

CHAPTER 2

THE NATURE AND USES OF OPEN LEARNING

- 2.1 Open learning is best understood as an attitude rather than a system; the intention is to make education and training available to learners in forms, at times and in places such that they can take advantage of it. The task of the open learning developer is to identify the barriers which stand in the way of potential students and to work to remove them.
- 2.2 Conventional education and training is built round the convenience of the teacher and the administrator. Students are required to attend on the teacher at set times, and to work with the teacher at a set rate. The first and in a sense the most dramatic step towards overcoming these limitations is to provide learning at a distance, which both frees the students from the need to come to the teacher and also, since the teaching has to be provided in a form which can be transmitted over distance, can begin to free the learners in the choice of the rate and times at which they will study. Distance Learning is thus the best established form of open learning, and indeed to many the terms are synonymous. But it should be pointed out that there can be other barriers which distance learning does not overcome; students may be well able to attend an institution but not able to meet requirements for regular attendance at classes, or the barriers may be within the student's own perception of himself and his capabilities. The general scope of open learning includes schemes which (i) allow students access to facilities at any time convenient to them, (ii) provide support to students in exploring their own potential, and (iii) allow students to negotiate the course they will follow and the way they will follow it.
- 2.3 Nevertheless, most of the schemes we have studied, and the pattern which we shall assume we are encouraging, are of distance learning. Typically the subject content is encapsulated in materials, which may be text, audio or video recordings, computer based learning programmes, or a combination of these, delivered to the student by post, telecommunications or broadcasting, with provision for students to undertake practical work in appropriate subjects and for them to apply what is being learned in essays, assignments and exercises on which he receives feedback and tutorial guidance. By far the best internationally known examples are the UK Open University and its analogues in other countries but it should be remembered that there are also many distance learning systems which have developed outside the framework of academic studies, to meet the demand for professional and technical training. Distance and open learning are also in significant evidence at pre-university levels.

2.4 Open learning is widely used in order to expand educational opportunity. The circumstances in which it has been found particularly useful are:-

- a) when there is a widely dispersed population of students for a particular subject, so that it is difficult or expensive to assemble a class in one place;
- b) when students have other (family or work) commitments which prevent them from attending at a specified time;
- c) where there is a shortage of suitably qualified teachers or instructors and their skills can be made more widely available by this means;
- d) where there is a need for updating or in-service education which may be either continuous or irregular;
- e) where there is a widespread training requirement which could not be met in time by orthodox means - e.g. when a new curriculum or a new examination is being introduced across an education system.

2.5 The process of open learning involves more than sitting down and working one's way through a specially arranged text, and an open learning system consists of more than packages of learning material. Learning involves acquiring and **applying** knowledge or skill, and open learning must provide for both. In addition, learning is very susceptible to the social environment, and an isolated learner faces much more severe difficulties than one supported by a peer-group. A good system must therefore provide material, provide opportunities for applying the knowledge and skill acquired from the material (either in practical applications, problem solutions or written assignments) and provide for the support of the student, through professional assistance in the form of study counselling and tutorial support, and when practicable through the creation of a study circle or other peer group.

2.6 There are also some conditions which make the application of open learning more difficult; for example where there is a requirement for substantial peer group interaction, when the subject is one which can best be taught by observation of a practitioner - "sitting next to Nellie" - or when a subject has a substantial practical component. There are however many examples of open learning courses with a strong practical element - where practice is provided either through using the work environment as a training place, through the provision of local "practical training facilities" or through carefully designed practical kits which can be sent to students - and the fact that a subject has a practical aspect does not rule it out.

2.7 It must also be recognised that open learning systems involve investment of human resources, time and money in their creation.

While the unit costs, given a suitably large number of students, are often lower than those for orthodox education and training, nevertheless an open system, particularly if it involves developing or adapting substantial amounts of materials, calls for initial investment and a significant lead time.

2.8 Thus from the point of view of the decision-taker, the questions to be asked are:-

Are there groups of people who need education and training which they cannot at present get?

Could their needs be met by expanding the present system?

Can sufficient teachers and trainers, and particularly sufficient specialists in the subject area, be made available?

Are the conditions such as to allow for the necessary level of tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction and support?

Is the subject one which is appropriate to open learning - does it require any provision which it is difficult to provide in an open learning system?

What material exists which could be used either as it stands or after modification? Are the owners of such material willing to grant permission to use on reasonable terms?

What will it cost, and at what level of utilisation will it compare favourably with an orthodox solution?

How long will it take to establish? Can it meet the need in time?