

Strengthening Basic Education through Open and Distance Learning: How Open Schooling Contributes.

Executive Summary

This comparative research study examines the way in which open and distance learning is used to strengthen basic education in four countries in Asia and Africa. Specifically, the study focuses on the role of open schooling in basic education.¹ Our four collaborating partners were the Andhra Pradesh State Open School, India; the Bangladesh Open School; the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning, and the Namibia College of Open Learning.

The study set out with specific aims:

- To conduct a series of practitioner research projects which were culturally specific and relevant and whose results could feed directly back into the institutions
- To raise the institutional capacity of research in the local institutions
- To establish a network of partners working in ODL at the basic level of education
- To communicate the research findings within and across the four institutions

A model was devised to look at the factors affecting educational effectiveness and sustainability (Perraton and Edirisingha, 1999) in ODL and basic education.

		Factors susceptible to interventions through action research	Externally controlled factors
Context-related (external factors)	Political context and political support Integration into the mainstream education Independence of the organisational structure Access to communication infrastructure		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • •
Intermediate factors (both context-and programme related)	Funding regime Cost of the programme Relevance of the curriculum Existing structures and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •
Programme-related (internal factors)	Instructional design Selection of media Quality of the learner support system Capacity of in-house research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • 	

The overall research strategy was to ensure that the individual projects would increase our understanding of the factors that affect success. After each institution identified an area of research, training in research methodology was provided by the IRFOL researcher. The degree of support needed varied between institutions. The findings from the research were disseminated in two ways: in country workshops and an international meeting in the United Kingdom.

The experiences and outcomes from the four pieces of practitioner research with our collaborating partners shed light on some of the challenges inherent in north-south collaborative work. The research illustrated varying levels of ability and capacity of institutions to undertake research.

These four examples of practitioner research, carried out in the context of four very distinctive models of open schooling, allow us to reflect on two important dimensions of policy. The first, which relates to research collaboration, encourages clarification of the role that research might or should play in these non-tertiary institutions. We conclude that attention to research capacity within these institutions can add significantly to their profile and effectiveness. As a minimum, there needs to be a strong focus on monitoring and evaluation throughout the institutions, but there needs to be an additional focus on more fundamental questions relating to, for example, student motivation, student approaches to learning and the quality of teaching-learning materials. The construction of a clear set of guidelines for north – south partnerships would enhance collaborative work of this kind.

The second dimension highlights key questions raised by the findings of the research, in relation to the role of open schools in the wider context of the achievement of the MDGs. There are at least three major areas which this study has generated new understandings but where further work may yet be needed. They are:

1. ODL and reaching the Excluded: Access and Equity

Can an open and flexible system of schooling be used at the primary (or primary equivalence level) to reach some of the most excluded and marginalised populations? Is such an organisational structure an option for providing access to those who are excluded from conventional schooling from the barriers excluding school-age children and adults from attaining a basic education? Can these models be replicated elsewhere in situations where access to formal schooling is not possible or likely? The APOSS example shows that open schooling can contribute to reaching some of the most marginalised and excluded groups in India.

2. Bridging the Gap between Primary and Secondary Education

Can open schooling at the secondary level respond to the thirst for education which the EFA and MDG targets have stimulated through the increased enrolments in primary schools? In many countries, success in increasing completion of primary schooling is leading to a significant pressure on the places in junior secondary schools. BOCODOL and NAMCOL were created with exactly this target population and show the great potential and demand for open schooling at this level. The Open School in Bangladesh provides a similar response in the very different context of an E-9 country.

At present, the three institutions providing secondary level courses and qualifications deliberately mimic the offerings of the mainstream secondary system. Is there scope for a more flexible and imaginative approach to curriculum and assessment, given that the processes of instruction and learning in open schools are so distinctive?

3. The most appropriate form of delivery

Despite globalisation and the impact of ICTs, the ‘classic’ mix of print, radio and face-to-face instruction is still the most accessible mode of delivery. While computer technologies are becoming more visible in these countries, the particular situation of learners linked with institutions like BOCODOL and NAMCOL means that ready access to computers remains the exception.

¹ Open schools are defined here as autonomous institutions which use the methods of distance education to provide education to out-of-school learners. Basic education refers to education addressed at both adults and children and it is defined as ‘education at primary and secondary levels, addressing both children and adults, and includes both programmes equivalent to conventional primary and secondary education.’ (Yates and Bradley, 2000).

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