



# NCHE

## STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR DELIVERY OF ODeL PROGRAMMES

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**Promoting Quality,  
Accessible, Relevant and  
Inclusive Higher Education**

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Private Bag B371

Lilongwe

MALAWI

Telephone: +265 1 755 884

Fax : +265 755 886

Email: [info@nche.ac.mw](mailto:info@nche.ac.mw)

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## **Foreword**

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) is committed to making the Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) viable mechanism of education delivery in the country. This is very essential, considering that the Ministry of Education has now put in place an ODeL Policy to enable provision of education accessible and flexible using technology to enhance learning in Malawi and beyond.

By using the ODeL Standards and Guidelines, it is envisioned that the quality of teaching and learning in HEIs will be enhanced through utilization of modern instructional materials and methods, including increased use of ICT; expanding access to education and training by developing capacity for increased enrolment through non-conventional approaches in teaching and learning; and exposing staff and students to ICT-driven teaching and learning experiences required in a competitive tertiary education environment.

In this regard, NCHE has high expectation that higher education institutions will adhere to the provisions as contained in this guidelines to achieve maximum outcomes as they devised ODeL programmes in their respective institutions.

**COUNCIL CHAIRPERSON**

## **Preface**

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) (hereinafter ‘the Council’) was established by an Act of Parliament, No. 15 of 2011 to regulate and promote higher education in Malawi. On pursuant of the aforesaid mandate, the Council has developed this open, distance and electronic learning (ODEL) guidelines. The Council believes that if ODeL is adopted, the academic profile of training institutions will not only be enhanced but also learners’ educational experience will tremendously improve thereby enabling students to pursue world-class training and education in a flexible learning environment outside a conventional classroom setting.

The purpose of the guidelines is to ensure that the country’s higher education system have a harmonised design and deployment of ODeL programmes. These guidelines incorporated the principles of equity, fairness, flexibility and scalability. The key objective is to support higher education institutions (HEIs) by integrating distance learning and ICTs in curriculum delivery and assessment and using ODeL as an alternative to conventional approaches.

The Guidelines detail the course of action that the HEIs will take on all matters related to ODeL. The areas covered are equitable access to ODeL, digitalisation of education curriculum, quality and relevance of ODeL, student support, assessment, investment and support, and how the ODeL Units will be governed and managed.

The guidelines were prepared by a taskforce of ODeL experts drawn from various HEIs whose contribution and shared experience was invaluable.

Ambumulire N. Phiri, PhD

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

## **Acknowledgements**

The ODeL standards and guidelines document is a product of contribution from various stakeholders through a detailed consultative process. The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) is therefore very grateful to individuals whose contributions made this document see the light of the tunnel.

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## **Acronyms**

ICT	:	Information and Communication Technology
HEI	:	Higher Education Institution
LMS	:	Learning Management System
M&E	:	Monitoring and Evaluation
NQF	:	National Qualifications Framework
ODeL	:	Open, Distance and e-Learning
OER	:	Open Education Resources
QA	:	Quality Assurance
UDL	:	Universal Design for Learning



## Definition of Terms/Glossary

<b>Blended Learning</b>	: A type of learning that combines delivery of programmes through both face to face and distance mode using technology.
<b>Digital instructional materials</b>	: Electronic content used in teaching and learning.
<b>Digitalisation</b>	: Integration of digital technologies in teaching and learning to optimize outputs.
<b>Distance education</b>	: Any form of organized teaching and learning where a student and a teacher are physically separated and technology is used to bridge this physical and instructional gap.
<b>Dual mode institution</b>	: An institution offering both face to face and ODeL programmes.
<b>Single mode institution</b>	: An institution offering only one mode of delivery (either face to face or ODeL programmes)
<b>e-Learning instructional materials</b>	: The content conveyed within an online course including lectures, readings, textbooks, multimedia components, and other resources.
<b>e-Learning</b>	: Intentional use of networked information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching and learning.
<b>Learning Management System</b>	: A software application that provides the framework that handles all aspects of teaching and learning. –
<b>ODeL</b>	: Teaching and learning that is facilitated by information and communication technologies, offered at a distance and that allows multiple entry and exit.
<b>OER</b>	: Open educational resources (OER) are free and openly licensed educational materials that can be used for teaching, learning, research, and other purposes.
<b>Open learning</b>	: 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.

**Universal Design for Learning**

: A framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn.

**Virtual lab**

: A software application for interactive digital simulations of activities that typically take place in physical laboratory settings.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

In its mandate to promote quality in higher education, the National Council for Higher Education has developed guidelines to facilitate coordinated and effective development and delivering higher education programmes through ODeL in Malawi. The guidelines articulate best practices for the effective design, development and delivery of academic programmes through ODeL. Through its 2063 (MW2063) agenda, Malawi aspires to be an inclusively wealthy, self-reliant, industrialised upper-middle income nation by 2063. This development agenda is anchored on three pillars and seven enablers, with Human Capital Development as one of the enablers. Higher education is essential to human capital development as it creates and advances new knowledge through teaching and research, and its demand is ever-increasing. To increase the supply of education in response to the increasing demand, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) started to independently develop and deliver instruction through the ODeL mode through varied strategies and approaches that are neither coordinated nor guided by a national framework. This situation makes it difficult for the education system to guide and regulate the development and delivery of ODeL in higher education nationally.

## **2.0 RATIONALE FOR THE GUIDELINES**

For the ODeL initiatives by the HEIs to have a sustainable impact at the national level, the Malawi higher education system must have a harmonised design and deployment of ODeL programmes. This requirement can be addressed by having national ODeL-specific guidelines. To objectively develop the guidelines, NCHE conducted an ODeL situation analysis. Among the key findings of the assessment were the following:

- a) ODeL programmes are limited to existing face-to-face courses and are primarily perceived in the context of face-to-face programmes
- b) Lack of clear policies on the management of ODeL in HEIs
- c) Limited capacity and inadequate provision of student support system
- d) Lack of both internal and external quality assurance guidelines on ODeL
- e) Lack of human and technical capacity leading to underutilisation of ICT in ODeL programme delivery
- f) Competing priorities in dual-mode institutions lead to low prioritisation for OdeL Programmes.
- g) Negative perceptions towards ODeL<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to ODeL Framework, (2020)

- h) Insufficient research on ODeL in the Malawian context

Given the identified challenges, the guidelines are aligned with the national ODeL policy to provide a framework for developing and delivering programmes through ODeL by laying down a set of acceptable minimum standards for HEIs in Malawi.

### **3.0 ELIGIBILITY OF AN INSTITUTION TO OFFER ODeL**

HEIs shall conform to the five focus areas stipulated in the National ODeL policy as follows:

1. Equitable Access to ODeL,
2. The digitalisation of Education curricula,
3. Quality and Relevance,
4. Investment and Support
5. Governance and Management.

HEIs shall seek approval to offer their programmes through ODeL from NCHE.

### **4.0 NATURE OF ODeL**

HEIs shall specify whether they offer blended or fully online ODeL, providing evidence of interactive teaching and learning. HEIs shall indicate the delivery of courses that require a practicum.

### **5.0 ODeL STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES**

#### **5.1 Equitable access to ODeL**

**Definition** - Equitable access means that every student should have the same opportunity of accessing education as any other student. It also reduces barriers to accessing education.

**Standard** - HEIs shall ensure that the ODeL programmes and their learning mode and facilities are equitably accessible and flexible to all students.

#### **Guidelines**

Institutions shall:

- a) Adhere to the minimum entry requirements for university admission.
- b) Allow qualified students to register and study any programmes of their choice from anywhere within and beyond Malawian borders.
- c) Increase flexibility in programme design, e.g. multiple entries and multiple exits, credit accumulation and transfer.

- d) Provide adequate information to prospective and current students regarding the programme and study mode before, during and after registration.
- e) Provide access to appropriate facilities and technical support for the delivery of programmes including the practical components (e.g. adequate lab space, virtual labs).
- f) Provide opportunities for enhancing computer and information literacy to students and facilitators.
- g) Ensure that instruction is available in both online and offline formats
- h) Design instructional materials using universal design for learning (UDL) principles to accommodate all students' needs and abilities and eliminate unnecessary hurdles in the learning process.
- i) Use open education resources (OERs).

## 5.2 Digitalisation of Education Curriculum

**Definition** - Utilisation of digital technology to make education accessible everywhere and at any time.

**Standard** - HEIs must have digital learning materials that students can access from anywhere and at any time.

### Guidelines

Institutions shall:

- a) Digitalise all instructional materials
- b) Have an established and functional 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 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.

### 5.3 Quality and Relevance of ODeL

**Definition** - conformance and appropriateness of learning experiences to clients' and stakeholders' expectations

**Standard** - HEIs must provide ODeL that satisfies the expectations of the students and stakeholders.

#### **Guidelines**

Institutions shall:

- a) Carry out needs assessments, research and employability analysis to inform the development of ODeL programmes
- b) Regularly evaluate facilitators and courses (regular feedback, e.g. through student satisfaction surveys, students evaluation of teaching and peer evaluation)
- c) Develop policy and guidelines for ODeL
- d) Ensure all staff are familiar with the policy and guidelines for ODeL operations.
- e) Implement policy and procedures for quality assurance and enhancement in ODeL.
- f) Provide house style manual for institutional material design and development.
- g) Ensure availability of self-learning materials for all ODeL courses on offer
- h) Conduct ongoing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for existing and new staff in ODeL.
- i) Ensure that ODeL policies, guidelines and practices are aligned with the minimum standards for developing and delivering ODeL programmes in Malawi.
- j) Develop functional Monitoring & Evaluation (M & E) Framework for ODeL (e.g. student attendance, monitoring and performance tracking).
- k) Build capacity of QA personnel in ODeL M & E.
- l) Benchmark programmes to meet national, regional and international standards and quality

- m) Engage relevant industry and stakeholders in curriculum design, development and delivery.
- n) Ensure the development and delivery of programmes are characterised by the highest standards and relevance to the context of national socioeconomic development and human resource needs.

#### 5.3.1 Student Support

- a) Provide academic, social, and psychological counselling and guidance services (career guidance, student motivation).
- b) Plan and conduct academic orientation and acculturation procedures for new students.
- c) Provide assistive technology and infrastructure to accommodate students with special learning needs.
- d) Establish a dedicated student support services mechanism.
- e) Establish physical or digital resource centres where discussion forums will be promoted.
- f) Build human resource capacity to provide student support services.
- g) Provide student-centred support services that are responsive to the diverse needs of the students.
- h) Establish physical or virtual study circles.
- i) Provide students with basic skills on ODeL (Reading skills; independent study skills; notetaking skills; writing skills; and ICT skills).

#### 5.3.2 Assessment

- a) Develop guidelines for setting, moderating, administering, marking and processing formative and summative assessments.
- b) Ensure learning and assessment demands are commensurate with the level of study
- c) Subject examinations to both internal and external moderation
- d) Provide students with information on how they will be assessed on the course.
- e) Set clear procedures for receiving, recording, processing and turning around assignments with a time frame that allows students to benefit from formative feedback before submitting further assessment tasks.
- f) Develop formative and summative assessment procedures to ensure consistency and accuracy of marking and grading and provide helpful feedback to the students.
- g) Ensure a variety of formative and summative assessment tasks and methods which ensure that all learning outcomes are adequately assessed.
- h) 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.

- i) Develop and implement antiplagiarism guidelines.
- j) Use anti-plagiarism software in student assessment.

## 6.0 INVESTMENT AND SUPPORT

**Definition** – Provision of resources to support the design, development and delivery of academic programmes through ODeL.

**Standard** - A Higher Education Institution shall have appropriate financial resources to provide and sustain distance and e-learning programmes.

### **Guidelines**

Institutions shall:

- a) Have a specific budget and bank account for the ODeL Unit.
- b) Charge fees that reflect the actual cost of providing the service and its continuing investment requirements.
- c) Develop a business model/policy guide for development and investment in ODeL.
- d) Give ODeL activities equal attention in terms of resource provision in dual-mode institutions.
- e) Ensure appropriate investment in ODeL technologies, including ICT infrastructure, materials development, support services and research.
- f) Have an ICT policy to maintain and upgrade technologies and ensure reliability, privacy, safety and security.
- g) Provide financial safeguards for income from ODeL offering to improve, sustain and maintain ODeL systems.
- h) Have full-time administrative staff that are qualified in ODeL.
- i) Ensure that not less than 70% of the resources generated through ODeL are used in ODeL activities.
- j) Build capacity for its personnel in ODeL through induction and regular and targeted continuous professional development (CPD) programmes.

## 7.0 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

**Definition** – Provision of leadership and conducive policy context for properly implementing ODeL activities within the institution.



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

### **Guidelines**

Institutions shall:

- a) Maintain appropriate academic oversight of the ODeL programmes.
- b) Establish a semiautonomous (for dual mode) ODeL Unit governed by regular institutional management structures, e.g. Senate.
- c) Ensure autonomy in the operations of the ODeL Units.
- d) Appoint a full-time Director/Coordinator to coordinate operations of ODeL Unit and programmes.
- e) Ensure that the ODeL Director/Coordinator reports directly to the DVC/Head of Academics.
- f) Integrate total quality control management systems in the development and delivery of ODeL and all academic and support services.
- g) Develop institutional policies and guidelines for smooth operations of ODeL activities.
- h) Develop strategies to ensure the sustainability of ODeL programmes.
- i) Provide the required information and communication technologies and related support services.
- j) Promote cost-effective ways of deploying ICT, e.g. group bargaining.
- k) Facilitate partnerships with other institutions for sharing best practices in ODeL.
- l) Develop a workload policy to reduce overload in ODeL facilitation.
- m) Engage staff with relevant qualifications and experience in ODeL.
- n) Develop and implement a marketing plan to enhance awareness, visibility and publicity of ODeL.
- o) Ensure that facilitators sign contracts with well stipulated conditions of service.

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National Council For Higher Education  
NCHE House, Area 47/2  
Near Petroda Filling Station  
Private Bag B371  
Lilongwe Malawi

 +265 (0) 1 755 884

 [info@nche.ac.mw](mailto:info@nche.ac.mw)

 [www.nche.ac.mw](http://www.nche.ac.mw)