



higher education  
& training

Department:  
Higher Education and Training  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

## Department of Higher Education and Training Position on Online Programme Offerings

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# Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Position on Online Programme Offerings

## 1. Introduction

Modern technology makes it possible to offer truly global, more affordable access to increased learning opportunities, opening up such opportunities to people who would otherwise not have access to them. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are playing an increased role in the provision of education and training. With the ability of the internet to cut across demographic boundaries, online learning is rapidly becoming, not just an acceptable delivery method (together with a specific self-directed, learner-centred pedagogy), but also one that is in strong demand, even in campus-based education and training. Online learning is popular among different types of students because it offers the possibility of both synchronous and asynchronous use, the latter affording students the ability to participate in a course/programme when it is convenient for them to do so. In this environment, students become more active, reflective learners and because they engage in learning through the use of ICT, they also become more familiar with technology by using it. This is a critical skill set for everyone to acquire in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The demand by students to study off-campus, and the increasingly sophisticated and technology-enhanced delivery methods on offer nationally and internationally, by both public and private institutions, have created a truly staggering shift in understandings of what learning and teaching mean. No longer are students confined to studying within one local institution; there are now increasing opportunities to study courses online from reputable institutions globally.

More and more demands are being placed on the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) System to respond to global trends such as online programme and course offerings, massive open online courses (MOOCs), multi-institutional education and training offerings, cross-border education and the privatisation/commercialisation of education.

Although distance education/blended learning/resource-based learning programmes are offered at various institutions and levels, and provision is made for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and the transfer of credits between programmes and institutions, much still has to be done to be responsive to:

- the needs and contexts of students and aspirant students,
- the need for improved success rates in the PSET system,
- the curriculum requirements of relevance to the world of work within a global context, and
- the demands of private institutions in massifying education and training.

Therefore, Open Learning, as defined in the 2013 *White Paper for Post-school Education and Training*<sup>1</sup>, is an all-encompassing premise for addressing the above demands and needs, and a viable option to be considered and implemented in the PSET System.

Online offerings, within the context of open learning, and as a collection of learning methods (coupled with a specific pedagogy as referred to above) that are made available through the internet, has potential to provide for different ways of learning and the construction of a potentially richer and more interactive learning environment. It can potentially cater for different learning styles, allow for greater diversification in learning, and afford greater access to learning. However, online learning does not equate to open learning or distance education, neither of which necessarily include the use of online technology.

Online learning can include the following aspects (that may reflect varying degrees of “openness”): online support for learning in a variety of forms, delivery of content, assessment, learning resources and/or interactive learning activities. However, it can only be effective if it is based on self-directed, learner-centred pedagogies.

Furthermore, if enrolments for online programmes are large enough to give rise to economies of scale, online offerings have the potential, through reducing the need for building additional classrooms and taking on additional full-time lecturers, to reduce the overall cost of provision over time (though initial costs of course design and technological infrastructure are usually high). Online offerings may also be an attractive option for those who wish to access opportunities for lifelong learning without having to travel to a campus, step into a classroom or take on the pressures of adapting to, and costs associated with, campus life.

While the power of online technology to provide learning opportunities is well understood, the realities of ICT infrastructure, specifically software and connectivity demands and costs; limited adoption of technology; the high cost of materials development; the current dearth of high quality student support; and challenges in administering credible assessment online and bringing about change in educators’ pedagogical approach, all sit heavily on the shoulders of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and institutions.

The DHET has a responsibility to ensure that online programme and course offerings are wisely adopted to support and advance teaching, learning and accountable assessment strategies, embracing open learning principles as set out in the 2013 *White Paper*.

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<sup>1</sup> Open learning is an approach which combines the principles of learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems.

## 2. Online Programme Modalities

In the *Concept Framework for an Open Learning System in Post School Education and Training in South Africa* (DHET, 2013) and the subsequent *Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South Africa* (DHET, 2014) the traditional one-dimensional notion of education and training delivery as lying somewhere on a linear continuum between full contact, campus-based delivery and remote delivery through distance provisioning (see horizontal axis in Figure 1), is expanded to a two-dimensional model that overlays the impact that digital technology/ICT has on education delivery (see vertical axis in Figure 1). Figure 1 illustrates the broader range of possibilities (in the area of the graph), and shows how institutions can choose delivery modalities for courses and programmes that draw on the opportunities afforded by digital and online technologies.

**Figure 1:** Education and Training Delivery Modes

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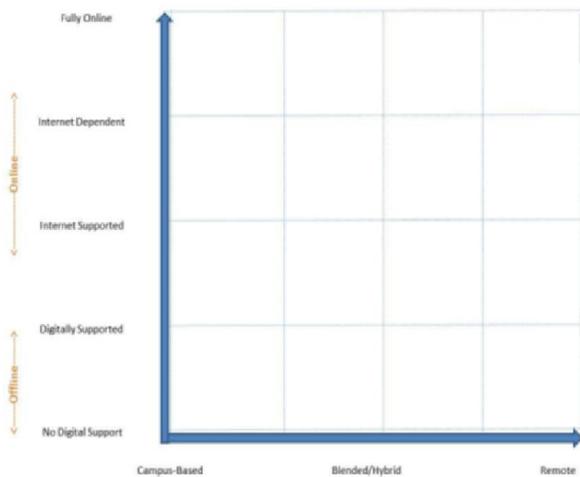


Figure 1 clearly illustrates the possibility of incorporating online learning opportunities in courses and programmes that lie anywhere on the continuum from campus-based offerings to remote offerings.

Therefore, online delivery of programmes and courses in the PSET System, within the context above, manifests itself in different modalities, including:

- Institutions offering programmes and courses online as part of their Programme and Qualification Mix;
- Institutions offering programmes and courses online through sub-contracted companies as part of their Programme and Qualification Mix;
- Institutions offering online programmes and courses in partnership with other institutions;
- Institutions offering online programmes and courses through companies owned by the institutions;

- Programmes, including online programme offerings, that are recognised by institutions for a qualification through credit transfer;
- Unaccredited programmes (national and international) and online programme offerings by private institutions, industry and organisations; and
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

### 3. Current Situation

The following sub-sections outline the current policy and legislative environment, and online programme offerings already in the PSET system or on offer in South Africa.

#### 3.1 Current Legislative and Policy Environment

This section gives a short synopsis of the current legislative and policy environment in place to regulate and direct online programme offerings.

##### 3.1.1 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013)

The *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013)* supports the development of a post-school sector based on open learning principles, where quality learning environments are constructed which take account of student context and use the most appropriate and cost-effective methods and technologies.

In the *White Paper* the DHET commits to build an expanded, effective and integrated PSET System.

In Chapter 7 of the *White Paper* the DHET also commits to working towards creating a PSET landscape based on open learning principles. This undertaking includes building a network of education providers supported by learning support centres and appropriate technology. Digital technology should be used where appropriate to enhance access, improve communication and generally optimise student engagement. The DHET encourages all PSET providers to establish collaborative partnerships and networks (where appropriate), and increasingly make use of available technologies, again giving careful consideration to its appropriateness.

The *White Paper* however acknowledges that to date, conceptions of how learning programmes and courses are designed and delivered, and the application of ICT and open learning principles, have tended to focus mainly on face-to-face, campus-based programmes and on the periphery, on distance education offerings. It is envisaged that as digital technology becomes more accessible in South Africa, a dimension of e-learning may be incorporated into different modes of provision. The DHET compels providers to collaborate in sharing infrastructure, learning resources and staff capacity in order to improve access, quality and cost effectiveness of provision.

The DHET intends to improve ICT access by developing an integrated ICT plan to improve access to technology for the PSET system and collaborating with the Department of Communications to facilitate increased bandwidth and reducing costs for educational purposes. Further mechanisms to build capacity for staff and student to use technology effectively, will also be supported.

### 3.1.2 Universities

As in the White Paper, the *Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-School System* (DHET, 2014) recognises the impact of ICT on the provision of education in the higher education sector. It supports the creation of an enabling environment for appropriate integration of ICT to enhance distance education provision, the utilisation of ICT to improve the quality of distance education and the need to expand distance education provision in an orderly manner in which access and quality issues are at the forefront.

Most universities have adopted some or all of the modalities outlined in Section 2 above. The model reflected in Figure 1, is a useful framework to inform a survey of current delivery modalities in the system, which would enable the development of a database of online courses and programmes in South African higher education.

It is also important to note that while the policy recognises the possibility of multiple delivery options with a two-dimensional matrix, the higher education funding system continues to differentiate simply between contact and distance provisioning. A truly differentiated provisioning system would likely need a more nuanced funding system.

Section 38.1 of the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 97) supports collaboration and partnerships in higher education. In alignment with the Act, the *Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities* signals the intent of the DHET to draft a policy on partnerships and collaborations that will likely also formalise opportunities for institutions to collaborate on the offering of programmes, including online programmes.

### 3.1.3 Technical Vocational Education and Training Colleges

The Continuing Education and Training Act (No. 16 of 2006) commits to “ensure access to basic adult education, further education and training and the workplace through continuing education and training by persons who have been marginalised in the past such as women, the disabled, and the disadvantaged;” and “provide optimal opportunities for learning, the creation of knowledge and the development of intermediate- to high-level skills in keeping with international standards of academic and technical quality”. The Act furthermore emphasises the provision of opportunities for life-long learning. The traditional way of providing education and training through face-to-face modalities are not sustainable in the current resource constraint environment. Thus sustainable, alternative methodologies, such as online learning has to be considered.

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In order to reach the 2030 target of 2.5 million enrolments set for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in the 2013 *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training*, the DHET has to rethink how institutions work, the long-term impact of technology advancements, and how TVET colleges need to structure themselves around increasing the employability of their students by considering additional, technology-based means of education and training delivery.

### 3.1.4 Community Education and Training Colleges

The Continuing Education and Training Act (No. 16 of 2006), as described above, has relevance to Community Education and Training (CET) colleges. The White Paper (2013) described CET colleges as a new type of institution that will be provided with adequate infrastructure to be responsive to the need of local communities, including empowering communities to embrace technology effectively to access the world of work and to embark on life-long learning.

### 3.1.5 Skills Development

The Skills Development Act (No. 97 of 1998) requires that learners have access to high quality and appropriate education and training, and skills development opportunities accessible in a work-integrated approach. It emphasises the relevance of education to the workplace and learning “on the job”. Online modalities open a hitherto-unavailable world of simulations and real world applications than ever before.

According to the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) III, people have to be capacitated and empowered to create their own opportunities in developing sustainable livelihoods. Online methodologies provide the opportunity to the entrepreneur to learn while earning his/her livelihood.

### 3.1.6 Registration of Qualifications and Accreditation of Providers

With the promulgation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act, three Quality Councils (QCs) were established to ensure the accreditation of qualifications within their respective sub-frameworks. Any qualification, regardless of mode of delivery, has to be registered through the standard established processes.

The QCs are also responsible for the quality assurance processes relevant to their sub-framework, and the institutions which deliver their qualifications. Private higher education and training providers which offer accredited higher education NQF-registered qualifications, and private colleges which are accredited by Umalusi to offer their qualifications, have to be registered with the DHET. Currently private providers of qualifications registered by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) on the Occupational Qualifications Sub-framework (OQSF) do not have to be registered by the DHET, but they have to be accredited by the QCTO or one of its delegated quality assurance partners. This will soon be changing to regularise registration requirements across all private providers for all three QCs. This measure will provide a means of ensuring the credibility of private providers.

All public and private higher education and TVET colleges, and community education and training colleges, have to be accredited by their relevant QC, in order to offer formal qualifications and part-qualifications. Non-formal provision, though, is not accredited or registered. This means that online providers of not-for-credit short courses do not have to be accredited by a QC or registered by the DHET.

The quality assurance regime has a responsibility to consider online programme and course offerings, and to consider how to ensure that programmes and courses offered online have the same structure of quality assurance as other means of delivery.

### 3.1.7 Transfer of Credits of Offerings done through Online Offerings and MOOCs

The DHET developed a draft Articulation Policy (No 373, Government Gazette No 39867, 30 March 2016) to provide purposes, principles and recommendations for articulation to inform the articulation practices of role-players in the PSET System. Once finalised it will facilitate the access, progression and mobility of students between and within the three sub-frameworks of the NQF.

SAQA has already developed the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Policy, which is binding on the three QCs and institutions, as per the NQF Act. This policy must also be tested against the offering of online programmes and courses. Current barriers exist through exclusionary practices of higher education institutions and professional bodies for students who are in formal residential programmes which are offered in face-to-face teaching and learning environments. The policies which exist are enabling, but the implementation of these policies are being hampered by traditional approaches to teaching and learning and resistance to articulation and CAT. Part of the challenge is in the continued application of the so-called 50% residency clause which is used by higher education institutions. Through the application of this clause, students may only get a maximum of 50% recognition of their credits when they transfer between institutions or programmes. The 50 % residency clause is linked to the funding formula of the public higher education institutions and this will need to be addressed as well. The implementation of CAT and RPL and other access policies in the delivery of MOOCs will need to recognise the way in which teaching, learning and assessment takes place in a MOOC and/or online environment. The barriers and challenges that exist in the formal teaching and learning environment will need to be dealt with by SAQA and the QCs. The current SAQA policies provide an enabling environment for simple application of the principles of CAT and RPL in these teaching and learning environments.

**Commented [L3]:** This section can either be included here or under section 5 which deals with issues to consider.

### 3.1.8 Recognition of Prior Learning

With the introduction of online programmes and courses from national and international institutions, companies and organisations, the implementation of RPL became a necessity to enable students to be acknowledged for what has been learnt through other open learning means.

The Minister has published the RPL Coordination Policy (No 381, Government Gazette No 39876, 31 March 2016), which is a clear statement and indicator that the DHET supports and recognises the need to open access to education for students and acknowledges that RPL is an important component of addressing this need. SAQA has published the National RPL Policy (2013), which provides for the operational implementation of RPL by the three Quality Councils (QCs), professional bodies and education and training providers. The three QCs will align their RPL policies within these policy frameworks. Many institutions have policies on RPL for admission to, and advanced standing within, a qualification. Candidates who obtained learning through online programme and course offerings that are non-accredited, need to be carefully assessed to ensure that recognition of prior learning takes place and that they are appropriately placed within a programme.

### 3.1.9 Quality Assurance

The QCs have the executive responsibility for quality assurance in education and training, and the promotion thereof. They develop and implement a system of quality assurance for education and training, including programme accreditation, institutional audits, quality promotion and capacity development, standards development and the implementation of the relevant Qualifications Sub-

Framework. They also have to monitor and report on the state of the education and training system, including assessing whether, how, to what extent, and with what consequences the vision, policy goals and objectives for education and training are being realised. They contribute to the development of education and training through engagement with key national and systemic issues, including international trends, producing publications, holding conferences and conducting research to inform and contribute to addressing the short and long-term challenges facing education and training.

The QCs have a responsibility to ensure that the issue of online course and programme offerings is considered, and that it promotes quality education and training in South Africa.

#### **3.1.10 Cross Border Education**

Because the development of the internet and associated telecommunication avenues affords almost instant access to a huge amount of information, the way is open for formal learning programmes and other learning resources to be distributed on a global scale. Unfortunately, it also opens the way for opportunistic purveyors of dubious information as well as those who unscrupulously exploit the unwary.

Online learning greatly increases the possibility of cross-border offerings, both for the offering of programmes and courses to South African students by providers outside South Africa, and for the provision of courses and programmes beyond South Africa's borders by South African providers. Although online programme offerings have to be seen as a viable mode of delivery, the provision in South Africa by private and foreign institutions or companies must be regulated in accordance with South African law.

In the 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, the DHET commits to supporting the international exchange of research, scholarship, academics and students, as well as academic partnerships between South African and other universities.

According to the Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities, the DHET is in a process of developing an agreed framework of principles and guidelines for action by all bodies and institutions in South Africa concerned with offering and receiving cross-border university education, and offering joint degrees within a range of diverse partnership models.

Although online programme offerings have to be seen as a viable mode of delivery, the provision in South Africa by private and foreign institutions or companies must be regulated in accordance with South African law.

#### **3.1.11 South African Development Community Protocol on Education and Training**

Although there is an increased demand for higher education in the Southern Africa region, levels of higher education provision and enrolments rates in the South African Development Community (SADC) countries are amongst the lowest in the world<sup>2</sup>. This is because the decline in the number of

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<sup>2</sup> Kotecha P, 2012. Higher Education in the Southern African Region: Current trends, challenges, and recommendations

academic staff, deterioration in the quality of higher education and higher demand for education have not been met by increased levels of funding and government investment. The problem is further compounded by the lack of physical infrastructure needed to accommodate the increased demand for access to higher education and training.

An objective of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training (1997) is to work towards the reduction and eventual elimination of constraints to better and freer access by citizens of Member States to good quality education and training opportunities within the region. Member States agreed that distance education (and by implication online programme and course offerings) may reduce the cost of education and training by maximising on the economies of scale offered by this modality. Member States further agreed to promote co-operation among institutions in the design and production of teaching materials.

The DHET endorses distance education across Southern African borders<sup>3</sup>. In the government-ratified *SADC Protocol on Education and Training* it supports the international exchange of research, scholarship, academics and students as well as partnerships between South African and other universities. It is understood that the cross-border distance education system could be expanded and transformed by expanding distance education provision through online programme offerings. It will, however, require significant investment in and development of large scale, modernised ICT infrastructure, and the development of programmes and support mechanisms.

### 3.1.12 Other International Agreements and Treaties

Recognised qualifications remain the “currency” of the PSET System. Directly related to online programme and course offerings, are a number of international agreements which have been signed and which enable improved comparability of qualifications and student mobility to study in the respective countries. Such agreements include an agreement between South Africa and Russia<sup>4</sup>; an agreement between South Africa and Cuba<sup>5</sup>; and an agreement between South Africa and Malaysia<sup>6</sup>.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Education Ministers approved the SADC Regional Qualifications Framework in September 2011, and the SADC Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Guidelines on 30 June 2016.

The recently approved Addis Convention<sup>7</sup>, which will enable Africa-wide student mobility and recognition of qualifications across Africa, has been submitted for ratification.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is a signatory to the African Qualifications Verification Network (AQVN) which will provide a feasible and secure process to verify qualifications with 14 other African States. SAQA is also a signatory to the Groningen Declaration<sup>8</sup> which comprises

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<sup>3</sup> White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013).

<sup>4</sup> SAQA memorandum of agreement between SAQA and Russia, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Draft Bilateral Agreement documentation, SAQA

<sup>6</sup> Draft Bilateral Agreement documentation, SAQA

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, 2015. Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher education in African States

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.groningendeclaration.org/>

of members from over 90 countries worldwide, with the purpose of enabling qualification verification and comparability to be done according to clear and agreed principles.

All of these agreements promote quality education and training, irrespective of mode of delivery, with a view to ensuring that the credibility of qualification awards is managed and assured.

### 3.1.13 Gaps and Duplication

The DHET acknowledges that there are gaps and duplication in the legislative and policy environment when specifically looking at online programme and course offerings. The DHET will, based on this position, carefully analyse the environment, make recommendations for streamlining legislation and policies, and address the gaps that exist.

## 3.2 Online Programme Offerings already in the PSET System or on offer in South Africa

### 3.2.1 Universities

Whilst there is a range of online courses and programmes offered by higher education institutions in South Africa through a combination of all modalities identified in Section 2, a consolidated and comprehensive database that provides information about these, and that is maintained and updated to record changes in a rapidly evolving environment, is not in place. It is therefore impossible at this point in time to provide an accurate, reliable and comprehensive picture of online course and programme offerings. If this is deemed to be something that is important to establish, then a process for establishing and maintaining such a database needs to be developed, and funding needs to be allocated to enable the work to be done.

[Input needed by University branch on institutions offering programmes and courses online as part of their Programme and Qualification Mix; offerings through sub-contracted companies; partnerships with other institutions; and offerings through companies owned by the institutions (third stream income).

Universities also to give the current situation on credit transfer; recognition of national and international programmes/courses, online programme offerings by private institutions, industry and organisations; and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).]

### 3.2.2 Technical Vocational Education and Training Colleges

Distance education is currently offered on a small scale as a variety of initiatives in 15 TVET Colleges (as at June 2015<sup>9</sup>), for different reasons such as allowing for the completion of studies, and demand from the local community and working students.

The commonest distance education methodology employed in colleges is the use of paper-based resources combined with tutorials and contact sessions using traditional communication (postal services, manual submission and collection of materials). Limited initiatives exist to use electronic

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<sup>9</sup> Preliminary report on TVET Colleges offering Open and Distance Learning

management systems, online resources, online assessments, recording of results and online feedback to students on assessments. In 2015 a survey to determine the extent of distance education in TVET Colleges was conducted, and of the fifteen TVET Colleges who participated in the survey, five colleges indicated that their distance education models included some form of online offering, developed in their own capacity to increase access and enrolment.<sup>10</sup> These include technology infrastructure such as video conference facilities and equipped computer rooms. However, limited internet access is available to support teaching and learning at most college campuses.

Distance education in a broader context, and online offerings in particular, are currently done in an uncoordinated and non-supportive way. Colleges mostly make decisions on offering distance education only for specific subjects and not for programmes as a whole. Distance education enrolment numbers in these subjects are low, and a limited number of subjects are offered across all colleges.

Various private colleges are making use of online programme offerings.

Current challenges in offering online programmes include access to sufficient bandwidth (broadband), stable connections to the Internet, funding to sustain infrastructure, maintenance and running costs (especially the cost of bandwidth), and college infrastructure. Colleges also do not have technical expertise (instructional designers, media experts and materials development experts), subject matter expertise and support mechanisms and infrastructure to develop content, to conduct assessments, and to support students. These challenges are further amplified by a lack of understanding of the value of the use of ICT on the part of management, lecturers and students, and a lack of ICT skills and access to ICT outside the college campus. A specific challenge unique to TVET colleges is the registering and conducting of continuous assessment and examinations of students who study at a distance.

The DHET has to engage in a structured engagement with colleges and the relevant government departments/agencies to assist colleges in increasing access to affordable broadband connectivity and to establish a mechanism to develop and support online programme offerings, especially where there are limited teaching resources as alternative ways of teaching the curriculum without reliance on numbers of highly qualified staff, fully equipped laboratories and associated equipment.

The DHET furthermore needs to develop a specific assessment strategy for distance education students in TVET colleges.

### 3.2.3 Community Education and Training Colleges

The CET Sector is currently being reconceptualised and new programme offerings are being considered. The National Senior Certificate for Adults (NASCA) has been designed so that students

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

will not be required to attend full-time classes. The CET Branch is considering online modalities for resource-based teaching, learning and support for the NASCA.

#### 3.2.4 Skills Development

The new occupational qualifications provide an ideal opportunity for the use of online modalities to deliver both theoretical and practical components of the curriculum by means of video materials, simulations and interactive applications. Information is limited on the use of online methodologies in learnerships, apprenticeships and skills development programmes for management, lecturers and students. Two examples are the occupational qualifications offered by the Institute of Certified Bookkeepers (ICB) that are registered with the Financial and Accounting Services Sector Education and Training Authority (FASSETA), and the Wealth Management Course offered by iCollege that is accredited by the Insurance SETA (INSETA).

### 4. The Department of Higher Education and Training's Position on Online Programme Offerings

The DHET supports the development of a Post-School Education and Training System based on **open learning principles**, where quality learning environments are constructed which take account of student context, and use the most appropriate and cost-effective methods and technologies. This approach responds to the competing imperatives outlined in the *White paper for Post-School Education and Training*: increasing enrolment, and improving throughput and curriculum relevance within a system and infrastructure that will continue to be under strain despite the plans to expand it substantially.

The DHET also acknowledges that **ICT** is increasingly becoming a critical ingredient for meaningful participation in a globalised world. It is also an indispensable infrastructural component for effective education provision, and is central to the notion of opening learning opportunities in the PSET System.

Although the DHET sees **online programme and course offerings as a viable mode of delivery**, the provision in South Africa by public, private and foreign institutions or companies must be regulated in **accordance with South African law and policies of the DHET**. Legislation and policies have to be aligned to support the online offering of programmes and courses. Specific attention has to be given to quality and quality assurance within the current three sub-frameworks of the NQF.

The DHET supports online programme and course offerings that **adhere to all the norms and standards applicable to delivering quality education and training** in the PSET system.

### 5. Issues for the DHET to Consider in Online Programme Offerings

The following critical issues around Online Programme Offerings in South African have been identified. These include:

## 5.1 Systemic Issues

### a. Policy, Legislation and Enabling Environment

Legislation and policies have to be aligned to support the online offering of programmes and courses. Careful consideration should be given to the different modalities outlined in section 2 and how it can be applied within the PSET system. Specific attention has to be given to quality and quality assurance within the current 3 sub-frameworks of the National Qualifications Framework.

Guidelines and directives have to be developed by the DHET, SAQA, and the three QCs to guide and direct institutions in the implementation of online programme and course offerings.

### b. Registration of Qualifications and Accreditation of Providers

Online programme and course offerings must meet the same basic requirements for accreditation as programmes offered through traditional modes of delivery. A key issue is to ensure equivalence of learning experience and exit-level expectations across a much more diverse student body and a range of learning contexts.

Programmes with Work-Integrated Learning and practical components will require additional investment in design and support processes. This investment and the efficacy thereof need to be captured in formal evaluation processes in order to inform not only appropriate funding models but also the minimum requirements for future accreditation.

### c. Programmes and Courses offered online as part of public institutions' Programme and Qualification Mix

The DHET acknowledges that online offerings might be part of any course or programme offered at a public institution. This is not regarded as a distance education offering.

The DHET has to provide information and support to institutions that want to use online programme offerings.

Institutions offering programmes and courses online through sub-contracted companies as part of their Programme and Qualification Mix have to declare it to the DHET in order to maintain quality offerings.

### d. Partnerships between South African PSET institutions and other institutions

Currently there are several institutions offering online programmes and courses in partnership with other institutions. Specific to universities, the tendency of establishing university-owned companies to offer online programmes and courses has been observed. Such companies are offering mainly non-formal courses under the name of the university, and giving the impression to the public that they are university programmes. The DHET has to provide clear guidelines to universities and other potential PSET institutions wishing to follow this path, as well as to communicate clearly to the public the difference between qualifications and non-formal offerings offered by universities and university-owned companies.

**e. Transfer of Credits for offerings done through online offerings and MOOCs**

In South Africa it is widely recognised that articulation across the PSET system is poor, with many universities not recognising courses taken at other universities. This dilemma is exacerbated by international institutions offering online courses and programmes.

Although institutions may have valid reasons for not recognising students' credits, every effort in developing and supporting an articulated PSET system must be made, and institutions must make every effort to avoid unfair and irrational barriers to acceptance and credit transfer.

SAQA has developed the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Policy, which is binding on the three QCs and institutions, as per the NQF Act. This policy must also be tested against the offering of online programmes and courses.

**f. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**

The DHET, SAQA and the three QCs have to consider a framework and a system for recognising learning that has taken place through online offerings and how to manage the process. The RPL Coordination Policy (2016) establishes coordinating and funding mechanisms for RPL implementation. The DHET will provide initial oversight and guidance to ensure that a national coordinating institute is eventually established. It will be supported by a RPL Reference Group.

The DHET, SAQA and the QCs have the responsibility to ensure that all the role-players are well informed, that capacity building takes place to ensure the mainstreaming of RPL, and that RPL can be conducted using a variety of modes of delivery and implementation practice.

**g. Cross-Border Distance Education**

The *Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-School System* (p17) states that provision in South Africa by foreign providers "must be regulated in accordance with South African law to ensure that acceptable standards are maintained, students are protected and the democratic transition of South African university education is sustained." The policy also requires that "South African providers offering cross-border services must uphold standards at least as rigorous as they are required to observe at home."

The policy also signalled that the DHET has embarked on a "process of developing an agreed framework of principles and guidelines for action by all bodies and institutions in South Africa concerned with offering and receiving cross-border university education, and offering joint degrees within a range of diverse partnership models" (p17).

**h. Quality Assurance**

The DHET, SAQA and the three QCs have to consider a framework and a system for quality assurance of online programme and course offerings and how to manage the process.

The design of all qualifications and part qualifications registered on the NQF are premised on a learning outcomes-based approach. They are also all aligned to one of the ten (10) levels of the NQF. The level descriptors in turn comprise ten (10) elements which describe the profile of a student and/or a graduate from a learning programme at any of the NQF levels. These two instruments are

particularly helpful when assessments are designed and when quality assurance of the teaching and learning process is applied. The level descriptors, and learning outcomes are applied generically in assessment processes, irrespective of the mode/modality of delivery. This enables new ways of teaching and learning, such as massive online open courses, open education and other e-learning modes, and RPL assessments, to be comparable. It also provides credibility in assessment and eventual award processes.

## 5.2 Implementation Issues

### a. Technology infrastructure and Connectivity

ICT infrastructure and access to broadband is indispensable for delivering online programme and course offerings.

The ICT infrastructure required to support and sustain an effective online education and training system includes sophisticated networks, effective and efficient connections to national and international bandwidth, and advanced security systems and devices capable of running and sustaining learner, learning and content management platforms. Access to bandwidth must be sustainable, and provide adequate and consistent internet access. Staff and students also have to have access to affordable end-user devices such as laptops and tablets for their own use.

In fully-online programmes and courses, all interactions with staff and students, educational content, learning activities, assessment and support services are integrated and delivered online. Therefore, in addition to hardware and software, technical and administrative support for both students and lecturers are required around the clock. The DHET is committed to creating a network of education providers supported by shared learning support centres and/or connectivity for students. A network of such centres has the potential to be a shared resource for the PSET sector to ensure access to the internet for learning purposes, for all registered students.

In an online learning environment, lecturers and students must be capacitated to use ICT effectively for teaching and learning. This may be achieved through appropriate training and development programmes conducted at the shared learning support centres.

### b. Institutional Capacity to Deliver, Administer and Manage Online Programme Offerings

There are similarities and differences in the configuration of the staffing structure between traditional face-to-face programmes and online programmes. The staffing mix required to implement an online education programme include the following:

- A programme/course management team to manage the offering of the programme/course, and to support staff in offering programmes/courses. This includes reviewing the curriculum and updating resources; supporting administrative personnel in providing advance reminders of impending deadlines with respect to issues such as uploading learning resources, assessment plans and assessment instruments, and monitoring and evaluating the programme;
- Subject matter experts to support students and to manage the learning and assessment environment;
- ICT support staff to assist academic staff and students with ICT-related matters, and to ensure that the technology does not form a barrier to learning;

- Administrators and managers to administer and manage the online learning environment, student records, call centre cases and communications with students and staff, as well as to provide support to staff;
- Call centre personnel to receive calls/communication from students and to direct cases appropriately; and
- Assessment support staff to monitor the progress of students and to manage and conduct the assessment of students.

The DHET recognises the need to diversify staff as well as the need for increasing certain levels of staff in proportion to increasing numbers of enrolments. The DHET will invest in professional development programmes for the management of institutions to manage and support open learning, as well as the professional development of full-time and part-time staff in various aspects of distance and online programmes.

#### c. Investment in the development of Quality Learning Materials

The DHET recognised the value of investment in the development of quality learning materials, especially for TVET and CET colleges.

The DHET supports the collaborative development of shared high quality learning programmes and resources and the use of Open Educational Resources (OER). The DHET is committed to pursuing the adoption or adaptation, in accordance with national needs, of an appropriate Open Licencing Framework, such as Creative Commons, for use by the PSET System. In line with the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural organisation (UNESCO) *Paris Declaration on OER* of 2012, learning resources developed partly or wholly using public funds administered by the DHET will be published under an open licence that encourages their use and adaptation for re-use.

The DHET will, however, provide support for the production and sharing of learning materials as OER at institutions in the PSET sector.

The DHET further encourages the use of open-source software whenever possible, as well as the purchasing of shared software licences by collective entities such as the South African Technology Network and other consortia that may be created.

#### d. Quality of Provision

Currently, the quality criteria for the accreditation of conventional programmes and distance education programmes at PSET institutions are the same. However, distance education programmes face other additional challenges in terms of enhancing the quality of delivery.

The key challenges in distance education, and therefore also in online programme and course offerings, include providing opportunities for students to interact with and get support from lecturers outside of normal hours; providing timely and appropriate interactive learning materials and feedback on assessments; providing technology support to staff and students to ensure a working learning environment, and making available expert guidance and support in order to derive maximum benefit from the learning materials.

These challenges must be addressed during the course design phase through the application and integration of ICT, as well as during the implementation phase, by engaging qualified and experienced lecturers, developing appropriate and sufficient learning materials, and creating effective and efficient student support systems.

It is acknowledged that the quality assurance standards of conventional programmes may not be fully applicable for online programme offerings. The DHET will update the 1996 document: *A Distance Education Quality Standards Framework for South Africa* to support institutions in the deployment of distance education offerings.

#### e. Effective Online Pedagogy

Instruction and interaction in an online learning environment may be either synchronous or asynchronous, or both – the latter providing the adult student with a better opportunity to balance personal or professional demands with academic responsibilities. As a result of the nature of online learning, the most important transition to the online learning mode for the lecturer and student alike, is that of adjusting to the online communication medium and the freedom of learning at one's own time and pace. An effective online learning environment requires the use of teaching and learning strategies that incorporate self-directed, learner-centred learning, facilitation of learning, support to students in synchronous and asynchronous ways, and a range of media as part of the pedagogical design.

Online learning further needs to grapple with quality issues such as appropriate learning resources to support more independent learning; the development of staff to enable effective teaching and learning through online provisioning; support for remote and widely distributed students; and assessment strategies with a strong emphasis on frequent formative feedback to encourage active engagement and retention.

The DHET will invest in professional development programmes for staff in various aspects of distance programmes, including online learning delivery and course design using open education resources.

#### f. Funding and costing model for Online Programme Offerings

There is international evidence that distance education can, under certain conditions, provide high quality educational opportunities more efficiently and cost-effectively than traditional face-to-face provision. This is also true for online programme and course offerings. The DHET is committed to exploiting the potential of large-scale provision to reduce per-student cost, and to the funding of quality online offerings. Funding regimes will be developed to accommodate the high costs associated with the development of quality learning programmes and materials, as well as the support to be provided to students. However, it will use economies of scale to ensure that online learning becomes a viable and cost-effective option for delivering education and training in the PSET system.

## 6. Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- A **legislation and policy** environment is created to support the offering and recognition of online programmes and courses, but also to ensure that students are not exploited by inferior programme offerings. These include international offerings and cross-border education and training;
- **Relevant quality assurance processes** that are in place embrace online programme offerings and are effective;
- The DHET honours its commitment in the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* to create a **network of education providers** supported by shared learning support centres and connectivity for students;
- The DHET and PSET institutions commit to the access to affordable (why not free ???) **broadband** to all students and staff in public PSET institutions;
- The DHET and the PSET community work collaboratively so that staff and students in public PSET institutions have **access to affordable end-user (mobile) devices**.
- The DHET commits to establishing a **mechanism to develop and support** online programme offerings in public institutions, especially for TVET and CET colleges;
- The DHET invests in **professional development programmes** for management and staff to develop, manage, offer, support and administer online programme offerings;
- The DHET invests and provides support for the **production and sharing of learning materials** as OER at institutions in the PSET system;
- The DHET develops a specific assessment strategy for distance education students, especially in TVET and CET colleges;
- The DHET, SAQA and QCs ensure that the provision, recognition and support of online programme offerings adhere to good standards of practice and to **suitable accreditation criteria**, and are embarked upon with responsibility and integrity;
- **Quality criteria for the delivering** of online offerings in an open learning environment be published by the QCs that embrace online programme and course offerings;
- The DHET, SAQA and QCs **communicate** the position on online programme and course offerings to the public and ensure that institutions offering online programmes and courses give full and correct information to students and the public;
- The DHET, in collaboration with PSET institutions, develops a **database of information about online programme offerings** in the PSET system; and
- Providers maintain a collegial **dialogue** on the subject.