



Online and Distance Learning (ODL) Policy

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Online and Distance Learning (ODL) Policy

1. **INTRODUCTION:** This policy sets minimum quality standards under which universities, other than those that specialize in distance education, would be allowed to offer education through online and distance learning modes. The ultimate objective is to protect the interest of students, while providing them with an opportunity to access affordable educational resources.

Clarification: This policy does not obligate every university to provide online and distance education but provides the policy framework for those universities wanting to use those modes, in addition to their offerings in the traditional in-person mode.

2. **DEFINITIONS:** In this document, unless there is something repugnant to the context, the following terms shall have the appended meanings.

2.1. Asynchronous Learning: Learning that does not require real-time interaction and is based on content made available online for students to access when it best suits their schedules, although assignments may still have to be submitted according to set deadlines. *See also Synchronous Learning.*

2.2. Blended Learning: A combination of online with in-person teaching, i.e., involving some regular in-person interaction between students and teachers, while allowing for the use of online materials or online learning strategies.

2.3. Distance Learning: Delivery of instruction by someone geographically removed from the learner, i.e., without requiring physical proximity between teachers and students, including through written materials or electronic communication regardless of whether it is shared by ordinary mail or information and communication technologies (ICTs).

2.4. e-Learning: *See Online Learning.*

2.5. Flipped Classroom: A type of blended learning where students are introduced to content at home (e.g., through videotaped lectures circulated in advance) and practice working through it at school. That is, a reversal of the normal practice of introducing new content at school and assigning homework or projects to be completed at home.

2.6. Hybrid Learning: A situation where some students attend class in person while others join virtually.

2.7. In-person Teaching: Traditional teaching system involving direct, face-to-face interaction between the teacher and the student.

2.8. Learning Management System (LMS): Software designed to distribute and manage the delivery of educational content, handle course registration and course administration, and tracking and reporting on progress.

2.9. Massive Open Online Course (MOOC): A structured online course or curriculum unit aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the Web.

2.10. MOOC Providers: Platforms that offer access to MOOCs, such as Coursera, EdX, Khan Academy, and others.

2.11. NAHE: National Academy of Higher Education, HEC.

2.12. OAC: The ODL Academic Committee established by the OMO (See 2.14 below).

2.13. ODL: The Online and Distance Learning Division, HEC.

2.14. OMO: The ODL Management Office, established at each participating university per paragraph 7 below.

- 2.15. Online Education:** *See Online Learning.*
- 2.16. Online Learning** (also called *eLearning* or *Online Education*): A form of distance learning using digital materials and electronic communication methods, deployed independently or in combination with traditional in-person instruction.
- 2.17. Open Educational Resources (OERs):** Teaching, learning, and research resources that are in the public domain or have been released under an open license. That is, an intellectual property license that permits free use and re-purposing by others and are available for use at any time without any time restrictions. These may include full courses, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge.
- 2.18. Synchronous learning:** Distance learning that happens in real time, often with a set class schedule and required login times. (See also *asynchronous learning*).
- 2.19. University:** All degree awarding institutions regardless of whether they are called universities, institutes, or by other names.
- 3. OBJECTIVES:** In keeping with the ultimate goal of enhancing access of students to new learning opportunities while protecting their interests, the policy seeks to incentivize universities to introduce continuous improvements in the quality of such education. In particular, the policy has the following objectives:
- 3.1. Standards:** Establish minimum standards, aligned with existing or improved standards, which have to be met by a university before offering online and distance learning courses or programmes.
- 3.2. Quality Enhancement:** Improve the quality of online and distance learning provided by universities, move towards international best practices in this domain, and narrow the perceived quality gap between distance education and in-person education.
- 3.3. Expansion of Access:** Expand access of students to universities, by allowing the latter to supplement conventional teaching methods with lower-cost ODL options.
- 3.4. Facilitation of Lifelong Learning:** Promote lifelong learning and continuing education by expanding the options available for in-career professionals.
- 4. SCOPE:** This policy lies within the ambit of HEC policies, especially those pertaining to standards and quality of education. Nothing that is stated here is to be read as restricting, interfering with, or reducing the scope of other HEC policies. It shall apply to all universities in Pakistan offering or planning to offer online and distance education.
- 5. ELIGIBILITY CONDITIONS:** A university that intends to provide online and distance education shall have to demonstrate its readiness for offering such programmes. Specifically, University's will have to provide the following evidence:
- 5.1. OMO and OAC:** The University has notified and established the OMO and the ODL Academic Committee (OAC) in accordance with *Paragraph 7 below*.
- 5.2. ODL Policy:** The relevant statutory bodies have approved the University's ODL Policy (*See paragraph 6 below*).
- 5.3. LMS:** The University has established and operationalized the LMS.
- 5.4. Courses:** All courses to be offered through online and distance education are also being offered as regular courses and have been reviewed for ODL delivery by the

OMO/OAC and approved by the relevant university bodies. That is, there will be no distinction between courses offered through the ODL mode and those offered through traditional face-to-face mode.

- 5.5. Faculty:** Faculty members assigned to teach ODL courses by a department will be subject to oversight by the OMO.
- 5.6. Technology:** The University has deployed the necessary infrastructure and software.
- 5.7. Examinations:** The University has arrangements to assess and evaluate students.
- 5.8. Library:** The University's library can provide online access to prescribed course materials.
- 5.9. Laboratory:** The University has made arrangements for supervised laboratory experience where needed.
- 5.10. Student Support:** The University has made arrangements to support students in accessing online and distance education.

6. UNIVERSITY ODL POLICY: A university that intends to provide online and distance education shall develop its own ODL policy and get it ratified by the relevant university bodies like the Syndicate and/or Senate. The policy should cover all items listed in Paragraph 5 above, and be consistent with HEC's policies, guidelines, and regulations, especially this policy, as well as the broader vision and mission of the university.

7. ODL MANAGEMENT OFFICE (OMO): A university that intends to provide online and distance education shall establish a dedicated office, to be called the ODL Management Office (OMO), to undertake all responsibilities for matters pertaining to ODL education.

The OMO shall have the following structure and functions:

7.1. Structure:

7.1.1. The OMO shall be headed by a Dean and supported by additional staff as may be required.

7.1.2. The OMO shall report to the head of the University.

7.2. Functions: The OMO shall be responsible for the following:

7.2.1. Establishment of ODL Academic Committee (OAC): With approval of the head of the University, notify and establish the OAC and serve as its secretariat.

7.2.1.1. Composition of OAC:

The head of the University shall be the Chair of OAC.

The head of the OMO shall be the Secretary of OAC. Other members of the OAC shall include:

- All Deans
- At least 2 Professors, to be appointed by the OAC Chair.
- At least 2 HODs, to be appointed by the OAC Chair
- At least 1 senior administration/management officer of the university, to be appointed by the OAC Chair.

7.2.1.2. Powers of OAC:

Besides infrastructural administrative matters, the OAC will have oversight over matters pertaining to academics and faculty teaching on the ODL mode as mentioned in the following sections.

- 7.2.2. **University ODL Policy:** Develop and obtain approval of the University's ODL Policy (*see Paragraph 6 above*) and ensure its implementation.
- 7.2.3. **Regulations and Procedures:** Frame any specific regulations or procedures required for effective delivery of online and distance education, and submit them for approval to the relevant university body;
- 7.2.4. **Integration:** Ensure the alignment of online and distance education policies and procedures with mainstream academic and governance bodies of the university;
- 7.2.5. **Course Approval:** Review and provide oversight to all proposed online and distance education courses. Provided that no course shall be offered through online and distance mode if it has not been taught through the in-person mode for at least 3 years immediately preceding.
- 7.2.6. **Capacity Building:** Approve training programmes and arrange the provision of training and continued professional development of faculty members, course organizers, and academic departments for designing and developing ODL courses, and effective delivery of online and distance content;
- 7.2.7. **Infrastructure:** Obtain and manage and supervise all technological and physical infrastructure needed to deliver good quality online and distance education, including LMSs, Digital Library, Digital Labs, virtual meeting software, and others;
- 7.2.8. **Technical Services:** The Information Technology (IT) section of the university shall provide all necessary services as required by the OMO.
- 7.2.8.1. **Online Library:** Ensure and certify the availability of library resources (*See Paragraph 13 below*);
- 7.2.9. **Student Support:** Assess student needs in regard to accessing online and distance learning, and arrange necessary institutional and financial support (*See Paragraph 15 below*);
- 7.2.10. **Annual Report:** Prepare an annual report on the academic performance of the institution in the domain of online and distance education;
- 7.2.11. **Review:** Undertake a periodic review every three (3) years of the operation of the policy, and introduce any amendments that may be needed to enhance quality and effectiveness; and
- 7.2.12. Perform such other functions as may be prescribed.

8. ODL COURSES:

- 8.1. In developing the courses, the OAC shall ensure that the syllabuses, including learning materials, are designed and developed in accordance with HEC guidelines and international best practices.
- 8.2. Every course that is to be offered through online and distance education mode shall be authorized specifically and individually by the Academic Council

- 8.3.** All approved courses shall be uploaded in a timely manner to the LMS before the commencement of teaching.

9. FACULTY TRAINING:

- 9.1.** OMOs shall provide opportunities for and facilitate faculty to receive training in designing, developing and delivering online/DL courses.
- 9.2.** The OAC/OMO shall approve training programs including those offered by NAHE. However, NAHE/HEC shall monitor the quality of non-NAHE training programs.

10. TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE AND SOFTWARE: Universities providing or planning to provide online and distance education must deploy the requisite software and technological infrastructure, make it available to all students and faculty members, and arrange technical support for trouble- shooting and smooth operation. The minimum required software packages include the university's LMS, selected meeting software (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Google Classroom), online library resources, and software needed for online examination systems.

11. LABORATORY AND PRACTICAL INSTRUCTION: Laboratory work and practical instruction requires the physical presence of the student and direct supervision by or interaction with their instructors. In general, this means a higher threshold for the approval of courses that require laboratory work or other practical instruction. In principle, universities have to provide evidence that the required instruction has been provided to the students, and that the students have been tested meaningfully on their learning. The following principles are designed to ensure the quality of education in this domain:

- 11.1.** In case an online/distance education course requires laboratory work, the university will have to produce evidence that the student was provided access to, and attended a supervised laboratory environment, for the number of hours prescribed for the course.
- 11.2.** More broadly the OMO, in consultation with the relevant academic department, shall develop and publish detailed guidelines on how students can fulfil the laboratory requirements in ODL programs. In case of professional streams, these regulations have to be validated by the relevant accreditation council.
- 11.3.** All regulations and guidelines in this regard must be approved by the OAC/OMO and relevant academic bodies of the university and communicated to all students and faculty members in a transparent and accessible manner.

12. EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT: Regardless of the mode of instruction, it is the responsibility of the university to assess performance and certify that each student possesses sufficient knowledge of the subject to qualify the course. Examinations and assessments will be in accordance with the relevant HEC and institutional policies, guidelines, and rules. Provided that all students registered for a course shall be assessed through one uniform mechanism regardless of mode of delivery.

13. LIBRARY AND DIGITAL RESOURCES: A university that intends to provide online and

distance education shall establish a library that enables students to access course material (including all required readings, optional readings, audio-visual materials, and ancillary literature or data needed for course- related research) through online and digital means, including through the LMS or HEC's digital library subscription, regardless of whether students are expected or required to purchase their own textbooks or materials.

14. OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (OERs): Faculty should be encouraged to use existing quality OER from around the world in various formats and adapt these to local contexts.

14.1. *Making University's Online Resources Available:* Universities should establish transparent regulations to allow external use of their online resources. All public sector universities should publish their online materials as OER under a CC-BY-NC-SA license. Private sector universities may choose to do so on their own volition, but would not be required to do so.

15. STUDENT SUPPORT: A university that intends to provide online and distance education shall arrange support to students who sign up for such courses. Specifically, the OMO shall ensure that students are familiarized with the requirements as well as the benefits of ODL education, provide a menu of options for students to receive course materials, collect information on the challenges faced by students in this regard, arrange tutoring outside regular classes if needed, and establish a complaint registration and redressal mechanism.

16. MONITORING AND EVALUATION: In order to ensure implementation and draw lessons for further refinement, the ODLD (HEC) will collaborate with the OMOs to monitor the standard of online and distance education.

17. REVIEW AND UPDATE: This policy will be reviewed and updated every three years, and the updated versions circulated.

18. REPEAL: This policy supersedes and replaces past HEC policies, regulations, and guidelines on online and distance learning.