

Open Schooling Practice in Nepal: An Overview

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Abstract

The number of students kept on increasing in open schools since their establishment until the academic session 2011/ 2012 but dramatic decrease appeared in 2012/ 2013. As far as the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) result is concerned, in the first four years, the rate of pass percentage in regular cum supplementary examination was satisfactory. However, since 2011/ 12, the result is not so satisfactory. This is the key challenge of open schools in Nepal. Trained human and financial resources, physical infrastructures and use of ICT as a delivery medium are also the challenges of open schools. To face these challenges, some measures can be taken, for example, ensuring clear policy, developing well trained human resources, increasing government's high priority on open schools, setting learner friendly content, managing physical infrastructure and equipping modern technology.

This article focuses on current policies, national as well as international practices, challenges and opportunities of the open schools and recommendations for concerned authorities and stakeholders so that they could contribute to improving the open schools further. To prepare this paper, books and journal articles have been reviewed. Moreover, this paper is based on secondary data regarding SLC result and the number of open school students.

Key words: Open school, Complementary and alternative approach, Enrolment, Pass percentage, Challenges, Way forwards

Introduction

Mukhopadhyay (1994) traced the first open school program to Australia where correspondence lessons were prepared at the request of a parent in Beech Forest in the Otway Mountains in 1914. Similarly, open schools were introduced in Canada and New Zealand in 1919 1922 respectively. In 1979, an Open School was established in India, as a project of the Central Board of Secondary Education, Delhi. Later, an autonomous body called National Open School, (NOS) was established in 1989 to operate and manage open schools. At present, it is known as National Open School Institute (NIOS) with the responsibility of running open schools. According to Perraton (1992:10) "at secondary level, African distance teaching institutions have long experience of using correspondence courses, with some radio support and face-to-face guidance, for students outside school." The 1960s saw a massive expansion of distance education across many countries especially in higher education. During that period, distance education at primary and secondary levels was confined to a few countries (Mukhopadhyay, 1994). Largely because of this, much of the literature on open and distance learning was, up to the turn of the 1990s, on distance higher education and less on open schooling. However, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has since then played a leading role in disseminating information about the practice of open schooling particularly in the Commonwealth through its publications and workshop reports (Mukhopadhyay and Phillips 1994).

The emergence of open learning is directly connected to the issue of access to education. Therefore, open schools are landmarks for the youths and adults deprived of school education due to social, geographical, economic, physical, political and many other reasons. In many countries, school level education is considered to be a basic right and is seen as a necessary requirement for improving the quality of life. Thus, open school emerged from concern about how to provide a minimum level of education to those who have no access to school level education due to different reasons. For example, despite the efforts of

Nepal government, net enrolment rate (NER) is only 54.9% at secondary level means 45.1% secondary level age children are outside the school system (Department of Education-DoE, 2013/14). Of several interventions to bring them into school system, open schooling is considered to be a very important strategy for fulfilling the stated objectives of achieving the national goals of education.

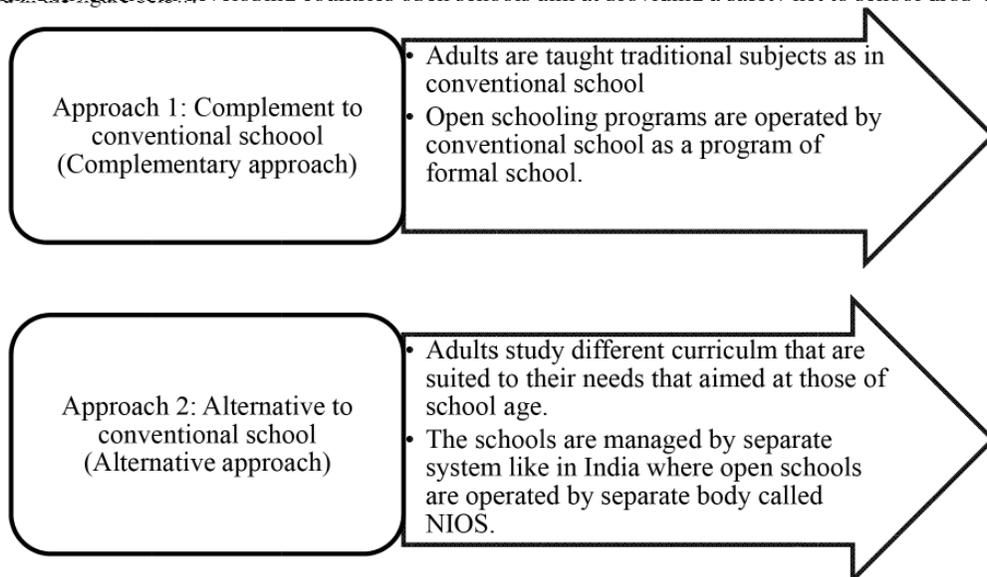
As Phillips (1994) stated, open schooling concerns using alternative and usually less resource-based approaches which characterize distance education methods and open learning, to deliver basic education and training” (p.149). In this way, Nepal has also implemented alternative primary and lower secondary school education, and lower secondary as well as secondary level open schools. These are alternative education to formal education based on the approaches as mentioned by Phillips.

Open schooling is defined by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) 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” (Phillips 2006, p. 9). COL further explains that the most common scenario is that the learners study specially designed open 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 in terms of rules dictating student ages, prerequisites, content of courses to be taken or number of courses in which students must enroll. For example, those who missed out schooling in their childhood can enroll in the courses, which will provide them with the equivalence of secondary education without their having to endure the embarrassment of being in classrooms with children much younger than they are.

Approaches to Open Schooling

Basically, open schools are grounded on two different approaches: one complementary to the conventional system, which shares the curriculum developed for conventional schooling system and the other alternative to the conventional system, which presents a more adult-relevant curriculum (ibid.). These two approaches can be presented in the figure below:

Mukhopadhyay (1994) has also clearly mentioned these two approaches of open schools in terms of the countries whether they are developed or developing. According to him, open schools in developed countries aim at reaching out with education to the disadvantaged population groups in dispersed locations where conventional schools are not available and providing a choice to students for what they want to learn. Conversely, in developing countries open schools aim at providing a safety net to school drop-outs



so they do not lapse into illiteracy and providing education who cannot attend conventional schools for a variety of social and economic reasons and as well to those who missed out and are now 'over age'. From this, it can be generalized that the first approach is found in developing countries while 'alternative approach' in developed countries.

Open schools in Nepal are operated based on complementary approach since they are following the same curriculum and contents taught to the regular students. Similarly, open schools are taken as the programs of conventional school since they are managed by the head teacher and management committee of conventional community schools. Moreover, finally the learning achievements are measured by the same examination system for both open and conventional schooling students, for example, School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination.

Open Schools in Nepalese Context

Every government in the world has an obligation to provide education to all its citizens, mainly because education is not only a human right but is also a critical factor in economic development and poverty reduction. In particular, basic (primary and secondary) education helps reduce poverty “by increasing the productivity of the poor, by improving health and by equipping people with the skills they need to participate in the economy and in society” (World Bank, 1995: 1).

Many governments have developed a variety of strategies for developing education and training programs. These include experimentation with innovative approaches and technologies such as open and distance learning. In particular, the challenge of implementing goals for universalizing primary education and the need to increase access to secondary education has contributed to the development and expansion of open schooling.

As far as existing policy provisions in Nepal are concerned, the Interim Constitution 2007 recognizes education as a fundamental right to all children irrespective of where they are born and live, and where they belong. This indicates that the state has the prime responsibility to ensure schooling opportunity (at least basic education) for all school age children. In this way, the Constitution directs the government to take necessary measures for realizing the goals of education for all (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). School Sector Reform Plan-SSRP (2009-2015) has put emphasis on the alternative provision in school education, which includes three different programs (Ministry of Education, 2009): i) alternative schooling ii) open education in lower secondary level (Grades-8); and iii) open education in secondary level (Grades 9-10). Therefore, SSRP aims at developing the integrated system of alternative education in the country, which includes flexible schooling, mobile schooling, and home-based learning system, open and distance education.

The policy provision of open and distance education has also been included in Education Regulations 2002. By realizing the importance of open and distance education in the country, Ministry of Education (MoE) has developed guidelines and directives, for example, Distance / Open Learning Operation Guidelines, 2063 B.S. (with fourth amendment, 2072 B.S.) based on the Regulations. As per the directive, secondary level open schools are being operated in the country.

In order to cater the needs of out of school students and adults, alternative/ flexible schooling and the provision of open schooling program in lower secondary and secondary education are made available in Nepal. Under alternative schooling, Department of Education (DoE) has operated non-formal adult schools. Some of these schools are also known as *Grihani Schools* where only adult women study. Such schools offer education to targeted students/ adults in flexible time, venue and teaching learning process.

Under open schooling system, lower secondary open schools and secondary level open schools are being operated in Nepal. In lower secondary open schools, two years' courses are made available for the students who have completed primary education either from formal education system or from alternative schooling system. The duration of the program is two years and is divided into level 1 and level 2. These two levels cover the entire present basic level curriculum (6-8). For this, learning achievements and

contents are condensed into two years. Altogether 37 open schooling programs are being operated in different community school across the country (NFEC, 2014). In such centers, everyday two hour sessions are organized to teach and facilitate students. Such programs run in the formal community schools which are responsible to run classes for those students. Some additional incentives are provided to teachers, head teachers and support staff for the additional tasks. Each class/ center receives block grants from district education offices for purchasing materials, stationery and text books (DoE, 2014).

For secondary level, there is the provision of open schools for the youths and adults who have completed lower secondary level either from the formal or open education system. Such students can join this program and complete secondary education within a year. At present, altogether 84 classes/ centers are being operated under open secondary education program. Seven face to face contact sessions, each of five hours, are conducted, where students are taught the contents as set for 10th graders of formal or conventional school, homework and project works are assigned and mid-term and final session tests are administered (NCED, 2010). Such programs are operated in formal schools and the teachers working for formal education system have been made responsible to conduct the contact sessions. Some additional incentives are also provided to teachers, head teachers and support staff for their extra work. Each center receives block grant from district education offices for purchasing stationery, facilitator allowance and library, and ICT management.

Guidelines approved by the Government of Nepal provide direction for implementing lower secondary and secondary level open school programs. And there are also clauses and provisions in the Education Regulations to run open education classes. Non-formal education center at the central level is responsible to manage all activities related to open education at lower secondary level whereas NCED has been taking care of all the technical aspects of open education at secondary level. Department of Education is responsible to release budget to the open schools through district education offices which are responsible at the district level to monitor open school activities.

The following table provides brief information on alternative, flexible and open schools running in Nepal.

Features	Secondary Level Open Schools	Low Secondary Level Open Schools	Non-formal Adult or <i>Grihini</i> School
Number	84	37	Non-formal primary education-235 Housewife Schools (Basic -333 and Secondary- 33)
Care taker	NCED	NFEC	DoE
Approved by	Distance Education Committee	District Education Office	District Education Office
Duration	One year	Two years	Primary- three years Lower secondary- two years Secondary- one year
Curriculum	Formal curriculum of Grade 10	Basic level (6-8) curriculum but condensed into two years	Primary- Formal curriculum but condensed into three years Lower secondary- Formal curriculum but condensed into two years Secondary - Formal curriculum of Grade 10
Classes	Seven five-day contact sessions	Two hours in every working day	Two hours in every working day

(Source: Department of Education, 2014)

Status and Challenges of Open Schools in Nepal

On the ground of Distance Education and Open Learning Policy- 2006, secondary level open school

programs started in five schools, one school in each region, as pilot program in the academic session 2007/ 008. In this academic session, 133 students attended SLC exam. The number of open schools and the students attended the SLC exam have been given in the table below:

Table: Increment of Students in Secondary Level Open School Program

Years	No of Schools	Increased by % compared to previous year	Students appeared	Increased by % compared to previous year
2007/08	5	-	133	-
2008/09	25	400	1330	900
2009/10	52	108	4992	275.3
2010/11	85	63.5	5559	11.36
2011/12	84	0	7362	32.43
2012/ 13	84	0	3184	-56.75
2013/14	84	0	3876	21.8
2014/15	84	0	3616	- 0.067

Source: NCED and Office of the Controller of Examination (OCE) Sanothimi, Bhaktapur

According to the table, in 2007/ 2008 five open schools were established with 133 students. In the second year, number of schools and students dramatically increased by 400% and 900% respectively. Except in 2011/012, number of open schools increased and the same trend appeared in case of students' enrolment. The number of students increased by 32.43% in 2011/012. Unexpectedly, the number of learners decreased by 56.75% in 2012/ 2013 despite the constant number of schools. After this academic session, the numbers of students enrolled in open schools seems nearly constant.

Regarding the pass percentage of the open school students in SLC exam, it fluctuates over the period. The graph below shows the rate of the result:

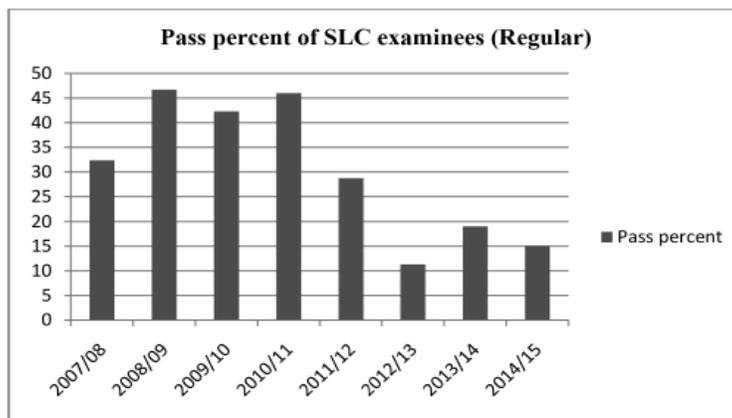


Figure: Promotion rate of open school students in SLC regular examination

(Source: OCE, Sanothimi Bhakatapur)

As shown in the figure above, the pass percentage of open school students in regular SLC examination has fluctuated over the years. However, pass percentage in the exam in the last four years is not satisfactory compared to the result of previous four years. The pass percentage dropped to 28.7% in 2011/ 12 and dramatically fell by 17.4% in 2012/ 2013 compared to previous year. In SLC 2013/14, the pass percent increased by about 4% but the trend of increasing could not remain even in the following year. The latest

result shows that the pass percentage is far less than the national figure almost by 33%.

The following figure shows that the pass percentage of SLC (regular cum supplementary) students in open schools seems to be more satisfactory compared to that of only regular students.

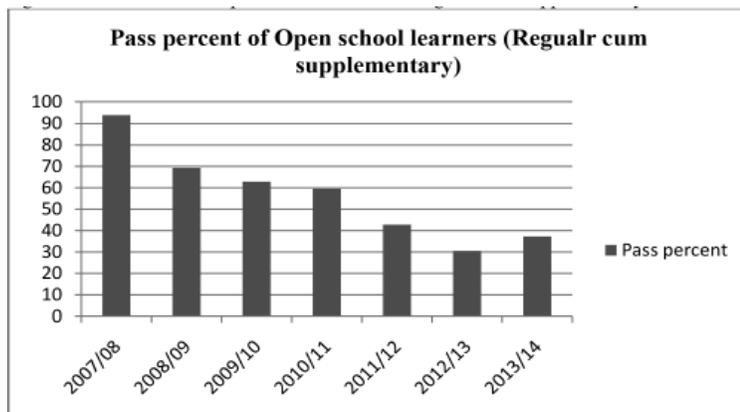


Figure: Promotion rate of open school students in regular cum supplementary SLC exam

(Source: OCE, Sanothimi Bhakatapur)

According to the above figure, total number of students passed in the SLC examination dramatically decreased by 24.7% in 2008/ 09 compared to the previous academic session. The figures nearly plateau in 2009/ 10 and 2010/ 11 before its significant decrease in 2011/ 12. The trend of decreasing in pass percentage remained in 2012/ 13 but a slight increase appeared in 2013/14. All the tables and figures as mentioned above explicitly shows that enrolment and promotion rate of open school students has decreased in later years compared to previous years.

Therefore, challenges regarding enrolment and achievement have been noticed in open schooling system in Nepal. This can be area of study for finding the reasons behind this challenge and setting way forwards. Except these challenges, there are several gaps in management and implementation of open schools. Niraula (2009) stated the following gaps of open schools in Nepal.

- Government initiated alternative schools for primary, lower secondary and secondary level open schools but these schools are running under different policies and directives. For example, lower secondary and secondary level schools are under the coordination of distinct government organizations viz. NFEC and NCED respectively. Hence, variations in operation, materials used, delivery methods and student evaluation system in lower secondary and secondary level open schools can be explicitly seen though they are conducted by government system and fund.
- Students, parents, teachers, school managers and educators are habituated with face to face mode of education, in this condition they are reluctant to believe on distance mode of education.
- Inadequate skill on ICT in teachers and students has brought difficulty to operate open schools in such a way that ICT is one of the prominent medium of self-study and virtual interaction between teacher and learner, among teachers or students.
- Difficulty has been realized in broadcasting audio and audio-visual materials because stakeholders' generally feel national radio broadcasting is not effective owing to frequency jam and TV due to excessive power cut.
- Access to ICT in rural area is also burning challenge for smoothly running distance based schooling system.
- The same curriculum and evaluation system for conventional and open school students has brought serious problem since adult learners desire the experience based and immediate result

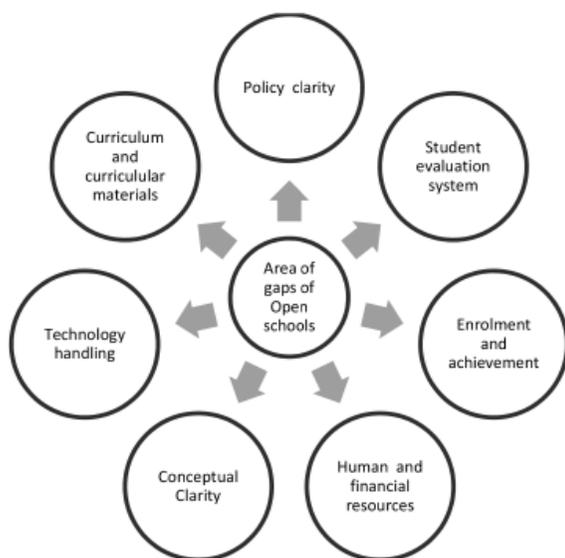
oriented contents.

- g) Because of inadequate human resources for developing materials for open and distance learners as well as poor management system, open schools are being operated without the spirit of distance and open learning.

According to Siaciwena (n.d.), open and distance learning institutions, especially in developing countries share similar inhibiting factors, which include:

- a) inadequate, or at least, varying financial resources from national governments that are inclined to destabilize both planning and operational stages at critical phases of development;
- b) inadequate or unreliable communications systems;
- c) limited access for the population at large to electrical and electronic communications technologies on which such large-scale systems may wish to depend;
- d) lack of qualified teachers, media production and administrative personnel;
- e) instinctive resistance of many, if not most, conventional teachers and educational administrators to the unfamiliar philosophies inherent in distance education.

With the analysis of all issues, inhibiting factors and gaps as mentioned above, the major challenges of open schools in the context of Nepal have been figured as below:



There are ample challenges in existing open schools although open schools have played instrumental role to provide school education to those who have not got access to secondary level school education due to various reasons. The challenges are categorized in different areas as shown in the above figure. One of them is policy ambiguity which causes variations in delivery process, material development and student evaluation system. For example, in the same school, lower secondary and secondary level open schooling programs are operated under two different organizations and directives. Lower secondary level open school students have to come to school regularly to attend two hour class whereas secondary level students thirty five days in the whole academic session. The school that runs both sorts of open schooling system should be responsible to both organizations, for example, NCED and NFEC in case of secondary and lower secondary level respectively.

Similarly, in secondary level, learners are compelled to study as per the curriculum set for regular students. Therefore, the curriculum hasn't addressed the learner's need, desire, experience and day to day life. The adult learners wish to learn such contents that could have immediate impact on their livelihood. The regular formal curriculum hasn't motivated adult learners to join open schools. From the curricular material perspective, open school students are fully dependent on text materials. Respective organizations haven't produced digital materials such as audio and audio visual materials which are more effective for

self study practice. Similarly, website hasn't been developed addressing the students and teachers of open schools. Further, most of the teachers lack technical know-how about ICT to support student differently.

Generally, open school classes are handled by the teachers who are habituated of conventional way of teaching. This results in using traditional methods for teaching open school students. Even today, teachers and community do not believe in distance education as complete form of education. They think that open schools are only for weaker students rather socially, geographically and economically deprived people. This kind of dogma of teachers, students and community hurdles the development of open schools.

As far as the government's practice is concerned, it has not focused on open schooling system as done on regular schooling system. Accordingly, nominal resources have been allocated for managing open schools, which is not sufficient to open schools with the essence of distance and open learning.

Lastly, but not least, student evaluation system for open school students is similar to the system for regular students. Paper pencil test is not suitable for adult learners. Project work, assignment, contact session performance and learning achievement are not taken as the foundations for their summative evaluation.

Way Forwards

To face the challenges as mentioned above, the following measures need to be taken:

- a) Both lower secondary and secondary level open schooling programs need to be coordinated and managed by only one governmental organization and guided by a common policy and directives.
- b) Government should establish separate government body or organization to run open school and other distance based educational programs so that open school learners would have opportunity to learn practical and adult friendly contents and take examination accordingly.
- c) Tutorial classes and other curriculum based educational programs should be broadcast via both national and local radio and television.
- d) The schools which are running open schooling programs need to be strengthened in terms of ICT facilities.
- e) All the stakeholders (both local and central level) should be aware of the concept and importance of open schooling system because all the stakeholders need to know distance education system and open school as second chance, not as second class education.
- f) Open school learners should have opportunities to choose courses as per their desire and need. For this, varieties of courses need to be designed, among which they could choose as per their want. The open school needs to be conducted in elective approach such as in open schools conducted by NIOS in India.
- g) Open school instructions compulsorily need to comprise the four elements: self study print materials (carefully designed and structured in modular format), electronic media (radio and television broadcast, audio and video conference), interactive face to face contact session (tutorials, interactive group learning, laboratory practical etc.) and student counseling (academic and personal).
- h) Mobile phone is easily access device to the most of the open school learners. Therefore, mobile learning technology needs to be introduced in open school programs.

Conclusion

In the secondary level of open schools in Nepal, enrolment of the students has been found in increasing trend with the growth of numbers of open schools. Conversely, in the academic session 2010/ 2011, students' number increased even though number of open schools was reduced from 85 to 84. As far as the achievement of open schools is concerned, the pass percentage of SLC attended students from open schools was satisfactory in the first four years. However, this rate dramatically dropped in the last four years and so did the enrolment in the academic session 2012/2013 onwards. Thus, low enrolment and low achievement have become the major challenges of open schools. Except these, there are some

other challenges such as inadequacy of skilled people and financial resource, using text materials without including audio and audio visual materials. These are the challenges at school level. Challenges have been realized not only at school level but also in policy formulation and central level. The challenges in policy and central level are impractical curriculum for open school learners, ambiguous and overlapped policies and limited resources to run open schooling system.

To face the challenges, the government should formulate one door policy to run open schools effectively. Furthermore, adult friendly and experience-based curriculum should alternatively be designed. Delivery mechanism and evaluation system need to be based on adult learning theories.

The big issue is whether open schools are second class education providers or second chance education. From second class education perspective, education through open schools has been considered lower graded education compared to 'face to face' education. This perspective can divide people into two classes among educated people in terms of mode they chose for education. Conversely, second chance perspective of open school education indicates on the equal opportunity of marginalized, disadvantaged and deprived people in education. This concept has the base on the right of deprived youths and adults. Finally, open school education needs to be taken as second chance rather second class education.

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