

Costing Open Schooling Provision for Out-Of-School Youths



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Title slide

Thank you for providing me with a space on the programme to talk about costing of open-schooling provision.

Slide 2: Overview

In 2016, prior to the pandemic, UNESCO reported that efforts to reduce the number of out-of-school children and youths had plateaued. We are simply unable to build enough schools and employ enough teachers to accommodate all the learners exiting primary school.

Post-pandemic, last year, UNESCO reported that, despite major international campaigns, the number of out-of-school youths had actually increased by 5 million.

Slide 3: Scale of need

- 1.6 billion learners in 188 countries had their schooling disrupted by the pandemic: not all came back.
- According to the World Bank, reporting UIS data, the GER was 77% in 2022.
- According to Statista, on average, 21.78% of young people are not in employment, education or training in 2024.

Slide 4: Tension 1

In much of SSA, education at the schooling level, including through open schooling, is free. This is great in one sense as cost should not be a barrier to education access. However, there is the challenge that open schooling providers are then entirely dependent on government subsidy, and governments have competing demands on the fiscus. Post-pandemic, many countries experienced an economic decline. So despite international movements to increase spending on education like GPE, Education Watch reported that in several countries the allocation budget actually decreased in 2023. When ODL providers in general, and open schooling providers in particular, need to cut their budgets, they tend to cut student support. This has a double impact of increased drop out/stop out and decreased enrolment – potentially making future provision even more precarious.

Slide 5: Scaled provision

One reason for offering ODL is to increase access but as Tait observes, non ODL institutions have maintained their claim to quality through exclusion (and high fees). This led to the notion of an iron triangle that can only be broken through provision of ODL.

Slide 6: Tension 2

However, the increased use of online learning, even by non-ODL providers, has led to further tensions ... a disjuncture between ODL and online learning, a question about the costing implications of small, online, constructivist pedagogy.

Slide 7: Tension 3

The argument is made that constructivist pedagogy employed in online learning works against the economies of scale that supported ODL provision in the past ... and presumably, we should be contrasting constructivist approaches with instructivist approaches ...

Slide 8: Tension 4

If constructivist approaches work against scaled provision, because they challenge the potential economies of scale ... what is the alternative? Perhaps, activity-based costing for cost recovery?

Slide 9: Conceptual framework

This then leads to a conceptual framework as illustrated.

Providers currently in Quadrant 1 (print-based correspondence) might more easily move to Quadrant 2 (extensive use of text and video – xMOOCs).

While providers already offering a more constructivist model (trading economies of scale for printed materials against not so scaled contact support for student engagement) might more easily move to a similar model online with digital materials supported by online tutorials and forums.

It might be harder for an institution in Quadrant 1 to move to Quadrant 4.

Slide 10: Options

- Not to move to Quadrant 4 after all. In fact, some providers might choose not to move, or perhaps more likely given market expectations, to move rather to Quadrant 2 (for example an xMOOC-based model).
- To move to Quadrant 4 but to charge higher fees to cover increased costs per student (an orientation informed by a notion of education as a private good, perhaps).
- To move to Quadrant 4 but to lobby for higher state subsidies or grants to cover increased costs per student (an orientation informed by a notion of education as a public good, perhaps).
- To move to Quadrant 4 but to reduce the demand on full-time staff to mediate support and to explore alternative models such as use of less expensive adjunct part-time staff (as is done at the University of Pretoria) or to enable peer support (as at Peer-to-Peer University and

University-of-the-People) or to seek volunteer support (as at OER Universitas) or to employ automation/GAIbots (University of Samoa)

Slide 11: Costing mass education

- “The most important finding is that mass-media distance education could achieve economies of scale and could be designed so that the average cost per student (and to a lesser extent, because of higher drop-out rates, per graduate) could be lower than similar costs found in face-to-face education”. (Rumble, 2012, p. 41)
- “... in developing countries a combination of traditional mass-media-based instructional approaches with the intelligent use of mobile technologies appears to be more promising than imitating an online class model while having to increase class sizes to an extent that compromises the original instructional intentions of the model”. (Hülsmann, 2016, p. 37)

Slide 12: Bates (2018), 1

The research suggests that scaling with quality requires a delicate balance between:

- teamwork involving tenured faculty, specialist online experts such as instructional designers and media producers, and adjunct instructors, with full involvement of faculty in all aspects of the design and development of the programs,
- using adjunct faculty as instructors to support program delivery as the enrolments grow,
- managing student-instructor ratios so that adjuncts are not overloaded,
- ensuring the adjunct instructors are adequately trained or experienced in teaching online.

Slide 13: Bates (2018), 2

Other important factors in scaling with quality are:

- being sure there is an adequate market demand to justify the scale of online/digital programs you are proposing: good market research is essential,
- being confident that new entrants into the market will not have the scale or quality to capture your market,
- being sure that there is a sufficient pool of available qualified adjunct instructors,
- developing a multi-year business plan that will accommodate losses in the first two years in return for later economies of scale and scope,
- a sympathetic and creative administration that will consider and encourage new funding models.

Slide 14: Time Driven Activity Based Costing

The current dominant process for allocating budgets is detrimental to quality improvement. But we lack contemporary costing data to make an alternative case. The Time Driven Activity Based Costing approach advocated by Andalya et al at PCF9 in 2019 could be useful. If several institutions were interested to conduct a study based on this model for one programme or school subject in their institution and country, we might be able to compare the findings across a variety of contexts and

pull out some useful guidelines for future practice that we might publish together. If anybody is interested to do this, please let me know.

Slide 15: COL publications

COL has developed a few reports and guidelines on costing, but I would be keen to use contemporary data from multiple contexts to inform a new version of our handbook on Costs and Financing in Open Schools.

Slide 16: References

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Slide 17: Thank you