

Open Schooling in the Commonwealth: Learning from Practice



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Thank you to WES2023 for providing a space for me to talk about open schooling. I work for the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and I will reflect on COL's recent work.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was established in 1987 by Commonwealth Heads of Government "... to create and widen access to opportunities for learning, making use of the potential offered by distance education and by the application of communication technologies to education." (Memorandum of Understanding on the Commonwealth of Learning)

I will frame the presentation around frequently asked questions.

Why rethink schooling?

- Over 300 million out-of-school children (OOSC) pre-pandemic (UNICEF)
- Growing numbers of Not in Employment Education or Training (NEETs)
- Concerns about academic achievement
- Entrenched industrial models not well equipped to respond to changing needs

What is "Open" schooling?

Open schooling uses Open, Distance and Flexible Learning approaches to improve: Access, Flexibility and choice, Quality, Flexible Pace; Lower Cost. But it's not one-size-fits-all ...in Europe, for example, open schooling also means traditional schools which open their doors to working with their communities.

How can open schooling help?

It can't be one-size fits all because needs vary.

Young children are probably best placed in physical schooling but the pandemic made clear that Senior Secondary learners do not need to be in school all the time.

For some learners or types of learning, a blended form of provision might be ideal.

Also, it can't be one size fits all, because curricula and contexts vary.

What are some pros and cons?

A complementary approach is probably most appropriate if the target audience is out of school children.

However, for youths not in employment nor in education and training an alternative curriculum focused on employment or self-employment might be more appropriate.

Many countries have begun explored a more vocational curriculum for both in-class and out-of-school learners.

There are also many ways in which an open school may be established and operated.

Evolving practice

Also, moving from student dependence to student autonomy requires a conscious learning pathway design in which the focus moves from the teacher to supplied resources to activities for which students need to source content for themselves. It does not happen by accident!

What can we learn from practice in the Caribbean?

Many countries have large and growing numbers of NEETs.

Traditional schooling cannot meet the needs of these learners so open schooling approaches are needed.

This can help make schooling systems more resilient when physical schools need to close and learning needs to be managed digitally.

Learning from practice in Africa (since July 2021)

There are nineteen Commonwealth member countries in Africa and different needs in different contexts require different strategies.

What have we learned?

- It's about people
- Digital divide: print, open textbooks, online may all be needed
- Readiness of teachers critical as is
- Readiness of managers and
- Readiness of learners and
- Readiness of parents & communities
- It's also about Resilience, for example countries which already had developed curriculum-based open educational resources shared these during emergency remote teaching and Te Kura, the Open School in New Zealand, cloned it's entire LMS to support continuity of learning during the pandemic.

What new opportunities have arisen?

Open schools take different forms and can be found all over the world from Africa, to Asia, to the Americas, to the Pacific. Sometimes they are stand-alone institutions. Sometimes they take the form of initiatives within universities or ministries of education. There is no one-size-fits-all model or approach for open schooling. The common link is a shared commitment to overcoming barriers to access and success through flexible modes of provision using appropriate technology in appropriate ways.

What is a typical development journey?

- From capacity-building (Years 1-2)
- To piloting inclusive, accessible, and multilingual OER (for secondary level teachers and learners) (Years 2-3)
- To sharing and scaling nationally for sustainability and systemic resilience (Years 3-4)
- and adding value through international collaboration on shared curricula e.g., vocational courses, and mainstreaming (Years 4+)

Open Schooling Resources can be found at <https://www.col.org/education/open-schooling/>

If anyone listening is interested to work with COL in open schooling, please let us know! There is an email submission form on our website.

Thank you.