



THE COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING



## Open and Distance Learning Policy Development

(Particular Reference to Dual Mode Institutions)

KNOWLEDGE SERIES

A TOPICAL, START-UP GUIDE TO DISTANCE EDUCATION PRACTICE AND DELIVERY

# Policy issues crop up in DE whether it is recently introduced or well established.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Some years ago a Commonwealth university used established on-campus policies and procedures for its distance education (DE) programme. The goal was quality control and academic integrity, but the result was administrative confusion. The time needed to communicate at a distance meant neither staff nor off-campus students were able to meet deadlines stated in the policy. The majority of students were not officially registered at the start of classes; they received learning material and official access to library, advising and administrative services many weeks late. In some cases they had missed examination application deadlines before they had a chance to register.*

Dual mode institutions teach both on campus and at a distance. In most dual mode institutions policy is based on the needs of on-campus students and faculty, as DE is a small, peripheral component or may be a recent addition to the institution's programmes.

However, policy issues crop up in DE whether it is recently introduced or well established; in the rapidly developing DE environment, policy must be constantly reviewed and adapted or new policies developed to accommodate changes in DE practice, such as increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT). As in the example above, it is problematic to apply established policy to DE without adapting it to the DE context.

This guide looks at ways to deal with some of the policy issues faced by dual mode institutions. This information is for anyone involved in policy development and review for dual mode institutions, or more generally with an interest in delivering quality DE programmes.

## EXAMINING POLICY DEVELOPMENT FOR DE

To work, policies must be realistic. An institution's DE policies must take into account the reality that DE is different from on-campus education in the way it is taught, how the material is delivered to learners, and how the students actually learn and interact with their teachers/facilitators and each other. An institution's policy makers must also consider how DE policy is influenced and partly shaped by state and national policies, new technologies, accreditation requirements, institutional legislation and existing internal policies and procedures.

### STATE AND NATIONAL POLICIES

State or national policies that can hinder effective DE institutional policy development:

- Qualifying rules for student financial aid that exclude distance education students, such as criteria based on where the student is from, instead of academic performance or financial need
- Institutional grant funding based on factors that do not apply to distance education students, such as specifying a certain number of student on-campus class or contact hours for eligibility
- Restricting how public funding for institutions may be used, for example, by excluding activities important for distance education such as toll-free telephone services or off-campus learning centres.

State or national policies can help DE policy development by:

- Allowing enrolment or aid to students from outside national boundaries
- Widening grant funding eligibility to include DE programming, or creating grants specifically to encourage DE programme development
- Establishing and maintaining access to ICT networks, for example, Internet and teleconferencing access through community centres.

The purpose of national education policies on open and distance learning is often to:

- Extend access to tertiary education
- Provide upgrading opportunities for employees without degrees
- Deliver continuing technical or professional education for graduates already in the workforce
- Encourage closer economic ties between industry (broadly defined), and education institutions.

Development agencies such as the World Bank ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)) work closely with governments to shape policy for higher education, specifically to aid national development.

### ICT POLICIES

Many open and distance learning providers have turned to ICT to bridge the gap between increasing educational demand and limited financial, teaching and administrative resources. An institution needs a detailed and clear policy on ICT use.

For an institution to develop effective policy on ICT, it must:

- Develop a strategic vision and goals for ICT use within the institution



- Identify what the ICT will be used for, e.g. administration or instruction, and what technology applications will be used
- Find and sustain funding for the ICT.

National policies on ICT development and their use in education can have direct consequences for institutional policy. An example of a positive, nation-wide ICT policy is the CANARIE (Canada's Internet Development Organisation) initiative in Canada, which encourages Internet use in education and other fields through funding projects such as:

- Designing a model of distance education for post-secondary students, based on a combination of traditional videoconference and multi-point Internet streaming technologies
- Developing a prototype national database and portal website for learning and knowledge resources.

How specific existing national policies on ICT are, and their impact on education, varies from country to country. In a review of national ICT policy for education in eight countries of Southern Africa, Neil Butcher observed a range from no policy at all to local strategies and specific policies. Butcher also noted that generally, policy was lacking in tertiary education.

## ACCREDITATION POLICIES

In some countries, an education institution's policies must meet regional or national accrediting agency standards that provide guidelines for programme structure, student recruitment, teaching staff qualifications and teaching methods.

For example in the United States, Regional Accrediting Commissions have detailed accreditation guidelines for universities and colleges, including some for distance education and online delivery. For example, the distance education policies of San Diego State University explicitly refer to and follow the *Good Practice Guidelines for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programmes* of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) in the following areas:

- Curriculum and instruction
- Evaluation and assessment
- Student services
- Facilities and finance (referred to as "institutional context and commitment" by WASC).

However, some accrediting policies may not recognise credits obtained through DE. The American Bar Association, for example, only began to allow law schools to offer a limited number of distance education courses for credit for the first time in 2002.

## LEGISLATION, STATUTES AND REGULATIONS

The laws under which institutions were established are binding. National or state legislation provides the authority for policy, and in some cases dictates the overall purpose of an institution, its governance mechanisms and even its responsibility for certain activities, including DE programmes. For example, the Statutes of Kenyatta University, Kenya, state the Senate is "to promote and administer extramural, external and extension work of the University."

## EXISTING POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES

Every institution has existing policies and procedures, organisational structures, job requirements, contractual obligations and computer-based information systems that guide what it does and how it does it. As we have seen, existing procedures must be reviewed and if necessary, changed before being used for DE.

# establishing ESTABLISHING DISTANCE EDUCATION POLICY

## REVIEW EXISTING POLICY

Institutional policies are formal, general statements of intent, goals and objectives that guide the activities, behaviour and attitudes of an institution and its staff. They need to reflect the mission and values of the institution and must be consistent with governing regional or national legislation. Most institutional policies are not, at the start, specific to a mode of study.

DE programmes must be guided by institutional policy that specifically addresses its needs. After assessing the wider national or state policy context for guidance on establishing institutional DE policy, the next step is to review whether, and to what extent, existing institutional policy is appropriate for DE. A review should:

- Consider how the institution's mission fosters or inhibits DE
- Determine the values that should govern the DE component
- Identify areas where policies need to be revised or where policies specific to DE need to be developed.

## MISSIONS, VALUES AND POLICY PRINCIPLES

Effective organisations have a clear and focussed sense of what they do, and of the principles and values that guide how they do it. These are sometimes contained in mission statements. A dual mode institution needs to clearly address the overall role and purpose of open and distance learning in its institutional profile, if it is to achieve all of its strategic goals and objectives.

An example is the Mission Statement of the University of the South Pacific:

*The objects of the University shall be the maintenance, advancement and dissemination of knowledge by teaching, consultancy and research and otherwise, and the provision at appropriate levels of education and training responsive to the well-being and needs of the communities of the South Pacific.*

Implicit in the statement is a commitment to:

- Excellence
- Academic freedom
- Regionalism
- Disciplinary focus
- Quality teaching
- Dual mode operation
- Consultancy
- Research
- Working co-operatively with students and staff
- Developing links with national and regional educational and research organisations
- Diversifying its funding base.

The University's policies for University Extension (which includes DE) reflect both its mission and value commitments: "To develop, deliver and administer credit courses and programmes through the distance mode for people who are not able to enrol on campus."

The overall mission and values of USP are also reflected in specific policies on the role of university centres, pre-degree and bridging courses, teaching and learning, and transfer from non-credit to credit programmes.

## VALUES GUIDING DUAL MODE PROVISION

The values governing distance education provision need to be spelt out. Some institutions do this in a specific distance education policy, with detailed guidelines and standards of practice.





A policy environment friendly to open and distance education delivery and practice must contain the following values:

- Commitment to maintaining academic quality and standards in all programmes, irrespective of mode of delivery
- Equal consideration for student, professional and community esteem across all modes of delivery
- Guaranteed access for DE students and faculty to a range of services comparable to those available for on-campus students
- Sufficient training and numbers for staff to successfully deliver DE programming
- Commitment to providing or finding financial resources for the DE programme.

## REVISING EXISTING POLICY

After the institution's policy makers have decided on the DE programme's mission and values, existing and proposed policies and procedures must be evaluated for goodness of fit with them. Existing policies can then be changed or removed, if the fit is not a good one.

### POLICY AREAS NEEDING REVISION FOR DE

Overall, policies and procedures should ensure that DE students have an off-campus educational experience as rich and rewarding as a traditional on-campus experience. Some policy areas that affect DE programmes in dual mode institutions:

- *Staff and student use of ICT*, including the development of ICT infrastructure such as computer access rooms, and how staff and students are allowed to access it. How will remote students obtain access to ICT, for example, if present policy only allows full time, on-campus students to access computer equipment?
- *Curriculum and learning resources development and production*, including intellectual property and copyright considerations. Wider rights may need to be obtained for DE learning materials, and does policy guarantee access to quality materials for distance learners in the first place?
- *Learning resources distribution*. Is it reasonable to expect off campus students to get learning resources (e.g. textbooks) from the same locations as students on campus, such as campus bookstores, or to pay high shipping costs for textbooks?
- *Student recruitment and admission*. Do distance education programmes require special policies about admitting non-traditional students? For example, should a different policy be in place for distance learners in the area of course prerequisites, such as allowing a certain amount of on-the-job experience to replace academic course credit?
- *Graduation requirements*. Do these adequately address the needs and reflect the realities of part-time and remote students? For example, is it reasonable to expect a distance learner from a remote location to obtain course credits from student discussion groups, to qualify for graduation?
- *Student access to library resources and laboratory facilities*. How can the needs of remote students be accommodated? Does policy allow for sharing or loaning facilities and resources with other institutions for its distance learners?
- *Teaching and learning processes*, including counselling and other forms of student academic support. How will students

receive timely feedback on their progress? Does policy guarantee distance learners access to a similar level of academic support to that enjoyed by students on campus?

- *Student assessment*. How can remote students be examined? For example, does policy acknowledge alternative assessment methods, such as peer review, or the handing in of non-hard copy assignments, such as essays sent via e-mail?
- *Programme evaluation and accreditation*. Does the institution's policy allow DE course accreditation? Is appropriateness for distance delivery considered when evaluating programmes?
- *Student records and other administrative support services*. How are these services to be provided away from the main campus?
- *Staff development*. Will central and remote staff be trained to serve and answer the questions of both on-campus and off-campus students well? How will training be provided?
- *Alliances, partnerships and co-operative delivery*. Are any policies and procedures needed to make a particular arrangement work, such as a supportive policy on ICT use and development?

Policies will already exist for the above in most institutions. A policy audit will likely reveal that some of these policies and procedures work well in a dual mode situation; these you won't want or need to change. Some, however, you will need to modify. More examples are provided in this guide's Resources section.

## HOW TO REVIEW POLICY

### THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

Discovering how well an institution's DE mission and values are reflected in policy can involve a considerable amount of detective work. Institutional policy is implemented through a framework of regulations that is the guideline for actual institutional procedure. Policies are usually found in a central register, but may also be scattered through committee minutes, official documents (such as calendars or handbooks) and different departmental procedures. An orderly way to review, develop and maintain a policy framework is through a policy audit.

### POLICY AUDITS

A policy audit is a structured, systematic review of an institution's existing policies to find any contradictions, redundancies, omissions and outdated items.

A policy audit should be conducted when an institution faces a significant challenge, such as a change from single to dual mode delivery or an increase in its DE programming. Policy audits can also be conducted periodically as part of an ongoing process of policy review. The policy audit helps ensure that policies consistently support all of a dual mode institution's goals and objectives.

In a policy audit, the institution:

- Examines how each existing policy applies to on and off-campus education provision, and how consistent it is with institutional values and principles
- Identifies areas where no policies exist, but where policies are now needed for DE
- Reviews activities and publications to identify how policies and procedures are actually carried out and expressed
- Assesses how well, as statements of intent, existing policies

# policy



## RESOURCES

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### ILLUSTRATIVE INSTITUTIONAL SITES

Athabasca University: *Service standards*. [www.athabascau.ca/misc/expect](http://www.athabascau.ca/misc/expect)  
CANARIE: *E-Learning program projects and objectives*. [www.canarie.ca/funding/learning/background.html](http://www.canarie.ca/funding/learning/background.html)

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### OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING POLICY DEVELOPMENT (PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO DUAL MODE INSTITUTIONS)

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