

A NATIONAL OPEN SCHOOL?

Are we afraid of educating people differently?

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The model of school education in England differs little from the 1950's. As we head towards the middle years of the 21st century- and against a backdrop of massive, pandemic-influenced social change- this article proposes that we embrace pluralism, and adopt educational methods that follow the direction that social trends are already heading. We suggest the time is right for a National Open School.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A NATIONAL ONLINE SCHOOL?

The concept for the Open School (OS) is for a state funded mainstream school for people, young and old, who for their own reasons can't **and may never** access a bricks and mortar institution. The Open School would fit in with existing accountability, regulatory and inspection frameworks and work with existing providers of school level distance education and other partners to provide high quality national provision accessible to all potential students regardless of location and circumstances.

So the name, *Open School (OS)* is the working epithet we give to a very different way of educating young people. The OS would be a fully functioning online school, targeted at students who find the traditional school environment overwhelming and unproductive and those who wish to improve their qualifications. Students could be home-based, attending classes online taught in real-time by teachers or studying independently at times to suit them. Various local premises could be used depending on the local context: many rural areas still have poor internet connectivity. Students would also have access to the full range of learning support and pastoral care offered by bricks and mortar institutions. A crucial part of the OS offer is to balance individualised home learning on the one hand with opportunities for regular structured and unstructured social interaction. For example, for those who can do this, this might take the form of regular meet-ups with classmates (at least one full week every half term) in order to engage in learning and assessment of a more practical nature, and also crucially for the social benefit. However, we also recognize that for many young people and for those in work or with caring responsibilities, the online space itself is a perfectly valid meeting place for social interaction.

The OS differs from similar existing online educational offerings in the UK. The OS is intended

to occupy a wholly new place within the existing educational 'ecosystem', providing a school community and strong sense of belonging for students. It promises a truly personalised and blended approach (mixing online and f2f interaction) to attendance and learning, harnessing the full potential of technology in order to meet the needs of a cohort who are not benefiting by the current one size fits all system. On the one hand the OS is by definition not a static repository of pre-recorded lessons, teaching resources and online tests. Neither is it a form of ad hoc 'alternative provision', there as a backstop for students without a place in a mainstream bricks and mortar school (and often the province of previously excluded students, or those with special educational needs [SEND] but for whom there is no suitable school place).

We are proposing an online school which has all the organisational structures you find in a physical school, including personal support for learners who need a mentor or additional support to help them learn. Our proposal would use technology and existing quality assured resources, in order to bring high- quality, cost-effective schooling to these vulnerable cohorts. This contrasts directly with the existing model of schooling, which expects all learners to attend schools based on the same essential model. For many students (e.g. neurodiverse individuals; those who face barriers to attendance) the traditional school is not always the best environment.

A STEP CHANGE IN BLENDED TEACHING AND LEARNING

The pandemic and its enforced lockdowns launched secondary schooling years into the future. With access to schools restricted mainly to children of key workers and learners classed as 'vulnerable', accepted concepts about where students learn and how they learn had to change overnight. For thousands of students the very space in which they learned was transformed.

Teachers' response to the pandemic, employing a diverse set of existing tools with some determination arguably saved mass education. Teachers and students demonstrated that the online space was a valid one for learning. Their efforts were proof that online-based education not only works at scale, but for some students it can even be superior. For example, academics from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge found that one in three young people say their mental health and wellbeing improved during COVID-19 lockdown measures (Soneson et al, 2022).

Yet as society struggles to get back to normal, those bold strides into a technologically-inspired educational future have been checked. Traditional classroom teaching may work well for many but as Soneson et al (2022) found there is a sizable minority for whom this model of teaching and learning is not productive.

MEETING REAL NEEDS

The inescapable problem with putting students into the same space is that we create an inflexible 'one size fits all' culture that fails to meet the needs of all children. The way the mainstream

education system is set up sends a very clear message: that you're either in school or you're not learning; that you either fit in, or you find your own arrangements. As many students and families will attest - especially where school-based anxiety and special educational needs are concerned - making more bespoke arrangements to meet needs can be incredibly hard.

According to Square Peg- a community interest company that champions the cause of children and young people who find it hard to attend school- almost a million pupils were persistent absentees from school as of Autumn 2019. There is a long standing problem potentially leading to a large uneducated population who are denied life chances. England's Children's Commissioner for England has identified 100,000 children missing from school (Shearing, 2022) following school closures during the pandemic. The Department of Education (October, 2021) identifies 13% of pupils from a population of about 8 million- i.e. 1,040,000 children- as persistently absent from school in January 2021. (DfE guidance states that "a pupil enrolment is identified as a persistent absentee if they miss 10% or more of their possible sessions".) The causes of persistent absence are many and various, some of the common reasons being bullying, school-based anxiety, and unmet special educational needs.

Ultimately we see a national Open School service as providing catch-up opportunities, over a number of years, for those whose learning has been disrupted through covid, as well as those whose learning is disrupted for other reasons.

We talk of inclusive education but the current system is not inclusive enough. Such absence data makes it clear that the school classroom is clearly not the best place for thousands of children, and that trying to force these 'square pegs' into the educational 'round hole' of school and the classroom causes genuine trauma, leads to educational potential going unfulfilled and affects outcomes in later life with consequent disadvantages and alienation cascading down through the generations. So many students have their needs diagnosed but not properly met. They need options and solutions.

THE OPEN SCHOOL CONCEPT

The Open School concept is born of solution-focused thinking. It takes those lessons learned during the pandemic, and draws further inspiration from long established online school provision in countries like Australia, such as the Schools of the Air and the Virtual School Victoria. This is the first serious attempt to make online educational provision on a large scale an accessible part of the educational offer in the United Kingdom.

The Open School fits into an enhanced version of the education system that would be more flexible and pluralistic. Along these lines, the secondary, tertiary, and further education systems become more adaptable and able to serve the needs of more young people in all their myriad different ways. Central to this is an understanding that the classroom is not the only definition of a space for learning, and that different things work for different people at different times.

The Open School builds on the philosophy which brought the Open University into being and in time, we would hope to see a national Open College offer to provide high quality alternative provision to the current schooling system.

Here again in a nutshell is The Open School offer. It would be based online, harnessing the internet and all the flexibility and depth of knowledge that this gives access to. For some students, it would use face-to-face teaching in real time to support active and collaborative learning and community building. Instead of the classroom being the learning space, teachers, students and their peers would connect online, largely from their own homes. Unlike existing online schools, The Open School would be free to attend for young people of school age, because it would take its place within the existing state school system. Table 1 outlines potential cohorts.

Table 1: Target cohorts: learners with ADHD, ASD, SEND and Gypsy Travellers, refugee and asylum seeking children, children facing long term absence from school, e.g. medical absence and emotionally related school avoidance (ERSA) and in their own classes, adults who have missed out. We intend for The Open School to be a separate institution, and for students enrolled at the School to consider themselves Open School students.

However, The Open School could offer services flexibly with other settings, to provide supplementary support for young people who are homeschooled and young people enrolled in Pupil Referral Units. A final potential cohort could be pupils who are enrolled at an entirely different school, but who wished to take a course of study not offered at their home institution (for example a keen linguist who wished to study a language not widely offered, such as Japanese).

In time - as The Open School develops - the target cohorts and the offer could be expanded. Online evening classes could be provided, to include those who have missed schooling and who want a second chance to obtain level 1 and level 2 qualifications. People in these cohorts would include those in prisons, single parents, those on low wages, career changers, and people generally who wish to upskill.

Access to level 3 qualifications could be established in time in collaboration with existing colleges.

The BBC as a public broadcaster is an obvious partner and the experience of the Open University would accelerate the development and management of high quality provision.

Many students would be based at home if home could provide a safe and comfortable environment which would remove all of the school-based distractions and sources of anxiety that affect so many youngsters. However, the specialist Open School teaching could be accessed by some students in their physical school or other institution. Home-based schooling - especially where parents and carers may be at work - does present challenges. Therefore The Open School would operate at secondary school level, most probably starting from year 9 and it would use a pedagogy focused on personally relevant deep learning approaches such as those provided by 'Rich Tasks' pedagogies. 'Rich Tasks' pedagogies for school age learners mirror the pedagogies used at Masters and Doctoral level allowing in depth study of personally relevant topics (Harris, 2022).

Another key aspect of The Open School offer is a blended approach to study and to learning. Not everything can be taught online, and it's vital that we recognise the importance of face to face interaction among students. Therefore, we propose that at regular intervals (such as once every half term) classmates who can, should have the opportunity meet up in local learning hubs (located in partner schools, or specially designated locations) in order to perform tasks that are best done in person. This would include academic activities like practical science experiments. It would also include parts of the wider curriculum offer (sport and PE). It would also provide much needed space and time to access other things where face to face contact is vital. This includes personal therapies, checking in with members of the Open School's pastoral staff, and of course simply hanging out with peers. Local hubs would also double as examination centres as needed. The Place Programme, in Bedford, provides an existing successful example of such a hub.

A NATURAL AND LOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

There is an acute contemporary need for The Open School. It would see the creation of a new and valid permanent learning space. It would also be a natural evolution of our education system.

Consider some past examples. After an 1870 Act of Parliament guaranteed elementary education for all children, our Victorian forbears embarked on an extensive school building programme up and down the land. Another long and extensive programme of school building took place after the Second World War. This was in response to both the post-war Baby Boom, and the massive expansion of secondary education. Our predecessors literally made space for education.

Of course, a learning space doesn't have to be a dedicated public building. Since the 1960s, The Open University has tapped an enormous appetite for learning among the adult population. To the thousands who accessed lectures broadcast on TV, the home suddenly became the main space for learning, and the OU's work continues in today's internet age. The collaboration with the BBC means specialist programmes can be enjoyed by the whole population. Programmes made for the Open School could similarly be accessible to the whole population. The Open School is a practical and purposeful innovation that fits perfectly into this sequence.

We are of course not the only ones to propose steps in this direction. The ‘Not School’ project which ran in the late 1990s was an early forerunner of what we now propose with the OS. Meanwhile, early on during the first lockdown in 2020, Tim Brighouse and Bob Moon were among the first to call for an Open School (Brighouse and Moon, 2020; Sutton et al, 2020). There are a number of small initiatives but a national strategy is needed to cater for the needs of different groups of potential students.

We have a number of supporting documents including FAQs on practical issues such as funding, governance, staffing that have been raised by educators who have been involved in consultation to date. We are working on the funding model drawing on resources already in the system for long term funding and supported by startup grants but drawing on the existing resources provided principally by public and charitable bodies.

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WEB LINKS

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

Not School.net <http://www.notschool.net>

Square Peg <https://www.teamsquarepeg.org>

The Place Programme <https://place-programme.org>

Victorian Open School <https://www.vsv.vic.edu.au>

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Note: A 2020 study by the University of Sussex (Shepherd and Hancock, 2022) found “the majority of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) felt less stress and anxiety away from school and at home during lockdown”. It also stated that “three out of five parent carers felt their child with SEND were less stressed, as lockdown allowed greater time spent with families, increased one-to-one time and provided greater flexibility to pursue own interests at home while removing the social pressures of school, the requirement to wear uniform and experiences with bullies.”

FAQS

FAQ Q1 and FAQ Q2: Who are the target students, and what would the general student experience be like?

Education through the Open School would be based on a 'blended' approach to both teaching and learning and to attendance. This blend would mix the online and mainly home-based approach to study and interaction, with face-to-face interaction (where possible) on a regular basis. The essential point is that everything is done in a way to meet each learner's individual needs, and to promote personal and academic development.

This 'best of both worlds' offer balances an academic setting that is a comfortable one for particular students, with a considerate and nurturing approach to social interaction.

Who are the students who would benefit most from the OS?

In broad terms, we anticipate that the OS will cater initially mainly to young people for whom the traditional 'bricks and mortar' school is an unproductive environment. This may be for specific academic, social and personal reasons, or a mixture of any and all of them. We also anticipate that the OS would benefit those young people for whom there are barriers to attendance in a mainstream, bricks and mortar school.

The main point to note is that there is a sizeable number of young people who are not happy in school, and there is a sizeable number of young people who are classed as persistent absentees. (In addition there are adults for whom the Open School would enable catchup in qualifications.)

Because the OS is designed to serve young people for whom the traditional model of state education is not working out, the typical OS student is therefore likely to be someone who fits into one or more of these three broad categories:

- a) Lifestyle and location make regular attendance at a bricks and mortar school impossible e.g. fairground families, young parents with babies, the gypsy/traveller communities, island and remote communities .
- b) Potential OS students experience difficulties in-school which are increasingly obvious to themselves and to others e.g. sensory overload, isolation, bullying, inability to keep up with the pace of the school day, the constant shift of focus and the lack of time to study topics in depth. Overall these difficulties are having an increasingly disruptive effect on the young person's educational career.
- c) Typical remedies and interventions have failed to address the core issues of effect an improvement in wellbeing and development e.g. children with specific needs.

As a national resource, the Open School would be available to support hospital and prison education services.

The OS student is someone who comes to the school via an application or a referral process, in order to ensure that the OS is the best fit for a student, and also to make Local Authority planning and budgeting easier. This is not to say that the OS is in some way a form of alternative provision. On the contrary, we are adamant that the OS is not a form of alternative provision, but instead a new kind of school which takes its place well and truly within the mainstream of state educational provision. (And by implication we are saying that the OS is positioned as an 'alternative' to alternative provision.)

That said, the OS is by definition not for everyone. Society assumes that the vast majority of young people will attend conventional school because it will meet their needs, and while success is always relative, conventional school suits the majority.

In the light of all of the above, we think that the OS student would be enrolled as part of a referral process. This would certainly be true of those OS students who already receive SEN Support, or who have an EHCP. But more broadly, given the particular nature of the OS, any enrolment would have to come as part of a considered and deliberative process.

Talk of the OS's particular nature leads naturally to a discussion of the age of the students. We think that the OS is best for those students in year 7 and above. The main reasons for this are safeguarding ones. If- as is very likely- an OS student will be 'working from home', then the chances are that a number of them will be home alone for part, most or all of the day, as parents and carers may be at work. Another reason for targeting the older cohort is that it is usually in Key Stage 3 (years 7-9) that issues around school become apparent to the point of disruption. A final point to note is that one of the key parts of the OS offer is to harness the capacity for online learning to facilitate more in-depth study and research, and this is the kind of thing that older students will be more used to and capable of in our view.

We want to end this section by going into detail about what we call the OS engagement model. By this we mean the ways in which the OS would nurture a sense of connection to each student, and the basic learning environment they would encounter at each stage. In describing the different levels, we also hope to give a sense of which kinds of young people would benefit.

The OS pedagogical model

There are four levels of engagement (with the working names Connection A, Connection B, and so on).

Connection A: At this level, we are literally concerned with making an initial connection, providing a sense of validation and acceptance for each student. Work at this level is more individualised, and would not necessarily follow a set curriculum,

instead being geared around the student. There may be some set work, based around the development of particular skills, but work and the timetable would be largely geared towards the student's own needs and interests, and may in practice consist of a series of shorter tasks to develop confidence cumulatively. Connection A is literally about connecting the student to the OS and to their own sense of interest in education. It is therefore a start point for some students referred to the OS who have put up with the most disruption to their educational careers- consider, for example, a pupil who has been without an educational place for a number of terms in succession, and whose confidence and ability to engage has suffered as a result.

Connection B: This level is for students who are somewhat more secure in their knowledge and skills base, and for whom there has possibly been less prolonged disruption to their educational careers. But nevertheless, there may be scope for rebuilding confidence and gently getting them used to uninterrupted full-time education once again. Hence Connection B has elements of A (a focus on the student's needs and interests, and trying to build a personalised curriculum and timetable around this). However, there would be more focus on sustained project work or schemes of work, and there may be more formal taught elements. There would also be a greater emphasis on collaborative group tasks, as students may be more confident to share ideas and engaged in peer learning.

Connection C: At this level, students essentially follow the national curriculum and follow a more set timetable. Suitable for students for whom disruption has been less marked, and who are essentially picking up where they left off.

Connection Plus: KS4/ KS5: Aimed at students from other schools, who wish to access subjects via the OS that aren't offered at their 'home' school- e.g. a student in Yr 10 wishing to study GCSE Psychology or Mandarin; or a student in Year 12 wishing to study Japanese.

It is important to note that the above does not represent a progression route. Students are not all placed in Connection A, leading to B and so on. The model used to engage with each student is based on each student's needs upon referral, and are adapted from there.

Finally in this section, a brief note about the all-important model of pastoral support in the OS. This would be very important in fostering and maintaining a sense of connection between the School and its students (especially as so much learning would be home-based). We envisage that all students would be put into a tutor group as in a physical school. However, pastoral support could be made available at any time during school hours. In addition there is no reason why members of the OS pastoral team could not make home visits. Finally- and as alluded to above- the OS represents a truly blended model of attendance, and part of the student offer for regular chances to meet up with teachers and peers (at least once per half term).

FAQ Q3 - Budget and costs

Our investigations show that funding required would not be too dissimilar to a bricks and mortar school as the funds saved through not incurring costs associated with buildings repair and maintenance would be used to support the personalised approach. There are potential increased economic benefits to society through a better educated population and those savings may be able to be built into any funding model to be presented to the Treasury.

In order to be truly cost-effective and to ensure sustainable student numbers, we envisage that the OS would be best organised and run by local authorities working together as regional consortia, e.g. The Open School South West (Cornwall, Devon etc); The Open School Greater Manchester (covering the various LAs in that region).

Clearly a collaboration with the existing Open University using their technical knowhow and processes and the BBC with their remit "To support learning for people of all ages" would provide efficiencies and ensure the highest standards.

Additional points

The flexible working allowed through the Open School could provide opportunities to retain teachers who otherwise would leave teaching because of their lifestyle, location, caring responsibilities, or indeed their own commitment to a model of personalised education.

FAQ 4 Cost Challenge - Would The Open School entail greater outlay?

Response

1. This would be a productive use of money especially from revenue streams like the High Needs Budget;
2. A small but significant number of LAs have effectively been bailed out by central Govt to help clear High Needs/ SEND budget overspends, a condition of some bailouts being that said LAs do more to cater for CYP with SEND within the authority (rather than students going out of Borough) the assumption being that Authority provided provision would be more cost effective. The Open School is a potential solution here, as a source of reliable, and cost-effective education provision for some within the SEND cohort.
3. For The Open School, the operating costs will be lower, because there are no buildings. The bulk of day-to-day operating costs would be for staffing and HR; IT infrastructure; and learning resources.

FAQ 5 Don't online schools providing real-time teaching already exist?

This is true to a degree, but in the UK these are private institutions, and none of them have any significant reach into the key cohorts we are describing.

The evidence suggests that the private education market cannot sustain online schools. If it could, then we would have seen them take root and spread to a significant degree. This has not happened.

Instead, the existing fee-paying online schools appear to form a relatively small part of the wider education 'ecosystem', and within that forming a relatively small part of the home-education and private tuition markets.

Furthermore, it would appear that these schools do not fall under the existing schools' inspection regime. As mentioned above, The Open School would operate within existing legal frameworks.

FAQ 5 Don't we already have a national online school?

Launched early in the pandemic and funded by central government, Oak National Academy has been used by thousands of students to support lockdown and distance learning.

However, Oak is not a 'school' delivering lessons in real-time. Instead, it follows an existing model for delivering online learning which is essentially static. It consists almost entirely of videos, infographics, material to read, and powerpoint presentations. Arranged into learning 'modules' these are often followed by a quiz, to assess a student's learning.

In this respect, Oak has more in common with existing provision like BBC Bitesize. While they are both valuable parts of the education 'ecosystem', they are not online schools with students organised into classes, receiving real-time teaching and interacting in the movement with their peers.

FAQ 6 Surely there is no substitute for face-to-face education, with teachers and students physically present?

We no longer live in a 'one size fits all' world. The Open School is for those for whom the current system doesn't work. There is a cost to all of us if young people are not sufficiently educated to be able to make a constructive contribution to society. Not all students can access schooling in the 'traditional' way, so why not use modern technology to bring schooling to them?

FAQ 7: Who is best placed to run these schools?

We think a cost effective solution is for LAs and leading educators to work collaboratively across regions to share resources and to benchmark provision. Running these inhouse means there is direct line of oversight and straightforward accountability.

If you have questions you would like us to answer please email these to mark.williams85@btopenworld.com and marilyn.leask@icloud.com.