Open Schools: catalysts for creating an education system fit for the 21st century

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Open schools are urgently needed to provide access to education for millions of children who currently have no access to any formal schooling. While the world average for secondary school enrolment is 66%, the Gross Enrolment Rate in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is 34%.

(UNESCO, 2010)

Access to schooling remains inequitable, especially in rural areas where girls are being particularly disadvantaged. As governments stretch their resources to make progress towards the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education (UPE) by 2015, it is unlikely that the expansion of conventional secondary schooling will be a priority. Even if one new secondary school were to be built every month for the next ten years, the increased demand will not be met. In their study, Evaluative Open Schooling for Secondary and Higher Secondary Education: Costs and Effectiveness in India and Namibia[1], Koul and Rumble concluded that 'given the cost of setting up conventional schools, open schooling may be the only way of meeting the tidal wave of youngsters demanding secondary education'.

What is open schooling?

Open schooling is defined by the Commonwealth of Learning as '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 can be either complementary or an alternative to the conventional school system, and can deliver quality education cost effectively and at scale.

How OERs can add value to the national school system

Some of the challenges faced by secondary education providers stretch wider than access. There is also the need to increase the breadth and equality of access to secondary education, as well as ensuring that the curriculum provided to secondary school leavers learners is relevant to the needs of the various constituencies (Abrioux and Ferreira, 2009). Evidence of current practice in countries such as Botswana and Namibia shows that the course material used in open schools could replace the conventional school textbook. As open schools are also more flexible, it is also possible to tailor the curriculum to meet the requirements of the target audience. An example is the recent development of a curriculum for the planned Cameroon Open School. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) supported the development of a curriculum that included a range of academic and vocational subjects to address the needs of the target audience and the market/industry.

COL's OERs for open schooling initiative

COL has identified the development of open educational resources (OERs) as a strategy to help countries increase the breadth and equality of access to all levels and types of education, but especially secondary education. Through this initiative it is hoped that 20 sets of self-instructional learning materials on the secondary curriculum can be created in six developing countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia.

It is hoped that the content of the material will be suitable for use in both open and conventional schools, and will enable open schools to offer traditional and new subjects through interactive print and e-learning formats. The initiative does not simply centre on content development, however, but also focuses on training teachers in the use and integration of ICTs in their classrooms, through various capacity-building activities. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which has supported several OER projects in higher education, has provided COL with grant funding for this initiative.

Governance and ownership

Since initiatives can only succeed with the support of all stakeholders, this initiative has been founded on a governance structure that includes all the different stakeholders.

- The first level of governance is COL's Standing Committee, which provides the maximum support to the team working on this project, thus helping to send a clear message to the partners that this initiative is a high priority.

- The second level of governance is an international Steering Committee, in which senior members of the six countries are represented. This decision-making body also ensures that country teams are supported and actions are implemented at country level.

- The final level of governance is through the Country Management Committees, Country Coordinators, Country Consultants, Subject Team Leaders and Subject Teams, who all help to ensure that the initiative is properly implemented.

Each participating country, through their open school and Ministry of Education, has given a written commitment to use the content as part of their core learning resources. Once the content is completed, it will be distributed to all Commonwealth countries, as well as made available to non-Commonwealth jurisdictions, who will be free to use and adapt the content to suit their curriculum needs.

Monitoring the initiative

Monitoring and evaluation are integral components of the initiative. The monitoring mechanisms allow control of the process, which contributes to the initiative's success.

Close monitoring of the content development and professional development of teachers is taking place through online 'Base Camps', monthly reports from the Country Consultants and Country Coordinators, as well as monthly stakeholder teleconferences. It is essential in a project of this kind that the findings of the evaluation are built in to the process to allow the necessary improvements to take place.

Capacity-building activities

The following capacity-building activities were undertaken over a period of 18 months beginning in October 2008. Teachers were trained in three face-to-face workshops (in total, 30 days with intervals) and consultants provided online support to teachers, and continued to do so until March 2010 (the planned completion date for the initiative). Below are some of the areas in which the teachers were trained.

- Using computers and the internet.
- Understanding 'Base Camp' as a communication and content development tool.
- Using COL's Instructional Design Template.
- Being aware of copyright restrictions.
- Using Moodle as a Learning Management System (LMS) and content development platform.
- Transforming print-based OERs into online OERS.

Achievements

Developing synergy between open and conventional schooling is demonstrated by the composition of the subject teams, which include curriculum specialists from ministries of education, teachers from conventional schools, and distance learning experts. Each subject team continues to collaborate online through 'Base Camp', where a complete record of activities is available. The teams use COL's Instructional Design Template[2] to develop the material collaboratively. To ensure standardisation of the content, COL has developed a Moodle template that transforms print-based content into online content.

The consultants have learned how a systems approach to course development can enhance quality through the use and application of a course blueprint, which COL has created to ensure quality of the material. Thus far we have developed 11 sets of print-based content and 3 sets of multimedia content.

The teachers are working well online and in teams, but there is still room for improvement in building this community. Following the baseline study's results, there is evidence that the teachers' capacity has increased in all areas. In addition, the project has strengthened the management capacity of team leaders.

Challenges

Communication with and among participants remains a tricky area. Communication via email is new to many of the teachers involved in this initiative. In the first place, the technology is new, and secondly, as a new venture, it needs constant attention from the project team's side. Connectivity to the internet is taken for granted in the developed world, but in the six countries involved in this project, it is not so simple. The challenge is also more complex than mere connectivity; it involves issues such as low bandwidth, affordability and access to hardware. Furthermore, this initiative is an additional challenge for teachers, and as such it is inevitable that there are many delays. Despite the fact that teachers have been offered incentives to work on the project, and that the capacity building in itself is a huge investment, most of them feel that they would be better motivated through monetary incentives.

Conclusion

COL's OERs for Open Schooling initiative will serve as a model for similar activities in the future and, as such, our experience will be through the COL website and Wiki Educator (wikieducator.org). Despite the challenges that have arisen, there are many more advantages to this initiative, not only for the teachers, but also for the COL staff and associates working on the project.

Endnotes

[1] See www.col.org/resources/publications/Pages/detail.aspx?PID=261

[2] COL has developed a template for instructional design that helps content developers to convert their subject matter expertise into learning materials. It helps authors incorporate ODL instructional design techniques into their learning texts.

References

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