with this project.

The National Institute of Open Schooling, formerly the National Open School, is headquartered in Delhi with regional centres in 11 cities and a presence in Nepal, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Study centres are provided by 3,000 accredited institutions which register students, supply study materials, provide tutorial support, handle assignments, hold exams and distribute certificates.

NAMCOL, the Namibian College of Open Learning is headquartered in Windhoek and HQs in Windhoek has 110 study centres in the country's 13 political regions as well as two computer-based learning centres in Windhoek & Ongewediva. It accounts for some 18% of the secondary school population and a much

higher proportion at senior secondary. At Junior Secondary Certificate level NAMCOL's contribution is 11%, while at Senior Secondary it is 49% (pg 179). Most of its students are female.

This chart shows some comparative statistics for the two institutions, the gaps in the table remind us that there has been little research on open schools. Nevertheless, even with the gaps you can see that these are significant operations in terms of their numbers.

These figures for the enrolments in India show that the focus is mainly on academic programmes although at the moment much more emphasis is being placed on developing vocational programming. The figures for Namibia show, as I just observed, that NAMCOL plays a very significant role at senior secondary, where 48% of the senior secondary students who sit their end-of school examinations are enrolled at NAMCOL.

Comparing the learner profiles reveals both similarities and differences. Both institutions recruit students in the age range 15-25 but the gender balance of one is the mirror image of the other. Few NAMCOL students have paid work, but a significant minority is involved in other educational courses.

Effectiveness, costs and efficiency

This chart shows that NAMCOL's results are pretty good, with around 90% of students who complete most of the course getting grades. Looking at it the other way around and adding up drop-outs and incompletes gives an attrition that varies around 20%, which is good for this kind of education.

With these figures in mind the cost per student at NAMCOL is very attractive at about 20% of the cost in the formal system. Perhaps reflecting on the scale of NIOS, the figures in India are even more impressive. Unit costs are less than 10% of those of the conventional central schools.

The effectiveness of NIOS is also good. Taking a snap shot of four sittings in 2005/6, the majority of the conventional Boards have a throughput at Secondary Level that averages between 40-60%, while NIOS has a throughput of **58%.** At Senior Secondary level the majority of the Boards have a throughput between 60-80% while the figure for NIOS is **61%.**

Implications for policy and action

Let me highlight some of the implications. As I said earlier, open schooling is an area crying out for more research and better documentation. The problem is not just the poor data on open schools, but the poor data on secondary school systems generally, which make comparisons of outcomes very difficult. It is equally important to document the phenomenon of open schooling in an objective way. That is what you will be engaged in this week as you prepare your handbook.

It is vital work because in the real world we often have to make decisions without all the research data that we might like. Our study shows that open schooling can address the challenges of increased demand and reach out to diverse target groups: from older secondary-school-age children to young adults. Your handbook will show how this can be done by describing good practice.

Open schooling is significantly more cost-efficient than formal education and can have high retention rates approaching 90%. Moreover the production of learning materials in print, audio, CD-ROMS and video creates an asset for the whole school system not just the open school. This is very important, especially with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, because where countries cannot afford substitute teachers the use of distance learning material is an excellent way not to disrupt the learning process.

In the category of weaknesses, the principal area needing attention is learner support. In fact, open schooling shares this imperative with open and distance learning at all levels. For example, COL has just completed a study of tertiary level open and distance education in Papua New Guinea, which also reached the conclusion that improving student support was the key priority for improving the system.

In terms of its impact, open schooling is a powerful way of addressing issues of equity and social justice since it can bring the formerly excluded into the schooling system. It is also a vehicle for ramping up the proportion of technical and vocational education and training in the school system as a whole and for fostering innovation generally. For example, it is the open schools that have pioneered the idea of exams on demand at the secondary level.

Lessons of the study

What lessons does the study teach us?

First it shows that political will is necessary to make open schooling an integral part of a national education system and that this political will needs to express itself in the form of enabling policy and planning. Open schooling is a system that derives its benefits from scale. It cannot be improvised on the back of an envelope as a small pilot project. It follows that adequate human, financial and technical resources are critical to success and need to be planned. The economic model is that a higher upfront investment pays off in lower operating costs once the system is running.

Next, just as tertiary institutions embarking on open and distance learning need to train their staff to operate a different pedagogy and teaching/learning system, so staff from conventional schools must be trained in the special requirements of open schooling. Your handbook will be a major asset in that process. Much of COL's work with NIOS has been in support of training for its many thousands of tutors and facilitators. Learner support is the area of open schooling where attention to improvement is most needed. Indeed, open schooling shares this imperative with open and distance learning at all levels. Investment in learner support should be approached from the angle of staff development.

Finally - and this is really a great opportunity - creating an open school provides an opportunity for partnerships with a range of local governmental and non-governmental bodies. These can be true win-win affairs. The open school acquires a regional and local network of centres while the local bodies are enabled to provide more extensive services to the youngsters that they are caring for.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth of Learning will continue to make the promotion and support of open schooling a key plank of its work. That is why you are here this week. We are also supporting the development of

open educational resources for use in open schools. But COL is a tiny agency. The purpose of my visit to the World Bank, and of commissioning this study of NIOS and NAMCOL, was to encourage those who formulate development policy to take open schooling seriously as a way of expanding secondary education.

This is not just a matter of supporting new open school projects. Many African countries, such as Malawi, Zambia, Kenya and Tanzania have had forms of open schooling for years but they have tended to operate in a grey zone below the radar. Were the World Bank and other agencies to encourage governments to give open schooling a larger place in their secondary education policy considerable benefits could flow without large expenditures of funds.

I wish you well in the important work you are undertaking. I hope that your handbook will encourage politicians and officials to proceed with confidence in using open schooling to scale up for the secondary surge.