

A Gender-Sensitive ICT Strategy for Open Schooling

Author- Koyali Burman, Consultant, Commonwealth of Learning
bkoyali@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

All commonwealth countries are trying to improve the quality of the education system and participants mentioned that it would be worthwhile for open schools to highlight and advocate how problems in the conventional system of education can be reduced by the application of the ICT based Open Schooling system. Perhaps the most important question here is: Why has so little been done in the area of gender in broadening ICT based education system in open schools of commonwealth countries? Taking this issue as a foundation; a gender audit was commissioned from the Commonwealth of Learning to various Open schools in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Caribbean region and North America. This study is the outcome of the participatory gender audit where strategies for addressing the issues, prioritising approaches based on pressing needs, assessing the capacity available and defining ways and means for building a gender-sensitive ICT based Open Schoolings system in the commonwealth countries.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in the study was conducted in two phases – (i) through survey questionnaires and phone interviews; ii) participatory workshop. During the first phase survey questionnaires were sent electronically to selected individual in the education sector in fifteen commonwealth countries.

During the second phase, a workshop was conducted in Mozambique. The workshop was attended by a group of 12 delegates from 9 countries – South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Caribbean region. The country delegates were from Open schools, Institution of Distance Education, Open University, Institute of Adult Education, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Women and Social Affairs.

Below is the demographic information of the participants who participated in the study.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Females comprised of 56% of the total respondents and males 44%. The questionnaires were completed by the Open Schooling area coordinators, curriculum/programme developers, tutors and learners. The phone interviews were conducted with the senior management staff of the Open schools and the Ministry of Education.

The data interpreted and recommendations provided are intended to provide blanket generalisations covering a wide diversity, rather they are to be adapted and prioritised according to countries' specific national circumstances. The important considerations in this regard are:

- Needs in the particular setting
- Priority considerations, given the triggers for change
- Extent of the willingness to change
- Resources available to effect the change

This is because countries vary widely in terms of educational indicators as well as cultural, social and economic specifics. The selected Open schools have different governance models, wide range of areas served, long drawn experiences in dealing with gender related issues and ICT with

those of newly established open schools, wide range of annual enrolment, wide range of infrastructures etc.

Framework of Analysis

The “Gender Lens” was applied in the study to analyse the role of gender in broadening ICT based education systems in open schools of commonwealth countries. The key areas identified and examined within the context of Open Schooling are:

1. Organisational Policy – Policy structure, budget and allocation, consultation and decision making (management), organisational culture.
2. Curriculum Design and Development – Learners profile, representation, consultation, curriculum parameters, learning materials and presentation, flexibility and open model, delivery mechanisms.
3. Human Resource and Development – Faculty and staff eligibility, training and development, Learners support.
4. Partnership – Sources of support, networking and resource mobilisation, capacity building.
5. Research and Innovation – Creativity and innovation, sustainability.
6. Monitoring and evaluation – Institutional monitoring and evaluation, learner assessment.

This participatory gender audit approach was deemed important because it does not only enrich the strategy through sharing of ideas around issues of gender and ICT in Open Schooling context, it also enhances the utilisation of the end product, Gender-Sensitive ICT Strategy by members of the institution who are the end users of the gender-sensitive ICT strategy.

Below are some of the gaps around gender sensitivity in the emerging areas:

EMERGING AREAS & GAPS

National Education Context & Institutional level: Policy and Strategic Direction

The study shows that there is an existing National Gender Policy or Draft Gender Action Plan in Saharan Africa, Caribbean and South Pacific regions. However decisions on how policies should be operationalised are largely left to the Open Schooling institutions. The study points to the fact that there is scarcity of information around existing gender-sensitive ICT policy for education systems in general and Open Schooling systems in particular in the commonwealth countries. At the institutional level there is a general misconception of the term “Gender” in the educational context of Open Schooling. One respondent highlighted that “the concept of gender is often misunderstood...”. It also points to the fact that within the institutions there is a perception of the use of “ICT as a male thing”.

A pattern of gender segregation is being reproduced in the ICT sector in the institutions where male staff holds most of the high-value added responsibilities. There is also lack of synergies within the organisational culture – resistance to change and fear of change from traditional approach. Gauthier (2009) from Vancouver Learning Network (VLN) states about the degree of openness that “some limitations exist in enhancing ICT based approach to Open Schooling at the institutional level and these reflect both the broader educational culture and historic practice in mainstream”. A respondent from British Columbia mentioned that “at the administrative level, a very small shift has occurred towards gender balance in the past twenty years. Despite of female characteristics embedded in the role of educators, less women than men are in educational administration”.

Although there is a balanced representation of the female staff at the senior management level of the Open Schooling institutions such as National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), Botswana College of Open and Distance Learning (BOCODOL) and National Open School of Trinidad and Tobago (NOSTT), there is still an urgent

need for attention and commitment from the senior management to look into the implementation of gender equity from policy to practice. Without gender-sensitive goals, strategies and expected outcomes in a policy statement makes it difficult to allocate resources to meet the goals. Good policy is crucial for practice and the lack of a well-balanced policy suggests a lack of attention from the management level. In addition the institution is more vulnerable to changes in the government and funding priorities.

Du Vivier and Ellis (2009) summed up the importance of policy in the following terms: "If there is no such policy present, institutional activities are not harmonised and people do not feel obliged to do certain things".

Curriculum Design and Development

Regardless of any educational model, institutions are concerned about the quality of development and delivery of a comprehensive and diverse range of ICT based open learning programmes to diverse groups that which would prepare the learners for further education, employment or self-employment, to diverse groups. For example In Namibia "current secondary education curriculum concentrates on the attainment of academic qualifications but offers limited opportunities for skills-based vocational training. A respondent mentioned that "NIOS is working towards enlarging the scopes of vocational programs like Hunar which addresses region specific problems of Muslim girls in the states of Bihar and Delhi".

Curriculum departments leads the design of curriculum of curriculum, teaching and learning materials but there is not enough evidence around formal gender-sensitive needs assessment being carried out for curriculum development. Often institutions generalise female learners before developing a curriculum but women are not a homogenous group and different criteria of the female learners should be considered. A respondent from NIOS noted that "specific situations of women are not considered often (for example female learners with disabilities, Indigenous/Tribes, Scheduled caste, Backward classes) while designing a course".

The Open Schooling institutions like BOCODOL, NAMCOL, and NIOS have materials presented mostly in the English language and this often makes concepts difficult for the teachers to explain to the learners who are second-language speakers. It is necessary to develop materials in major local languages. Gauthier (2009) from Vancouver Learning Network states that "Vancouver Learning Network offer wide range of online courses to diverse learners in various languages. The VLN is the sole provider of online Mandarin, Korean, Japanese and Italian languages in British Columbia. The provisions of new online courses are also attracting additional adult learners seeking to upgrade knowledge and technology skills or to engage in lifelong learning". Not only is there a need to address the challenge of language, the existing programmes and curricula also need to meet the demands of the labour market for female learners.

There is also need to explore ICT based study materials for disabled learners in general and female disabled learners in particular. The female learners living in the rural areas in Sub Saharan Open Schooling institutions find challenges in gaining access the study centres. There is also lack of support for teenage mothers in providing child care, offering advice on issues such as health and nutrition for mothers and their infants, as well as flexible attendance requirements for female learners.

Human Resource and Development

Developing a high quality curriculum and materials requires a high degree of specialised knowledge and skills. The study identified that most of the institutions use part-time staff who are usually from the traditional education system and who have less understanding of the nature of the disadvantaged learners and female learners in particular. It was acknowledged by the study participants that the gender-sensitive aspect of the staff requirement or competency is still at the periphery during the hiring process. An effective delivery of technology based inclusive curriculum requires appropriate systems of support for both full-time and part-time tutors. The institutions

require different ways of orienting, teaching and motivating practitioners as well as access to professional development. But the shortage of the financial resources for the training and development are the common thread for most of the countries that participated in the study.

Partnerships

The study shows that institutions have started giving importance to partnerships and collaboration by sharing resources, networking and capacity building due to limited resources and massive need. The principle of encouraging and fostering partnerships and collaboration is intrinsically “good”. However the study pointed to the fact that collaboration established on weak foundations among partners would most likely create impediments to effective educational provision which could lead to wastage of resources.

Collaboration and capacity development is an area whereby most collaboration ranging from organised workshops to consultants sharing information with other institutions and the Commonwealth of Learning, has been developed. But there is less evidence of workshops being organised or sharing of resources around gender-sensitive ICT based approach to Open Schooling. NAMCOL collaborated with the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, BOCODOL in the development of curriculum and service delivery. Moreover there are periodical regional meetings of network agencies that NAMCOL participates regularly. At the meeting gender is not a separate topic of discussion but as part of an issue between other topics of discussion.

Extensive collaborative work has already been done in the area of materials development in general as well as ICT based in most of the Open Schooling institutions like NAMCOL, BOCODOL, NIOS, BOU, Institute of Adult Education (IAE), Malawi College of Distance Education (MCDE) but the shortage of gender-sensitive materials is a common thread that runs through the data between all the institutions. Collaborative ventures tend to offer contracts to academics with the assumption they possess the necessary skills to develop good quality learning materials, although many have very little knowledge or experience of gender-sensitivity. More so, such inter-institutional materials development projects operate in relative isolation and their results are quickly dispersed once the project is completed.

Rectifying the above loopholes in the development of collaborative materials can provide an excellent mechanism for sharing knowledge and experience, building the capacity for educators, producing highest quality gender-sensitive ICT based materials, and reducing overall cost of delivery of curriculum.

Research and Innovation

Creating a culture of innovation does not happen just by itself and educational institutions, particularly at the tertiary level, are resistant to change. “It requires a strong and supportive leadership from senior management to shape institutional plans, budget and norms with respect to innovation” (Du Vivier, 2009). The study emphasises the fact that there are fewer research studies around diverse profiles of open school learners, especially female learners. The NAMCOL research division occasionally invites students and consultants to participate. There were some research conducted and reports published such as the Tracer study of former NAMCOL learners. The study was focused on learners in general but not from a gender perspective.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In most of the member states there are ICT policies in place separately but there is an absence of gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation policy or plans of action for staff and learners. Learner’s assessments methods include formative (continual) assessment and summative (final examination). Gauthier (2009) points to the fact that “in the online environment the greatest challenge is ensuring authenticity of student work”. In some of the member states there is a shortage of ICT based qualified markers. There is general absence of established benchmarks

around quality provision and effective system for the review and evaluation of gender balanced ICT based approaches to service delivery in most of the Open schools.

OUTCOME & RECOMMENDATIONS: A GENDER-SENSITIVE ICT STRATEGY FOR OPEN SCHOOLING

Throughout the course of the study, clearly there are several commonalities between the Open Schooling institutions in gender-sensitive aspects from infrastructure to monitoring and evaluation, even though there were differences in target audiences and focal points, depending on the regions. But the institutions do not have clear strategic direction around how to use ICT to build organisational and learner's capacity and to support gender equality and social justice.

Below are some of the key gender-sensitive strategies as overall recommendations of the study.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL:

Getting the Policy Right: Leadership and Governance

Creating a broad consensus around reviewing the existing policy and developing a ICT based gender-sensitive policy as well as developing a sustainable plan is the most appropriate direction for future development of Open Schooling. Even more so, women's involvement in leadership and decision-making at the highest levels would prove vital to the institution in redefining strategic priorities, setting new gender-sensitive priorities that reflect and address gender specific concerns, and providing new perspectives and approaches for the realisation of institutional and national gender equality goals.

PARTNESHIP DEVELOPMENT:

Building Capacity Through "Consortia"

Development of a "consortia" or other interdependent system of member states by sharing a gender-sensitive vision and action plan as co-operative of all stake holders and ensure that consortia look into issues that speak first to overall enhancement of the open school system, specifically to the use of ICT in educational provision that promotes gender equity in a quality learning process. Establish gender-sensitive training and knowledge exchange programs to inform the Open Schooling institutions about best practices in funding and procurement, program development, and monitoring and evaluation.

Other Alliances and Collaboration

Collaborate with private sector with an interest in education and technology and utilisation of existing resources without having to invest in the infrastructure and still maintain the quality and standards.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT:

Learning Materials & Production Model

Develop a multi media studio where all gender balanced materials would be in multi media format.

Diversity of Courses

Diversify ICT based curriculum and include more gender-sensitive vocational courses to enhance employability of the female graduates in general and disadvantaged female learners in particular.

RESEARCH & INNOVATION:

Gender-Sensitive Research

Considerable attention has to be given to gender-sensitive research studies as research informs practice. Research study needs to be conducted around the gender and ICT based approach to Open Schooling as there is little work done in this area in most of the institutions under study. It is highly advisable for the new open schools to create a gender budget and allocate resources for research and development and create a culture of innovation.

Promotion of Innovative Approaches to Incentives

Set up small grants for piloting gender-sensitive ICT based innovative projects for disadvantages population (nomads, scheduled caste/backward class, prison inmates)

HUMAN RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT

Staff Training & Development

Develop collaborative gender-sensitive e-teaching trainings for the teachers in the development of e-pedagogical skills with the changing needs of the technology. It was noted in the study that there is considerable lack of women teachers and instructors.

Student Support for Remote Areas

Run a remote ICT help desk for staff and students. This would help in any down time in the system that caused disruption to delivery of programs.

Recruit or increase female study centre support staff or offer more gender trainings to male study centre staff to help support female learners especially in the rural areas.

MONITORING & EVALUATION

Management Information System (MIS)

Additionally the Open Schooling institutions are required to tone up Management Information System and create a gender-sensitive e-management system to bring efficiency in formulation, implementation monitoring and evaluation of programmes and activities. Throughout process the female senior management staff members are encouraged to take the leading role. An effective MIS will go a long way to ensure quality of the Open Schooling system and placing it on a sound footing.

Data Collection, Analysis and Monitoring of Strategies on a Regional Basis

It is important to develop gender-sensitive ICT based institutional transparency benchmarks for monitoring and evaluation systems. There is a need to create monitoring and evaluation tools that outline clear gender-sensitive indicators to measure program outcomes.

CLOSING COMMENT

The study has drawn considerable attention to the need for a coherent gender-sensitive ICT based approach from policy to practice at the institutional level. It is up to the decision makers to work towards transforming the existing system into a more gender-sensitive one. Crucial to the success of executing this strategy is the level to which it is embedded into the rest of the organisation.

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Checklist (All items required)

(X) Contributions must not have been previously published and must not have been submitted elsewhere.

(X) Contributions must be in Microsoft Word, Rich Text Format (RTF), equivalent Open Source document file format, or HTML format

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