



Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education
Quality Assurance in Higher Education



**MINIMUM STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR OPEN DISTANCE AND
E-LEARNING FOR UNIVERSITIES OFFERING CONVENTIONAL
PROGRAMMES**



ACRONYMS

HEI:	Higher Education Institutions
ICT:	Information Communications Technology
ZIMCHE:	Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education
ODeL:	Open Distance e-Learning
OER:	Open Educational Resources
SLMs:	Self-Learning Materials
LMS:	Learning Management System
MOOCs:	Massive Open Online Courses

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Odel: A mode of providing flexible learning opportunities by overcoming the separation of teacher and learner using various media, including print, electronic, online and occasional interactive face-to-face meetings with the learners or Learner Support Services to deliver teaching-learning experiences, including practical or work experiences.

Blended Learning: A type of learning that combines delivery of programmes through face-to-face and distance mode using technology.

Digital instructional materials: Electronic content used in teaching and learning.

Distance education: Any form of organised teaching and learning where a student and a teacher are physically separated, and technology is used to bridge this physical and instructional gap.

e-Learning instructional materials: The content conveyed within an online course including lectures, readings, textbooks, multimedia components, and other resources.

e-Learning: Intentional use of networked information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching and learning.

Face-to-face learning: Learning that is conducted in a classroom or practical room where a lecturer interacts directly with students as per the allocated timetable.

Online learning: Learning where a student and an instructor are being connected through the internet instead of being in a physical classroom. Online learning is a virtual technique of disseminating knowledge where the educator records and uploads lessons and related resource materials for the recipients/ students to access and learn from anywhere and at any time at their own pace.

Online courses: A form of distance education where the primary delivery mechanism is the internet. These could be delivered synchronously or asynchronously. All instructions are conducted at a distance.

Proctoring software: A software that is used to monitor online examinations. Online proctoring software helps test administrators create a secure testing environment by curbing instances of academic dishonesty. An ideal online proctoring software authenticates test-takers identity, invigilates their screens, behaviours and environment using an advanced Artificial Intelligence mechanism and ensures the generation of reliable exam results.

Learning Management System: A software application that provides the framework that handles all aspects of teaching and learning.

ODeL: Teaching and learning that is facilitated by information and communication technologies, offered at a distance and that allows multiple entry and exit.

OER: Open educational resources (OER) are free and openly licensed educational materials that can be used for teaching, learning, research, and other purposes.

Open learning: A form of an educational system accessible to every individual with minimal restrictions. It emphasizes the flexibility of the system to eradicate problems caused by barriers like age, geographical location, time constraints and economic situation.

INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) was established as a higher education regulatory body in Zimbabwe with the responsibility of ensuring standards in the establishment of higher education institutions as well as the programmes offered by these higher education institutions.

In executing its mandates, from time to time, the ZIMCHE, issues standards and guidelines on various aspects related to the provision of university education in the country. This is necessary to ensure that the education provided is up-to-date and meets national, regional, and international standards.

In recent years, there has been an increased use of the Internet and other mobile facilities among university staff and students. Globally, there has been a surge towards Open Distance and e-Learning and blended modes of learning particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Zimbabwe have also been adopting them to increase enrolments and gain benefits associated with ODeL as their counterparts elsewhere. However, the context of Zimbabwe is different, and institutions face different challenges from those faced by Western institutions. As a result, the adoption and implementation of these systems do not guarantee that institutions will enjoy similar benefits as those institutions in the developed world. Indeed, due to several challenges, previous studies that have investigated contextual factors such as low Internet connectivity, shortage of computers, expensive data

bundles and lack of electricity and has brought a lot of scepticism about the quality associated with programmes that are offered through online and blended modes.

Therefore, to ensure that online programmes offer quality instructions that meet the required standards, the whole process of delivering programmes needs to be monitored and guided. As online delivery modes continue to grow and diversify, the need to ensure that these new forms of delivery support rather than reduce the value, quality and validity of higher education are important.

In its mandate to promote quality in higher education, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) developed minimum standards and guidelines to facilitate coordinated and effective development and delivering higher education programmes through Open Distance and E-Learning (ODEL) in Zimbabwe. The standards and guidelines articulate best practices for the effective design, development, and delivery of academic programmes through ODeL.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) 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 progression opportunities, many higher education institutions globally have opened opportunities for ODeL to operate as an additional learning model.

These Standards and Guidelines are meant to assist prospective and existing providers of ODeL. These guidelines support the development of flexible learning opportunities using online delivery methods, for access to higher education. They also ensure academic standards are maintained across all courses offered by universities in Zimbabwe. The ZIMCHE will carry out a rigorous assessment of the provider's or proposed provider's administrative and delivery methods, educational materials and publicity to ensure that all standards are met.

All students enrolled in online programmes must be granted access to the relevant Standards and receive appropriate training on how to use them. This requirement will form part of ZIMCHE's assessment criteria for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of online programmes.

PRINCIPLES

The application of these guidelines should bear in mind the following principles related to university online programme delivery:

1. The guidelines form a benchmark for assessing the quality of any online programme offered by a university in Zimbabwe;
2. A university will apply these guidelines in the development, delivery and assessment of online programmes to ensure enhanced quality student experience;
3. Universities in Zimbabwe are primarily responsible for ensuring the quality of their online programmes;
4. The guidelines provide minimum parameters to be adhered to in the formulation and delivery of online programmes. Universities may exceed these guidelines provided that the focus is on becoming more competitive in terms of quality and excellence;
5. ODeL is appropriate to the university's mission and vision;

6. ODeL is incorporated into the university's systems of governance and academic oversights;
7. Curricula for the university's ODeL offerings are coherent, cohesive and comparable in academic rigour to programmes offered in traditional instructional face-to-face;
8. The university evaluates the effectiveness of its ODeL offerings, including the extent to which the ODeL goals are achieved and uses the results of its evaluations to enhance the attainment of the goals;
9. Staff responsible for delivering ODeL curricula and evaluating the students' success in achieving the ODeL learning goals are appropriately qualified and effectively supported;
10. The university provides effective student and academic support services;
11. The university provides sufficient resources to support and if appropriate, expand its ODeL offerings; and
12. The university assures the integrity of its ODeL offerings.

PURPOSE

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide guiding principles for the development, delivery and assessment of programmes offered through online mode in university institutions in Zimbabwe.

SCOPE

These guidelines shall apply for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes unless stated otherwise in specific sections. These guidelines apply exclusively to online programmes offered by conventional universities. Separate guidelines will be developed for distance and open learning institutions. Additionally, specific guidelines for blended learning will be issued in due course. Matters unrelated to programme delivery—such as admission, certification, and graduation—are governed by existing university regulations

MINIMUM STANDARDS

Before offering programmes through ODeL, the university should have explicitly designed systems for administering and teaching learners at a distance and planned for contingencies to meet its stated aims in terms of academic quality and standards.

To ensure the universities are adequately prepared for delivering programmes through the Open and Distance e-Learning mode, an institution is expected to begin with no more than five programmes. Before launching any of these programmes, the university must invite the ZIMCHE to conduct a Readiness Assessment. Programmes may only be launched upon receipt of formal clearance from the ZIMCHE.

1.0 STANDARD 1: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

An institution of higher learning shall show evidence that an appropriate needs assessment or feasibility assessment has been undertaken giving the rationale or justification for starting the programme.

Guidelines

The feasibility study shall cover the following areas:

- a) Identification of target groups to be served by the institution, including assessment of their digital literacy skills.
 - b) Assessment of infrastructural capacity in the catchment regions, focusing on telecommunications (internet bandwidth and speed), electricity, and transport networks.
 - c) Evaluation of educational resources, including learning centres, library services, human resources, digital content availability and quality, and technical support services for students.
 - d) Analysis of market demand at both national and international levels.
 - e) Engagement of key stakeholders—including faculty, staff, students, and industry partners—during the needs assessment process.
 - f) Specification of available regional, study, or off-campus learning centres to ensure ODeL services are accessible to clients.
- e) **Submission of a needs assessment report:** A comprehensive needs assessment report should be submitted to the ZIMCHE before the launch of the online programmes.

2.0 STANDARD 2: GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

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 shall;

- a) Facilitate the associated instructional and technical support relationships;
- b) Provide the required information technologies and related support services;
- c) 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;
- d) Provide training and support to participating instructors and students;
- e) Assure that electronically offered programmes meet institution-wide standards, both to provide consistent quality and to provide a coherent framework for students who may enrol in both electronically and traditional on-campus offered programmes;
- f) Maintain appropriate academic oversight of the ODeL programmes;
- i) Establish a semiautonomous (for dual mode) ODeL Unit governed by regular institutional management structures, e.g. Senate;

- k) Appoint a full-time Director/Coordinator to coordinate operations of ODeL Unit and programmes;
- l) Integrate total quality control management systems in the development and delivery of ODeL and all academic and support services
- m) Develop institutional policies and guidelines for smooth operations of ODeL activities
- n) Develop strategies to ensure the sustainability of ODeL programmes;
- o) Facilitate partnerships with other institutions for sharing best practices in ODeL; and
- p) Engage staff with relevant qualifications and experience in ODeL.

3.0 STANDARD 3: FINANCIAL RESOURCE, INVESTMENT, MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

A higher education institution shall have budgetary provisions for the programmes including those under ODeL

Guidelines

The institution shall:

- a) Have adequate financial resources in order to ensure provision of the ODeL programmes ;
- b) Have a policy and plan for sustainability of the programme;
- c) Have a budgetary allocation reflected in the overall institutional budgetary structure to ensure viability and maintenance of facilities;
- d) Develop a business model/policy guide for development and investment in OdeL;
- e) Ensure appropriate investment in ODeL technologies, including ICT infrastructure, materials development, delivery, support services and research;
- f) Have an ICT policy to maintain and upgrade technologies and ensure reliability, privacy, safety and security;
- g) Have full-time administrative staff that are qualified in OdeL; and
- h) Build capacity for its personnel in ODeL through induction and regular and targeted continuous professional development (CPD) programmes.

4.0 STANDARD 4: HUMAN RESOURCES

4.1 Human Resource Policies

A higher education institution shall have appropriate human resources policies that will ensure the recruitment and retention of adequate numbers of qualified and competent staff delivery and manage programmes including those under OdeL.

Guidelines

- a) The institutional policies on e-delivery of academic programmes shall be clearly defined

- b) The institution shall ensure that it employs appropriate and competent staff as follows:
- i) Academic staff with appropriate knowledge in the discipline and basic instructional systems design theories and techniques relevant to ODeL;
 - ii) Technical staff with appropriate information and communication technology and management skills;
 - iii) Administrative and financial management staff with skills in personnel management, budget making, costing and cost analysis;
 - iv) The institution shall develop sets of administrative procedures for key distance education functions-registration, assignment management, and examinations
 - v) The institution shall put in place mechanisms for evaluation and appraisal of all staff to establish their performance and effectiveness.

4.2 Academic Staff

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

Guidelines

- a) Arrangements should be put in place for:
- i) proper recruitment and monitoring of academic staff on the ODeL programme.
 - ii) Continuous professional development in terms of training in materials writing, delivery and assessment in Open, distance and e-learning modes of programme delivery.
- b) The academic staff devoted to the programme should be sufficient to cover, in terms of experience and interest, all relevant subjects.

4.3 Administrative and Technical Support Staff

The higher education institution shall have sufficient administrative and technical staff to handle specialized tasks of registry, dispatch, management of assignments, administrative support, assignments, technical support to learners and staff with required ICT hardware and software.

Guidelines

- a) Arrangements should be put in place for:
- i) Proper recruitment and monitoring of administrative and technical staff to support the management of ODeL programmes.
 - ii) training of administrative and technical support staff.

b) There are opportunities for individual academic support for learners using appropriate ODeL communication channels.

5.0 STANDARD 5: INFRASTRUCTURE AND FACILITIES

The higher education institution shall ensure that there is technology enabled infrastructural facilities that are adequate and appropriate to support ODeL, teaching 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

5.1 Administrative and Academic Staff Offices

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) Academic Staff: 13 sqm per person
- b) Non-Academic Staff: 7 sqm per person

5.2 Library Resources

- a) The institution shall provide adequate library resources to support open, distance and e-learning.
- b) The library shall have adequate and reliable Information and Communication Technology infrastructure to support easy access to e-resources.

Guidelines

- a) There shall be enough e-learning resource materials such as textbooks, periodicals, and journals in the relevant subject area.
- b) The institution shall provide facilities, equipment and communication links, sufficient in size, number, scope, and accessibility to reach all users to attain the objectives of the ODeL programme/s.
- c) The library services offered to the ODeL community shall be designed to ensure reliability and sustainability.

d) The internet speed must be adequate for the number of users.

5.3 Institutional and ICT Support Infrastructure

The higher education institution shall ensure the availability and adequacy of technical, and ICT infrastructure and appropriate technical support staff for the infrastructure.

Guidelines

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

- i) Server space
- ii) Redundancy or load balancing
- iii) Technical help desk
- iv) Internet access

b) Technical services shall be reliable in terms of:

- i) back-up
- ii) remote services

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

- i) maintenance of technologies,
- ii) upgrading of technologies
- iii) ensuring reliability, privacy, safety and security.

d) The staffing structure shall be appropriate for the support of the available infrastructure.

6.0 STANDARD 6: DIGITALISATION OF CURRICULUM

A higher education institution must have digital learning materials that students can access from anywhere and at any time.

Guidelines

A higher education Institution shall:

- a) Digitalise all instructional materials.
- b) Have an established and functional Learning Management System (LMS) for online delivery where all instruction processes are managed and tracked.
- c) Integrate ICT for:
 - (i) Academic support (e.g. module facilitation, assessment and feedback, tutoring, discussion boards, use of e-resources, open courseware),
 - (ii). Administrative support (orientation, tuition fees, course requirements, management)

- d) Develop self-learning interactive materials.
- e) Prioritise the use of ICT to diversify modes of delivery.
 - f) Adopt teaching and learning approaches that primarily utilise digital platforms.
- g) Equip students and staff with ICT skills.
 - h) Equip satellite learning centre/unit/campus with devices, internet and network facilities for student and staff access.
- i) Promote the use of e-resources among staff and students.
 - j) Have mechanisms for both offline and connectivity access for students outside learning facilities (Zero-rating (where feasible should be sought) and remote access to e-resources, e.g. Moodle mobile).
- k) Train relevant staff in the production of e-learning instructional materials.
- l) Orient students and facilitators on how to use LMS and digital materials.

7.0 PROGRAMME DELIVERY AND LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

7.1 Mode of delivery

A higher education institution shall specify the media used for the basic delivery of the programme and for support to the learners.

Guidelines

- a) The higher education institution shall indicate the media available for delivery and which should be combined for multi-media approach to meet the diverse nature of learners. They should include:
 - (i) Print-based media;
 - (ii) Audio-visual media;
 - (iii) Audio-conferencing;
 - (iv) Audio-video conferencing;
 - (v) Online;
 - (vi) External media (e.g., CD ROM memory sticks); and
 - (vii) Internet and e-mail based.

The ZIMCHE expects all the above media to be readily available to students.

7.2 Learning Management System

The Higher Education Institution shall provide an interactive learning management system (LMS) that effectively supports ODeL learning.

Guidelines

The Learning Management System shall provide for:

- a) student-to-student interactions;
- b) student and instructor interactions
- c) evaluation of interaction.
- d) tracking of delivery of e-learning modules, learners' engagement, assessment, results and reporting all in one centralised location.

7.3 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:

- a) Basic skills on ODeL;
- b) Academic orientation and socialization including:
 - i) Provision of pre-entry guidance and counselling;
 - ii) Course support after admission;
 - ii) Post-course support service.
- c) anything else necessary for student support.

7.4 Technical Framework

The higher education institution shall assure consistency and coherence of the technical framework for students and staff and ensure that any technology change is introduced minimizing any negative impact on students and academic staff.

Guidelines

- a) The institution shall have:
 - i) a clear structure of communicating changes in software, hardware or technical system/procedure when a student or staff proceeds from one course to another;
 - ii) a training programme/process for both staff and students when a new software or system is adopted;
 - iii) access to training by students; and
 - iv) learning policy on new software when student or tutor proceeds from one course to another.
- b) The Institution should have the hardware, software and technical support to effectively support the learners:

- i) a help desk that is functional for 24 hours and 7 days a week
- ii) a system for monitoring and supporting a range of hardware/software
- iii) clearly stated technical expectations
- iv) a system for Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which should be accessible to students and staff.

7.5 Students Social Mentorship

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

Guidelines:

a) There shall be a policy on student welfare, which should address the following among others:

- i) Mentoring
- ii) Academic support
- iii) Career guidance
- iv) Healthcare
- v) Financial matters
- vi) Student organisations
- vii) Rules and regulations on the conduct and discipline of students.
- viii) Recreational, cultural and spiritual support

b) Where the students are physically present at the campus during face-to-face interactions or during examinations, the institution shall make available appropriate student support services including recreational facilities and avenues for cultural and spiritual support.

8.0 STANDARD 8: PROGRAMME SELF-LEARNING MATERIALS

A higher education institution shall ensure availability of self-learning materials to suit learners' needs.

Guidelines

The features of effective self-learning materials shall include the following:

- a) Clear layout and format used consistently in all self-learning materials;
- b) Clear and appropriate learning objectives and learning outcomes;
- c) Overview of content included in the introduction of both module and individual lectures;
- d) Use of conversation or dialogue to provide for two-way communication;
- e) Content divided and presented into module, units and lectures;
- f) Clear explanations of technical terms;
- g) Illustrations which are set next to the text they illustrate with appropriate captions;

- h) Clear guide to learners in the use of modules provided including the time a learner of average ability might spent on each unit;
- i) Keeping the learner actively involved through the use of text and self-assessment questions and other activities involving the application of the new knowledge and skills;
- j) Situations and feedback to self-assessment questions to show the learner his/her performance and progress;
- k) Summaries for both the lectures and the unit or modules;
- l) Well-directed and specific references at the end of each unit or lecture; and
- m) Taking all reasonable steps to ensure that programme materials are effective and do not contain significant errors of fact, misleading or outdated information, concepts or approaches.

9.0 STANDARD 9: ASSESSMENT

Where assessments are to be conducted online, the higher education institution establishes a robust computer-based assessment system for online tests and examinations.

Guidelines

- a) Develop guidelines for setting, moderating, administering, marking and processing formative and summative ODeL assessments.
- b) 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.
- c) Develop and implement antiplagiarism guidelines.
- d) Use anti-plagiarism and AI detection software in student assessment.
- e) Develop guidelines for practice tests to enable students to test equipment and internet connections.

10.0STANDARD 10: PROGRAMME MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A higher educational institution shall have an up-to-date record of the students admitted to ODeL programmes in the form of programme results and other relevant management information to analyze completion rates of each group of learners, identify at risk learners and inactive learners.

Guidelines

- a) Record of attendance at contact sessions/tutorials/practicals.
- b) Submission of formative assessment including feedback.
- c) Tracking the participation of the learners and prompting them to participate.

Approved by Council at its 52nd meeting held on the 25th of March 2026 at the Management Training Bureau at Number 21 Falice Road, Msasa, Harare

Signature:.......... Date:.....

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