

Open Schooling for Systemic Resilience

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Abstract


Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, too many children of school going age were not in school. As schools re-opened after the pandemic, not all children returned. Moreover, there is a growing number of youths who are not in employment nor in education and training. More of the same will not get these children and youths back into education. However, the pandemic has reminded us that we can use technology to share content and mediate the school curriculum and, moreover, experience tells us that we can do this cost-effectively using appropriate open and distance learning approaches. These are the premises on which open schooling are built. This paper argues that there is ample evidence to support the value of open schooling as a key strategy for educational system resilience. Approached from a pragmatist perspective, this paper draws on several recent research reports from a literature review to make the case.

KEYWORDS: *Pandemic; School, Open and Distance Learning, Open Schooling, Resilience*

As noted in a recent publication from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (Mays & Singh, 2020), open schooling, which employs open approaches, distance methods and makes appropriate use of appropriate technology and infrastructure to mediate learning and support depending on context, offers possibilities to address the needs of out-of-school children and youths. However, relatively few countries have formally embraced open schooling. This is despite the fact that open schooling is based on open, distance and flexible learning approaches which can help ensure continuity of learning even when traditional physical schooling provision is not possible and so can contribute to building a more resilient education system.

India is one of the countries which has embraced open schooling at scale, however, and the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) in India is the world's largest example of an open school. COL has partnered with NIOS on many occasions in the past to explore various aspects of open schooling provision including the roles of volunteerism

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and NGOs (Ambasht, et al. 2001), promotion of open schooling (Ambasht, et al., 2002, NIOS/COL, 2005), advocacy (Ambasht, et el. 2002), community enterprise endeavours for open schooling (Ambasht, et al, 2003), and research to increase access (Ambasht, et al., 2003) among others. The launch of the International Journal of Open Schooling (IJOS) presents a welcome new avenue for collaboration and sharing of research and experience.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Proceeding from the perspective of a pragmatic social scientist (Babbie, 2016, 2017; Hookway, 2016), concerned to find practical, but not permanent, answers to constantly changing education challenges, this paper explores three inter-related questions:

1. Why is open schooling important and why is it not practised in every country?
2. How have technology and costs impacted open schooling possibilities?
3. How can open schooling contribute to systemic resilience?

METHODOLOGY

This is a discussion paper based on personal reflection and experience and a review of recent literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Objectives 1 - Why is open schooling important and why is it not practised in every country?

Prior to the COVID pandemic, it was estimated that some 300 million children of school-going age were not in school (UNICEF, 2018). After the pandemic, it is by no means clear that all the children who were in school, have or will return to schooling. Moreover, recent studies commissioned by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in the Pacific (Narayan, et al., 2021) and among Commonwealth member countries in Africa (COL, 2022), indicate large and sometimes growing numbers of youths who are not in employment nor in education and training (so-called NEETs). There are challenges with retention at both primary and secondary levels, and challenges with progression from primary to secondary and from junior secondary to senior secondary levels which we are unlikely to address effectively using traditional approaches, even if we could afford them. Moreover, many countries which have not formally adopted

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at a policy level, have adopted Inclusive Education (IE) policies and the flexibility inherent in ODL provision is entirely consistent with the implementation of IE policies.


However, a recent survey of policy and practice undertaken by COL (Mays, et al, 2021), found that outside of Australia and India, which both have extensive networks of distance and open schools, there are relatively few Commonwealth countries which have embraced open and distance learning for public schooling at a national or provincial level (Appendix A contains a list). Although a few countries have been exploring possibilities for open schooling models (Manyamba, et al., 2021; reliefweb, 2021), in at least two Commonwealth countries open schooling provision has been suspended due to changed priorities.

Part of the challenge is that providers of schooling are conservative by nature. Even in developed and connected economies the industrial notion that all learners and teachers need to be in the same place at the same time to work through the same curriculum in the same way and at the same pace holds away, even though this is at odds with the dynamic nature of societal change more generally, (Howard and Mataheru, 2019). Moreover, even when countries are seeking to make changes to their education systems, these often fail to address issues of embedded inequity of various kinds as well as limited uptake of policy provisions (Ainscow, et al., 2019; Oyedotun, 2020). However, during the pandemic, Ministries in many countries found quite innovative ways to provide emergency remote teaching (ERT, COL, 2020) by making use of various technologies. The extent to which hybrid and blended forms of provision will evolve from these experiences in the longer-term post-pandemic remains to be seen. It should have become clear to all, however, that we need no longer be bound by the bricks and mortar industrial model of schooling provision.

Objectives 2 - How have technology and costs impacted open schooling possibilities?

NIOS was one of the first institutions involved in flexible schooling provision to see the opportunity afforded by growing access to technology with its early NIOS on-line project (Bist, 2008) and other existing open schools were subsequently challenged to “raise their game” (Daniel, 2010, 1-8).

However, we first need to have an imagination for doing things differently and for assuming new roles. For example, digitally literate librarians can support both on-campus and remote learners, and can also support both teachers and learners with digital skills development and access to Open Educational Resources (OER) which are



curriculum-aligned. More widely, we need not only to embrace new roles but also new ways of working together both within and across institutions and countries using the ever-expanding technological tools available to us (Babayemi, et al., 2021). Internet-based technology means we can learn immediately from experience anywhere in the world. But we also need to be open to new ways of working, including new ways of working together.

We need to explore more integrated models that combine OER, various forms of ODL including massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Communities of Practice (CoP) and Open Educational Practices (OEP) within Open Schooling to promote open education and foster inquiry skills not only for provision but also for Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) to inform such provision, a key approach advocated by the European Commission (Okada and Sherborne, 2018; Nitschke, et al, 2020). There should probably be an explicit agenda to create a stronger link between past research in distance education and current research related to open and distance learning and open and online provision. For example, current research into the practice of open online forms of provision often neglects to acknowledge the history of prior research into open and distance education research observe Weller, et al., (2018). Another issue of concern for a new research agenda, which IJOS begins to address, is the dominance of publications based in developed countries, especially the US and the UK (Amoozegar, et al., 2018), potentially at the expense of limited relevance or insight into nuancing which might be needed to realise the potential of open schooling provision in a wide variety of developing contexts.

However, some things seem clear.

It seems clear that teacher educators need to prepare teachers for use of technology and help them to develop the necessary digital fluency and so that they in turn can prepare and support learners (Chigona, 2015, 2018, 2020).

It also seems clear that there is need for a better alignment with the needs of society and drawing upon the rich heritage of traditional learning, we can encourage co-learning through cooperation between students, scientists and communities to solve real-life problems aimed at promoting better professional socio-scientific education as well as responsible citizenship (Okada and da Matta, 2021).

It also seems clear that while curriculum-aligned content availed as OER can add value, there is need for ongoing support for both teachers and students to help turn access into


success and stringent monitoring and evaluating processes so that we can know what is going on and can close the feedback loop into improved practice (Nitschke and Louw, 2020).

In Mozambique, for example, a mixed methods tracer study was recently designed and implemented to explore open schooling provision in that country. It used quantitative analysis to ascertain student enrolment, retention and success and then switched to a qualitative focus, through surveys and focus groups, to gauge the satisfaction of students, teachers and managers with the open schooling model being piloted. While the pilot was generally considered successful in augmenting existing secondary schooling provision, access to devices, teacher development and support and expansion of curriculum coverage were all found to be in critical need of improvement if the model were to be scaled (Cossa, et al., 2021)

The study also revealed that, in general, minimum technological conditions were created at most participating pilot schools for the distance learning process, despite some discrepancies between schools and students. These findings are considered useful for documenting and sharing the reality of open schooling provision in the Mozambican context. Such knowledge is key to influencing educational policies to include training in digital literacy, as well as strategies for technology distribution for students from the pilot for example (Cossa & Ramos, 2022). In fact, the findings from the pilot have informed a revision of the national strategy.

Understanding the changing technology profile of learners must inform the design and re-design of provision. In a recent study from Botswana, the results showed that most of the respondents had average ability to navigate on the e-learning school platforms (E-library, portals, websites, etc.) and average awareness of the business learning software and applications which were recommended. They were familiar with several common online functionalities such as email and searches and had a basic understanding of relevant computer hardware. However, the study also revealed that respondents needed improvement in the use of ICT tools for learning subject content, and that the improvement of the use of ICT tools, by both teachers and learners, would enhance their understanding of the subject matter. Respondents cited poor internet connectivity and unreliable power supply, as well as slow internet connectivity, as some of the key challenges they faced (Hamaluba, 2022).

At scale, well-designed, and using appropriate technology in appropriate ways, distance and online learning approaches can be offered at a lower cost per learner, and even a



lower cost per successful graduate, than face-to-face provision. However, there is need to invest upfront in personnel, system and course development and to budget for review, renewal and learner support (Daniel, et al.,2009; Hülsmann, 2016; Sadruddin, 2019). Moreover, it is worth noting that investment in open schooling models in particular offers both an individual and a social return beyond the scope of the intervention itself (Di Vivier, 2016; Manyamba, et al., 2021).

Appropriate use of appropriate technology for a given context will continue to be a central concern for effective open schooling provision and as noted previously, a concerted effort is needed to ensure learners and teachers have access to appropriate devices and the Internet, regardless of where they happen to be physically located (COL, 2020).

Objectives 3 - How can open schooling contribute to systemic resilience?

As noted in COL (2020): Resilience encompasses the ability both to cope with current adversity and to recover quickly from the challenges presented. However, it also entails the ability to recover in ways that seek to learn from the experience, to adapt and to mitigate the impact of future similar challenges. (p.2)

Context is key and understanding the reasons why children do not access schooling or do not thrive in schooling is essential for designing appropriate interventions (Rajasekaran and Reyes, 2019). In many contexts it is likely that different needs will need to be met in different ways, ranging from largely autonomous learning through carefully scaffolded resources in print. or downloaded once-off and in entirety to a personal digital device (for example, for learners with social anxiety or physical challenges or children from nomadic families unable to get to centres or to access internet on a regular basis), through to fully online courses with all the bells and whistles (possibly for learners living in urban areas, needing to work in an entry-level job at the same time, and possibly even able to pay part of the cost).

It should be obvious that children who had a negative experience of schooling and dropped out are unlikely to want more of the same as their second-chance opportunity as youths or young adults (even if it was affordable to offer this). Allowing learners to choose what subjects they want to do, when and how, and also when and how they want to be assessed, has become much more possible than it was in the past by using appropriate technology in appropriate ways.

It is also relatively easy to design a course for online provision (for example in Moodle) and then adapt that well-scaffolded content into a self-study open textbook for blended or even independent study.

This would allow us to address the following diverse kinds of needs:

- (i) Learners unable to access face-to-face schooling
- (ii) Learners in face-to-face schools which are unable to offer all the subjects learners require
- (iii) Learners who need to step out of school for extended periods
- (iv) Learners who are in a traditional face-to-face school but who need additional resources and support
- (v) Learners who have dropped out of school and are unable to get back in due to age, family, work or other commitments or barriers.

Thus, the same well-scaffolded curriculum-based content can be used to augment the face-to-face system to reduce stop-outs and drop-outs while addressing the needs of a primary audience of learners who have been unable to access or succeed in traditional provision. Moreover, the availability of well-scaffolded learning materials means that learning can continue even if campuses close for a wide variety of reasons.

However, if we are to scale provision in these ways, we need to address challenges related to digital access, learning readiness and systemic readiness for online and blended learning (Jha and Ghatak, 2022).

As noted in COL (2020, p.13) we can use the following six key questions to help us begin to think about an open schooling intervention:

- (i) What curriculum do we want out-of-school/off-campus learners to follow?
- (ii) How many learners do we want to reach and what are their ages, gender and geographical location?
- (iii) What staff and resources do we have to design and implement the programme?
- (iv) In what ways could the learning resources be delivered to the learners?
- (v) How will the learners be supported?
- (vi) How do we plan to monitor the system, including the assessment of learner progress?



CONCLUSION

We cannot reach all learners in need of schooling using bricks and mortar provisions alone. Appropriate use of appropriate technology for context can help us not only to reach the unreached but can also help us to make the whole education system more resilient by ensuring continuity of learning when physical schooling is not possible due to pandemics, climate emergencies, conflict or other reasons. When the next pandemic, natural disaster or conflict disrupts schooling, it should be possible for learners to continue learning without further disruption to their futures beyond the current emergency. However, this may require a mindset shift in how we think an education system in general, and schooling in particular, should be managed (Sahlberg, 2021).


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Appendix A: Open Schools in the Commonwealth

Australia:

Alice Springs School of the Air: <https://www.assoa.nt.edu.au/>

Bourke-Walgett School of Distance Education: <https://bourkewalg-d.schools.nsw.gov.au/>

Brisbane School of Distance Education: <https://brisbanesde.eq.edu.au/>

Cairns School of Distance Education: <https://cairnssde.eq.edu.au/>

Camden Haven High School: <https://camdenhave-h.schools.nsw.gov.au/distance-education.html>

Capricornia School of Distance Education: <https://capricorniasde.eq.edu.au/>

Carnarvon School of the Air: <http://www.carnarvonsota.wa.edu.au/>

Charleville School of Distance Education: <https://charlevillesde.eq.edu.au/>

Charters Towers School of Distance Education: <https://charterstowersde.eq.edu.au/>

Dubbo School of Distance Education: <https://dubbo-d.schools.nsw.gov.au/>

Kalgoorlie School of the Air: <https://www.kalsota.wa.edu.au/>

Katherine School of the Air: <https://www.ksa.nt.edu.au/>

Kimberley School of the Air: <https://www.ksota.wa.edu.au/>

Longreach School of Distance Education: <https://longreachsde.eq.edu.au/>

Meekatharra School of the Air: <https://meekatharrasota.wa.edu.au/>

Mount Isa School of the Air: <https://mtisasde.eq.edu.au/>

North East Public School of Distance Education: <http://www.nepsode.org.au/>

Northern Territory School of Distance Education: <https://www.ntsde.nt.edu.au/>

NSW School of Languages: <https://nswschoollang.schools.nsw.gov.au/>

Open Access College: <https://www.openaccess.edu.au/>



Port Hedland School of the Air: <https://porthedlandsota.wa.edu.au/>

School of Isolated and Distance Education: <https://www.side.wa.edu.au/>

School of the Air Broken Hill and Hay: <https://schoolair-p.schools.nsw.gov.au/>

Tasmanian Academy: <https://www.tasc.tas.gov.au/tasmanian-academy/>

Tasmanian eSchool: <https://www.tasmanianeschool.education.tas.edu.au/>

Victorian School of Languages: <https://www.vsl.vic.edu.au/>

Virtual School Victoria: <https://www.vsv.vic.edu.au/enrolment/>

Bangladesh Open University, Open School: BOU OS

Botswana Open University's Centre for Open Schooling

Canada:

Fraser Valley Distance Education School: <https://www.fvdes.com/>

Open School BC: <https://www.openschool.bc.ca/>

South Island Distance Education School (SIDES): <https://www.sides.ca/en.html>

Vancouver Learning Network: <http://vlns.ca/>

Eswatini: Emlalatini Development Centre Report

Ghana Centre for National Distance Learning and Open Schooling CENDLOS

Guyana: Adult Education Association: AEA

India:

Andhra Pradesh Open School Society: [apopenschool](http://apopenschool.org/)

Assam State Open School: <https://www.ahsec.nic.in/StateOpenSchool.html>

Bihar Board of Open Schooling and Examination Chanakya National Law University:
<http://www.bbose.org/Contacts/Contactus.html>

Chhattisgarh State Open School: <http://www.cgsos.co.in>

Delhi State Open School Patrachar Vidyalaya: <https://www.cbsepatrachardelhi.com/>

[cbse-open-school-admission/](#)

Haryana Open School: <https://bseh.org.in/haryana-open-school>

Jammu & Kashmir State Open School: <https://www.jksos.co.in>

JSS Karnataka Open School: <http://jssonline.org/our-institutions/general-education/jss-kos-open-school/>

Kerala State Council for Open and Lifelong Education (SCOLE): <http://scolekerala.org>

Madhya Pradesh State Open School: <http://www.mpsos.nic.in>

National Institute of Open Schooling: <https://www.nios.ac.in>

Odisha State Open Schooling: <https://osos.in>

Pandit Sundarlal Sharma (Open) University: <http://pssou.ac.in>

Punjab State Open School: <http://www.pseb.ac.in/open-school>

Rajasthan Open School Literacy and Continuing Education: <https://rsosapp.rajasthan.gov.in>

Tamil Nadu Council for Open and Distance Learning: <http://www.tamilnaducouncil.ac.in/open-schooling/>

Tamil Nadu State Open Schooling: <https://tsos.in/>

Uttar Pradesh State Open School (Patrachar Shiksha Sansthan): <https://www.upsosb.ac.in/>

West Bengal Council of Rabindra Open Schooling: <https://wbcros.in/>


Malawi College of Distance Education (MCDE): [Report](#)

Mozambique: Instituto de Educação Aberta e à Distância (IEDA): <http://ead.mined.gov.mz/site/>

Namibian College of Open Learning: <https://namcol.edu.na/>

New Zealand: Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (formerly known as The Correspondence School):

<https://www.tekura.school.nz/learn-with-us/learn-with-us/about-te-kura/>



Papua New Guinea: Flexible, Open and Distance Education (FODE): <http://fode.education.gov.pg/>

Seychelles Institute of Distance and Open Learning: <http://www.sidol.edu.sc/>

Sri Lanka:

National Institute of Education: <http://nie.lk/> ; Open School Unit: <http://www.nie.lk/facdep45>

Tanzania:

The Institute of Adult Education (IAE): <https://www.iae.ac.tz/en> IAE has ODL education programmes starting at the secondary-school level via open schooling and regional centres. IAE also runs ODL programmes at the tertiary level, intended to prepare facilitators and administrators of adult and non-formal education programmes in the local government authority areas.

A list of the 151 public open schools and 516 stakeholder-owned open schools affiliated with IAE can be accessed [here](#)

United Kingdom: National Extension College: <https://www.nec.ac.uk/>

Zambia College of Distance Education: <https://www.facebook.com/people/Zambia-College-of-Distance-Education/100057314774864/>

Zambian College of Open Learning: [ZAMCOL](#)