

# Exploring the potential of open schooling



**Susan Phillips**

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 to support and expand the use of open and distance learning (ODL) to increase opportunities for education and training in developing countries. Since it began its operations, COL has been employing ODL methodologies as well as, increasingly, the judicious use of information and communications technologies (ICT) to demonstrate that these alternative means of delivery can result in a significant increase in the access to education and training opportunities in many non-industrialised countries.

There are many examples of COL's work in these areas – ranging from teacher upgrading to skills training for agricultural workers – and one of its most obvious and successful is its continuing work in Open Schooling.

COL embarked on its work in Open Schooling in 1994, when it produced one of the first publications of case studies in the area of delivering school level education through open/distance learning techniques and methodologies. This was long before there was much recognition or acceptance of Open Schooling as a possible remedy to some of the educational challenges facing the developing world.

Today, at least partially because of COL's work, new Open Schools are 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 educational gap at the school-level caused by the lack of qualified teachers and well-equipped schools, a situation that prevails in many developing countries today.

## The growth of basic education

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

Over the last fifteen years or so, the development community has focused much of its work on increasing access to basic education. First there was the Jomtien World Conference that launched UNESCO's *Education for All* (EFA) initiative in 1990 and set the goal of Universal Primary Education (UPE) to be attained by the year 2000.

Following the launch of the EFA initiative, the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were endorsed by world leaders and the development community in 2000. Two of these goals relate to education – the achievement of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education. These two goals emphasise the importance of providing access to education to those living in the developing world, and the acceptance of these by the international development community and the work that has been carried out in their furtherance, has assisted many developing countries to move closer to achieving basic education for all.

However, along with the partial success of these initiatives, comes a new challenge for educators. Now that many more children, youth and adults, are primary school graduates, a new requirement has been generated – the need to provide more opportunities for post-primary learners to access secondary education. Without opportunities to continue their schooling, research has shown that neo-literates will quickly return to their earlier state of illiteracy. Similarly, if there is no post-primary educational or training path available, those who are currently enrolled in basic education programmes often lack the incentive to continue and, as a result, they drop out of the system, citing the fact that they see no reason to continue.

Therefore, to continue to increase the level of primary school registrations and to ensure that the learners successfully complete their studies at this level, it is important that a way is found to provide quality secondary education, integrated with technical/vocational training where required, 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 running new conventional institutions.

Of course, the number of students in classes 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 number of students that can be accommodated 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?

Education must be accessible, of good quality and affordable in order to meet the requirements of learners and providers, particularly in developing countries. ODL can, if well planned for and carefully implemented, fulfil these criteria. For example, using ODL is an excellent argument for economies of scale. To have a successful and high quality open/distance system delivering school level education, there must be an initial investment in the development of high quality learning materials. But once the materials have been developed, any number of learners can use them. And, with the increased use of computers during the development process, materials can be easily adapted and modified to suit local contexts and curriculum requirements, thereby allowing materials development costs to be shared by any number of institutions/ministries.

For Open Schooling to work, in addition to high quality materials, there are other systems required:

- A robust and reliable delivery system. This system can range from a high-end interactive computer system to a delivery van dropping off print materials at local learning centres, as long as it is reliable and timely.
- Learner support. This system is crucial to student success and is reliant on the quality of the staff that work in the system. Staff must be trained to provide support to learners in an open system, in specific areas such as how to mark assignments in a critical but sensitive manner and how best to facilitate tutorial sessions.

Once these various systems are in place, large student numbers can be accommodated with a minimum increase in expenditure. To increase the number of students in an ODL system, there must be additional materials provided, and the delivery and student support systems 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 needed to put in place the requirements for additional students in an ODL system is short, compared to the time required adequately to prepare 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 for secondary education.

### 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 to children and adults, as well as secondary and senior secondary courses, and vocational programmes. It provides education mainly to out-of-school children and youth, including drop-outs and socially and economically challenged learners.

NIOS also acts as a national resource agency for Open Schooling in India. It has an important role, which is to assist states in establishing State Open Schools (SOSs). NIOS provides technical and resource support, and shares its courseware and other resources with newly established SOSs. It also works with the staff at SOSs to jointly develop learning materials and to provide training opportunities in various areas designed to strengthen the institutions and improve the quality of the education and training that they deliver. NIOS is actively working to expand the system of SOSs to all of India's 28 states – currently there are about fourteen SOSs either functioning or for which there are implementation plans.

COL supports NIOS by providing training in multi-media and instructional design, which is planned to strengthen the capacity of its staff to develop quality course materials. COL

is also working with NIOS to implement a training strategy for their staff working in the regional centres. By sponsoring visits for NIOS staff to open polytechnics that offer vocational training through open/distance learning, COL is assisting NIOS to expand its course offerings in vocational areas. COL has also contracted with NIOS for consulting and expert services, provided by NIOS staff, to assist new, as well as existing Open Schools in the Commonwealth.

In order to support NIOS's expansion into the international arena, COL and NIOS have collaborated on a number of events, such as conferences and institutes organised by and held at NIOS. The institutes, held on an annual basis, target education officials and practitioners from developing countries of the Commonwealth such as Bangladesh, Botswana, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the United Republic of Tanzania, to name just a few of the countries that have participated. Through these events, the decision-makers and government officials gain valuable insight and firsthand experience with Open Schooling practices that will help them establish or enhance the educational systems in their home countries.

COL is proud of its long time association with NIOS and plans to continue its work in cooperation and collaboration with the institute to expand and enhance the use of Open Schooling within Commonwealth countries.



## 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 alternative teaching methodologies, and where feasible, ICT to bridge the separation and deliver 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 self-instructional 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 rules dictating student ages, prerequisites, courses to be taken, number of courses in which students must enrol or even the timing for an examination.

This flexible, student-driven approach provides opportunities for many 'non-conventional' learners, such as:

- Youth that missed out on schooling in their childhood can enrol in courses which will provide them with the equivalent 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 by studying at home, and attending tutorials only when necessary and their responsibilities permit.
- Working adults can enrol in one or two courses of their own choice at any given time, and study whenever their personal and work commitments permit.
- Young adults can acquire skill training coupled with academic subjects while they are self-employed or working as non-skilled labour.

The openness facilitates the learning process – learners 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. 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 simply to guide the learners and assist them to understand how to study the content in the material. These sessions are seldom mandatory.

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 a key factor. 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 at fixed times during a week, or may be held at the students' and

Jasmine Technologies, Inc. is a leading educational software company developing products for the next generation of students. With the proliferation of wireless networks, school adaptation of laptop computers and drastically reduced prices for hardware and software by all the major vendors, schools are adopting educational software in the classrooms.



*Terrence Elliott,  
Chairman,  
CEO & Co-Founder*

Competing in the educational space of Student Information Systems (SIS), Learning Management Systems (LMS), Online Gradebooks and Content Management Systems (CMS) is what Jasmine does best.

Jasmine develops, markets and sells five software products. The flagship product is LetterGrade, which is the premier online Gradebook.

LetterGrade has enjoyed five years of success and a 99% retention rate.

The second product in Jasmine's offering is its highly developed SIS, named DaVinci. DaVinci is the most advanced SIS on the market, designed with future technology in mind - not as an afterthought. Information that would previously have been overlooked is now taken into consideration with DaVinci.



*Cassandra B. Medford,  
President,  
COO & Co-Founder*

The third product offering by Jasmine is its eSchool web portal. eSchool will be the portal and

storefront for extending the learning environment from the classroom to the home. eSchool is positioned to tie all the Jasmine offerings into a single interface that will allow single log-on and support an electronic student profile that will cover the academic, physical, social and personal growth dimensions. eSchool will be positioned to follow the child through his school years.

The fourth product of Jasmine, allows students to participate virtually in classes that their school may not offer. With over 400 nationally approved courses in its databank, students virtually attend, participate and engage in instructor led virtual classrooms. These courses are already in use and have been field proven in over 70 schools in five English speaking countries.

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facilitators' convenience. Having the learning centres located in local neighbourhoods adds to the increased access of the education, especially for girls and women who possibly would not be permitted to travel any distance to a public school. Sometimes the meetings may be virtual, organised through teleconferencing, interactive radio, 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.

Further, in an open system, it does not negatively 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 they are ready and it is convenient for them to do so.

Open Schooling is most often offered at the secondary level to students/learners who have achieved a basic level of literacy, although there are some notable exceptions, such as the Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) initiative in Zambia. In addition to providing education for children in grades 1-4 under the guidance of a mentor and significantly improving literacy, the IRI programme is also attracting adults who never had the opportunity to go to school when they were young. People ranging in age from 17 to 51 have enrolled in classes and are following the same syllabus as the children.

The potential for the use of Open Schooling at the primary level has recently become much greater, however, because of the additional capabilities for delivery and support offered through newly available and affordable ICT. More research needs to be undertaken and new models examined and explored before expansion of Open Schooling at the primary level can be scaled up with full confidence in its success.

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

### Biographical notes

**Susan Phillips** is Education Specialist in Basic Education at the Commonwealth of Learning, where she assists member countries in their work towards achieving the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals in Education.