



Distance Education Association of Southern Africa

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Draft

Policy Brief SADC-ODEL Response to Covid-19

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Executive Summary

The emergency and rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus towards the end of 2019 has disrupted the provision of education world-wide, affecting 1.5 billion learners, who are currently on lockdown at their homes in order to curb the spread of the virus. The provision of education and training to learners under the Covid-19 lockdown is a global challenge which is also affecting the SADC region adversely. Efforts toward addressing the challenge are currently underway with governments and educational institutions adopting remote online learning approaches to ensure some continuity for learners. However, the reactive nature of these efforts have been compromised by inadequate relevant policy frameworks to guide the efficacious implementation of remote online learning. As well, resources are needed to support capacity building to upskill academic and professional staff for remote online teaching and learning, to develop online content and related learning materials and technology-enabled learner support for online learners.

The purpose of the policy brief is to advocate for urgent development of appropriate policies and strategies to fully enable remote online teaching and learning, and to guide the adoption and implementation of open, distance and online learning policies, models and systems for teaching and learning during – and after – the Covid-19 pandemic.

The proposed policy considerations are underpinned by the SADC context in terms of the current teaching and learning practices, and specifically, the 1997 SADC Protocol on Education and Training aimed at harmonising education and training in the region, and the 2012 SADC Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Regional Policy Framework and its related instruments developed to promote ODL and support the domestication of the protocol and Regional ODL Policy Framework.

The policy considerations entail three phases.

Phase 1 focuses on the immediate response to Covid-19, through the development and implementation of open, distance and online policies and strategies, mobilisation of resources, academic and professional staff capacity building in online content development and delivery. Phase 2 focuses on the recovery and achievement of medium term outcomes. Phase 3 is geared towards the consolidation of open, distance and online learning offerings, systems, models and broadening access that is equitable and thereby enables large learner populations to enrol in relevant and quality programmes and services. Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, this intervention must also be recognised in the context of achieving learning for sustainable development, with emphasis toward [SDG4](#) and AU's [Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want](#).

Policy Context

The unprecedented emergency and rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in 191 countries closing all schools, affecting 1.5 billion learners from pre-primary to tertiary education (UNESCO, 2020). More than 80% of the world's student population has been forced to stay at home in order to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus. Most countries in the world are in lockdown and educational institutions are closed. To ensure that teaching and learning occurs even during this time of crisis, many schools and universities are moving their courses to online environments. Those who are already using online or familiar with online delivery are assisting colleagues with technology-enhanced ways of teaching to ensure that education continues even during the current lockdown. The successful implementation of online learning requires Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) infrastructure (hardware and software), stable internet connectivity, and most important of all, efficient, competent and qualified teachers to teach online. Many countries in Southern Africa do not have a stable electricity supply, let alone widespread access to appropriate devices and internet connectivity to enable teachers and students to fully engage in online teaching and learning. In addition, the costs of data in some countries is prohibitive. Due to the current crisis created by Covid-19, many governments in developing countries are looking at ways of ensuring that teaching and learning takes place while students study remotely.

Reaching out to learners and ensuring that learning continues has become a national priority in many countries. In the interim, distance learning, and remote and online learning programmes have been put in place to ensure that disruptions to learning are minimised. However, many learners from underserved, marginalized and poverty-stricken communities do not have access to the digital devices that are required for remote online learning. Besides turning the world upside down, COVID-19 has amplified the struggles that most learners in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) member states face on daily basis. Almost all countries in the SADC region are on lockdown to curb the spread of the Corona virus. The lockdown decision by governments has adversely affected the education sector. During the first quarter of 2020 when the lockdown was declared, learners from schools and universities have not attended any classes. To address this problem, education departments and policymakers have looked at distance and online learning as an option for ensuring the continuity of education during the lockdown period. Distance and online learning offer a flexible way of delivering content and resources while enabling interaction amongst students and teachers. However, this delivery mode requires heavy investment in ICT infrastructure, digital capacity, learners and teachers' capabilities to engage in teaching, learning and assessment practices. It is important that solutions for developing countries should ensure that no learner is left behind. Therefore, efforts should focus on expanding access to all learners and teachers irrespective of their environment.

Hence, governments and institutions need to come up with context specific plans and strategies to address these challenges amongst SADC member states.

To address the challenge of transitioning from classroom to remote online learning in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the international community of distance and online learning, institutions, organisations, researchers and practitioners are collaborating to assist governments and educational institutions around the world with this change. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Information Technologies in Education (IITE), the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) and the Open Education Resources universitas (OERu) are working together in supporting educational institutions and governments to widen global access to relevant expertise (see, for example, <https://opendoor.col.org/>). This international initiative of like-minded Open Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) practitioners, researchers and academics was established to support ministries and institutions to build capacity in distance and online learning, in particular, policy development, strengthening systems, development of online content and delivery of programmes and support services. This is similar to the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA)'s mandate of enabling member institutions to share information and work together to promote distance education and online learning practices. This need has never been more urgent than it is under the shadow of Covid-19.

The use of distance and online education is even more critical in places of limited resources such as in many SADC countries. The recent disruptive events due to Covid-19 prevent students and staff from meeting face-to-face and as such, requires alternative delivery modes of teaching and learning. The distance learning mode of delivery is not new in the SADC region. In fact, many education policy documents have alluded to distance and online education as a viable solution to address unmet demand for higher learning at affordable costs. However, the uptake of online learning over the years has been slow. The recent closure of educational institutions, however, has compelled institutions to consider alternatives, such as remote online teaching and learning.

Governments and institutions have found themselves having to adopt online delivery systems in order to ensure that teaching and learning occurs even during the Covid-19 lockdown. This poses challenges in places of limited resources such within some members states of the SADC region. In 2012, the SADC members states facilitated the development of a Regional Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Policy Framework meant to support integration, harmonization and maximization of resources in the education and training sector. The SADC member states identified ODL as a key mode in widening access, equity and participation in higher education and an enabling instrument for the region to realise their social, political and economic development needs.

Although ODL has played an important role in improving access to, and promoting the quality of education and training, its development has been constrained by strong policy frameworks at both regional and national levels (SADC, 2012). The absence of policies makes it difficult for member states to respond effectively in times of crisis. Covid-19 has illuminated the necessity of member states to develop policies and strategies that can respond to unforeseen circumstances to which online teaching and learning can respond. Policies serve an important role to provide rules that are meant to inform, guide and support the deployment of open, distance and online learning in universities (Simonson & Bauck, 2003). Without ODL policy frameworks and strategies, governments and institutions cannot be able to strategically plan for the effective implementation of distance and online

learning. ODL Strategic plans are even more critical now. Those that exist set out realistic goals predicated on sufficient resources available for the implementation of ODL policies.

In order to respond to the turbulence caused by Covid-19, the Ministries of Education in SADC Member States need to develop strategic policies and plans directly addressing challenges that hinder the seamless uptake of open, distance and remote online learning. Strategic policies provide a vision for education systems that will benefit the citizens of a given country (Kozma, 2005). Institutional or operational policies, by comparison, focus on the implementation process. Put another way, strategic policies layout particular goals, whereas operational policies provide a blueprint to reach those particular goals. This policy brief serves to assist SADC member states to respond effectively and efficiently to the Covid-19 crisis so that learners may be afforded a level of continuity in their learning under such as in the current lockdown. The overall aim is to assist policy makers and governments to develop operative strategies to ensure that learning takes place during COVID-19 crisis.

Purpose

The purpose of the policy brief is to:

- Advocate for policymakers and governments to develop national education policies and comprehensive strategies and plans for the effective delivery of education and training through open, distance and remote online learning modes.
- Provide guidelines on how to support the provision of education and training using open, distance and remote online learning modes.
- Enable University Management to support and facilitate the uptake and implementation of open, distance and remote online learning modes.
- Encourage the development of policies, strategies and structures that could enable different systems, and university departments to work together towards a seamless offering of programmes and support services to all registered learners including those from underserved and marginalised communities through online platforms.
- Promote the translation of policies into actions that enable university-wide provision of education and training through open, distance and remote online learning modes.

Policy Consideration

The starting point of developing a policy is understanding the context of teaching and learning in the SADC region and why the need to change is essential. To address the urgent need of transitioning from a classroom setting to an online or distance learning environment requires an understanding of the differences between these learning environments. Online learning, in this time of Covid-19, presents an ideal option to make the provision of education accessible to many with access to internet connectivity. However, due to the current crisis created by the Covid-19, many governments in developing countries are now looking at ways of ensuring that education takes place even when students are at home. As a result, there is a massive scramble to get courses that were developed for face-to-face provision to online environments to enable remote learning. Educational institutions that see this as a quick fix need to be careful if and when shifting lectures, print-based notes, and tests to an online environment. Classroom based teaching is fundamentally different

from online teaching. In a classroom, an educator teaches a group of students who congregate in one place. However, in an online learning environment, an educator teaches an individual student in a house that may be full of other people who are not involved in learning. In this context, the educator uses different approaches to ensure that students who are isolated are motivated to learn and participate in online activities. The place and time in which teaching and learning takes place is a critical component of the education transaction. The teaching approaches are usually affected by the environment in which learning takes place.

Table 1 below illustrates the differences between Classroom, Distance and Online Learning environments.

	Classroom	Distance	Online
Pedagogy	Teacher-centred	Resource-centred – Mediated form of facilitating learning	Student-centred Personalised and Individualised form of learning
Interaction	Face-to-face, immediate interaction	Mediated form of interaction – print, audio, video, virtual	Virtual through videos, chat forums, social media, downloads and uploads
Process of learning	Real- and specific-time frames	Media based that supports learning anytime and anywhere	Virtual and anytime
Learning material	Lecture notes and textbooks	Study guides, tutorial letters,	Digital resources, OERs, open textbooks, ebooks, videos
Structures and systems	Classroom-based systems developed to address the needs of full-time students	Industrial-type – systems made up of interrelated subsystems meant to support distance education	ICT infrastructure, stable electricity supply, computers, internet connectivity, mobile broadband technology and mobile devices

Table 1 shows that the pedagogy, the structures and the systems that support delivery of learning in these modes is fundamentally different. Therefore, there are a number of things that need to be factored into the planning of education and training during this Covid-19 pandemic. The current situation in many SADC member states may not be conducive to different types of delivery modes. A number of countries are inadequately prepared to use different types of technology including low end ones such as radio and television.

Several countries have turned to distance and remote online learning as a means of mitigating for lost time in school. Countries such as China, France, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and others have been using fully online platforms to deliver education and training. Other developing countries such as Vietnam,

Mongolia and others have used mobile phones and televisions. Bulgaria has encouraged publishers to open the digital textbooks and learning materials, whilst other countries have been adapting existing platforms for use in smartphones and others have entered into agreements with mobile companies to eliminate the cost of accessing learning material for study purposes. All these mitigating efforts require additional support and investment toward the different modes of delivery.

Policy Recommendations

It is therefore necessary for governments to draw up strategic plans that respond to the Covid-19 crisis as part of a larger strategy to mitigate future unforeseen circumstances. The success of the strategic plan will be determined by its ability to balance short, medium and long-term goals. Unfortunately, in time of crisis the tendency is to focus on short term solutions and in the process ignore what is likely to be faced in the post crisis. It is precisely during the crisis that the focus should also be on the long term and to think and act strategically in terms of outcomes to be achieved. Therefore, attention should be given to all stages of the strategic planning process. In the process, it is critical to reflect on a given university's purpose, context, strengths, threats, opportunities and areas for development. All these factors should be seen in relation to the turbulent circumstances in which universities are currently operating to fully contemplate the necessary resources and inputs to function.

This policy brief focuses on three different phases proposed to address the educational challenges presented by Covid-19. The policy brief also proposes a strategic approach for this phase in order to enable universities to emerge from the crisis stronger.

Phase 1: Short Term (Crisis period)

Phase 1 of the strategy should respond to the immediate crisis presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Central should be developing plans on how to deal with the crisis in relation to educational institutions' mission while providing resources to universities and schools to ensure that learning continues unimpeded. However, the development of responsive plans faces a number of challenges. Many lecturers/teachers do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to take their face-to-face teaching to the online environment. Professional staff development is a critical component of quality teaching and learning. Since there is very little time to design and develop online content and prepare learning materials for online teaching, institutions may seek technical assistance and support from communities and colleagues and other experts in the field of open, distance and online learning so that they can provide appropriate help for their students (Olcott, 2020). Working in collaboration with other experienced online institutions and international partners can assist universities to upskill and equip lecturers/teachers with appropriate skills to teach through open, distance and online learning modes. Instead of developing new programmes which may take time, OER which can be licenced under Creative Commons 4.0 International share alike, meaning the ability to use, share, re-purpose and so on, can be used to speed up the process of staff training and development of online course content. It is only when lecturers/teachers are trained that they will be able to carry out teaching online. However, the success of these training programmes is dependent on solid strategic plans and policies which guide the ODL implementation.

Phase 2: Medium Term (Recovery period)

As the crisis phase dissipates, institutions have to move into a recovery period, where institutions will need to implement measures to regain lost time. This is the time when lessons learnt during the crisis period will need to be integrated into the recovery period. Given the short-term interventions that are mentioned above, it is also essential to plan for medium term intervention strategies for online teaching. Professional development frameworks and programmes for enabling the acquiring of competencies for teaching in an open, distance and online learning environment will be essential to sustain the effort. In this phase, capacity development of lecturers/teachers should continue with an emphasis on exploring more innovative ways of using technologies to enhance teaching and learning in virtual environments.

It is also during this recovery period that education departments and institutions will need to put plans in place to prepare, invest and reinforce systems as a way of moving forward. Educational institutions will also be expected to put measures in place to ensure sustained continuity of learning beyond the Covid-19 crisis. These measures may include operational factors such as enrolment periods, assessment strategies and alternative ways of delivering education. It is at this time when decisions have to be made about utilising distance or online learning within a traditional face-to-face teaching and learning space. Institutions embracing this blended model will need to develop systems and structures that enable and support open, distance and online learning. Developing institutional dual mode policies, for example, which stipulate the implementation of contact and distance learning options within a given course/programme, or dedicated and concurrent offerings of the same programme through distance or contact, need to be debated, and ultimately actioned.

Phase 3: Long Term (Sustainability period)

As the new normal is established, the focus of the future goal is on how governments, policy leaders and institutional leaders consolidate the gains of the first and second phase for integrating open, distance and online education into the core values and organizational culture of universities, communities and societies (Olcott, 2020). In developing long term goals, Olcott (2020) argues that “leadership is as important as technology in the crisis.” It is at this phase of planning that leaders and policymakers should ask themselves about where they want their institutions to go? What is their long-term mission and goal? Who are their key stakeholders and how do they serve and support their learners? What are the innovative ways of serving individual learners using open, distance and online learning modes?

In future as institutions mature in embracing open, distance and online learning modes, they may adopt the blended learning approaches or different models for delivery. It is also possible for some universities and schools to fully adopt online learning. What is clear and needs to be recognised is that a new normal is emerging and hardly anything which is obtained in the teaching and learning space before the Covid-19 pandemic will remain the same. The shift or change is inevitable.

Glossary of Terms

Dedicated ODL institution or single mode institution - These institutions are dedicated to offer programmes of study at a distance; therefore their teaching and learning is mediated by media and technology such as print, audio, radio, CDs, telephone or tele-conference; video conference, television, computers and in some cases face-to-face teaching and online learning. This model is characterized by institutions which have been set up almost exclusively to offer distance education or programmes through ODL. The most common or recognised institution of this type is the Open University, of which there are dozens around the world, and several notable ones in the SADC region including UNISA, BOU, and OUT.

Distance Education - It is a mode of teaching and learning characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place for most of the educational transaction. Distance education is mediated by technology for delivery of learning content with the possibility of face-to-face interaction for learner-teacher and peer to peer interaction, provision of two-way didactic communication, and acceptance of an industrial process toward the division of labour, and economies of scale (COL, 2015).

Dual mode institution - In these institutions, teaching, learning, and administrative systems support both campus or contact-based and distance education. In dual mode provision, an existing contact institution sets up a distance learning entity concurrently with its classroom-based learning programmes. These entities serve to coordinate and provide support for activities that have to do with distance learning including developing courses, providing general administration and looking after support services for distance education learners (King, 2012). Usually, dual mode programmes are tailor made for two kinds of learners: the ones who attend regular classes only and the ones who study at a distance only. Sometimes there is cross-over in registration whereby the learning experience combines both contact and distant forms of learning. This is generally referred to as blended learning.

e-Learning is an umbrella term that refers to the use of electronic technologies including radio, television, internet, computers and mobile devices for teaching and learning, especially for delivery or for accessing of content.

Learning Management System (LMS) is a Internet-based software system that assists professional support staff and teachers to manage courses and deliver lessons online. It helps in the administration, tracking and reporting of the teaching and learning process. An LMS is also known as a course management system or virtual learning environment.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) these are online courses accessible to anyone who wants to enrol, and normally without costs to register, though paying for a credential (i.e., certificate) may be required. These courses provide a flexible and affordable way of learning on the open web, however, courses are not necessarily openly licenced.

m-Learning or mobile learning is the provision of teaching and learning using mobile devices such as tablets, smartphones and mobile / cell phones.

Mixed mode or blended learning – This is an approach that mixes contact and distance methods, technologies, and resources to improve teaching and learning. Curriculum, including study materials and activities, is often *divided* into online and face-to-face components according to the relevant strength of the available resources. In this setting, face-to-face learning and technology-mediated learning can be leveraged to optimise the learning experience using the mixed mode or blended learning approaches or models.

Open learning – an ever evolving philosophy rooted in the belief that everyone is educable. It aims to push the boundaries of what learning can be, facilitated through institutional policies (i.e., open admissions), flexible learning (pace, place, space independent), and relevant learning materials (culturally relevant, linguistically adaptable).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) - a way of providing learning opportunities characterised by the separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place; learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency; the use of a variety of media, including print and electronic; two-way communication that allows learners and tutors to interact; the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings; and a specialised division of labour in the production and delivery of courses (e.g., course teams, rather than a single instructor).

Open Educational Resources (OER) - any “teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions. Open licensing is built within the existing framework of intellectual property rights as defined by relevant international conventions and respects the authorship of the work” (OER Paris Declaration 2012).

Remote online learning mode – a form of distance learning that occurs through a reliable Internet connection.

Open Schooling refers to institutions that use open, distance teaching and learning methodologies and leverage information and communications technologies (ICTs) to develop and deliver school equivalency programmes and services to out-of-school youths and adults studying at a distance.

Open University is a type of single-mode distance teaching institution that also offers flexibility in terms of choice of courses, entry requirements, learning media and approaches, choice of time and place of study. Courses and programmes of an open university may offer different degrees of openness in their provision based on the nature of the studies and the legal contexts of operation (COL, 2015).

Southern African Development Community (SADC) - is a regional body currently comprised of 16 Southern African countries. These include: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, eSwatini, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Virtual University - This is an institution based on an electronic network which can perform the same functions as higher education institutions. It offers instructional programmes using information and communication technologies to connect learners, teachers, researchers, funders and administrators in a flexible way. The flexibility aspect allows learners the opportunity to learn at their own pace, space and place. A Virtual University does not have campuses. It exists through

electronic networks. Virtual Universities vary from being strictly a university that offers programmes online or a department offering a programme online or a broker-type organisation obtaining and offering online programmes for other institutions or they can award credentials or other services. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the most well recognised is the African Virtual University which holds offices in Nairobi, Kenya and Dakar, Senegal.

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