Institutional Imperatives and Alternatives for Open Schooling: autonomy, accountability, quality and sustainability

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PART1. AN INTERNATIONAL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
Introduction

50 years ago, Michael Young set up the National Extension College (NEC) in Britain as a 'pilot project for an Open University'. He was a social reformer with a lifelong commitment to education for all whenever and wherever they needed it. He noted the potential of the broadcasting media, as well as the unreformed methods of correspondence courses, to provide learning on a part-time basis, using existing educational facilities. The idea of an Open University was taken up by the incoming Labour Government in Britain and became a fact in 1969, perhaps the most significant educational fact of the mid 20th century. This is often seen as a sea-change in the development of open and distance learning. Its example was followed in many other countries over the next few decades, both in the industrialised world and in less developed countries.

Some of the earliest experiments in modern distance education, however, were at secondary education level. Pitman in the UK in 1843 and Hermods in Sweden in 1898 started to enable students not able to continue in their schools, to further their studies through an exchange of letters, containing educational guidance and exercises, between teachers and students, which became known as 'correspondence education' or '*Brevskolan*' in Swedish.

By early 20th century correspondence education was widespread in Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand. In much of Europe, including Britain, it was mainly in the hands of private institutions. Several of these colleges saw an expanding market in the African colonies as they emerged into independence. Their quality, however, and the relevance of their courses, not being subject to rigorous quality control, was often quite poor. The NEC was an attempt to put student needs at the centre of such developments

In Australia and New Zealand, these were set up under government control. In France also, in response to the Second World War and the evacuation of thousands of children from the place of their school, the Ministry of Education established the Centre National d' Enseignement par Correspondence (CNEPC). It was run by government and was closely monitored to ensure equivalent quality of education to that in the formal system. In 1959 it changed its name to Centre National de Tele-Enseignement (CNTE) recognising its introduction of other media to support the correspondence courses..

During the 1960s correspondence colleges were set up, mainly by Ministries of Education, in several developing countries. In India in 1965 several State Boards of Secondary Education recommended the use of correspondence courses to improve the academic standards of education offered to private students which led eventually, in 1979, to the establishment of an Open School by the Central Board of Secondary Education, with bridging courses to enable students, who had dropped out of school before qualifying for entry into secondary education, to qualify to do so externally. (Singh 1992). Initially it was funded and managed by the CBSE. It was taken over in 1984 by the national Ministry of Human Resource Development as a semi-autonomous institution (Dewal 1990).

Simultaneously, several experiments in correspondence education were launched by the new governments of independent Africa where educational expansion was a top priority. In Zambia and in Malawi, in 1964 and 1965 respectively, national Correspondence Schools were set up by their Ministries of Education. By 1975 similar programmes existed in several other African countries, including Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritius, Swaziland, Tanzania and Uganda, sometimes as part of the Ministry of Education, sometimes attached tenuously to adult education departments of universities. Initially the target audiences were adults who unable to complete their secondary education when of school age but now needing qualifications for career advancement. As economic problems hit in the mid eighties, resources for education were severely limited. Such unconventional approaches suffered first; their quality declined. As countries expanded their primary school enrolment, however, huge numbers of primary school leavers were unable to find places at the limited number of secondary schools. Correspondence was seen as a cheap answer, but the extra resources needed for this new target audience were not forthcoming. Completion and success rates dropped dramatically and teachers who had been co-opted to run them, from the formal

school system, usually with little or no specialised training, were only too keen to return to 'mainstream' education so as not to be sidelined in career terms. If they were unable to do so, their commitment and motivation dropped too.

By the mid 1980s and early 1990s the concern for quality in correspondence education distance and open learning was growing. This was partly in response to the evidence being produced by the Open Universities spreading around the world that ODL could provide high quality learning if properly managed. This in turn led to a re-examination of the most appropriate forms of governance and financing which could combine the autonomy to experiment and innovate with accountability to ensure proper quality assurance and control mechanisms were in place. The issue of sustainability of such new and improved institutions also became crucial and related to both scale of operation and sources of funding, especially for educationally disadvantaged groups in any society.

In Africa, it was also being recognised (Murphy & Zhiri, 1992) that 'secondary education organisations need autonomy with regard to staffing, finance and decision taking' and initial government financial support for start-up. Within a decade, in 1997 the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) and in 1998 the, Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL)were set up as autonomous institutions directed by Boards of Governors under the auspices of their Ministries of Education. Both emerged from previous government departments. That pattern has not, however, been widely followed elsewhere, to the detriment of those institutions still largely run as traditional secondary schools by Education Departments.

Elsewhere, Open Schools have been developed by national Open Universities, as in the Bangladesh Open University (BOU). A similar example is the subject of the case study which forms the second part of this paper, an Open School in the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) of Pakistan.

At least four models of governance for open schools have emerged, then, over the last 50 years. These are: government institutions, semi-autonomous parastatal institutions, specialist units of universities and non-government independent institutions. In the next section we will look at the four issues raised in the title to our paper: autonomy, accountability, quality and sustainability.

Autonomy

History suggests that autonomy in management is essential to successful open learning for two reasons. First, the philosophical underpinning of ODL has traditionally been the urgency of finding the means to offer educational opportunities to members of society now, or in the past, excluded from such opportunities. Secondly, such provision requires innovation and experimentation in educational and technological design. Any expectation of conformity to traditional educational design, or even curricula, can obstruct such innovation and the organisation's ability to reach out to disadvantaged audiences.

Accountability

Such a body, however autonomous, must be accountable to the public, through legislation establishing a board of independent governors or trustees, to whom, both financially and in terms of policy, the management team is responsible.

Such accountability can be difficult to establish in entirely non-government private institutions such as the NEC quoted above. The history of private commercial correspondence colleges bears this out. Accountability can be assured, however, if the organisations are legally registered as charitable, not-for-profit, agencies under the countries' charity legislation and if they have governing boards which are cognisant of national educational standards and priorities.

Quality

A persistent problem ODL facing institutions is the perception that ODL is second rate education and does not measure up to the quality of traditional institutions. That perception was often justified in the past when ODL institutions were not subject to the same quality controls as their face-to-face equivalents. Proving that ODL could provide just as good an education as traditional institutions, sometimes even better, was a major concern of the Open Universities. This has now, mainly, been achieved: Open University graduates are accepted in Britain, India and Pakistan, for example, as being as well qualified for work or for further

degrees as more traditional graduates. There is still some way to go for this parity of quality recognition at pre-tertiary level.

Two crucial considerations affect quality. First their educational and management staff need skills not necessarily found in traditional teachers: the ability to work with educational-technology-facilitated materials and student support mechanisms and administrative and organisational innovativeness. These special aptitudes must be the criteria for the selection and promotion of staff in ODL. Secondly quality must be fitness for purpose. Over the years, ODL has become increasingly a means of providing education to out-of-school, including disabled students. They are often children and need a much more structured learning environment than adults. Open schools must provide appropriate learning conditions as well as curricula to meet these needs, including the provision of much more regular face-to-face tutorial support even if such support entails extra cost and many such learners will not be able to pay for it.

There have been vast changes recently in the potential of new technologies to facilitate learning at-a-distance. Open Schools must remain innovative. However, caution must be exercised in their introduction, as in many situations Open School students are the last people to get access to them The continued use of older, more accessible media, such as print, radio and audio, remains necessary. They must always use technologies to which their students have access.

Sustainability

Successful open schooling, then, especially for the social groups most in need of its services, is not necessarily cheap. Open Schools need to be confidant they can raise sufficient funds on an on-going basis both to develop the courses they are committed to provide and to afford to include the flexible, often expensive student support services their target audiences require. The examples we have quoted, NIOS, BOCODOL and NAMCOL, have reached funding formula with their governments, supporting their initial development and then on a calculated per-student formula. This seems the ideal way of allowing such institutions to have security of funding to achieve their expressed goals.

Achieving such funding security is obviously much more difficult for fully independent charitable agencies such as the NEC. The history of such bodies is full of intermittent funding crises. They depend on being able to raise enough funds from student fees, or on raising grants-in-aid from governments (NEC has only managed this twice in its 50 years!) or international donors. A negotiated recognition by governments of their responsibility towards special groups, where appropriate through ODL bodies, is clearly a preferred option. For open schools within universities or Ministries, similarly guaranteed funding, independent of their other activities, is essential.

PART 2: AIOU CASE-STUDY
Introduction

Pakistan is still struggling to meet EFA and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). A number of studies indicate there are 40 to 50 million adult (10+) illiterates, 2.5 million new illiterates each year from primary school (P/S) dropouts and Primary School non-entrants, 05 million out-of-school children of primary age (UNESCO 1999-2011 figures) (3.2 million females, c. 1.8 million males). The Govt of Pakistan also reported that 02 million P/S completers not entering middle and 03 million middle school entrants not entering secondary school (Pakistan Government 2008), 2009). But the most crucial and alarming situation is dropout which is about 50% of the enrolment. As the output of expanded formal primary schools grows in response to commitments to EFA, the pressure for middle and secondary school provision grows far beyond Pakistan's formal school capacity to meet it. At the same time, there are large gaps in the provision of basic education to yesterday's children, now adolescent and adult, who were unable to find places in formal schools when they were children. All these factors apply even more dramatically to girls and women. In the light of Pakistan's commitment to EFA and the MDGs, it is recognised that a large-scale open school programme is urgently needed.

AIOU's previous involvement in pre-tertiary programmes

From its foundation, AIOU has run experimental projects aimed at people, both adults and young people, in rural areas who have been deprived of opportunities to follow and/or

complete their formal schooling at primary and secondary level. These have included pre-literacy functional education for adults, basic education programmes for young people and adults, middle education programmes and matriculation programmes for women and girls. These have pioneered and tested innovative methods, learning materials and media as well as organisational and learner support structures for their specialised audiences. They have achieved considerable and documented success. They have not to date been rolled out to scale throughout the country. In 2006 AIOU commissioned a feasibility study and implementation plan to set up an open schooling institution within the university to extend these experiments nationwide, to more levels and for more audiences. The study was completed early in 2012. It concluded that there was clearly a recognised national need for such a programme, and that AIOU was an appropriate institution to take such an initiative.

AIOU's capacity to take the initiative
AIOU is the leading Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provider in Pakistan. It is the second oldest Open University in the world, established in 1974. It now has well-established professional, technical and administrative structures and capacities for the development and delivery as well as the assessment of open and distance learning courses and has the potential for expansion. It also has a commitment, through its charter, to the development of mass education and long experience of developing courses using open learning methods for that purpose. These courses have benefitted from accreditation and recognition through the University. AIOU, therefore, is the most appropriate national institution to undertake this initiative. The report summarised below proposed an immediate plan of action, to be implemented over a three year period.

Autonomy and accountability: proposed governance structure within AIOU
It is proposed that AIOU create a dedicated National Open Schooling Institute possible named the National Open School Institute for Lifelong Learning (NOSILL**)** to launch this initiative**, by** transforming the existing Bureau of University Extension and Special Programmes (BUESP) absorbing all its current programmes, staff and experience but giving it a new focus, and status. To achieve this, it is proposed that the new Institute would report directly to the VC, and have faculty status with special internal structures, governance arrangements, staffing and career development patterns not fully conforming to those of existing faculties, recognising that the new Institute combines academic, administrative and management functions at pre-tertiary level. It would be headed by an Executive Director with the rank of Professor, treated as a Dean. It would have a Board of Management, chaired by the Vice Chancellor, made up of senior AIOU officers and external members, consisting of renowned Pakistani citizens, representative of national and provincial bodies with who the Open School will be in partnership. The Chart at the end tries to capture this governance structure and status.

Quality: Fitness for purpose
- Commitment to/roles of innovation, experimentation and research
  AIOU is the leading Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provider in Pakistan. The AIOU was fully committed to NOSILL in recognition of the needs of millions of out of school children and illiterate adults. It has potential to start this new and innovative setup through experimentation and research. The proposed plan of is based on continuous experimentation and research, conducted by the regional network/setup on instructions or in-consultation with headquarters in Islamabad.
- Specialist staff requirements
  The final Chart illustrates the proposed pattern of staffing for the new/reconstructed institute. It attempts to identify the different categories of staff NOSILL will require. Some of these are already in place in BUESP. Others, particularly the academic and media/technology specialists, will need to be added. The rationale for the proposed staffing structure is that an open school programme needs a mix of staff dedicated to the programme at its core, while drawing on the part-time services of a large number and range of specialists. The core NOSILL staff will participate in the course development, delivery and supervision functions but will mainly have the roles of co-ordinating, training and leading teams in the application of their specialism to open school courses.

Open schooling staff cannot be easily equated in terms of qualifications to those of normal university faculties and departments. Their skills, experience and qualifications must relate to the activities for which they will be responsible. If AIOU is to set up an Open School institution within its present structure, these characteristics and requirements, rather than traditional academic requirements, such as research and publications, must be recognised for appointment, promotion and career structures. Otherwise, it will be unable to attract and hold the best and most appropriate staff for the work it is undertaking. NOSILL must distinguish itself by providing to all its staff, both full-time and part-time, appropriate staff development opportunities, for which they will be given recognition in promotional procedures.

- <u>Variations in patterns of and intensity of student support services</u>

The educational background and age-range of most of NOSILL's expected student body, as is common with open schools in other countries, it will be essential to provide regular contact support services, mainly, but not exclusively, on a face-to-face basis, in all the proposed pilot projects. This will necessitate the establishment of a network of study centres within easy reach of the students where intensive face-to-face support can be given, especially in the lower-level courses. None of these will be centres owned by NOSILL, but will be set up on a part-time basis, by negotiation with partners, in existing institutions such as schools, technical colleges or vocational training centres and community centres.

- <u>Proposed uses of media and technology to meet student needs</u>

AIOU's Open School must be at the cutting edge of new technology. At the same time, realism about what technology the expected students will have access to must be paramount. In the immediate future it is likely that the traditional ODL media of printed self-study materials combined with audio support and, where possible with video elements along with the regular face-to-face support of local tutors/mentors will predominate. From the outset, however, experiments should be built into courses with whatever digital technology can be economically made available to the students. Once again, research, monitoring and evaluation must be at the centre of NOSILL's methodology.

Sustainability: expectations and plans for adequate assured funding

. It is envisaged that there would be several potential sources of revenue for the new body:

a. AIOU is expected to invest funds from its own resources including money traditionally funding of BUESP's project work.

b. As the intakes of learners expand dramatically, income from student fees can be expected to form an important part of NOSILL's income.

c. As NOSILL's experience grows and as its bank of tested learning materials grows, it can be expected that these materials can be marketed publicly and will form a source of income on their own.

d. Similarly NOSILL's expertise could raise income through consultancy activities so long as these do not deflect from its main responsibilities.

e. Negotiations with Provincial Governments, now responsible for pre-tertiary education provision, will seek a fixed subvention on a per capita basis, for example, at 60% of the cost of a traditional in-school student.

'Implementation progress

AIOU has now adopted the proposal in principle. Internal discussions on structures are in progress. Grants from AIOU central fund as well as from COL have been made for new content development and capacity building of staff. The first 'Open School' centre was launched in Katharina in Gujarat in March 2013 by COL President Prof. Ashia Kanwar inaugurated. The Open School imitative is acknowledged, endorsed and accepted by the Federal and Provincial Governments; very recently the President of Pakistan and Minister for State for Education and Training said they will support this unique system of education because it is needed for Pakistan.'

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