NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR OPEN DISTANCE AND E- LEARNING PROGRAMMES

National Council for Higher Education

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Acronym

HEI	Higher Education Institutions
ICT	Information Communications Technology
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
ODeL	Open Distance E-learning
SLMs	Self-Learning Materials

Preamble

The Uganda National Council for Higher Education was established as a higher education regulating body in Uganda with the responsibility of ensuring standards in the establishment of higher education institutions as well as the programs offered by those higher education institutions. Traditional Higher Education Institutions have offered programmes under the face-to-face mode of learning where the lecturer physically interacts with learners in the delivery, practicum and discussions. However, because of the increased demand for access, and the need to ensure lifelong learning through opportunities for progression, many Higher Education Institutions globally have opened up opportunities for ODeL to operate as an additional mode of learning.

In addition, there are now a growing number of HEI in the country that have proposed to offer programmes or are already offering programmes using ODeL mode of learning. It is therefore important to ensure that the quality graduates whether from ODeL or traditional mode of learning are not compromised. In addition, NCHE has developed the ODeL minimum standards to help in the accreditation of ODeL submitted programmes and also for ensuring that Institutions that seek to operate under this arrangement meet the minimum requirement as prescribed in this document. There is therefore need to regulate and develop standards for Distance and Online learning mode of learning and ensure that the quality of the graduates is not compromised

The document provides the benchmarks for all aspects of learning under ODeL: traditional distance education, E-learning provision and interactive CD ROMs, blended learning and virtual learning. In all these, and throughout the standards, the Centre focus has been the students and ensuring that quality in all aspects is not compromised. ODeL should ensure maximum interaction between the learners and the tutors even where physical engagement is not possible.

The standard also provides for among other things needs assessment, management of the ODeL, infrastructure and ICT support, the design of the courses and assessment of the programmes. The minimum standards therefore provide for basic quality control below which programs cannot be offered in higher education. It is therefore a quality assurance measure that can be used by national council to assess HEI as well as being used by HEI in knowing the standard expectation for the different program that they are to offer under the ODeL mode of learning arrangement.

INTRODUCTION

Open, distance and eLearning has been adopted and used to capture the philosophical and increasingly technological aspects of new and transitional learning modalities. It indicates continuity with the past, while engaging with emergent developments. The increasing demand and need for continuous learning have led to the introduction of ODeL. Many institutions have expressed desire to mount programmes under ODeL. In addition, ODeL will help increase access to Higher Education for persons who are constrained by distance, time and space to be available for the traditional mode of learning.

In view of the above considerations, NCHE commissioned the development of this minimum standard for the Open Distance and E-learning (ODeL) programme to guide the development of all Distance and Online programmes leading to Higher Education awards.

PRELIMINARY

The scope of these standards includes open, distance and e-learning offered by universities through the following modes;

1) Traditional distance education

2) E-learning provision and interactive CD ROMs.

3) Blended learning.

4) Virtual education.

Citation "These standards shall be referred to as the standards for Open, Distance and E-Learning.

Interpretation: In these standards, unless the context otherwise requires, the following definitions of key terms shall apply:

"curriculum" means any documented programme of study.

"distance education" means delivery of learning or training to those who are separated mostly by time and space from those who are teaching or training. The teaching is done with a variety of mediating processes used to transmit content, to provide tuition and to conduct assessment or measure outcomes. The delivery modes may include traditional distance education by standards

of National Council for Higher Education. Correspondence courses, on-line provision and interactive CD ROMs, e-learning and blended learning to open learning centres and face-to-face provision where a significant element of flexibility, self-study, and learning support, in an integral part.

"flexible learning" means provision of learning opportunities that can be accessed at any place and time. It relates more to scheduling of activities than to any particular delivery mode.

"e-learning" means the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance distance education, implement open learning policies, make learning activities more flexible and enable those learning activities to be distributed among many learning venues.

"open learning" means policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints and with recognition or prior learning.

"blended learning" means a style of education in which students learn via electronic and online media as well as traditional face-to-face teaching.

"programme of study" means the prescribed syllabus that students must be taught at each key stage.

"institution" means an organization founded for purposes of higher education and research;

"virtual education" means distance education which is largely web-centered, but does not necessarily limit itself to learners outside a conventional classroom. It uses multimedia and, besides delivering content, also enables a high level of interaction among learners, content, teachers, peers and administration both synchronously and asynchronously.

MINIMUM STANDARDS

Prior to offering programmes of study by distance education, the Higher Education Institution should have explicitly designed systems for administering and teaching learners at a distance and planned for contingencies in order to meet its stated aims in terms of academic quality and standards.

The Minimum Standards shall apply to all Higher Education Institutions that desire to offer Higher Education programmes using the Distance and E-Learning mode of instruction and study.

1.0 STANDARD 1: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Benchmark standard

The Higher Education Institution/provider shall show evidence that an appropriate needs assessment or feasibility assessment has been undertaken giving the rationale or justification for setting up the institution or starting the programme as reflected in the philosophy of the institution.

Guidelines

The feasibility study shall cover the following broad areas:

a) Target groups that are to be served by the institution focusing on their: a) demographical factors; b) education background/factors; c) motivational factors; d) experiences, including work situation; e) accessibility and familiarity to media and information; f) communication technology; and g) economic background.

b) The infrastructural situation in the catchment regions, especially telecommunication network, electricity and transport

c) Educational resources such as facilities in the learning institutions, library services as well as human resource; and

d) Market demand.

2.0 STANDARD 2: ACCREDITATION REQUIREMENTS

Programmes offered on ODeL shall be subjected to the accreditation requirements in terms of the Learner Management System, Assessment method, staffing and monitoring of the programme to ensure quality.

Benchmark Standard

1) The Higher Education Institution wishing to offer programmes through ODeL must be accredited by NCHE.
2) The programme to be delivered by ODeL must have been accredited by the National Council

3.0 STANDARD 3: GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Benchmark Standard

A Higher Education Institution wishing to offer programmes by ODeL shall put in place internal organizational structures to facilitate the development, coordination, support, and management of ODeL offered programmes.

Guidelines

Institutional structures should

1) Facilitate the associated instructional and technical support relationships;

2) Provide the required information technologies and related support services;

3) Develop and implement a marketing plan that takes into account the target student population, the technologies available, and the factors required to meet institutional goals;

4) Provide training and support to participating instructors and students;

5) Assure compliance with copyright law;

6) Provide contract for products and outsourced services;

7) Assess and assign priorities to potential future projects;

8) Assure that electronically offered programmes and courses meet institution-wide standards, both to provide consistent quality and to provide a coherent framework for students who may enroll in both electronically offered programmes and traditional on-campus courses;

9) Maintain appropriate academic oversight;

10) Maintain consistency with institution's academic planning and oversight functions, to assure congruence with institution's mission and allocation of required resources; and

11) Assure integrity of students work and academic staff instruction.

4.0 STANDARD 4: FINANCIAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Benchmark Standard

A Higher Education Institution shall have budgetary provisions for the programmes including those under ODeL

Guidelines

1) The Institution shall have adequate financial resources in order to ensure provision of the Distance and e-learning programmes

2) There shall be a policy and plan for sustainability of the programme;

3) Budgetary allocation shall be reflected in the overall institutional budgetary structure to ensure viability and maintenance of facilities

5.0 STANDARD 5: HUMAN RESOURCES

5.1 Human Resource Policies
Benchmark Standard

The Higher Education Institution shall have appropriate policies human resources that will ensure recruitment and retention of adequate numbers of qualified and competent staff delivery and manage her programmes including those under ODeL

Guidelines

1) The institutional policies on e- delivery of academic programmes shall be clearly defined
2) The institution shall ensure that it employs appropriate and competent staff as follows:
   a) Academic staff with appropriate knowledge in the discipline and basic instructional systems design theories and techniques
   b) Technical staff with appropriate communication and information technology and management skills;
   c) Administrative & financial management staff with skills in personnel management, budget making and costing and cost analysis.

   d) The institution shall develop sets of administrative procedures for key distance education functions-registration, assignment management, examinations

   a) The Institution shall put in place mechanisms for evaluation and appraisal of all staff to establish their performance and effectiveness.

5.2 Academic Staff

Benchmark

The academic staff teaching on the Open, Distance and e-learning programmes shall have the requisite qualification as subject experts and satisfy the minimum requirement for teaching in the mother institution. In addition, the staff member teaching under ODeL shall have sufficient skills to teach and deliver courses under ODeL.

Guidelines

1) Arrangements should be put in place for

   a. proper recruitment and monitoring of academic staff on the ODeL programme.

   b. Continuous professional development in terms of training in materials writing, delivery and assessment in Open, distance and e-learning modes of programme delivery.

2) The academic staff devoted to the programme should be sufficient to cover, in terms of experience and interest, all relevant subjects.

5.3 Administrative and Technical Support Staff

Benchmark Standard

The Higher Education provider shall have sufficient administrative and technical staff to handle specialized tasks of registry, dispatch, management of assignments, administrative support,

assignments, administrative support, as well as technical support to learners and staff with required IT hardware and software.

Guidelines

1) Arrangements should be put in place for

   a. proper recruitment and monitoring of administrative and technical staff to support the management of ODeL programme.

   b. training of administrative and technical support staff.

2) There are opportunities for individual academic support for learners either by telephone, by appointment or online

NB: The ratio of academic staff/Technical support staff to students needs to be discussed and agreed upon. Generally, there shall be a tutor for a module. The tutor shall be supported by a course coordinator and technical support team.

6.0 INFRASTRUCTURE AND FACILITIES

The Higher Education Institutions whether on a blended learning or only online mode of learning shall ensure that there are infrastructural facilities that are adequate and appropriate to support teaching, learning and research.

These shall include:

a) Administrative and academic staff offices
b) Reading rooms/seminar rooms;
c) Appropriately equipped Technical and Skills Laboratories
d) Library
e) Information Technology services

6.1 Administrative and Academic Staff Offices

Benchmark Standard

A higher education institution shall provide adequate office space to accommodate academic and non-academic staff. Staff offices shall be accessible to all stakeholders

Guidelines

1) The following requirements shall apply for office space.
   a) Acceptable: 2.0sqm per person

b) Good: 3.0 sqm per person

c) Ideal Practice:4.0 sqm per person

6.2 Library Resources

Benchmark Standard

1) The institution shall provide adequate library resources to support open, distance and e-learning.

2) The library shall have adequate and reliable Information and Communication Technology infrastructure to support easy access to e-resources.

Guidelines

1) There shall be enough e-learning resources materials such as text books, periodicals, Journals in the relevant subject area.
2) The institution shall provide facilities, equipment and communication links, sufficient in size, number, scope, accessibility to reach all users in order to attain the objectives of the open and distance learning programs;
3) The library services offered to the open and distance learning community shall be designed to ensure reliability and sustainability.
4) The internet speed must be adequate for the number of users.

6.3 Institutional and ICT Support Infrastructure

Benchmark Standard

The Higher Education Institution shall ensure availability and adequacy of technical, and ICT infrastructure and appropriate technical support staff for the infrastructure.

Guidelines

1) Institutional infrastructure shall be sufficient to address technical support in terms of:

a) Server space

b) Redundancy or load balancing

c) Technical help desk

d) internet access

2) Technical services shall be reliable in terms of:

a) back-up

b) remote services

3) The institution shall have an ICT plan for purposes of:

a) maintenance of technologies,

b) upgrading of technologies

c) ensuring reliability, privacy, safety and security.

4) The Staffing structure shall be appropriate for the support of the available infrastructure

8.0 STANDARD 8: COURSE DESIGN AND COURSE MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

The course design and materials development should focus on the following:

a) The content

b) Instructional design

c) Assessment

8.1 Content

Benchmark Standard

The Higher Education Institution shall ensure that the course content for all courses in the programme are sufficient and adequate for the level and that course materials and orientation to ensure quality material is "fit for purpose". For each course, there is a description of the learner outcomes; knowledge credits, teaching and learning strategies, content outline, items in the learning package (slide guides, textbooks, tutorials, audiotapes, videotapes and assessment strategies).

Guidelines

1) Course outcomes clearly defined and tested against academic/workplace standards

2) Level of course outcomes aligned to the relevant level of bloom taxonomy

3) The content promotes interaction and peer coaching

4) The quality and quantity of content is representative of the intended level of learners

5) The course contents are accurate, up-to-date and relevant to the labour market

6) The content meets the institutional and transfer credit requirements

7) The materials are accurate in terms of format, style and content.

8) Identification of the course team to include: a) course writer; b) media producers; c) editors/instructional designers; and d) reviewers.

9) Training of the course team on writing for ODeL students by expert in structural

designers;

10) Writing and illustrating the course materials;

11) Reviewing the course materials by peer and other experts;

12) Editing the course materials;

13) Pre-testing of the materials on a trial basis; and

14) Production of the course materials ready for use

8.2 Instructional Design

Benchmark Standard

The provider shall ensure the instructional materials are well structured to reflect synchronized learning activities.

Guidelines

1) Learners are encouraged to create and participate in 'communities of learning' in which the individual learner thinks and solves problems and others engage in similar tasks.
2) The learners are subjected to a variety of learning activities
3) Learner activities/instructional materials are linked to course objectives
4) Active learning strategies that engage the student and promote the achievement of the stated learning objectives.
5) Tools are available to engage students in critical thinking.

8.3 Assessment

Benchmark Standard

Assessment is recognized as a key motivator of learning and an integral part of the teaching and learning process. It is used to inform the teaching and learning process and improve the curriculum. Institutions should ensure that proper assessment strategies are put in place to ensure that the assessment reflects the students' performance and abilities. The standards for oOpen, Distance and e-learning shall apply to all levels of Higher Education qualifications. The level of challenge of the assessment in the programme is appropriate for the level of qualification to which it leads.

Guidelines

1) Learning and assessment demands should be commensurate to the level

2) Examinations should be subjected to both internal and external moderation to ensure that it conforms to the level of qualification.

3) Learners are provided with information on how they will be assessed on the course

4) There are clear procedures to receive, record, process and turn around assignments with a time frame that allows learners to benefit from formative feedback prior to the submission of further assessment tasks.

5) Marking procedures for both formative and summative assessment ensure consistency and accuracy of marking and grading and the provision of helpful feedback to the learners.

6) There are variety of formative and summative assessment tasks and methods which ensure that all learning outcomes are vividly assessed.

7) Put in place measures to ensure that there is no impersonation and that the registered students are the ones who undertake the tests and examinations.

8) Learners access progress/achievement records in a timely manner

9) Assessment tools appropriately measure mastery of learning outcomes

8.4 Self-Learning Materials (SLMs)

Benchmark Standards

A Higher Education Institution shall ensure availability of self-learning materials to suit learners' needs.

Guidelines

1) Clear layout and format used consistently in all lectures;

2) Clear and appropriate learning objectives and learning outcomes;

3) Overview of content included in the introduction of both module and individual lectures;

4) Use of conversation or dialogue to provide for two-way communication;

5) Content divided and presented into module, units and lectures;

6) Clear explanation of technical terms;

7) Illustrations which are set next to the text they illustrate with appropriate captions;

8) Clear guide to the learners in the use of module provided including the time a learner of average ability might spend on each unit;

9) Keeping the learner actively involved through the use of text and self-assessment questions and other activities involving application of the new knowledge and skills; 10) Situations and

feedback to self-assessment questions to show the learner his/her performance and progress;

11) Summaries for both the lectures and the unit or modules;

12) Well directed and specific references at the end of each unit or lecture; and

13) The provider shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that course materials are effective and do not contain significant errors of fact, misleading or outdated information, concepts or approaches.

8.5 Pre-testing or Piloting Learning Materials

Benchmark Standard

The Higher Educational Institutions shall have in place mechanisms for pre-testing or piloting the learning materials to establish that they are at the learners' level and that the learners will use them without difficulties, and finally be able to achieve the objectives or intended learning outcomes.

Guidelines

The broad requirement in pre-testing shall be made available by providing reaction sheets addressing key aspects or areas of the study materials, for example:

1) Students understanding of the objectives;

2) The language of presentation;

3) Explanation of concepts, ideas and theories;

4) Use of examples for illustration;

5) Use of illustrations and graphics;

6) The activities and practice exercise given and feedback provided;

7) Use of symbols or icons

8) Navigational devices for online materials.

9.0 STANDARD 8: COURSE DELIVERY AND LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

9.1 Media

Benchmark standards

A Higher Education Institution shall specify the media that are to be used for the delivery of the programme and support to the learners.

Guidelines

1) The provider shall indicate the media available for delivery and which should be combined for multi-media approach to meet the diverse nature of learners;

2) The chosen media mix should be based on the following ACTIONS:

- A: How Accessible the media is to the learners;

- C: Cost of using it, both by the institution at installation and maintenance as well as learner cost;

- T: Its Teaching strengths in relation to specific content;

- I: Its capacity in creating Inter-activity;

- O: Organizational requirements for development.

- N: How Novel it is.

- S: Speed within which it can be set up.

9.2 Learning Management System

Benchmark

The Higher Education Institution shall provide an interactive learning management system that effectively supports ODel-learning.

Guidelines

Learning Management System shall provide for:

1) student to student interactions;

2) student and instructor interactions

3) evaluation of interaction.

9.3 Student Support services for Students on ODeL programmes

The Higher Educational Institution shall facilitate orientation for learners to prepare them to undertake ODEL programmes.

Guidelines

The orientation shall focus on skills for ODEL and academic socialization. The areas to be covered should include:

1) Basic skills on ODEL;

2) Academic orientation and socialization including:

      a) Provision of pre-entry guidance and counseling;

      b) Course support after admission;

      c) Post-course support service.

3) anything else necessary for student support.

9.4 Technical Framework

Benchmark Standard

The HEI shall assure consistency and coherence of the technical framework for students and academic staff, and ensure that any change in technology is introduced in a way that minimizes any negative impact on students and academic staff.

Guidelines

1) The institution shall have:

    a) a clear structure of communicating changes in software programme, hardware or technical system / procedure when a student or staff proceeds from one course to another;

    b) a training programme / process for both staff and students when a new software or system is adopted;

    c)   access to training to by students; and

    d) learning policy on new software when a student or tutor proceeds from one course to another.

2) The Institution should have hardware, software and technical support to facilitate effectively support the learners:

    a) a help desk that is functioning 24 hours and 7 days a week

    b) a system for monitoring and supporting a range of hardware / software

    c) clearly stated technical expectations

    d) a system for Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which should be assessed and feedback given to students and staff.

9.5 Students Social Mentorship

Benchmark Standard

The Higher Education Institution shall make available facilities to cater for the welfare of students on ODeL.

Guidelines:

1) There shall be a policy on student welfare, which should address the following among others:
    a) Mentoring
    b) Academic support
    c) Career guidance
    d) Healthcare
    e) Financial matters
    f) Student organisations
    g) Rules and regulation on conduct and discipline of students.
    h) Recreational, cultural and spiritual support
2) Where the students are physical present at the campus during face-to-face interactions or during examination, the provider shall make available appropriate student support services including recreational facilities and avenues for cultural and spiritual support.
3) Where the programme on ODeL is not purely virtual, the student shall be required to have 30% physical presence at the campus for face-to-face sessions and examinations.

10.0 STANDARD 10: PROGRAMME MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Benchmark Standard

The Higher Educational Institutions shall have an up-to-date record of the students admitted on ODeL progamme in form of course results and other relevant management information so as to analyze completion rates of each group of learners, identify at risk learners and inactive learners.

Guidelines

1) Record of attendance at contact sessions/tutorials/practicals

2) Submission of formative assessment including feedback

3) Tracking the participation of the learners and prompting them to participate