Policy

Distance Learning

Policy number	AC PL 005
Version	Final
Managed by	Dean's office
Approved by	Senate
Approval date	14 May 2014
Implementation date	01 June 2014
Review date	01 June 2017

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ACRONYMS

CHE	Council on Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PQM	Programme Qualification Mix
SADC	South African Development Community
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority

1. INTRODUCTION

The MANCOSA 2014–2016 Strategic Plan takes its direction from the MANCOSA vision to be a leading distance education provider that is responsive to the evolving education needs of emerging economies through a commitment to people, opportunity and quality. This includes expanding its programmes into the SADC countries, thus providing much needed higher education to develop an entrepreneurial spirit that ultimately facilitates social and economic development in the region.

MANCOSA is committed to contributing towards:
- Facilitating access to accredited quality higher education programmes;
- Increased education and training quality;
- Eliminating the legacy of discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities;
- Contributing to producing graduates who are personally and professionally successful and who contribute to national and regional socio-economic development.

The conceptual framing of supported distance education is a key element to enable MANCOSA to realise its mission and strategic objectives.

2. INTENT

Locate MANOCSA as a leading supported distance higher education provider locally, in the region and internationally.

Conform to the guidelines for cross-border provision, including the recognised 2005 UNESCO[1] guidelines.

Pledge to engage with emerging local and global good practice and guidelines as they relate to ensuring quality distance education provision.

3. DEFINITIONS

Blended learning is a combination teaching and learning strategies, with technology, as well as contact interaction in the context of the use of integrated physical and virtual resources;

Distance education is a an approach to educate a range of geographically dispersed students not in the locality of the institution, fellow students, academics and support mechanisms;

Learning is an active process of developing graduate attributes or characteristics made of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Learning is developing knowledge, skills and attitudes using resources including individuals, study material, technology, work-integrated activities, use of research, etc.;

Supported distance education overcomes the time and geographical restrictions, which offers educational access beyond economic, social, educational and technology constraints. In addition, it removes the limits to access learning, provides some flexibility of learning opportunities, and by being student-centred supports student success;

Student enrolment processes identify potential students taking into account their employment and educational background, and makes use of assessment tools if necessary to grant admission. Student support is important to enable to the student to be academically successful. An important aspect is to assist students with the transition into higher education through giving attention to epistemological and social access where possible;

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1 UNESCO, Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education, 1995.

  (http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf . Accessed 22 January 2014)

Student-centred learning focusses on the student as the principal subject of the educational process. Students understand their role as partners in their education and are expected to take responsibility for their learning and achievement of mastery of the qualification outcomes. The approach taken is expected to:

- support learning through the use of a what is described by NADEOSA as 'rich learning' to enable active student learning,
- connect the student's social and educational history, context and knowledge with the competencies to be acquired in the programme, and
- foster independent and critical thinking;

Student support includes institutional services to help students achieve their academic objectives successful graduates. Student support includes:

- academic support including detailed formative assessment; use of workshops; interviews with academics or pastoral support staff; technology mediated contact that is accessible to students (such as email, the telephone and the use of the learning management system); and remedial actions to enable student to be academically successful;
- support by students for studies in promoting peer study groups;
- ensuring modules and study material are designed with a sensitivity for context, current issues, gender sensitivity, etc., and in the process finding ways to enhance student engagement with the study materials;
- high quality administrative support to students about all aspects of their academic studies – from registration to graduation, with timely and accurate information; and
- teaching facilitation, academic guidance, mentoring and oversight of activities which assists students through their studies and research, including scaffolding the curriculum and material, and providing support for students to deal with difficult sections in the modules and dissertation processes.

4. PRINCIPLES

4.1 As a supported distance education provider, MANCOSA commits to:

- Supporting students for academic success of students through ensuring high quality services by student support.
- Provide access to rural students and those in locations where access to higher education is challenging.
- Make available affordable and cost-effective programmes.
- Identify and contact students at-risk of failing (inactive students), while regularly monitoring student retention and throughput rates for improvement purposes.
- Enhance internal staff capacity in supported distance education strategies and implementation through staff development activities and regular reflection by them on institutional support mechanisms.
- Commission internal research into good practice in supported distance education and contribute to improving sectoral practice in distance education.

4.2 The curriculum will take account of the following:

- Academic honesty by staff and students.
- Ensuring that knowledge of enrolled students informs curriculum, pedagogy and assessment development.
- List the graduate characteristics of each programme and linking them to each programme and module objectives and outcomes, as appropriate
- Implement teaching, learning and assessment strategies to meet these outcomes.
- Curriculum development involves academics, curriculum and distance education module design specialists, and includes reference to student support staff, counsellors, external specialists and industry experts and, current students and alumni, where feasible.

4.4   The student is central to the whole academic process from registration to graduation, and to alumni who offer feedback on programmes and who act as 'representatives' for MANCOSA.

4.5   Quality assurance monitors the academic processes and suggests areas for improvement, using. student feedback as a key data source for information to suggest enhancements.

4.6   Teaching and learning

Appropriate teaching and learning approaches:

- Are informed by the specific programme level, outcomes and type of modules, the type of enrolled student and the HEQSF level of the programme and modules.
- Incorporate independent study, formative assessment tasks, workshop provision and opportunities to interact with fellow students with independently, online or in a tutorial-type setting.

4.7   Study materials

Study materials are to be:

- Systematically and coherently designed for distance learning,
- Appropriate to a programme's HEQSF level,
- Enable and support active student engagement,
- Construct knowledge based on student experience thereby integrating new knowledge, skills and attitudes (also known as graduate characteristics).

MANCOSA will make use of innovative educational and social technologies to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning.

4.8   Delivery channels

Various media will be employed to support student learning and success, such as:

4.8.1   Print media

Print media is reliable and accepted as a medium for studying purposes given feedback received from many students. However this may change as the student profile changes.

4.8.2   Use of technologies with limited interaction to support learning

- Resources such as digital media, online classes, online distribution of content and information via *myMANCOSA* will be used to facilitate the process of learning.
- Asynchronous technologies such as wikis, blogs, social networking facilities and e-portfolios can be used effectively to support teaching and learning.

4.8.3   Technology with interactive options

- Technology such as the telephone, webinar, video and audio conferencing, the use of SMSs and MMSs, email and discussion forums/chat facilities via *my*MANCOSA's learning management system offer supported learning and are to be considered for inclusion at the design phase of study materials.
- The appropriate use of technology is essential to the effective functioning of MANCOSA as a leading distance education provider which supports student personal and professional success. The use of technology makes it possible for academic and administrative staff, students and others to interact with MANCOSA asynchronously and from any place. Mastery of technology is an essential aspect of graduate skills where graduates are expected to compete in a knowledge-driven globalised society.

- The use of a range of technology is often more successful than the use of a single type. Criteria for the selection of media in teaching and learning include its:
  - access and availability
  - pedagogical appropriateness
  - its integration into the overall learning experience.

4.9 Student support services

- Gives attention to the varied needs of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- Is essential in a supported distance education mode.
- Connects and supports student learning through administrative support. Module support includes opportunities to engage in debate and discussion with peers and academics. Regional support, where feasible, plays a critical role to facilitate interaction with academics, peers, access to library materials, etc.
- Includes student orientation.

4.10 Module coordinators and adjunct faculty

- Module coordinators and adjunct faculty are central to ensuring student success.
- The role of module coordinators and adjunct faculty is to:
  - facilitate learning and guide students to attain knowledge, understanding of the module content and acquire the necessary skills and competencies to succeed in their studies.
  - assist students to become self-directed and independent learners, addressing academic difficulties they might have, conducting workshops, and providing feedback on assessments.

4.11 Assessment

Assessment influences the way students respond to their modules and how they behave as students.

- The assessment strategy will:
  - See that that students develop effective cognitive, reflective and practical skills,
  - Provide formative assessment which supports learning process and support research skill development,
  - Include both formative and summative assessment and which is used to make a judgment about the achievement of particular graduate characteristics and learning outcomes,
  - Assist students to monitor their progression.
- The turnaround time for assessed work in distance education has proven to be a crucial element in enabling student success.
- Integrated assessment strategies will be implemented, as outlined in the Assessment Policy.

4.12 ICT and Management

- MANCOSA will make use of documented management processes, procedures and sound organisational systems underpinned by effective and efficient institutional ICT systems.
- It will regularly review and develop its management and technology infrastructure to give effect to its
- mission and strategy.
- It will implement fit-for-purpose business processes to allow the academic project function in an optimal way through the use of an integrated, systemic institutional planning process.

4.13 Staffing and staff development

- Staff

MANCOSA employs sufficient academic (full-time and adjunct), administrative and professional employees to ensure that its supported distance education model operates efficiently to provide uninterrupted, consistent and quality service to its stakeholders, the students.

- Capacity development

Staff capacity development has both short-term and long-term objectives.

In the short term to:
- Educate about the particular characteristics and approach of supported distance education and its underpinning educational philosophy.
- Involve academic and administration staff in discussions on the educational goals and implementation of supported distance education.

In the longer term to:
- Develop leading distance education skills among academics and administrative staff,
- Ensure alignment with the institutional strategy and purpose, and
- Offer training for staff development including support for publication on distance education topics to inform the body of existing teaching and learning strategies and practices.

4.14 Research

- MANCOSA is committed to scholarly teaching as well as the scholarship of teaching and learning for the improvement of its practice.
- Research can assist in, for example
  - Describing and analysing current distance education trends.
  - Revealing challenges and obstacles to effectiveness in delivery of distance education.
  - Evaluating programmes and establishing successful models in African distance education context.
  - Identifying strategies to identify and support at-risk of failing students, their support and improve student success.
  - Evaluate impact of distance education strategies and procedures.