



POLICY ON ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION

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¹ Approval must be by the same structure that approved the initial policy.

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1. PREAMBLE

The *Policy on Online Distance Education* of the University of Johannesburg (the Policy'), provides for the offering of learning programmes through online distance education (ODE). UJ ODE must comply with national policy, regulatory and quality provisions as set out by the relevant bodies. The Department of Higher Education and Training's *Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-School System* (DHET, 2014: 8) indicates that distance education is "an indispensable and integral component of our national post-school education system". The DHET policy recognises increasing variations between the binary of distance and contact modes, indicating that distance education "refers to provision in which students spend 30% or less of the stated Notional Learning hours in undergraduate courses at NQF Levels 5 and 6, and 25% or less in courses at NQF Level 7 and initial postgraduate courses at NQF Level 8, in staff-led, face-to-face, campus-based structured learning activities" (DHET, 2014: 9). The DHET policy, therefore, bases the distinction on the percentage of contact time.

The DHET policy acknowledges the "affordances of technology to improve the quality of distance provision" and that it has "become essential for universities to have prepared their graduates for meaningful participation in a digital world" (DHET, 2014: 10). It also alludes to the role of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in assuring and ensuring the quality of learning programmes offered through distance education (DHET, 2014: 12).

In 2021, the CHE issued *A Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Higher Education in South Africa*. To facilitate implementation of the QAF, the CHE is developing higher education practice standards (HEPS). One of the HEPS² relates to *Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision* which sets out the essential dimensions of learning and teaching provision in all modes. The HEPS statement is as follows:

The learning and teaching provision in a HEI articulates the inherent identity, agency and espoused pedagogy/pedagogies of the institution, its administration and support and is expressed in policies, structures, plans, processes, resource allocation and measures that are in place to effectively implement, evaluate and continuously improve its institutional position. The effective provision of the full range of current and future planned programmes to enable student success is achieved through intentional reflexive design by attending to the interrelated dimensions of time-pace-space, preparedness, responsiveness, integrity, and institutional support.

According to the HEPS, there are five dimensions to the mode of provision. Each dimension is expanded into its respective elements. These are set out in the graphic below:

² Draft *Higher Education Practice Standard for Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision* (CHE, released for comment in 2024)

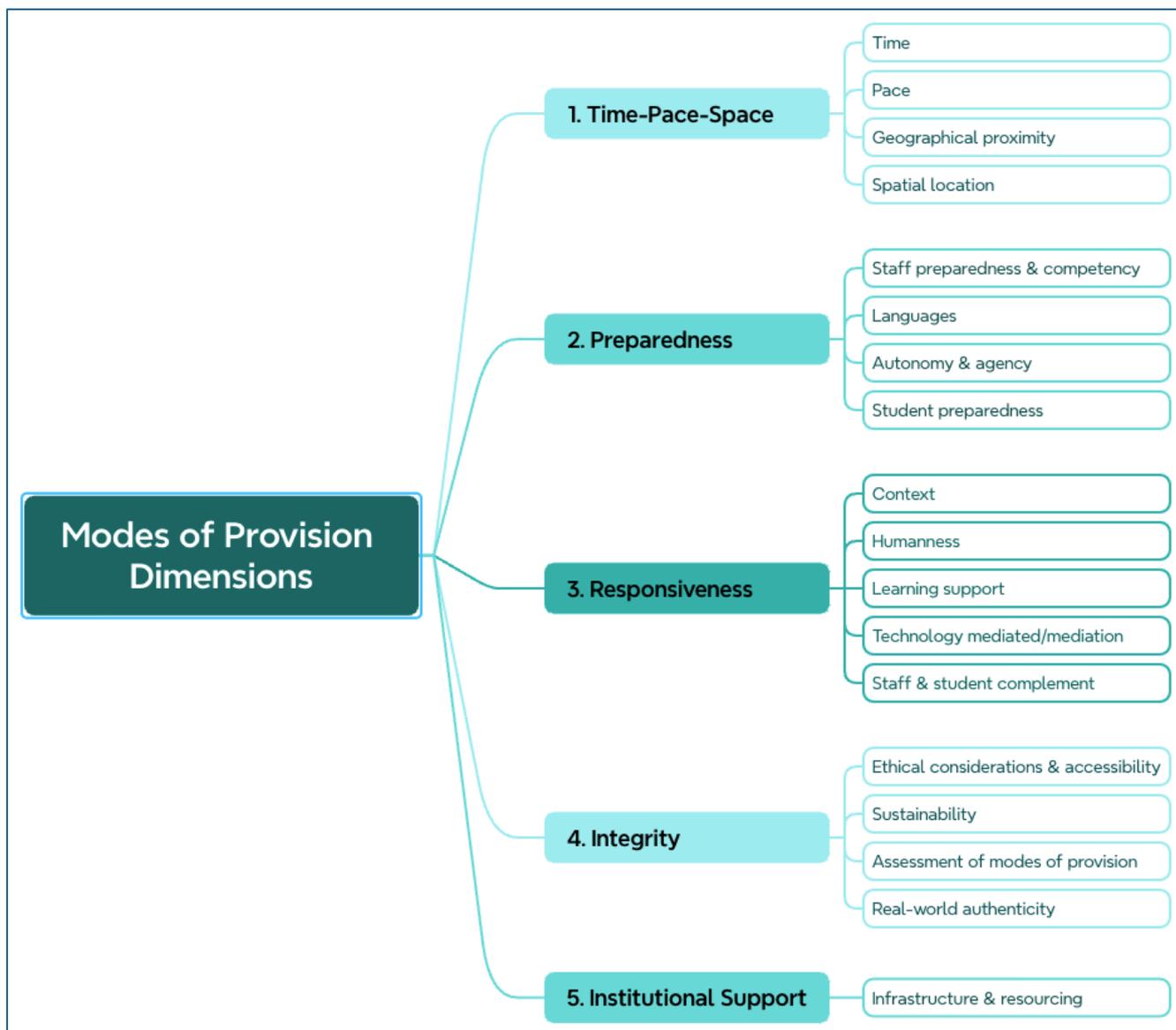


Figure 1: Dimensions of Learning and Teaching Modalities of Provision (CHE, 2024)

In its commitment to providing quality programmes regardless of the mode of delivery³ the University has considered the above five dimensions for the mode of provision in this Policy. In this way, a quality ODE experience is enabled for all students, ensuring “equivalence of provision, in quality and standard across all teaching and learning modalities”⁴ and appropriate support designed to enhance the likelihood of academic success.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of the Policy is to:

- 2.1 Set out the requirements for, and principles underpinning, the offering of learning programmes through online distance education.
- 2.2 Establish the requirements to assure the quality of online distance education, such that the advantages of the mode are maximised in the best interest of the student.

³ Academic Programme Policy (UJ, 2021; as amended)

⁴ Teaching and Learning Policy (UJ, 2022; as amended)

- 2.3 Establish the basis for ensuring that the UJ online distance education experience meets institutional standards for ODE, the relevant Higher Education Practice Standard(s)⁵ (HEPS), contributes to student success, and enhances UJ's stature in this area.
- 2.4 Ensure the standards⁶ for UJ's online distance education align to national requirements and are motivated by the University's commitment to a quality learning experience for students and academic excellence.
- 2.5 Assure the quality of UJ's online distance education, whether offered through short or whole learning programmes, including their development, design, provision (in the selected environment/s or platforms), and operationalisation.
- 2.6 Assure the quality of practice in UJ's online distance education across all aspects of institutional support, including marketing, administration, and student and staff support.
- 2.7 Establish minimum requirements for the design and (re)production of all learning and training materials, including assessment.
- 2.8 Establish the requirements for online learning support for student access and success in terms of navigating the online environment/s or platforms, tutoring, and monitoring student engagement and interaction, among others.

3. SCOPE

- 3.1 The Policy applies to all learning programmes, whether subsidised or non-subsidised, offered in ODE at UJ, leading to a registered qualification on the NQF for which the qualification is awarded and a certificate issued by the University.
- 3.2 Short learning programmes offered in ODE are subject to this Policy, in line with the provisions relating to SLPs⁷.
- 3.3 The Policy must be read in conjunction with:
 - all relevant national policies, including but not limited to the DHET *Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-School System (2014)* and relevant HEPS and related criteria and guidelines developed by the CHE
 - institutional policies and relevant documents, including but not limited to UJ's *Online Policy Framework (2016)*, *Academic Programme Policy (2021, as amended)*, *Teaching and Learning Policy (2022, as amended)*, *Assessment Policy (2022, as amended)*, and *Policy on Short Learning Programmes (2024, as amended)*.

4. TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

- 4.1 UJ offers quality learning programmes through the utilisation of the following modes of provision, strategies, and/or approaches. Online distance education is, therefore, contextualised within the spectrum of modalities as defined⁸ below:

4.1.1 Contact learning:

Means learning that takes place when students and lecturers are required to be together in the same place at the same time (for example, in lectures, laboratories, tutorials, practical sessions, etc.). Contact learning may include blended components. Contact

⁵ *Higher Education Practice Standard for Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision* (draft released for public comment, 2024) and other applicable HEPS

⁶ See Draft UJ Standards for ODE (2025)

⁷ *Policy on Short Learning Programmes* (2024, as amended)

⁸ Various definitions exist but for the purposes of the Policy, the definitions provided by the CHE have been used (*draft Higher Education Practice Standard for Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision*; CHE, 2024) as well as definitions provided in the *UJ Online Policy Framework* (2016) and academic regulations.

learning may be supported or supplemented by methods or technologies that do not require students and lecturers to be in the same place at the same time, such as online learning management systems.

4.1.2 Digital education:

Is an overarching term for the application of a range of digital technologies which mediate and enrich learning and teaching. It encompasses online learning, blended learning and the inclusion of technology into face-to-face learning and teaching. When used effectively, digital education allows students to achieve learning outcomes. Digital education should facilitate accessible learning as well as develop both students' and academics' digital skills.

4.1.3 Distance learning:

Distance learning is not dependent on the student and the lecturer being in the same place, at the same time, for teaching and learning to take place. Distance learning takes numerous forms, from paper-based correspondence to fully online learning, teaching, and assessment. Distance (fully online) learning can be synchronous (lecturer and students present in the same virtual room at a designated time) or asynchronous (meaning that students can access lecture material at any time). At UJ, all distance learning is fully online. Distance (i.e. fully online) programmes are equivalent to on-campus contact programmes in terms of admission criteria, credits, overall workload, and overall module outcomes (i.e. online modules are of equivalent standard as contact modules). Distance (fully online) programmes can also be offered in a carousel model.

4.1.4 Online education:

Refers to a mode of instruction in which students receive course materials and interact with instructors and peers in a digitally mediated context or LMS, typically via the Internet (adapted from Dung et al., 2023). All learning, teaching and assessment are designed for and happen fully online. Activities are intentionally designed for online and offered synchronously (at the same time) and/or asynchronously (in own time). Online learning may include limited non-compulsory contact time for particular activities (such as study groups) and/or venue-based final assessment.

4.1.5 Blended learning:

Refers to the provision of structured learning opportunities using a combination of contact, distance, and/or ICT-supported opportunities to suit different purposes, audiences, and contexts (DHET, 2014). Blended learning is not a mode of provision; it is a strategy or approach. Blended learning involves purposefully integrating technology-mediated activities to support face-to-face learning, teaching, and assessment. It can involve different approaches, such as the flipped classroom. Thus, the term blended learning implies that the dominant mode of learning is enhanced with supplemented learning, which may be enabled by technology, contact or tools.

4.1.6 Hybrid learning:

As a combination of both synchronous and asynchronous modalities, integrates elements of real-time interaction and flexibility. This approach allows for a blended educational experience where students and faculty can engage both synchronously, at scheduled times, and asynchronously, with the freedom to participate at different times. Hybrid learning provides a balance, leveraging the advantages of both modalities to accommodate various learning styles and preferences. The synchronous component involves simultaneous interactions, akin to traditional classroom settings, while the

asynchronous aspect allows for individualised learning schedules and increased flexibility in accessing educational materials. In hybrid mode learning, teaching and assessment involve a purposefully designed combination of face-to-face and online. Different forms may include Block release (blocks of contact time interspersed with periods of fully online learning, teaching and assessment); dual delivery (teaching happens face to face and online at the same time); and hyflex (students can choose to participate synchronously in-person or online or asynchronously in their own time).

4.2 For the purposes of this Policy, the term online distance education (ODE) is adopted. At UJ, all distance learning is fully online. Distance (i.e. fully online) programmes must be equivalent to on-campus contact learning programmes in terms of admission criteria, credits, overall workload, and overall module outcomes (i.e. online modules are of equivalent standard as contact modules).

4.3 Online distance education at UJ is defined as follows:

Online distance education (ODE) encompasses suitable learning and teaching activities, employed in short learning programmes or formal whole programmes leading to registered qualifications, which are facilitated using technology designed to enable and promote student engagement, interactivity and communication between students, staff and relevant role-players, and provide access to learning and teaching, academic support and relevant resources, facilities and infrastructure.

4.4 The term, “online distance education,” and the acronym, “ODE,” must be used consistently in all relevant University documentation.

5. PRINCIPLES FOR ODE

The following principles underpin the provision of ODE at UJ:

5.1 Shared responsibility

- 5.1.1 ODE is contextualised within an holistic, integrated, internal educational ecosystem, which implies shared ownership and responsibility. All aspects of the online distance education environment must support student learning. For this purpose, in-depth, regular engagement among all relevant role-players at all levels of the process is required.
- 5.1.2 The roles and responsibilities of staff, students, service providers and other role-players and stakeholders need to be clearly communicated.
- 5.1.3 For ODE to be successful, the University provides suitable and sufficient financial, human, physical and other resources, and infrastructure to support learning, teaching, and development.

5.2 Pedagogical framework

- 5.2.1 ODE is located within a pedagogical framework which presupposes the active and conscious creation of a suitable learning environment to support student engagement and engender learning.
- 5.2.2 ODE involves consideration of the (percentage) time, pace of learning, and space allocated for this purpose and how these should be configured within the purposeful design of learning programmes to achieve fitness for purpose.
- 5.2.3 The ODE learning environment guides, directs, and initiates learning and teaching as appropriate to the qualification type, NQF level and anticipated student intake.

5.3 Access

- 5.3.1 ODE facilitates access to learning programmes for a diverse and widely dispersed student population. It offers flexible study options and, potentially, individualised education.
- 5.3.2 ODE is enabled by technology, allowing learning and teaching activities and engagement to occur. The use of technology for engagement and the achievement of learning outcomes must be carefully calibrated to ensure that the mode meets the desired purpose.

5.4 Responsiveness

- 5.4.1 Emerging technologies that enable efficient and effective service delivery and an enhanced educational experience must be explored and incorporated where viable.
- 5.4.2 All academic and support staff and relevant role-players in the ODE environment are trained to respond to ODE students' needs appropriately and timeously.
- 5.4.3 For effectiveness and efficiency in the relevant roles, continuous improvement of ODE, and risk management, ODE processes need to be regularly reviewed and improved where necessary.

5.5 Preparedness

- 5.5.1 All staff, students, tutors, and facilitators who operate in the online learning environment need to be competent in the use of available technology, including the learning management system, digital tools, and services.
- 5.5.2 Students are trained in the online learning environment, and continuous support is provided by a dedicated team in the Centre for Academic Technologies. An online module which orients online students to UJ is in place.
- 5.5.3 The academic staff is continuously trained and supported in the application of teaching methods and the development of learning materials specific to the distance online pedagogy.
- 5.5.4 Staff members who work on / in the online environment (including administrators, academics, tutors, support functions, etc) are trained and continuously supported.
- 5.5.5 Mechanisms are in place to navigate emergency situations.

6. REQUIREMENTS FOR ODE

6.1 Governance and management

- 6.1.1 The University's strategy in terms of learning and teaching provision for ODE is holistic and in line with its identity, mission, vision, pedagogies, and strategic planning.
- 6.1.2 The University's policies and procedures in various domains of operation (programme design, materials design, learning, teaching and assessment, student administration and support (including tutors), ICT, LMS operation, etc.) give effect to the espoused strategy and pedagogies for ODE and have quality assurance and continuous improvement built into them.⁹
- 6.1.3 The University upholds standards¹⁰ for the implementation and management of ODE to ensure quality provision.
- 6.1.4 There is adherence to the standards for ODE by all staff and relevant role-players in terms of the design, provision, review, support, and administration of short and whole learning programmes.

⁹ 5.1-5.2: cf. Draft HEPS for *Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision* (CHE, 2024)

¹⁰ 5.3-5.4: See Draft UJ Standards for ODE (2025)

- 6.1.5 Parity of provision in the education offered across contact and distance modes in the same learning programmes is acknowledged and accounted for with regard to:
 - 6.1.5.1 Resourcing
 - 6.1.5.2 Provision of, and access to, learning materials and equipment
 - 6.1.5.3 Provision of, and access to, academic, psycho-social, technical, and administrative support
 - 6.1.5.4 Suitable and sufficient facilities and infrastructure to accommodate and facilitate ODE.

Note: Notwithstanding the provision of 6.1.5, students in the ODE mode are expected to have their own laptops/devices and to have adequate and reliable access to data / the Internet.

- 6.1.6 The University ensures that the digital literacy of academics and tutors is improved through various appropriate, continuous learning opportunities. Excellence, innovation, and experimentation with new technologies are encouraged and acknowledged.
- 6.1.7 The University ensures that students' digital literacy is continuously improved through the provision by the Centre for Academic Technologies (CAT) of accessible online training on the learning management system and on managing one's studies in the distance environment. Students are prepared and supported to familiarise themselves with the online learning environment, how to navigate technological issues, and direct, manage and monitor their own learning and their learning choices in complex and flexible learning ecosystems.
- 6.1.8 The University implements strategies, policies, and evaluation mechanisms to embed the ethical, responsible, and transformative use of technology by staff, tutors, and students.
- 6.1.9 The University employs a suitable learning management system and management information system that encompass arrangements for ODE, with the necessary digital platforms and tools to facilitate learning and teaching activities in the online learning environment and incorporate cybersecurity and data protection.
- 6.1.10 Students' information and communication needs receive due attention via the utilisation of suitable digital platforms, including the learning management system. Students are timeously informed of the hardware and software requirements for ODE.
- 6.1.11 The University's physical and digital infrastructure and resource allocation is adequate and appropriate to support the espoused strategy and planning for ODE, now and into the future. Staff, tutors, and students have appropriate and adequate access to devices and data to support the strategy.¹¹ NB: This does not mean that the University is obliged to provide devices and/or data for student use.
- 6.1.12 Students have adequate library support in the online learning environment and authorised access to library resources, such as electronic databases.

6.2 Programme design, provision and review¹²

- 6.2.1 The faculty and department have a clear and correct record of how each short and whole learning programme (including its modules) is offered in ODE.
- 6.2.2 Effective administrative systems are in place for:
 - 6.2.2.1 Dissemination of faculty and/or department information, coursework information, and learning materials
 - 6.2.2.2 Identifying academically non-active students
 - 6.2.2.3 Monitoring student performance to ensure timely identification of at-risk students

¹¹ 5.6-5.7, 5.9 & 5.11: cf. Draft HEPS for *Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision* (CHE, 2024).

¹² cf. *Criteria for Programme Accreditation* (CHE, 2004; revised 2012)

- 6.2.2.4 Dealing with the needs of a diverse student population in various geographical locations.
- 6.2.3 Appropriate, timeous intervention and support strategies are available on suitable digital platforms to facilitate and enhance the interaction between staff, tutors, and students.
- 6.2.4 A suitable teaching and learning strategy is in place for offering the learning programme in ODE and mechanisms are employed to ensure that the learning and teaching methods are appropriate for the design and use of learning materials and instructional and learning technology.
- 6.2.5 A suitable assessment strategy is in place for offering the learning programme in ODE. There are appropriate structures and procedures in place for assessment, internal and external moderation, monitoring of student progress, explicitness, validity and reliability of assessment practices, recording of assessment results, settling of disputes, and the rigour and security of the assessment system in ODE.
- 6.2.6 Postgraduate learning programmes offered in ODE are governed by the relevant University policies¹³ and procedures in terms of the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and students (including periodicity of contact between the two parties), management of research projects, dissertations, theses and other research output, research ethics, code of conduct, regulations on plagiarism and intellectual property rights, examination, and qualification requirements.
- 6.2.7 The learning programme offered in ODE is effectively coordinated to facilitate the attainment of its intended purposes and outcomes.

7. REVIEW

In accordance with the *Policy on Policy Development and Amendments*¹⁴, the Policy will be reviewed every five years or earlier should the need arise.

Approval History Table	
Name of Approval Body (Committee)	Date that the policy/review was approved
STLC	8 May 2025
Senate	11 June 2025

¹³ Relevant UJ policies include, but are not limited to, the *Higher Degrees Administration Policy* (2022, as amended) and *Higher Degrees Policy* (2022, as amended)

¹⁴ *Policy on Policy Development and Amendments* (2020)