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## In Focus



## Exploring the potential of open schooling

**By Ms. Susan Phillips, COL Education Specialist, Basic Education**

COL's mandate includes working at the leading edge of open/distance education and using technology to deliver and support learning opportunities for those living in developing countries. There are ample examples of COL's work in these areas - and none are more obvious than the early and continuing work in Open Schooling.

COL embarked on its first major work in the area in 1994, when it produced one of the first known publications on Open Schooling, long before there was much recognition or acceptance of it as a possible remedy to some of the educational challenges facing the developing world.

Today, at least partially because of COL's work, there are new Open Schools being established throughout the developing world, and existing institutions that offer school-level education through non-conventional means are being strengthened and improved in a variety of ways. There is now an acceptance of Open Schooling as a viable and feasible alternative way of filling the gap caused by the dual lack of qualified teachers and conventional schools that plague many countries in the developing world.


### ***The growth of basic education***

Why has Open Schooling recently become so important to educators in developing countries? There are a variety of factors to consider as we look at the multi-faceted answers to this question.

Over the last fifteen years or so, the development community



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has focussed much of its work on increasing access to basic education. First there was the Jomtien World Conference that launched UNESCO's *Education for All* initiative in 1990, followed by the endorsement of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 by world leaders and the development community. These two initiatives emphasise the importance of providing basic education to the populations of the developing world, and both have assisted many developing countries to move closer to achieving universal basic education.

However, along with the success of these initiatives, comes a new challenge for educators. Now that many more children, youth and adults are primary school graduates, there is a new need - the need to provide more opportunities for post-primary learners to access secondary education. Without opportunities to continue their schooling, neo-literates can quickly return to their earlier state of illiteracy. Similarly, if there is no post-primary educational path, those that are currently enrolled in basic education programmes may lack the incentive to continue.

A means must be found to provide quality secondary education, coupled with technical/vocational training where appropriate, in a cost-effective, timely manner. New schools cannot be built in time, nor can more teachers be trained quickly enough. Even if there were schools and teachers available, limited budgets that are already stretched to the breaking point in many ministries of education could not support the increased costs.

Of course, class sizes may be increased so that there are more students in existing classrooms. This is a common strategy to save money, both in developing and in developed countries. However, research has proven that it does not work after a certain class size has been reached; more students may be in the classroom but the quality of the education decreases. The disadvantages associated with stretching resources - teachers, desks, books and paper - along with the decrease in personal attention to individual students more than offsets any advantages offered through increasing the size of the class as a means to provide additional access to education.

Education ministries and departments have learned that increasing the access in the conventional system through increasing the class size but keeping the funding levels the same leads to a rapid reduction in the quality of the education provided. However, through using non-conventional means such as open learning, once a certain investment is made in the system, student numbers can increase, quality can remain high and only a nominal increase in funding is required.

### ***How is this possible?***

Open/distance education is an excellent argument for economics of scale. Although to have a successful and high quality open/distance education system, there must be an initial investment in quality materials, delivery and student support systems, once these are in place, large student numbers can be accommodated with a minimum increase in funds.

To provide quality education to an increased number of students in an ODL system, there must be additional materials provided, and the student support system must be able to accommodate the increased numbers; however, these costs are low compared to building new schools and training more teachers. Further, the time required to put in place the support for additional students in an ODL system is short, compared to the time required to adequately ready the conventional system for increased student numbers. And time is not a luxury that most developing countries have when it comes to providing increased opportunities to their populace for secondary education.

### ***Is open schooling distance education?***

There are different views on what Open Schooling is. COL uses a very broad, but simple definition - the physical separation of the school-level learner from the teacher, and the use of unconventional teaching methodologies, and information and communications technologies (ICTs) to bridge the separation and provide the education and training.

Open Schooling is not called open/distance schooling for a reason. Open Schooling may follow different 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 they meet together with a facilitator on a regular basis. The "open" in Open Schooling refers to the openness of the system - seldom are there are rules dictating student ages, prerequisites, content of courses to be taken or number of courses in which students must enrol. For example,

- Youth that missed out on schooling in their childhood can enrol in courses which will provide them with the equivalence of secondary education without their having to endure the embarrassment of being in classrooms with children much younger than themselves.
- Young mothers can take secondary level education through studying at home, and 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 openness facilitates the learning - anyone can enrol in any course at any time and study at their own convenience and schedule.

The face-to-face sessions with the facilitator are mainly to clarify any difficulties that the students may have experienced 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 facilitators do not teach the learners. 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 the expert available is key. Although he or she may only be called upon once in a while, it is important that facilitators are aware that someone is there to answer any content questions that might arise.

The student-facilitator meetings are often held in learning centres located in libraries, churches, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), schools or other semi-public places. The meetings may be fixed times during a week, or may be held at the students' and facilitators' convenience. Having the learning centres located in local neighbourhoods add to the increased access of the education, especially for girls and women who would not usually be permitted to travel any distance to a public school. Sometimes the meetings 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 while helping them to understand their mistakes.

Open Schooling is most often offered at the secondary level to students/learners that have achieved a basic level of literacy, although there are some notable exceptions, such as the Interactive Radio Instruction literacy initiative in Zambia.

The potential of Open Schooling at the primary level is great because of the additional opportunities that are feasible due to the newly available and affordable ICTs. However, more research needs to be undertaken, and new models examined and explored before expansion of Open Schooling at the primary level can be successfully rolled out.

COL recognises the vast opportunities for education and training that can be provided through successful Open Schooling initiatives. We will continue to work to increase the availability and quality of all levels of schooling provided through non-conventional means and to work with local ministries and institutions to help them meet the education and training needs of their most disadvantaged communities.

### **NIOS leads the way**

The largest Open School in the world, the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) plays an important role both in India and internationally. Established as an autonomous institution by the Government of India in 1989, NIOS has a cumulative enrolment of more than 1.3 million students. NIOS offers basic education for children and adults, secondary and senior secondary

courses, and vocational programmes. It provides education mainly to out-of-school children, including drop-outs and socially and economically challenged learners.

NIOS also acts as a national resource agency for Open Schooling in India, assisting states to establish their own State Open Schools. It provides technical and resource support, including sharing of courseware and joint development of courses. With COL's support, NIOS is actively working to expand the system of State of Open Schools to all of India's 28 states.

COL also supports NIOS by providing training in multi-media, instructional design and quality issues. By sponsoring visits for NIOS staff to open polytechnics that offer vocational training through OD, COL is working to help NIOS expand course offerings into vocational areas. COL has also facilitated consulting and expert support provided by NIOS staff to other Open Schools worldwide. COL and NIOS have collaborated on a number of Open Schooling institutes held at NIOS for education ministry officials and educators from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as well as many countries in Africa. Through these gatherings, developing countries gain valuable insight and firsthand experience with NIOS best practices that can help them establish or enhance the Open Schooling system in their home countries.

[www.nos.org](http://www.nos.org)

## Open schooling fills a gap in Bangladesh

***By Dr. Arshed Ali Matubber, Dean, Open School, Bangladesh Open University***

Three years ago, COL started work with the Open School of the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to develop a proposal for a pilot designed to demonstrate the use of a non-conventional model to provide junior secondary education to out-of-school children who have completed Grade 5 at non-formal/community schools. In Bangladesh, nearly 400 NGOs provide primary education at non-formal/community schools to nearly 10 million students.

The Open School, with assistance from COL, developed the proposal in association with staff from NGOs and the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a coalition of NGOs. The Royal Netherlands Embassy and Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation agreed to jointly fund the project through the CAMPE offices. Staff at both BOU and in the NGO network will work to produce the materials and implement the

programme, which emphasise both vocational and academic courses so that graduating students will have the opportunity for involvement in income generating activities.

The Open School has begun to develop the curriculum for the distance education courses for the Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) programme for out-of-school children who graduated from non-formal/community schools. Currently, these graduates do not have the opportunity for further education. The Open School offers the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) programme for Years 9 and 10, so after students complete Years 6, 7 and 8 in the JSC, they can continue their secondary education with the Open School.

The Open School is developing the curriculum using an innovative method so that the new programme is suitable for the target group. The process comprises a literature review of existing materials, focus group discussions and the submission of the draft curriculum for review in a national level expert workshop. The Open School is planning to incorporate more ICT-based vocational courses to increase the opportunities for better livelihoods. After the draft curriculum is submitted to the Curriculum Committee of the University for final ratification, the focus will be on developing texts and audio-video materials. COL has agreed to provide an instructional design consultant to ensure quality issues are addressed during the materials development process.