

Open Schooling: the Next Frontier for Distance Education?



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Education?*

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Abstract

The challenge of getting all of the world's children through primary school - let alone bringing in the 400 million 12-to-17 year olds who are not in secondary school - cannot be addressed by business as usual. An important part of the answer is open schooling, which relies on the use of distance learning at scale.

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here. Thank you for having the nice idea of getting the EDEN Fellows together on this 20th anniversary. I'm sure we shall have a wonderful time reminiscing about the past and forecasting the future.

You have kindly invited me to give keynote address to the main conference on Monday and I do not want to bore you or steal my own thunder by repeating the same thing twice, so this morning I shall take a different tack.

So I am calling this talk *Open Schooling: The Next Frontier for Distance Education*. I want to immerse you for a few minutes in the global challenge that we call the campaign for Education for All.

We can date this campaign back to the world conference on education for all that convened in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, just before EDEN was created. The Jomtien meeting was convened because in 1985 some 105 million children aged between six and eleven were not in school, the majority of them girls. Forecasts suggested that the number of out-of-school children might double to 200 million by 2000. At Jomtien 155 governments and various international organisations and NGOs committed themselves to a set of targets covering education at various levels.

However, on the primary indicator of children in school, Jomtien was a failure because a decade later the number of children out of school had grown to 125 million. There were various reasons for this which I won't go into – you will recall that the 1990s were a pretty turbulent decade.

So the international community decided to hit the nail harder and convened another world forum on education for all in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. The Forum again came up with a set of targets but this time put more effective mechanisms in place for supporting countries that wanted to make progress.

As a result of this, and to cut a long story short, much faster progress was made towards Universal Primary Education in the decade from 2001 to 2010. We are not there yet, but large countries like India and Bangladesh are making big strides. Nigeria and Pakistan are the biggest remaining challenge.

Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All

These figures are the background to a book that I published last year with the title: *Mega-Schools. Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All*. Essentially the book examines the consequences of both the successes and the failures of the campaign for Universal Primary Education.

The success is that enrolment rates have increased significantly. The numbers in school have increased substantially representing a tremendous input of resources and effort by developing countries.

The flip side is the failure. Many children are still not in school. It is hard to forecast the precise numbers of primary age children who will still be out of school by 2015 – a lot depends on how fast the economic downturn ends – but the estimates range around 72 million – more than the total population of the UK and Ireland combined.

This is the starting point for the book, which addresses both the challenge of success and the challenge of failure.

The challenge of success is the secondary surge.

The challenge of failure is the need to train more teachers.

Part of the book is about expanding secondary education. The other part is about expanding teacher education.

Today I shall focus on secondary education.

My first point is that the numbers are very considerable. Up to 400 million children from 12 to 17 are not in school. Of course some children, like these, are well catered for. But others are not so lucky.

In the book I make several arguments for the importance of secondary education but the only one I shall use today is that secondary schooling is the best medium-term weapon against climate change. That is because the most powerful driver of climate change is increasing population.

Since the industrial revolution the world population has grown by a factor of seven and each human being today, on average, makes seven times greater demands on the earth's resources. That's a fifty-fold increase in humanity's impact on our planet in two centuries.

Slowing population growth is one way of limiting that demand. Women with secondary education have, on average, 1.5 fewer children than those without. A difference of one child per woman means 3 billion more or fewer people on the planet by 2050. Secondary education for girls must be a priority. Expanding secondary education is – or soon will be – the key priority for many developing countries.

Yet in a time of economic difficulty countries need to strive for greater efficiency – and in many countries secondary education is not at all efficient. Professor Keith Lewin's finds that if the unit cost of secondary education is more than double the unit cost of primary education a country will never achieve universal secondary education. Yet in many African countries the multiple is far greater than two.

Hence, I stress the importance of expanding open schooling, which is an adaptation of the methods of distance learning.

But I do not simply propose 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 into an educational ecosystem fit for the 21st century.

I shall return to that.

The key point is that it will not be possible to accommodate the secondary surge 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.

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 differential is increasing.

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 first used the word. Secondary schools are usually much smaller than universities, so in this book I 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 in high population countries much larger enrolments, exceeding a million in the cases of India, Mexico 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.

The Commonwealth of Learning promotes the concept of an integrative open school that is placed at the heart of the whole school system in order to improve 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

From this we can construct a list of desirable features that could 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 leaven for the entire school system. COL's work with the Hewlett Foundation is helping countries collaborate in the production of learning materials for senior secondary schooling.

The Collaborative Creation of Learning Materials

Open schools have to produce learning materials, usually in a variety of formats. These materials have always been useful to the conventional schools. 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, COL is part of 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).

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is supporting COL's OER work in open schools through a programme that combines the professional development of teachers with the development of OERs. 20 sets of self-instructional learning materials on the senior secondary curriculum will be completed this year 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.

Open schools can also help whole school systems implement computing. Collaborative projects in OER curriculum development can help to create locally adapted eLearning materials of quality that are always in short supply. Moreover, since open schools have to be technologically savvy to take advantage of new developments for their own students they are a natural source of expertise for wider use.

I conclude that we are seeing the beginnings of a process that will lead to much closer integration between open schooling and conventional schooling. Materials that are aimed, in the first instance, at the pupils of open school will very quickly find their way into conventional classrooms.

21st Century Educational Ecosystems

This is what I meant earlier by saying that open schools should be at the heart of 21st century educational ecosystems that bring together ministries of education, teacher education institutions, school systems and, most of all, the communities that support all of these. As I shall argue on Monday, distance education is spreading steadily throughout higher education, even if it is encountering resistance on the way.

Today I have argued that we shall see the same thing in secondary education, with the difference that whereas the developed countries have led the way in bringing distance education into campus teaching, with open schooling it is the developing countries that are taking the leadership.

Let me end there. I thank my COL colleagues Frances Ferreira and Abdurrahman Umar for inspiring me, as I wrote the book, through their work in these important areas of open schooling and teacher education.

If my remarks have sparked your interest in the global education challenge then you can always read the book.