OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING STRATEGY ON TRAINING

INTRODUCTION

UNISA recognises that the effective implementation of the 2015 Strategic Plan is dependent upon the existence of qualified and competent personnel that are willing to play a role in positioning UNISA as a leading institution in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) practices and processes. This can only be achieved through building capacity and increasing awareness on ODL. The major challenge facing the university is to achieve a shared understanding of the nature and the implications of ODL systems, practices and processes across the institution as the precondition to the successful implementation of ODL good practice. The aim is to build on existing practices in order to develop a strategy for training in ODL.

 The Unisa' ODL policy outlines the purpose of professional development as re-skilling and knowledge upgrading with regard to what ODL is, its underpinning philosophy and how it fits into the wider scheme of things at Unisa. The role of training in this regard is seen as a systematic process through which staff members are going to be capacitated and empowered to master the defined tasks they are expected to perform in an ODL environment. This includes planning, implementation and evaluation of all ODL initiatives which are embedded in sound theoretical, philosophical and epistemological grounding within the university. This can be achieved if academic, professional, management and administrative structures work collaboratively to improve ~~to~~ develop training programmes that will promote good practices in the ODL environment. Although the different university reports point to the importance of staff/professional development in the ODL context, professional development has not gained enough momentum as it should.

The implementation of ODL at UNISA requires innovative interventions and training, geared towards improving practice. The aim of this document is:

- To report on the ODL activities that are taking place within the university
- To develop the continuing professional development training plan
- To make recommendations on the best way forward.

SECTION 1: FOREGROUND OF THE ODL TRAINING

1.1 ODL INITIATIVES

Although there are many ODL initiatives around the university, ~~we~~ table 1 only reports on the initiatives that collated to date.

Table 1.1: Existing IODL initiatives

Name of the College/ Directorate	Type of Intervention	Format of intervention	Purpose of initiative
College of Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET)	Flagship research project	Seminars	Contributing towards innovative and scientific knowledge on teaching and learning in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) within the ODL context.
College of Human Sciences (CHE	ODL office	Surveys Information sessions	Provide support on ODL matters Collect information on ODL initiatives in the college
DCLD	Informal training programmes	Workshops Seminars	Provide training for academic staff.
TSDL)	Informal training programmes	Workshops	Conducts generic development workshops for appointed tutors
CC&M	Awareness raising campaign	ODL student walk campaign	Raise awareness on Unisa systems
IODL	Informal training programmes Formal Programmes	Workshops Seminars Lectures BA-ODL	Provide the framework and the intellectual space on ODL for the entire university community

All these initiatives were meant to sensitise and raise awareness about the processes, systems and practices in an ODL environment. They all played a critical role as the first part of the strategy towards orientating staff to ODL.

Since 1996, Unisa has offered a number of formal ODL programmes that were meant to provide skills and knowledge to people involved in the ODL environment.

Table 1.2: Formal ODL programmes

FORMAL	LEVEL DESCRIPTOR	STATUS
The Certificate Programme in Distance Education (CDEP)	One year - NQF level 5	Phased out
BA in ODL	NQF level 6	In the process of being phased out
Postgraduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE)	NQF level 7	Phased out
MEd (Distance Education) –	NQF level 8	Phased out

Each of these programmes had undergone the accreditation process and were nationally recognised by the Department of Education and regionally recognised by SADC-member countries. They were also meant to provide skills and knowledge to people who are already working in ODL environments and those who are interested in working in the field. The advantage of a formal qualification is that it gives an individual a qualification to work in any ODL institution of choice.

Despite the need for ODL training, these formal programmes were unable to attract as many staff members as they should. Part of the reason was that, firstly, members of staff resisted enrolling for ~~in~~ these programmes because they felt that they are already experts in their respective fields and therefore did not need another qualification. Secondly, staff members cited the length of time needed to complete these programmes as a problem. Thirdly, most faculty members did not attach value to doing these courses because they felt that they are neither recognised nor rewarded for enrolling in these courses.

Since these formal programmes were not as successful, most of the staff members relied on informal training programmes which were usually short term and focussed on specific objectives. Most of these interventions were provided by the DCLD through its Continuous Professional Development programmes. In addition, the Centre for Community Development offer a nonformal short learning programme Assessor course - at NQF level 7 for academic staff. Although this course is not formally recognised by the national system of education, it addresses the competency based skills, attitude and knowledge that are required for direct application to a task or a job. Continuous Professional Development is developmental in nature in that it allows these activities to be integrated with the aim of enhancing ODL capacity.

1.2   COMPETENCIES

The starting point for the development of a training programme is to identify competencies needed to perform the functions and roles in specific job area. The competencies as described by van Koller (2003) are different from Key Performance Areas (KPAs). Competencies are descriptive tools that identify skills, knowledge and behaviour that is needed to effectively perform a role whereas KPAs refer to intended outcomes and outputs to be achieved. Distance education, by nature is different from other forms of education in that students are physically and socially separated from their lecturers, their peers and the institution. As a result the traditional teaching techniques which emphasises the delivery of content in a lecture-based format is not as effective if the delivery has to be mediated through technology.

Since there was an absence of competencies required of distance education practitioners in all Unisa's documents, a literature review was conducted. The aim was to find out what the functions and competencies of the distance education practitioner entails. A brief literature survey revealed that competencies of distance education practitioners include the following:

1. Courseware design and development;
2. Facilitation of learning via ODL (assessment);
3. Collaboration/Teamwork Skills
4. Planning skills
5. Writing skills
5. Project management skills
6. Knowledge of distance education field

7. Basic technology knowledge
8. Skills in development of student-focused learning – learner support
9. Technology-based instruction
10. ODL Research skills
11. ODL Management and administration
12. Change agent skills

However, this list is not exhaustive but it reflects how other scholars have identified competencies needed for distance education practitioners. Egan and Akdere (2005) clustered all the competencies under four broad themes: (1) Communication and interaction; (2) management and administration; (3) technology and; (4) learning and instruction. Unlike earlier studies that emphasised communication as the most important competency in distance education (Thatch and Murphy, 1995), Egan and Akdere (2005) found that participants in their study prioritised technology as a major competency in distance education. This shows the impact of new technologies in distance education.

The implications for this literature review illustrate that competencies are necessary to provide guidance and structure for formal and informal training for distance education practitioners. However, the review illuminated some challenges that may be faced by Unisa in developing professional development programmes. One of the major challenges, is that there is an absence of required competencies that are specific to Unisa staff. Therefore, there is a need for the development of a framework that articulates the roles and competencies of distance education practitioners (academic, professional, support, service and administrative) in order to develop training programmes that are appropriate to the required competencies. The other challenge, especially for academics, is that ODL by nature requires a shift from the teacher as a primary source of information to the teacher as a facilitator of knowledge.

1.3   TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS

Prior to the development of ODL professional development programmes, it is important to collect information that is going to assist to addressing the question of whether or not UNISA provides desired training; who are the potential participants in the training; whether the job requires a particular skill or knowledge to perform it; and finally whether the training is the desired solution. The training needs analysis will

serve as a construct for the development of the professional development programmes.

A training needs analysis was conducted with some Unisa staff and revealed that there is need for training in ODL. Academics expressed the need for training that would enable them to teach/facilitate learning in ODL environment, especially in the South African higher education landscape. They pointed out serious concerns about their ability to teach effectively within the constraints of ODL in the South African context. The administrative and the professional staff pointed out that the digitization of information resources has forced them to change how they have been functioning. As a result, there is a need on training on technology.

Table 1.3.1: Training topics that emerged from the Training Needs Analysis are listed below

ACADEMICS	ADMINSTRATIVE/PROFESSIONAL SERVICES
1. Course design and development 2. Orientation on systems and processes in ODL 3. Teaching strategies and models 4. Skills in developing or enhancing student centred learning environment 5. Understanding of different learner support services 6. ODL assessment strategies 7. ODL facilitation processes 8. Writing and editing skill 9. Basic technology and usage of technology in ODL 10. Multimedia knowledge 11. Collaborative and teamwork skills 12. Data analysis 13. Evaluation processes and strategies	1. Understanding ODL systems and processes 2. Systems and technology training for administration staff 3. Customer service training 4. Communication and interpersonal skills 5. Study material tracking systems 6. Management information reports 7. Web 2 training 8. Planning in ODL 9. Online development learning 10. Blended learning

1.4 PRINCIPLES FOR THE TRAINING STRATEGY

The strategy for training should be directed by principles that are meant to serve as guidelines for identifying formal, non-formal and informal educational programmes that are designed for distance education staff members.

- Though academic and administrative/professional personnel have different roles to play in ODL, they share the need for a general shared understanding of ODL.
- Specific constituencies have specific training needs as reported in the training needs analysis. eg. academic, professional and administrative staff have different training needs.
- There is a difference between the training needs of new staff and staff that have been with Unisa for more than 3 years who needs to be acknowledged for their understanding of ODL.

- Training should address the knowledge and skills required to perform a task – this should involve transferring learning into practice. This could be done through informal, nonformal and formal programmes.
- Not all ODL training will be done by the IODL, or any one particular provider for that matter. Expertise will be shared, celebrated and effectively deployed.
- ODL training initiatives should contribute to a collective understanding of the competencies and values needed to make Unisa a world-class ODL institution.
- All staff will be able to submit an RPL portfolio to provide evidence of competencies in identified outcomes in order to receive certification.
- Providers in ODL training will be identified, supported and effectively utilized.

SECTION TWO: TRAINING PLAN

The training plan will be guided by the competencies identified and the training topics that emerged from the needs analysis. What the training needs analysis findings suggest is that, the ODL training should kick off with basic understanding of ODL practices, systems and processes. This type of training could be offered through formal, nonformal and informal training programmes. Each output of each training

programme must reflect the competencies required for performing a task in an ODL context.

The first certificate course that IODL is presently developing will be based on the general overview of ODL. Table 2.1 reflect ODL Programmes. The purpose of the NQF level 5, 12 credit course is intended to equip academics, professional, management and administrative staff with knowledge, attitudes and skills that are required by a competent practitioner in an Open Distance Learning (ODL) context.

Table 2.1. ODL progammes

Programme	Purpose	Target Audience	Competency	Dates	Responsible
Introduction to Open Distance Learning	To introduce ODL practitioners to the unique characteristics and foundational knowledge and values needed for quality ODL practice	Academics Administrators/ Professional/Support Management	Basic knowledge of distance education field	Process of Development Commences June 2010	IODL
ODL materials design and development	To equip academics with the skills they require to facilitate learning	Academics	Courseware design and development	Development October 2010 Commences June 2011	DCLDIODL HRD
Management and administration in ODL	To plan, implement, manage and review ODL initiatives	Administrator/Management Professional/ Support	Project management organisational and planning skills	Development January 2011 Commences June 2011	IODL HRD

The idea is to ensure that all ODL practitioners have a shared understanding of what ODL systems, contexts and policies entail. This course will foreground other courses that will be audience specific such as one for academics, administrative and professional staff with the necessary knowledge in ODL.

Table 2.2: formal, non-formal and informal progammes

	Formal	Nonformal	Informal
What is available	BA-ODL is in the process of being phased out Med (Distance Education)	Assessor course Introduction to ODL	Induction programme Workshops on course development, writing skills etc.
Who is offering the course	IODL Dept. of Education	Centre for Community Development IODL	DCLD IODL
Purpose	Nationally recognised qualification	competency based skills that are required for direct application to a job	Specific, short term programmes focussed on specific objectives.

Both informal and nonformal training are meant to increase knowledge and skills for a particular job. The scope of both informal and nonformal is limited by their objectives and tends to concentrate on skills development while formal education provides knowledge base that is concerned with a broader subject matter of conceptual or theoretical nature. It is important to take into cognisance that professional development is continuous and directly related to lifelong learning principles. Therefore members of staff have to be exposed to different types of training so that they can make a choice on which trajectory they would like to follow. For example, there are staff members who would like to make ODL a career and therefore may take the formal route where they get qualification in the field. Those who need training on a specific skill or need knowledge on how each systems work together, they may choose the informal or the non-formal trajectory.

2.2   RECOMMENDATIONS

- ODL training activities should be co-ordinated in a central hub.
- IODL, DCLD, ICT, Human Resource and all other stakeholders should develop a policy and a framework that articulates the roles and competencies of distance education practitioners (academic, professional, support, service and administrative)
- Training should address the knowledge and skills required to perform a task – this should involve transferring learning into practice
- Members of staff should be encouraged to participate in training events to enhance their knowledge and skills and this should be attached to recognition and rewards.
- Rewarding structures for performance should take into cognisance the roles and competencies of distance education practitioners. IPMS should concur and relate to required competencies
- Professional development should consist of planned learning experiences designed by, or in collaboration with individuals who have the intention of advancing knowledge and skills to be used in their employment.
- Training should be a continuous process aimed at addressing staff members' concerns and therefore designed to meet the needs of individuals.
- Professional development programmes should be aligned to the institutional goals as set out in the 2015 strategic plan
- Professional development programmes should be designed in such way that they empower staff members to carry out their functions effectively and efficiently.

Clay (1999) points out that training simply won't "take hold" unless support is ongoing, with job-embedded opportunities for practice. One of the factors that may motivate staff is the availability of support services that will ease their workload.

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