

Open Schooling for Better Working



*Vocational Education and Training through Open Schooling:
Challenges and Future Strategies*

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Introduction

Thank you for your warm welcome. It is a pleasure to be back in Kerala again less than a year since I was here last and to be the Chief Guest at this important event. The Commonwealth of Learning is very proud of its close and lasting relationship with the National Institute for Open Schooling and delighted to collaborate in the organisation of this conference. Thank you also for the invitation to address you. These remarks have been prepared with my COL colleague Susan Phillips, who has done such a splendid job developing and nurturing the productive relationship between COL and NIOS.

Following the remarkable success of the world's open universities, which have simultaneously increased access to higher education dramatically, cut costs substantially and created benchmarks for quality, the attention of educators around the globe is now turning to open schools.

In fact, as we shall note shortly, open schools have been around much longer than open universities. However, the interest in open schooling, especially open schooling at scale, has been rekindled by the worldwide drive to achieve education for all.

At the heart of the campaign for education for all is the Millennium Development Goal of achieving

Universal Primary Education by 2015. Many countries will struggle to achieve that goal, but whatever success they do achieve will create additional demand for secondary education that most of them will not be able to satisfy by building schools.

The six goals of Education for All that were set by the world community in Dakar in 2000 go beyond Universal Primary Education. One of the Dakar goals is to ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes. That refers in part to technical and vocational education and training.

These two goals define the focus of this conference. We are interested on open schooling generally for its contribution to universal basic education, but we have a particular interest in its application to vocational education and training, three long words that spell two short words: WORK and JOBS.

In these remarks we shall start with some reflections on the history of open schooling and on its nature. We shall also recall COL's involvement with NIOS and the open schooling movement. Finally, we shall look specifically at the challenges - but also the opportunities - that vocational education and training presents to open schooling.

A Little History

Let us begin with a little history. Open schools predate open universities. More than fifty years ago, Canada, Australia and New Zealand all had government-run educational programmes which offered courses from kindergarten to Grade 12 through what we would now call distance education. Australia's School of the Air, which used radio to reach children on the remote farms in the Outback, captured the imagination of the world. These programmes were designed for particular groups such as the children living on scattered sheep farms or in families responsible for lighthouses. They also served students in small towns whose schools could not offer specialised courses for want of qualified teachers.

These open schools also served in times of crisis. When New Zealand had to shut down its whole school system because of an epidemic of measles all the children in the country studied for a period of weeks through the Correspondence School. The largest open school outside the Commonwealth, France's Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (CNED) was created to serve the thousands of French children who were evacuated from the cities at the outbreak of World War II.

These early open schools were successful. At the primary school level, pupils were tutored by their parents using high quality learning materials. At the secondary level, students were usually highly motivated learners taking the courses to satisfy requirements needed for admission to specific programmes of advanced study.

In the 1960s there were attempts to establish correspondence schools in the developing countries such as Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. With funding from richer countries some of these institutions, such as the Malawi College of Distance Education and the National Correspondence College, Zambia, were initially successful. Sadly, as development regressed, they were not sustainable. The models used

followed too closely those in the industrialised world with too little reference to local context. For example, pupils in developing countries seldom had educated parents to tutor them. The courses were often imported from richer countries with content that made little sense to the children living in a completely different environment. Moreover, even when courses were adapted to local contexts, issues such as printing costs, the price of paper, tutor availability and communications infrastructure were not taken into account in the planning process. As a result, many of these institutions failed in their mandates to successfully deliver school level education through non-conventional means.

Despite these failures, COL decided soon after its creation that the concept of open schooling was too important to be abandoned. The challenge was to implement the concept effectively. There was a hill to climb because of a legacy of distrust of schooling systems that are not based on classrooms staffed with teachers.

COL began its work in Open Schooling with the publication in 1994 of a number of case studies entitled *Open Schooling: Selected Experiences*. One of the first publications in the area of open schooling, it is still cited in research on non-conventional school level education a decade later and remains a significant contribution to the literature.

As many of you know, the publication included a study on the National Open School, whose Chairman, Professor Marmar Mukhopadhyay, was a joint editor. As well as marking COL's debut in open schooling, this was the start of a long and productive partnership with the National Open School. I am delighted that so many of the key figures in the history of the National Open School are here today, including Father Kunnakal, its founder.

The Importance of the National Institute for Open Schooling

The National Open School is a success story in the world of open and distance learning. It began as a pilot project in 1979. By 1989 demand for its services was so high that an autonomous institution, the National Open School, was established by the Government of India. Its scope and function was further expanded in 2002 when its name was changed to the National Institute of Open Schooling. Since then the success of the NIOS coupled with the demonstrable success of open universities, has begun to erode the resistance to alternative methods of schooling in developing countries.

NIOS has become a model of successful strategies. It has pushed back the boundaries and done what many claimed was impossible: making school education available through non-conventional means to hundreds of thousands of pupils. The old open schools in Africa are beginning to re-invent themselves and new ones are springing up. They are taking the NIOS as their inspiration. COL is proud to have been part of this process.

One potentially exciting development in open schooling is the possible creation of the International Baccalaureate International Open College. The International Baccalaureate is the world's most admired international school-leaving diploma. The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) is exploring how it might use open schooling to bring this international curriculum to a much wider international

audience. It is also looking at putting greater emphasis on vocational education and training in the curriculum. We understand that the IBO intends to pilot these developments in India and we hope that a link can be built between the IBO, the NIOS and COL for this purpose.

There is already an extensive list of joint activities between NIOS, COL and CEMCA, COL's Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia. They cover advocacy for open schooling; increasing access for the hard-to-reach learner; supporting the establishment of state open schools; improving the quality of the learning materials; and building NIOS' own capacity.

Our first joint event was designed to build awareness about the potential of open schooling to increase access to basic education for those who are difficult to reach, meaning marginalised groups like girls, women, the rural poor and people with disabilities. This first event was followed by more meetings organised on similar themes. As we raised awareness of the challenge, one pleasing outcome was a significant increase in the number of NGOs that applied to become Accredited Institutes of NIOS. This gave these NGOs the right to deliver and accredit NIOS courses and, as Accredited Institutes, they have increased access through their extensive network of centres throughout India. They have brought education to the learners' doorstep instead of requiring them to come to educational institutions.

The beauty of this arrangement is that it has increased access for the disadvantaged in rural and urban parts of India at little additional cost to either the national or state governments.

The Nature of Open Schooling

In our remarks so far we have bracketed open schools with open universities and used the general term 'open and distance learning' to describe what they do. But we must look more closely at the way we use these terms.

We can define open schooling as a combination of physical separation of the learner from the teacher and the use of unconventional teaching methodologies, including information and communications technologies, to bridge the gap and support the students' learning. This sounds much like the definition that we might use for an open university.

However, we do not call open schooling 'open/distance schooling' and there is a good reason for that. Open schooling follows a variety of patterns, but the most common scenario is that the learners study specially designed open learning materials on their own - at home, in their workplace, wherever it is convenient for them - and then meet a facilitator on a pretty regular basis.

In open schooling the word 'open' refers to the openness of the system. Usually there are no rules that regulate students' ages; that lay down prerequisites; that impose the course content to be taken or that specify the number of courses in which students must enrol. This means that youth who missed out on schooling in their childhood can enrol in courses that will give them the equivalence of secondary education without having the embarrassment of sitting in classrooms with much younger children. Young mothers can take secondary level education through studying at home - attending tutorials only when

necessary and their responsibilities permit. Working adults can enrol in one or two courses at a time, and study whenever their personal and work commitments permit. Young adults can acquire skill training coupled with academic subjects while self-employed or working as non-skilled labour.

The purpose of the sessions with the facilitator is mainly to clarify any difficulties that the students may experience when working through the learning materials. These sessions are seldom mandatory - it does not affect a student if he or she has to "drop out" for a period of time - they can pick up their studies once again, when it is convenient for them to do so. The learners are not taught by the facilitator - in fact, the facilitator may not know much about the subject-area at all - the role of the facilitator is to guide the learners, and assist them to understand how to study the content in the material.

In addition to the facilitator, there is usually a subject matter expert available - possibly through telephone or e-mail contact - who will respond to questions relating to the subject content. Having experts available is crucial. They may only be called upon once in a while, but the facilitators know that someone is there to answer any content questions that might arise.

The sessions with facilitators are often held in learning centres located in libraries, churches, NGOs, schools or other semi-public places. They may be held at fixed times during a week, or may be held at the students' and facilitators' convenience. Having the learning centres located in local neighbourhoods increases access to education, especially for girls and women who are often not permitted to travel any distance to a public school. Sometimes, the tutorial sessions may be virtual - organised through teleconferencing, interactive radio or television broadcasts or e-mail listservs.

The facilitators or experts mark the students' exercises and assignments, and provide feedback designed to assist the students in understanding content when their answers indicate this is required. Sensitive, careful marking is necessary, as it encourages and supports the learners at the same time as helping them to understand their mistakes.

Vocational Education and Training

The question we shall grapple with at this meeting is how can open schooling best be applied to vocational education and training?

We are seeing a resurgence of interest in vocational education and training - let's call it VET - worldwide. In the developed countries, like Canada where COL is headquartered, there is a new focus on training young people for employment rather than assuming that they should simply go on to higher education. One Canadian youngster in ten now drops out of high school. The main reason they give for dropping out is that they don't find their education in school relevant to their lives.

They find that their education does not lead to employment or help them get better jobs, so they ask why they should finish high-school if it will only lead to an unskilled labouring job that they can get as a drop-out. However, these youngsters agreed that if they were given technical/vocational training, continuing in school would be more attractive, relevant and interesting.

In the developing world the situation is even more critical. The first Millennium Development Goal is to eliminate poverty and hunger and the best way to do that is for people to have reasonably secure livelihoods: work that pays, either through a job or through self employment. We notice that development agencies are beginning to focus directly on the question of work creation rather than assuming that education will lead naturally to it.

Education and training for work are of fundamental importance because it is at work that our roles as competent human beings and responsible citizens come together most intensely. For many of us our work is the principal source of individual fulfilment in our lives. It is also usually the place where we create the widest network of acquaintances and where we adapt to people from many different backgrounds in order to work productively with them.

That is why people who have no work or who become unemployed lose much more than income. They lose a place in society, a network of colleagues, and the satisfaction of using their talents. That is why it is so important that education and training give people the wide range of intellectual, technical and social skills that will enable them to work effectively and enjoyably.

It means, for example, not just literacy, but functional literacy. Literacy that really makes a difference to the way a woman - or a man - can make choices and influence their community. It means not just learning, but lifelong learning. The world of work changes constantly as does the context of citizenship. People must learn continually not just to adapt to those changes but to help shape those changes as citizens.

There is some learning and some life skills that have global relevance. Computing and communication are the most obvious. But the real challenge for technical and vocational education and training is local, not global. It is, for example, to provide appropriate learning and life skills to rural people so that they can enrich their own environment rather than migrate to misery in the cities. It means bringing opportunities for learning life skills to girls and to others who have had not had these opportunities in the past. It means getting the private sector, large and small, north and south to support the training of its staff, both on and off the job.

We are here to explore ways to increase access to training cost effectively, most particularly how to do this with non-conventional delivery methods. One challenge is that vocational training needs to be more up-to-date than academic content. Mathematics changes only slowly, but the equipment in use in industry and consumer items like cell phones are in a state of rapid evolution. Training must be matched to the work environment and we must avoid fiascos like investing in carpentry courses in countries where there is little wood.

This means that educational institutions - in our case open schools - must continually interact with the private sector so that they are training their students in the skills that are required. We are pleased to see that NIOS recognizes this - one of the themes of this conference focuses on the importance of private-public relationships and the acknowledgment and recognition of accreditation frameworks. We hope that

one outcome of this conference will be a close relationship between NIOS and private companies across India aimed at expanding NIOS' course offerings and tailoring its technical and vocational courses to the skills needed by employers.

COL is delighted to be helping NIOS to give its students training that will equip them to apply for positions requiring higher skills. With our local regional office, CEMCA, we made it possible for two senior NIOS staff to visit The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (TOPNZ). TOPNZ has an international reputation for delivering high quality skills-related education to learners throughout New Zealand and our NIOS colleagues wanted to see how TOPNZ handled vocational training. As a result of the visit we expect that NIOS will expand its offerings to include more technical/vocational trades training. I might note that COL itself has worked with TOPNZ to produce open learning courses on 'Working with Concrete' and 'Working with Timber' for the Pacific Islands.

In closing, we suggest that in expanding its work in vocational education and training NIOS may have an advantage over conventional institutions. We talked a moment ago about the most special feature of an open school, namely its openness. As well as offering vocational courses designed to meet the demands of employers, NIOS should also be alert to the needs of the self employed - which is the status of many of its students. Some self-employed people may take vocational training in order to work for someone else. But it is equally possible to improve livelihoods and reduce poverty by increasing the quality of self employment.

What we are proposing is that NIOS, as an Open School, should find out what forms of self employment are most common amongst its students and design vocational education and training that will increase their productivity and skills in that self-employment. This is an important thrust of a new COL programme called Learning and Livelihoods. The idea is to help to create and improve livelihoods, not simply to train people in an abstract way in the hope that employment will open up.

This, of course, relates back to the fundamental skills of employability. We admire the way that NIOS continues to push the frontiers of open schooling. It recently received an award for providing basic education through non-conventional means. This is an area of immense importance for development. Thus far alternative ways of providing basic education on a large scale have not usually proved viable. However, through innovative thinking and experimentation, NIOS has demonstrated once again that the mould can be broken and that basic education can be delivered in new ways.

For all these reasons we are pleased that COL continues to help NIOS become an exemplary institution internationally. We have brought ministers, officials and educators from various Commonwealth countries to NIOS to see how it operates. We believe that supporting these study visits is increasing awareness of open schooling and contributing to its global expansion and developing quality. We hope that, partly as a result of this conference, open schooling will make an increasing impact on vocational education and training in the years ahead.