

Document name	Open Distance eLearning Policy
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OPEN DISTANCE eLEARNING POLICY

1. PREAMBLE

- 1.1 The *2030 Strategic Plan* of the University of South Africa (UNISA) dedicates itself to being *the African university* shaping futures in service of humanity. The Plan commits UNISA to an ongoing programme of curriculum transformation and pedagogical innovation.
- 1.2 UNISA espouses the values of the Constitution of South Africa, including the inalienable right to human dignity, and the recognition and respect of diversity for the attainment of equality. Additionally, UNISA commits itself to advancing social justice and fairness as a constitutive element of dignity, emphasising freedom of conscience, belief, thought, opinion and expression, academic freedom and freedom of scientific research, freedom of artistic creativity, freedom to receive or impart information or ideas, and the inherent right to have dignity respected and protected.
- 1.3 UNISA is South Africa's dedicated distance education university. UNISA is also mandated to be a comprehensive university offering programmes from NQF level 5 to 10, including non-formal programmes.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this ODeL Policy is

- 2.1 To position UNISA as a leading provider of higher education opportunities through open distance e-learning (ODeL) nationally, on the African continent and internationally.
- 2.2 To provide guidelines on ODeL processes, practices and systems.
- 2.3 To provide a shared understanding of ODeL and direct its implementation within a blended model of learning and teaching.

- 2.4 To commit UNISA to an ongoing, responsive interaction with current and emerging national and international imperatives and developments with relevance to quality ODeL provision.

3. DEFINITIONS

Blended learning	is the provision of learning opportunities using a combination of multiple teaching and learning strategies, pedagogies, educational technologies and student support where e-learning may form a significant proportion of the learning opportunities;
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 with personal change and empowerment as an aspiration to improve oneself in order to help others;
e-learning	is learning mediated through a wide range of current and emerging digital technologies and resources;
Open distance learning ²	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 e-learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed;
Open learning	is an approach which combines the principles of student-centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that students can succeed, acknowledging that students bring their own knowledges and experiences to learning and knowledge production;
Quality assurance and enhancement	is the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance in the entire student experience from first contact to graduation, ensuring that the concept of quality is always being enhanced and on a trajectory to excellence and innovation;
Responsible open admission	promotes equity of access and the provision of appropriate student support interventions aimed at bridging the gaps in

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'

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 e-learning

	students' academic and social readiness for higher education. It aims at identifying potential and appropriate support for students and constitutes competency evaluation and recognises students' educational background;
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. The pedagogy employed should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enable successful learning through rich environments for active learning, • establish links between students' current meanings and contexts and knowledges 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 offered by UNISA to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies;
Tutoring	encompasses a broad range of teaching, coaching, mentoring and monitoring activities that guide students interactively through their courses, mediating the packaged learning materials and facilitating the learning process.

4. PRINCIPLES

- 4.1 UNISA is a comprehensive open distance e-learning institution that will:
- 4.1.1 provide both undergraduate and postgraduate³ qualifications in ODeL in accordance with national policies and benchmarked with international best practice.
 - 4.1.2 offer the full range of qualifications on the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) in its Programme Qualifications Mix (PQM) and provide articulation pathways to allow maximum portability and progression between qualifications as befits a comprehensive university.
 - 4.1.3 promote lifelong learning by offering a variety of formal and non-formal learning programmes.
 - 4.1.4 provide quality education in an affordable and cost-effective way.
 - 4.1.5 not all learning programmes will be offered across borders.
- 4.2 Teaching and learning at UNISA:
- 4.2.1 is an integral part of each learning programme and is governed by the Teaching and Learning Policy.
 - 4.2.2 will be determined by the nature of the discipline and the level of the programme, the profile of the students and students' access to resources.
- 4.3 The curriculum of each learning programme will:

³ Masters and Doctoral programmes are not funded as distance education at UNISA

- 4.3.1 have academic integrity and be responsive to the vision and mission of UNISA, national educational imperatives, and societal and employment needs,
 - 4.3.2 be based on principles outlined in the Curriculum Policy.
- 4.4 Quality assurance and enhancement
- 4.4.1 All aspects of the provision of learning programmes will undergo regular monitoring and evaluation based on internationally recognized ways of quality assurance and enhancement in both higher education and in distance education.
 - 4.4.2 Student feedback, student success and improvement of the student learning experience will be central in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Framework.
- 4.5 Admission to learning programmes
- 4.5.1 UNISA will provide quality learning programmes in accordance to its carrying capacity that is outlined in the Enrollment Plan Procedural Manual.
 - 4.5.2 UNISA will adhere to responsible open admission policy⁴.
- 4.6 Learning material
- 4.6.1 will be systematically designed as outlined in the Tuition Policy, the Curriculum Policy and the Framework for a Team Approach to Curriculum and Learning Development.
 - 4.6.2 will be provided to students in digital format⁵. Printed learning material may be available at an additional cost to the student.
- 4.7 Student support
- 4.7.1 takes into consideration the diverse needs of students as well as the level of study.
 - 4.7.2 is a critical factor for teaching, learning and research in open distance e-learning.
 - 4.7.3 is integrated into each learning programme and implemented by various stakeholders as outlined in the Student Support Framework.
- 4.8 Assessment
- Assessment is central to student learning and fundamentally influences the way students structure their learning and plan their activities. Assessment at UNISA is governed by the Assessment Policy.
- 4.9 Appropriate management, administration and ICT systems
- UNISA will:
- 4.9.1 rely on well-defined processes, procedures and robust organizational systems supported by ICT.

⁴ UNISA Admission Policy

⁵ Indigent students will be provided with a device by the university as well as access to the Internet.

4.9.2 review and develop its governance, management and technology infrastructure on an ongoing basis in order to give effect to its institutional vision and ODeL mission.

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

4.10 Human resource provisioning and development

4.10.1 Staff complement

The University employs a sufficient number of academic, administrative and professional employees at the required level of competence and qualifications to ensure that the ODeL business model and systems operate optimally and provide continuous, consistent and quality service to the students.

4.10.2 Capacity development

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

In the short term:

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

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

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

The capacity development for academic employees and allied professionals is outlined in the Framework for Professional Development.

4.11 Research

- a) UNISA is committed to scholarly teaching in ODeL as well as the scholarship of teaching and learning.
- b) UNISA views reflective research as an extremely important component of ODeL research.
- c) Through research UNISA will constantly reflect on all aspects of ODeL education provision in order to improve practice.

4.12 Academic collaborations

UNISA collaborates with distance education institutions in South Africa, Africa and internationally to make opportunities available for employees and students.

4.13 Quality assurance

All policies⁶ at UNISA are intended to underpin excellence in ODeL. Self and peer evaluation are practices for academic, administrative and professional units within the context of ODeL at programme and institutional levels and are outlined in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Policy.

5. IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICY

This Policy is in effect from the date on which Council approves this Policy.



⁶ Integrated Quality Assurance Framework, Tuition Policy and its procedures Framework for the Implementation of a Team Approach to Curriculum and Learning Development