

OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING POLICY

1. PREAMBLE

- 1.1 The *2015 Strategic Plan* of the University of South Africa (UNISA) dedicates itself to becoming *the African university in service of humanity*.
- 1.2 UNISA commits itself to advancing social justice with an emphasis on redress, equity and empowerment of the previously disadvantaged groups in South Africa such as blacks, women, people with disabilities, the rural and urban poor and adults generally who have missed out on opportunities to access higher education.
- 1.3 UNISA is South Africa's only comprehensive dedicated distance education university. The conceptualization of distance education and open learning is central to achieving its vision.

2. PURPOSE

- 2.1 To position UNISA as a leading provider of higher education opportunities through open distance learning (ODL) nationally, on the African continent and internationally.
- 2.2 To commit UNISA to the guidelines for cross-border provision developed by the national Department of Education.
- 2.3 To commit UNISA to an ongoing, responsive interaction with current and emerging national and international imperatives and developments with relevance to quality ODL provision.

3. DEFINITIONS

Blended learning	is accomplished by using multiple teaching and learning strategies, a range of technologies in combination with face-to-face interaction and the deployment of both physical and virtual resources;
Distance education	is a set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students ¹ located at different places and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors/teachers as well as other students;
Learning	is an active process of construction of knowledge, attitudes and values as well as developing skills using a variety of resources including people, printed material, electronic media, experiential and work-integrated learning, practical training, reflection, research, etc. Learning is also associated

¹ Note: While the international literature on ODL favours the use of the term 'learner', feedback from UNISA learners indicates that they prefer to be known as 'students'

with personal change and empowerment as an aspiration to improve oneself in order to help others;

Open distance learning²

is a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed;

Open learning

is an approach to learning that gives students flexibility and choice over what, when, where, at what pace and how they learn. Open learning is all encompassing and includes distance education, resource-based learning, correspondence learning, flexi-study and self-paced study;

Responsible open admission

is aimed at identifying potential and appropriate support for students. It constitutes competency evaluation and recognises students' educational background. It promotes equity of access and the provision of appropriate student support interventions aimed at bridging the gaps in students' academic and social readiness for higher education;

Student centeredness

requires that students are seen as the main foci of the educational process and they are supported to take progressive responsibility for their learning and research. However, the pedagogy employed should:

- enable successful learning through rich environments for active learning,
- establish links between students' current meanings and contexts and new knowledge to be constructed, and
- encourage independent and critical thinking;

Student support

is a generic term that is applied to a range of services that are developed by UNISA to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies. Student support includes:

- tuition support in the form of detailed, individualised and timely feedback to formative assessment; regional tutorials in a medium (face-to-face, online, telematic etc.) that is accessible to students; remedial interventions such as responsible open admission programmes to help underprepared students achieve success in order to decrease the distance between student and teacher;
- peer support in the form of institutionally arranged and supported peer self-help groups;
- in-text support in the form of well-designed well-integrated courseware creating rich environments for active learning with a sensitivity for context, different voices, etc. and promoting dialogue between teacher

² UNISA's definition of ODL.. UNISA chooses to combine the characteristics of distance education (a method of education provision) and the approach of open learning into open distance learning

and student in order to decrease the distance between student and study materials;

- administrative support in the form of timely, accurate and accessible information from institution to students about all aspects of the learning process, from registration to graduation;

Tutoring in ODL encompasses a broad range of teaching, coaching, mentoring and monitoring activities that guide students through their courses, mediating the packaged learning materials and facilitating the learning process;

Widening participation denotes activities that are aimed at bringing in and supporting groups of people who are identified as underrepresented for higher education. In doing so, it takes into account the diverse needs of people in different sectors of the economy, as well as different racial, gender and age cohorts who participate in higher education.

4. PRINCIPLES

4.1 UNISA is a comprehensive open distance learning institution that will:

- 4.1.1 increase the participation of students and access to post-registration student support services,
- 4.1.2 diversify the body of students for the purpose of providing opportunities for social advancement for historically and socially disadvantaged social groups such as students in rural areas, small towns or those who do not have convenient access to higher education institutions,
- 4.1.3 provide quality education in an affordable and cost-effective way,
- 4.1.4 encourage and support temporarily inactive students, monitor retention and throughput and implement the necessary interventions for improvement,
- 4.1.5 develop its capacity in distance education delivery through reflective practice, including staff development processes,
- 4.1.6 engage in research and development of open distance practices and contribute extensively to national debate in this area,
- 4.1.7 start the teaching process with the development of curriculum long before the students register. This will enable better pre-registration decision-making for students as well as the development of more coherent programmes by academics.
- 4.1.8 offer the full range of qualifications listed on the new HEQF in its PQM and provide articulation pathways to allow maximum portability and progression between qualifications as befits a comprehensive university.

4.2 The curriculum will:

- 4.2.1 have academic integrity and be responsive to the vision and mission of UNISA, national educational imperatives, and societal and employment needs,
- 4.2.2 be aligned with the student profiles,
- 4.2.3 articulate clear exit level outcomes,

4.2.4 design teaching, learning and assessment strategies to meet these outcomes.

4.3 The curriculum development process will be conducted by a team involving academics, curriculum and course designers, student support specialists, student counsellors, language specialists, tutors, relevant external stakeholders and, where possible, representatives of current and past students.

4.4 The student is placed at the centre of the entire learning process from the moment the student intends registering through to graduation, and continuing on through to its alumni who play a vital role in evaluating impact and as ambassadors for the institution.³

4.5 Evaluation strategies will assure the quality of the learning process and will suggest improvements. Particular emphasis will be placed on student feedback. UNISA will ensure that it supports the student throughout his/her study.

4.6 Effective counseling and guidance

4.6.1 A decentralised, technology supported, guidance and counselling service will be provided to assist students in making appropriate career decisions and in choosing study programmes that will help them realise their career goals.

4.6.2 Students will be assisted during their studies and on their exit from the University to prepare for entry into the world of work.

4.6.3 Decentralised academic development services will be provided to assist students in acquiring a range of academic literacies.

4.7 Responsible open admission procedures

4.7.1 UNISA will adhere to responsible open admission policy⁴.

4.7.2 This process provides for the assessment of students' levels of academic preparedness and aims to design appropriate support systems for students who need help in addressing academic skills gaps. Social preconditions for successful study will also receive attention. These will be provided through actions such as foundation courses, extended programmes, academic literacy skills facilitation, as well as orientation to studying at a distance.

4.7.3 The support systems for students will balance issues of openness with statutory accreditation requirements and governmental enrolment targets.

4.8 Teaching and learning methods

The ODL teaching and learning methods for a particular programme or course:

4.8.1 will be determined by the nature of the programme, the profile of the students, students' access to resources and the HEQF level of the programme.

4.8.2 will include independent study of learning materials, completion of various activities, formative assessment tasks, tutorials, practical work and opportunities to interact with others as well as research activities.

4.8.3 will include work-integrated learning as a planned component of a curriculum when outcomes can only be achieved through work-based experience.

4.9 Learning material

³ See diagram in Addendum 2: (UNISA Students at the centre of the learning process) portraying our students as they enter the University until they exit from the University

⁴ UNISA Admission Policy

Learning materials:

- 4.9.1 will be systematically designed as outlined in the Tuition Policy and Framework for a Team Approach to Curriculum and Learning Development,
- 4.9.2 will be accessible to target students,
- 4.9.3 will require the active engagement of the student,
- 4.9.4 will build on the students' experience and knowledge enabling the student to construct new knowledge.

UNISA will make effective use of educational and social technologies in learning programmes in appropriate and innovative ways that improve the quality of teaching and learning.

4.10 Delivery channels

Advanced teaching and learning models, well designed courseware, effective/efficient administration and timeous student support using a wide range of delivery channels are core to the success of our students. UNISA will use the best possible mix of media to support these core functions which includes:

4.10.1 Print media

- Print media remains the practical choice since it is inexpensive, reliable and accepted as a medium for studying purposes.
- Courseware should be well designed to facilitate access to information.
- Courseware material should prepare the student for learning, develop the necessary skills, attitudes and knowledge that the student needs, guide the student through the learning process and include sufficient and appropriate learning activities to enhance knowledge.
- UNISA will invest in good quality course design and study material and will provide effective in-text student support services.

4.10.2 Technologies with limited interaction

- Other resources such as digital media (audio and video cassettes, CDs, DVDs), satellite broadcasting, online distribution of content and information via *myUnisa* and corporate websites, audio and video podcasting and streaming, and possibly radio and television will also be used to facilitate the process of teaching and learning.
- Some of the technologies that are asynchronous such as wikis, blogs, social networking facilities and e-portfolios can be used effectively to support teaching and learning.

4.10.3 Multimedia with interactive possibilities

- Diverse and current technologies that will serve UNISA's educational mission and be sustainable will be included in the delivery of courseware. Technologies such as telephony, multimedia CDs and DVDs, video and audio conferencing, SMSs and MMSs via cell phones, e-mail and discussion forums/chat facilities via *myUnisa* offer new possibilities for supporting innovative learning in distance education and must be integrated from the design phase of courseware. These various options are

used to facilitate interaction in support of the courseware. Highly interactive multi-party engagement can use:

- (a) well equipped facilities for face-to-face contact sessions, and
 - (b) many of the above technologies in combination with rich media and multi-directional, multi-user, collaborative toolsets in a distributed web-based environment.
- UNISA uses advanced synchronous technologies which range from web based document and application sharing, online whiteboards combined with audio/video and texting facilities, interactive assessment, to simulations and virtual reality. Most of the latter functionalities are already available in the *myUnisa*. The appropriate use of technology is essential to the survival of the institution as a global role player. Technology makes it possible for employees, students and other stakeholders to interact with UNISA anytime and from anywhere in the world. Therefore, it forms an essential part of the skills base of our students who have to compete in a knowledge-driven globalized society.
 - The multimedia approach with interactivity between students and lecturer(s), students and tutors, students and students, and students and institution is much more effective than a single medium. Criteria for the selection of media include:
 - access and availability
 - pedagogical appropriateness
 - integration of the media into a coherent experience.

4.11 Student support

Student support:

- 4.11.1 takes into consideration the diverse needs of students as well as the level of study,
- 4.11.2 is a critical factor for teaching, learning and research in open distance learning,
- 4.11.3 encompasses tuition, peer, in-text and administrative support and the orientation to work-integrated learning. Tuition support includes detailed, formative and timely feedback on students' assignments via the decentralised distribution of assignments as well as opportunities to engage in argument and debate with their peers and tutors through a variety of accessible and appropriate media, such as face-to-face, telematic and online. The regions will play a crucial role in providing facilities for tuition and peer support as well as access to library materials,
- 4.11.4 includes mechanisms designed to bridge the gap between student's learning experience from high school and the demands of higher education, or between undergraduate and postgraduate studies,
- 4.11.5 enhances communication between the student and the lecturer(s), student and peers, student and courseware, student and administrative support and student and institution.

4.12 Tutors

- 4.12.1 The tutor will be central to both student support and assessment.

4.12.2 The role of the tutor at undergraduate level is to:

- facilitate and guide the learning of the students so that they gain knowledge, understanding of the content and acquire the necessary skills and competencies to cope with their studies. In at least all high-volume first year modules, students will be assigned a tutor who will be responsible for liaising with students, motivating them to complete.
- prepare students to become self-directed learners, attending to any difficulties they might have, conducting tutorials as prescribed in the course design, and marking and providing feedback on assignments. This will be done through face-to-face, telephone and online tutoring.

4.12.3 Tutors will be appointed by the academic departments with the support of the Directorate: Tutorial Services, Discussion Classes and Work-Integrated Learning (TSDL).

4.13 Assessment

Assessment is central to student learning and fundamentally influences the way students respond to courses and behave as students.

4.13.1 The assessment strategy:

- will ensure that students develop effective cognitive, reflective, self-management and practical skills,
- will include formative assessment which is designed to support the teaching and learning processes or support research skills,
- will include formative and summative assessment aspects that will be used for making a judgment about the achievement of the learning outcomes,
- will assist students and tutors to monitor their learning in relation to formative assessment tasks and feedback.

4.13.2 The turnaround time for assessed work is a crucial element.

4.13.3 Integrated assessment strategies will be implemented, as outlined in the Assessment Policy.

4.14 Regional infrastructure and decentralised services

4.14.1 The regional infrastructure will provide the platform for the provision of a range of student support and administrative structures.

4.14.2 The decentralised regional structure bridges the gap between the University and its students.

4.14.3 Regional networks will provide an expanding range of services to students such as access to facilities for both independent and group-based study and discussion, materials collection, library facilities, computer facilities, counsellors, tutors and literacy development.

4.14.4 Regional centres will also arrange for facilities for limited contact classes and manage decentralised tutoring.

4.14.5 UNISA will constantly review and develop these regional and decentralised services, including access to and support in the use of emerging technologies.

4.14.6 Regional offices will assist with the placement of students for work-integrated learning.

4.15 Appropriate management, administration and ICT systems

4.15.1 UNISA will rely on well defined processes, procedures and robust organisational systems supported by ICT.

4.15.2 It will review and develop its governance, management and technology infrastructure on an ongoing basis in order to give effect to its institutional vision and ODL mission.

4.15.3 It will implement business processes which will enable teaching, learning and support services to be offered in an optimal way through integrated, systemic planning processes.

4.15.4 It will implement activity-based costing and management, as well as strategic resource allocation which will be underpinned by a realisation of the need to find an appropriate balance between the actual costs of academic offerings and services with the earned state subsidy and income from affordable student fees. This requires three-year planning cycles in line with programme development cycles, responsive annual operational planning and budgeting, and quarterly reviews.⁵

4.16 Human resource provisioning and development

4.16.1 Staff complement

The University employs sufficient academic, administrative and professional employees to ensure that the ODL business model and systems operate optimally and provide continuous, consistent and quality service to the students.

4.16.2 Capacity building

The purpose of capacity development in the UNISA ODL environment has short-term and long-term dimensions.

In the short term:

- to raise awareness of what ODL is, its underpinning philosophy and how it fits into the wider scheme of UNISA as an ODL institution.
- to engage with academic and support employees on the implementation of ODL at UNISA.

In the longer term, a programme of continuous renewal is supported to:

- develop ODL capacities of academics and support employees,
- promote convergence with institutional strategy, purpose and identity, and
- provide courses for ongoing employee development including support for research, scholarship and publication in ODL in order to inform teaching and learning strategies, practices and outputs.

⁵ All the above activities are driven by UNISA's 2015 Strategy and its Integrated Quality Assurance Framework

4.16.3 Role definitions

- In the ODL system, all the relevant roles will be redefined in order to ensure high quality ODL inputs, processes and outputs.
- The role definitions aim to have a significant impact in terms of our social mandate which is to provide access to a wide range of students with the correct support to ensure that access becomes a meaningful opportunity for success – work that supports this endeavour will be recognized and rewarded.

4.17 Research

- UNISA is committed to scholarly teaching in ODL as well as the scholarship of teaching and learning.
- Reflexive research is an extremely important component of ODL research.⁶
- Research in ODL can assist in:
 - Describing and analysing current trends.
 - Revealing challenges and obstacles to ODL effectiveness in delivery.
 - Investigating potential contributions of ODL to socio-economic development.
 - Evaluating ODL programmes and building models that work in the South African ODL context.
 - Formulating ODL theoretical explanations for ODL phenomena.
 - Identifying strategies to improve student throughput.
 - Evaluating impact of ODL practices.
- Through research UNISA will constantly reflect on teaching and support services in order to improve practice.

4.18 Academic collaborations

- UNISA collaborates with distance education institutions in South Africa, Africa and internationally to make opportunities available for employees and students.
- Collaboration is an important strategy for renewal and development in ODL.
- Academic collaborations are a common strategy for capacity building in the following areas:
 - Student support strategies in ODL
 - Academic strategies in ODL
 - Other aspects of ODL such as the development of courseware and the use of multimedia
 - The integration of technology to support teaching, learning and assessment at a distance
 - The integration of technology to support communication at a distance
 - The training and development of university employees
 - Joint development of formal or non-formal courses or instructional material or the licensing of material
 - Sharing experience on common policy issues
 - The sourcing of tutors for face-to-face or e-tutoring.

⁶ As is recognized in the *UNISA 2015 Strategic Plan*

4.19 Quality assurance

Policies⁷ underpin excellence in ODL. Self and peer evaluation are practices for academic, administrative and professional units within the context of ODL at programme and institutional levels.

5. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

The implementation strategy is outlined in Annexure "A".

6. IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICY

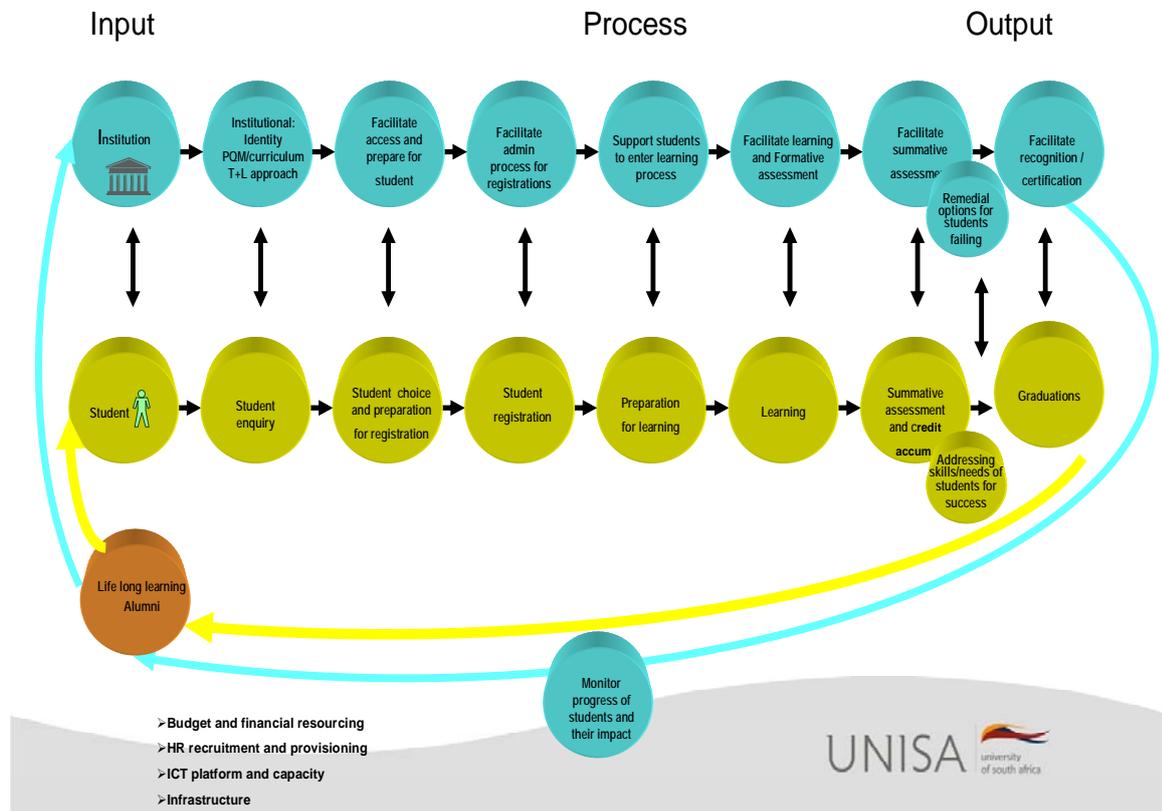
Related policies of the former institutions that were in force prior to the commencement of this Policy are replaced with effect from the date on which Council approves this Policy.



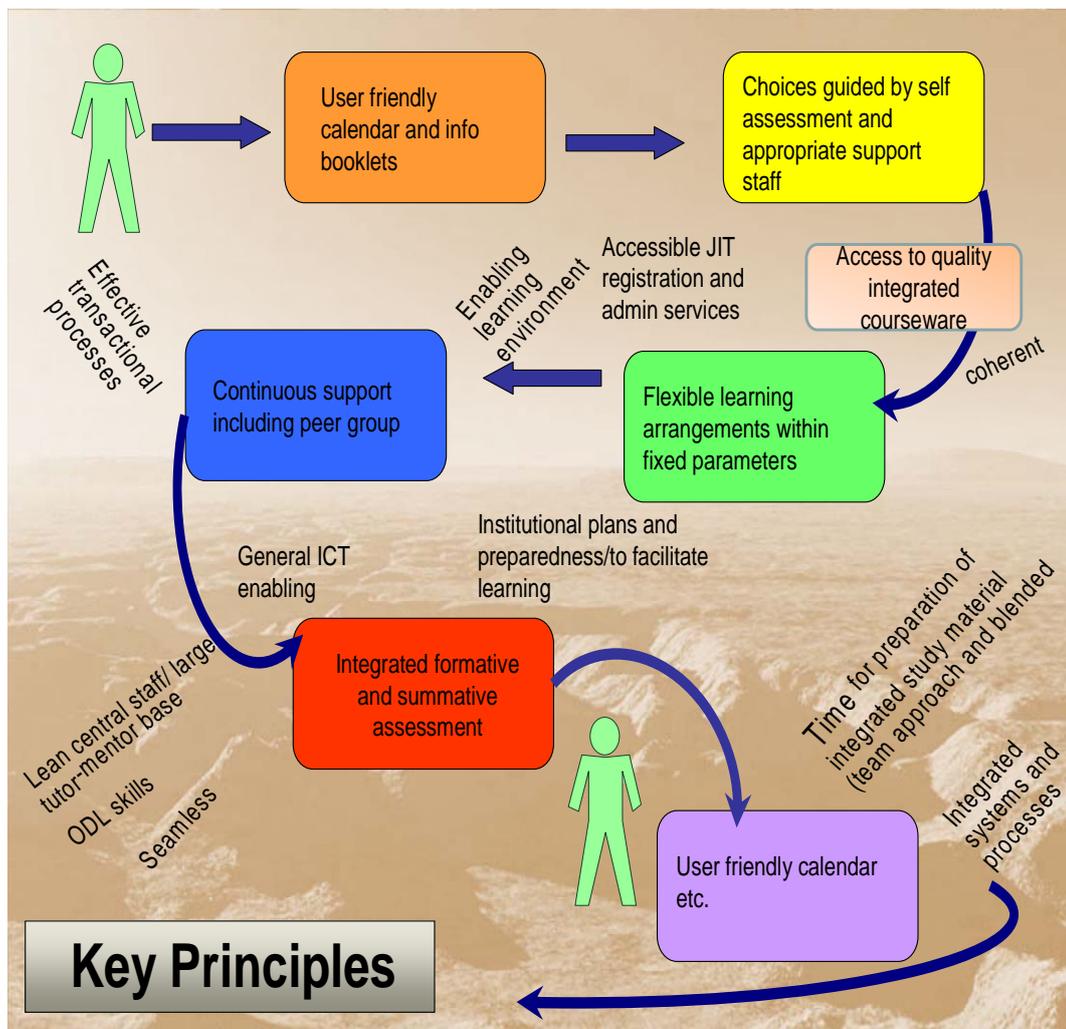
⁷ Integrated Quality Assurance Framework, Tuition Policy and its procedures Framework for the Implementation of a Team Approach to Curriculum and Learning Development

Addendum 1: UNISA's ODL Model

Unisa's ODL model



Addendum 2: UNISA students at the centre of the learning process



IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

1. Clear implementation procedures, monitoring, evaluation and cyclical review (internal and external) every five years will be compiled.
2. An ODL Management Committee, presiding by the Pro Vice Chancellor, will be constituted.
3. The ODL Management Committee will monitor, evaluate and review the implementation procedures.
4. The ODL Management Committee will report to the Management Committee and the joint Senate and Council Committee on ODL.
5. The ODL approach will be implemented on a project management basis in respect of selected courses (the so-called power courses). Essential student support interventions, such as tutor-marked assignments and tutorials, will be linked to these courses.
6. The ODL processes and procedures will be funded, in the interim, from the budget on special projects.
7. New processes and procedures must be introduced to operationalize ODL through the annual portfolio budgets.
8. An ODL training plan will indicate the short, medium and long term goals relating to the upgrading of the competence of UNISA employees in the delivery of ODL.
9. A communication plan will be prepared to ensure that the new approach to ODL is communicated to the employees of the University in such a way that enables each employee to understand the approach and his/her role.
10. Tutorial Letter 301 will be used to communicate the new ODL approach to students.
11. A change management plan, including the ICT strategy will be prepared to ensure that ODL is taken into the University.
12. Action research practices in ODL will inform essential and continuous process to ensure appropriate ODL provision.
13. The implementation of this policy is depending on systems and sub-systems which are consolidated around the teaching and learning process.

