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Recognising the realities of open schooling

By Professor Tony Dodds

Open Schooling is one of the top open and distance learning (ODL) priorities of developing countries at the present time. There is widespread recognition of the potential of Open Schooling to meet urgent educational and development needs, as well as the need to rapidly expand access to school-level education. But it is important that the hype and over-simplification that often surround the Open School movement don't obscure the realities that must be addressed. If these realities are not addressed, the Open School movement could turn out to be another "alternative" red herring in the search to provide education for all. Hopeful scenarios need to be tempered by an awareness of the constraints that have often prevented the movement from reaching its lofty goals.

The realities to which I refer include the following:

- Distance learning in its purer forms, i.e. when the learners are detached from a teacher or tutor for most of the time (a common definition of distance education) has nowhere, in my knowledge, been shown to provide an effective learning environment for young children. The effective models of distance learning for such age groups appear to be those in which very regular, almost continuous, face-to-face tuition/tutoring/guidance is in place. This is a contradiction in terms and inevitably interferes with the economies of scale argument of which distance education is so proud. Open learning through distance education is not therefore, in itself, a solution to the problem of the millions of children not yet in school.
- Similarly, these models of learners learning mainly on their own with occasional tuition have not in themselves, as far as I have seen, proved effective learning systems for illiterate or semi-literate adults. They also need to

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learn in groups with leaders, tutors or facilitators who are more educated than they are - even if not qualified teachers - to transform the knowledge and ideas contained in the distance learning materials into comprehensible and absorbable forms. This also has serious effects on costs. It is in the training and support of primary school teachers and adult learning facilitators that ODL has its greatest potential at these levels...but that is another story.

- The more common forms of distance learning, therefore, are most appropriate for older adult learners, or at least adolescents or young adults, who cannot get into or continue in formal, traditional schools but who have had some basic, elementary education. There are many millions of such learners in developing countries and it is on them that open schools, or as I prefer to call them, open colleges of lifelong learning, should be concentrated. Even here, however, the younger the target audience and the lower their level of formal education, the greater the need for guidance, support and structure. It is possible, though not proven, that the new interactive media could provide much of this structure and support, but this target audience in most developing countries is the least likely to have access to such technology.
- To be successful, open schools need a considerable lead-in time, very significant financial and trained personnel resources and heavy investment and involvement by the local communities in which they are based.

It is simple common sense that Open Schooling cannot be all things educational to all men, women and children. It is my fervent belief that these cautions in no way decrease the urgency of effective expansion of Open Schooling. They only emphasise the conditions of effectiveness.

Professor Tony Dodds is an international education consultant and former Director, Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia. He recently authored a report under COL auspices about the creation of a national open school in Nigeria.