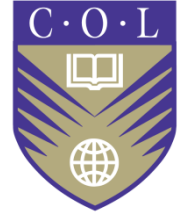


Open and Distance Learning (ODL): an Imperative for Bangladesh



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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be back at the Bangladesh Open University. I was last here in May 2005. A lot has changed in four years and I am delighted to have the opportunity to address you again. I have prepared these remarks with COL's Vice-President, Professor Asha Kanwar.

The Vice-Chancellor has asked us to inspire you with our thoughts about Open and Distance Learning in Bangladesh. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder and inspiration is in the mind of the listener so only you can decide whether what we have to say is inspiring. However, let us lay out a menu for these remarks.

We have entitled these remarks *Open and Distance Learning (ODL): An imperative for Bangladesh*. That title implies that we start from the assumption that it is vital for Bangladesh to make use of ODL if you are to achieve your national goals for education, training and learning generally.

Our remarks will be in four parts. First, we shall examine the contribution that technology can make to education and propose the aims that we should pursue through distance learning. Second we shall comment on the development of distance learning in higher education. Third, we shall explore the use of ODL at the secondary level through Open Schools and argue that this should now be a major priority for BOU. Finally, we shall update you on the Commonwealth of Learning and suggest how we might help you.

The Technological Revolution in Education

So let us start with technology and education. Form follows function; we should define ends before means. So what is the public, through its governments, trying to achieve in education?

Ministers of Education will tell you that the challenge they face is to pursue three goals simultaneously.

They want to widen access so that education and training can be available to all citizens that aspire to it.

In Bangladesh, despite your valiant efforts, many citizens are not achieving their aspirations for education at all levels.

Second, that education must be of good quality. There is no point in widening access unless education makes a difference to people's thinking and their lives.

Third, the cost must be as low as possible. Governments and individuals never have enough money. It is wrong to make education more expensive than necessary, because low cost will enable more people to take advantage of it.

So governments and the public want three outcomes from their higher education systems:

- Access: to be as wide as possible
- Quality: to be as high as possible
- Cost: to be as low as possible

The nature of the challenge is clear when you create a triangle of vectors.

With traditional methods of face-to-face teaching this is an iron triangle. You want to stretch the triangle like this to give greater access, higher quality and lower costs.

But you can't!

Try extending access by packing more students into each classroom and you will be accused of damaging quality. Try improving quality with better learning resources and the cost will go up. Try cutting costs and you will endanger both access and quality.

This iron triangle has hindered the expansion of education throughout history. It has created in the public mind – and probably in your own thinking – an insidious link between quality and exclusivity. This link still drives the admission policies of many universities, which define their quality by the people they exclude.

But today there is good news. Thanks to globalisation successive waves of technology are sweeping the world – and technology can transform the iron triangle into a flexible triangle.

By using technology you can achieve wider access, higher quality and lower cost *all at the same time*. This is a revolution – it has never happened before. This is the profound meaning of the campaign for digital Bangladesh.

But how does it work? The fundamental principles of technology, articulated two centuries ago by the economist Adam Smith, are division of labour, specialisation, economies of scale, and the use of machines and communications media.

ODL in Higher Education

Let us illustrate this in our second section, ODL in higher education. These principles have been applied successfully to higher education by the distance teaching institutions, often called open universities. The UK Open University is an institution that has stretched the iron triangle. With over 200,000 students and over a million alumni it has substantially widened access.

It is also distinguished by its quality. In the final year of operation of England's Teaching Quality Assessment system the Open University placed 5th out of 100 universities. For each of the last three years it has also topped government surveys of student satisfaction in all English universities.

Furthermore, the Open University operates at lower costs per student or per graduate than conventional universities.

Not surprisingly, therefore, distance teaching universities have become a global phenomenon. These two slides show how the number of open universities in Commonwealth countries has increased over 20 years.

South Asia has a strong concentration of open universities that form a natural affinity group despite political differences between the countries. India's Indira Gandhi National Open University, Pakistan's Allama Iqbal Open University and your Open University in Bangladesh have more in common with each other than either has with the conventional universities in its own country. You each enrol large numbers of students, each of you teaches nationwide, each uses similar technologies, and each costs very little to the public purse. Like you the Allama Iqbal Open University also runs a large open school.

You should be inspired by the success of other open universities. You probably feel that the people of Bangladesh see ODL as a second-class form of education – they are still locked into the idea that quality must mean exclusivity. But take heart. It takes time to build a good reputation for a new approach like ODL but the example of the UKOU shows it can be done. Do good work and your reputation will grow.

On the negative side remember that while it takes time to achieve credibility it can be lost very quickly if you let your quality slip. In ODL quality means giving students a good experience by supporting them. That doesn't mean that you have to add more and more personal contact and tutoring to your system, but it does mean that you have to put the student at the centre of your thinking.

Open Schooling

We now move to our third section: Open Schooling: This is going to be our longest section because we believe that for you at BOU open schooling is as important, indeed probably more important, for Bangladesh than your university programmes, not just in student numbers but for national development. Do your priorities reflect that?

I am here for a diploma ceremony on youth in development. So let's focus on youth.

Expanding secondary education is now the key educational priority for many developing countries. In a time of economic difficulty countries need to spend money efficiently. Sadly, in many countries secondary education is not at all efficient. The expansion of open schooling is a key part of the answer.

But we are not proposing the creation and expansion of open schools as a separate and distinct element within national school systems. Open schools should be seen as catalysts for integrating all elements of schooling with communities, teacher education programmes and open universities into an educational ecosystem fit for the 21st century.

Let's start with some context.

Striving for Education for All

For twenty years a major aim of international development has been to achieve Universal Primary Education. Not all countries will make it by the target date of 2015 but great progress is being made. Between 1999 and 2006 the number of children attending primary school increased by 40 million. Many of those are in Bangladesh, where you have made tremendous progress.

But the very success of the drive for Universal Primary Education is generating a huge surge of children and young adults (estimates range from 200 to 400 million) who seek to continue to secondary education. Some children, like these are well catered for.

But most of the coming generation is not so lucky. Bangladesh is a perfect example.

It will simply not be possible to accommodate such numbers through the conventional provision of secondary schooling, skills training and adult education. Governments must encourage alternative approaches and foster providers that can deliver quality learning at scale with low costs. As well as extending conventional public school systems, governments should encourage the expansion of private schooling for the poor, draw lessons from projects involving ICT, and give special priority to expanding open schooling.

We think that BOU is tremendously fortunate to be involved in open schooling already.

Developing and expanding open schooling are particularly promising alternatives that can also be integrated with other approaches to make them more cost-effective and cost-efficient. An integrated approach also holds the promise of providing education that is better adapted to the needs of the 21st century.

It can blur the unhelpful distinction between formal and non-formal education; build a bridge between knowledge acquisition and skills development; and has the potential to reduce the inequalities of access that blight conventional provision in most countries.

Very importantly, open schooling is less expensive than conventional schooling and the cost differential

is increasing. This is a key point because the expansion of conventional public schooling at the secondary level faces major challenges of both cost and effectiveness in developing countries.

Professor Keith Lewin's research shows that if unit costs at secondary level are more than twice those at primary level, a country will never achieve universal secondary education. In most developing countries the difference is far greater than that. I don't know what it is in Bangladesh, but in most African countries the unit costs of secondary education are from three to six times as much as the unit costs of primary education.

Moreover, despite this high expenditure, in some countries public sector schooling is losing credibility – and often pupils – as parents choose alternatives to schools plagued by decrepit facilities, uncommitted or absent teachers and a general lack of accountability.

Many assume that information and communications technologies can expand quality education cost-effectively.

The essential challenge, which all of you at the Bangladesh Open University know well, is to develop learning systems that: a) can be conducted at scale; b) are inexpensive; c) deliver acceptable quality consistently; and d) can be adapted to diverse needs. You use technology to scale up schooling by combining division of labour with specialisation and appropriate equipment.

In large scale distance learning systems specialisation and the division of labour are usually identified with three sub-systems: administration and logistics; course materials development and student support. Open schooling carries these principles over into secondary schooling. The Bangladesh Open University has the advantage of using these principles in both higher and secondary education and should be able to achieve some economies and qualities of scale.

Open Schools and Mega-Schools

Fifteen years ago I coined the term 'mega-university' for large distance-teaching universities and set the threshold at 100,000 active students.

The number and size of mega-universities has expanded significantly since I invented the word. Secondary schools are usually much smaller than universities, so in a new book we define a mega-school as an open school with more than 10,000 active pupils. In the school sector this is an indication of useful scale, even though some open schools like yours in high population countries have much larger enrolments, exceeding a million in the cases of India and Indonesia. But even small countries can have mega-schools.

The total population of Namibia is only 2 million, yet the 28,000 secondary students in the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) account for 40% of the country's secondary enrolment.

Open Schools: Ends and Means

Most open schools carry out the three functions of administration and logistics, course materials development, and student support in much the same manner, even where they use different technologies.

But differences between the world's open schools appear when we examine the ends that they pursue through these means. Open schools can achieve various purposes and you should be clear what your purpose is.

The term 'open' may designate different types of openness when used in the term 'open school'. Admission may be decided on exactly the same criteria as the conventional schools or it may be more liberal. The curriculum may be exactly the same as in the conventional system, or more specifically adapted to the clientele.

Given the unhappiness with conventional secondary school curricula in many countries, open schools present the opportunity to do something different. Too often the regular curriculum is geared to preparing a small proportion of pupils for access to tertiary education, rather than giving the majority a basis for lives and livelihoods in the 21st century. Because open schools usually reach out to those who do not have ready access to a conventional school they may serve them better by offering something different from the conventional curriculum. Everyone I have talked to in your government in the last two days has stressed the importance of vocational education and life skills training.

Which Model: Complimentary, Alternative or Integrative?

We can distinguish between three models of open schooling: complementary, alternative and integrative.

Complementary open schools

Complementary open schools offer the same curriculum as the conventional schools to children who never had a chance to attend a regular school or had to drop out because their grades were too poor. The open schools in France, Botswana, Namibia, Indonesia, and Mexico are complementary open schools. Would you put your Open School in this category?

What are the challenges facing complementary open schools? How can they improve their performance and contribute more fully to their national education systems?

We believe the answer is a combination of closer integration with the wider educational system accompanied by greater autonomy in governance and management – an advantage that you already have at BOU.

Closer integration – or at least better communication with ministries of education – is particularly desirable in the area of curriculum. By definition, complementary open schools teach to the national curriculum. But since good distance learning courses require significant lead times and investment to

develop and produce, governments should involve their open schools in all curriculum revision processes from the earliest stages.

Complementary open schools must do everything possible to improve the performance of their pupils. Since they teach to the same examinations as the conventional schools, the performance of the two systems can be compared directly. Open schools must continue to gain credibility by showing good results even though – or especially because – their pupils have a background of educational disadvantage.

Alternative open schools

Alternative open schools may cater to some of the same children as complementary open schools but they also aim to engage older youths and adults by offering programmes that are more vocationally oriented and have a greater focus on life skills. NIOS in India, the Papua New Guinea Open College and, to some extent, Indonesia's Open School can be considered as alternative open schools although they have very different national contexts, mandates and governance structures. You have the opportunity to become an alternative open school.

Alternative systems that break new curricular ground are steadily becoming more attractive in comparison to complementary systems that simply extend the conventional programme at a distance. How far should the system aim to produce the same results as the conventional secondary schools? Parents and students want credible certification for study.

The good news is that both India's NIOS and the PNG Open College have shown that programmes that focus on life skills and work-oriented content are attractive to students and their parents. In these two cases the institutions provide their own certification, which is accepted at par with certification from the conventional system by employers and tertiary institutions.

The alternative open schools can claim considerable success. NIOS is not only drawing many school-age youth into its alternative route (74% of its secondary students are aged 15 to 20) but also has achieved parity of enrolment between male and female students in its vocational courses. To the extent that these young women see a greater sense and purpose in education that promises economic independence and a better life, NIOS is acting as an important agent of social change.

We urge you to give the BOU Open School more of the quality of an alternative open school. For us, BOU's top priority should be to offer a complete programme of open schooling by working with the Bureau of Non-Formal Education and CAMPE to develop a programme at grades 4 and 5 so that young people can go right through from grade 3 to the JSC and the SSC. COL is there to help you.

Indeed, we hope that BOU will aim to make its Open School an integrative open school that plays a central role in the development of education in Bangladesh, pioneering in the areas of vocational education and showing the way to make digital Bangladesh a reality in the school system and in non-formal education.

Integrative open schools

Integrative open schools are placed at the heart of the whole school system in order to improve and strengthen the quality and reach of that system, to be a source of innovation, and to act as a catalyst for reform.

For most educational authorities the pressing issue is to make the conventional system more effective and improve its quality. How can open schooling help? UNESCO conducted a thorough review of what makes for effectiveness and quality in schooling (UNESCO, 2004).

From this we can construct a list of desirable features that might be obtained more readily by having an open school as a resource for the whole school system:

- good learning materials
- focus on the curriculum
- regular, reliable, and timely assessment of learning
- pedagogical materials for teachers
- relevant content
- teaching of reading and writing
- structured teaching: direct instruction, guided practice and independent learning
- appropriate language of instruction
- larger classes if accompanied by better inputs (assistants, materials, etc.).

Open schools can help national schools systems with many of the items on this list. Having a source of good learning and assessment materials is a particularly important foundation of effectiveness that supports other elements of quality, such as focus on the curriculum and pedagogical materials for teachers.

Today learning materials can be produced and shared in a very modern way as open educational resources and, more generally open schools can be a haven for the entire school system. COL is helping countries collaborate in the production of learning materials.

The Collaborative Creation of Learning Materials

Two developments have made the learning materials produced by open schools potentially even more useful to the wider school system.

First, most learning materials are now developed in digital formats, even though they may eventually reach students in the form of printed materials. Holding materials electronically has three advantages: they are easy to move around; they can readily be adapted and revised; and they can be converted to eLearning formats when online learning becomes a possibility.

Second, there is a growing movement, inspired by the ideal that knowledge is the common wealth of humankind, to create a global intellectual commons in which learning materials are shared. This

movement involves many thousands of teachers, at all levels, creating open educational resources (OERs).

COL now has a programme that combines the professional development of teachers with the development of OERs. 20 sets of self-instructional learning materials on the secondary curriculum will be produced in six developing countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia.

This material will be suitable for use in both open and conventional schools and will permit open schools to offer current and new subjects through print and online teaching.

The Commonwealth of Learning

Let us conclude with some brief words about the Commonwealth of Learning and its programme. We are an intergovernmental body that is there to help you.

COL's mission is to help you promote learning for development, both through formal education systems and more informally. So today's question is how can COL best serve Bangladesh in general and the Bangladesh Open University in particular.

COL is an intergovernmental body created by the Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 to help countries use technology for learning.

We are a small organisation with a total of 40 staff but we multiply our impact by having networks of partners across the Commonwealth and focal points in each country. Your focal point is Mr Md. Nazrul Islam Khan, PS in the Prime Minister's Office.

We have our main office in Vancouver and a small unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, which some of you will know well. Its Director, Dr Sreedher is your Contact Person at COL.

COL is funded by voluntary contributions from Commonwealth governments. The six major donors have ex officio seats on the Board but we receive funds from 40 countries and we are grateful for the ongoing support from Bangladesh.

In return for this support we are proud to be active across the Commonwealth. Every three years we report to each Member State on what COL has done in their country. This book, containing reports for all 53 Commonwealth countries, was made available to Ministers of Education at their meeting in Kuala Lumpur in June. At that meeting the Ministers also approved our Plan for the period 2009-2012.

Our task now, and one of my aims in coming to BOU, is to translate that overall plan into country action plans for each country.

In order to help you see where our expertise and your needs might coincide, we shall conclude by taking

you briefly through the programme. We have two sectors, each with four initiatives.

The aim of the Education Sector is to support the development of the formal education system: we do this in four areas.

First is Open Schooling, which is a very important area where we can work together. This initiative is led by Frances Ferreira, who was previously Director of the Namibian College of Open Learning for a decade.

The second area is Teacher Education, another vital area for the achievement of Education for All, led by Dr Abdurrahman Umar, who was formerly Academic Director of the National Teachers' Institute in Nigeria, one of the world's largest trainers of teachers at a distance.

Then we assist with Higher Education through Willie Clarke-Okah, a Nigerian-Canadian formerly with Canadian CIDA. He has a particular focus on quality assurance and also looks after the CEMBA/CEMPA programme of which BOU is a member. We expect some of you took part in the international workshop on the development of case studies that was held here at BOU last month. Thank you for hosting that very successful event.

In this Plan we are going to create a number of COL chairs in ODL. We should be very pleased to receive a request for a Chair from BOU. As with the UNESCO Chairs, you pay the salary and support costs and COL allocates funds to finance the research or capacity building that the Chair may undertake.

Finally, in the Education Sector we note the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This is not a new institution but a collaborative network for course development of the 32 small states of the Commonwealth. The products of their work are freely available to you too, as Open Educational Resources. This is facilitated at COL by Paul West from South Africa and John Lesperance from Seychelles.

Our other sector, Livelihoods and Health, is perhaps of more interest to the Non-Governmental Organisations that are so active in Bangladesh, but let us just enumerate the activities.

Work on Skills Development by informal means is led by Alison Mead Richardson who has recently joined us from the UK and southern Africa.

One important facet of skills development is our Learning for Farming programme under Dr Balasubramanian from India. This a programme that was developed in India and is now being rolled out in Sri Lanka and other countries. The aim is to increase the prosperity of farmers and villages by enabling them to farm better or differently based on their own vision of a better future.

Our Canadian colleague Ian Pringle, who has worked a lot in your part of the world, is helping people to use their community radio and other media for health education.

Finally, for our colleagues in Vancouver, Trudi van Wyk has recently joined us from South Africa to address the strong demand we get from all over the Commonwealth for capacity building in eLearning.

We must also mention our CEMCA unit in New Delhi, which is well known to some of you. The Director, Ramamurthy Sreedher and his team are also doing exciting work in community radio and developing some very inexpensive and powerful learning technologies by putting together hardware and software in new ways.

Next: a Country Action Plan

That gives you our menu of activities. As I said, the task now, which is being managed by our Vice-President, Professor Asha Kanwar, who is from India, is to translate it into a country action plan for Bangladesh. We don't expect you to order all of the eight dishes on the menu, but we are eager to know which of these initiatives are most relevant to your needs.

To conclude let us remind you that COL works for you. We believe that we bring to the table a lot of expertise and successful models of learning for development.

We invite you to dialogue with us, during my visit and afterwards, so that we can develop the country action plan for Bangladesh. Thank you for supporting COL financially. We are your organisation.

Thank you for listening.