

Book Review – Perspectives on Distance Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century

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Volume 11, numéro 2, mai 2010

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1067691ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v11i2.852>

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Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press (AU Press)

ISSN

1492-3831 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Sharma, R. (2010). Compte rendu de [Book Review – Perspectives on Distance Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century]. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 11(2), 97–99.
<https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v11i2.852>

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International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning
Volume 11, Number 2.
ISSN: 1492-3831
May – 2010

Book Review

Perspectives on Distance Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century

Editors: D. A. M. X. Abrioux and F. Ferreira (2009). [Perspectives on Distance Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century](#). Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning. ISBN: 978-1-894975-33-9.

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There is no denying the fact that primary school education is the most important building block of an educational system. If the foundation is strong, the future will be secured. Numerous commissions, forums, and governments have advocated greater attention and resource allocation to primary education. Open schooling (OS) has become one of the mechanisms to achieve that goal. This book deals with different dimensions of open schooling, such as the formulation of policies that foster the growth of open schools, the use of ICT, and the cost structures. To bring home the point, case studies from six Commonwealth countries are described to provide a diverse picture of the status and future of OS across the globe. These cases provide a picture of different governance models and levels of autonomy, different degrees of openness, different stages of establishment, and a wide range of enrolments, jurisdictions, student success, adoptability of ICT, instructional design, human support etc. The book draws a picture of the spectrum of OS systems.

The book's 11 chapters are distributed in four parts. Part I: Introduction contains one chapter by Dominique Abrioux. Part II: Themes offers three chapters. Part III: Case Studies presents case studies from sub-Saharan Africa (Botswana and Namibia), Oceania (Australia & Papua New Guinea), South Asia (India) and North America (Canada). Part IV: Conclusion contains the final chapter by the second editor, Frances Ferreira.

In his preface, Sir John Daniel categorically emphasizes that, following the success of postsecondary education through open and distance learning (ODL), it is now time for OS to flourish. Having restated the significance of Education for All in 1990 at Jomtien and in 2000 at Dakar, different governments have paid serious attention to Universal Primary Education (UPE), one of the goals declared at the Dakar Forum. To help developing countries to achieve UPE and gender equality, the Fast-Track Initiative (FTI) was introduced, and it boosted efforts to achieve higher literacy levels. Through carefully designed programs and the lifelong learning and flexible

mechanisms of OS, many issues yet to be addressed for UPE can be sorted out. Additionally, private providers are now beginning to pay attention to OS.

In the introductory chapter, “Special Issues and Practices in Open Schooling,” Abrioux discusses such core issues as the need to increase the breadth, equality, and openness of access, the relevance of curricula to the needs of stakeholders, the quality of the teaching and learning, and the maximizing of the cost-effectiveness, cost-efficiency, and sustainability of educational systems. These challenges in developing countries are particularly serious. He suggests the establishment of an OS model with mechanisms to overcome barriers and to enable access to open learning. There is a need to clarify whether OS is to complement or to serve as an alternative to the conventional schooling system. This chapter also touches upon three additional themes: policy for OS, use of ICT in OS to increase accessibility, and the quality and cost-effectiveness of OS.

The second chapter discusses policies that enable the development of OS. All six institutions examined in this book have different procedures, protocols, rules, and regulations that are affected by the state or provincial and national roles they play in relation to different levels of government. Some governments have taken OS quite seriously; for others, it is a low priority. This chapter poses a question as to why governments should formulate policies for OS. Emerging from the discussion is the conclusion that due to their different cost structures, both ODL and OS need specific policies irrespective of government’s commitment so that they are not subjected to changes in government or funding priorities. Identification and analysis of issues followed by setting a specific agenda can set the stage for the selection of a range of specific policy options. Policy documents should include the following: background of OS, definition of terms, statement of principles, application and scope, date of commencement, responsibilities of different units, and sources of funding, etc. The chapter presents useful tips to formulate effective approaches, such as consideration of the paramount importance of the beneficiaries, the cautious use of technology (recognizing it is only a mechanism), careful investment, integration of OS with existing educational systems, and a caution that OS not be treated as a one-fix solution to educational problems.

In the chapter on ICT for OS, the author points out that OS allows educational access to large populations, offers a platform to people with disabilities, young mothers, and street children, etc. who cannot participate in traditional educational systems, and caters to the need for lifelong learning. Increased access to high quality resources can increase learner involvement and motivation by allowing greater interaction among learners. OS institutions use various ICT tools to make intervention successful. Appropriate planning frameworks can resolve such infrastructure issues as availability of resources, funding requirements, and maintenance. Adoption of ICT must be in tune with learning models and the way ICT may be used to establish repositories of instructional lessons, self tests, quizzes, and program orientations. The authors of this chapter also discuss human resource issues, such as capacity building and the languages staff and students should use in their respective OS systems.

Chapter four pertains to the costs of open schooling and describes different approaches to calculate ODL systems, types of costs, factors affecting costs as well as costs related to ICT implementation. As suggested by the author, through careful design OS can deliver education that is at the same level of quality as that offered in traditional schools. Part III consists of six case studies originating in different Commonwealth countries. These case studies provide the following information about the OS systems: background, national context, legal and regulatory framework, governance, organizational model, institutional culture, funding mechanisms, student success rates, curriculum framework, degree of openness, student support services, student assessment practices, use of ICT, quality control, and cost-effectiveness mechanisms.

The final chapter presents a picture of the bright but challenging future of open schooling. The author asserts that open schools can be a solution for enhancing access to quality secondary schooling; on the other hand, there is a paucity of documented evidence to support this assertion, which is needed to advance the OS agenda and to remove the misconceptions about OS amongst policy makers and key stakeholders. Citing relevant practices of institutions described in previous chapters, the author of this chapter emphasizes the factors that address the issues of equality of access and outreach, relevance of curricula to societal needs, improvement of the quality of teaching and learning, and achievement of cost-effectiveness and cost-efficiency.

This book's critique of the existing practices, policies, rules, and regulations of open schools and its recommendations for creating new and successful OS models will appeal to distance education practitioners, policy makers, educational technologists, government officers, and researchers. The book deepens our understanding of the infrastructure, policy framing, ICT, and costing issues relative to the governance and operation of successful OS institutions. I strongly recommend it for all those who may have an interest in OS or who are concerned about planning its advancement, wherever they happen to be.

