Digital and Online Education Policy for UCT 2024

Policy Title	Digital and Online Education Policy
First Policy Approved	2017
Latest Policy Approved	2024
Policy Approved by	Senate, after review and submission by the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee
Latest Policy Review by	Online Education Sub-Committee
Review changes	Substantial changes made
Review cycle	5 Years Revision for approval by 30 Jun 2029
Policy Owner	Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning
Policy implementation monitoring	Online Education Sub-Committee on behalf of Senate Teaching and Learning Committee, on behalf of Senate Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees, on behalf of Faculty Boards
Policy review	This Policy will be reviewed every five years. Review will be managed by CILT and IPD.
Enquiries	Chair of Online Education Sub-Committee
Scope	The Digital and Online Education Policy for UCT applies to: All programmes and courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level. All students, staff, and others who are responsible for digitally enabled teaching and learning. All statutes, rules, and guidelines that have a bearing on digitally enabled teaching and learning.
Related Policies, Guidelines and Procedures	Vision 2030 Curriculum Change Framework (2018) University of Cape Town Teaching and Learning Charter (2017) Disability Policy (2021) Language Policy 2024 (forthcoming) Continuing Education Policy (forthcoming) Size and Shape for UCT Proposal 2023

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Purpose

This policy aligns the University's Vision 2030 for digitally enabled education with the changing regulatory environment and current context to provide guidance for teaching and professional staff developing educational offerings. The revised policy includes a new focus on the principles promoting greater flexibility, accessibility and resilience through digital technologies, and blended and online modes of teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

This policy seeks to give expression to the concepts outlined in Vision 2030 (Sept 2021) and in particular the statement: **UCT will provide both contact and digitally enabled education** (3.2).

The policy acknowledges both digital technologies' opportunities to enhance learning as part of the educational experience and the potential to exacerbate inequalities amongst students. UCT therefore is committed to strategies to provide all students with equitable digital learning opportunities through offering:

> *appropriate digitally enabled education at undergraduate, postgraduate and continuous education levels. This will allow us to expose our students to the latest learning technologies in an appropriate environment without sacrificing equity or student engagement with their teachers and peers.*

The policy provides clarity on terminology, definitions and modes of provision that consider Vision 2030, the global, national contexts and institutional imperatives in a post-Covid environment.

2. Framing and defining Digital Education

This policy asserts that most education provision is now digitally enabled with high quality learning and teaching comprising an intentional blending of in-person interaction and online engagement through digital platforms and tools.

This policy establishes a set of definitions for the UCT context that takes as its point of departure the two modes recognised by DHET and CHE for funding and accreditation purposes as follows:

> **Contact mode:** Interaction with institutional teachers or institutional supervisors, through lectures, tutorials, seminars, practicals, supervision, or other forms of required work, and which occurs at the institution's premises or a site of the institution.
>
> **Distance mode** is defined as interaction with institutional teachers or supervisors undertaken through "distance education" techniques (e.g. through the use of correspondence, telematics, or the internet). It avoids the need for students to discover the curriculum by attending classes in person frequently and for long periods.

In a similar vein, traditional definitions of the term "online education" have tended to use the term in a loose and all-encompassing sense - both to describe the use of educational technologies in any mode of education as well to describe a learning context where all learning activities take place fully online.

These terms do not adequately reflect the modalities of contemporary learning experiences in higher education where digital modes are pervasive. This policy therefore establishes definitions for a set of terms that encompasses the flexibility and fluidity of educational provision across a continuum.

By **"in-person mode"** we mean learning and teaching that happens when teachers and students are face-to-face together in the same physical spaces and where learning is synchronous. This includes on-campus lectures, tutorials and practicals.

By **"online modes"** we mean learning and teaching that happens when students and teachers engage through digital technologies and can be synchronous or asynchronous.

Blended learning refers specifically to how educators have chosen to mix or combine different modes of teaching and learning within an overall frame of digitally enabled education[1].

Blended learning means designing learning experiences that take into account the key considerations of the discipline, context, educational purposes, values and pedagogies, alongside the most effective integration of technology. To better understand how blended learning can be intentionally designed, this policy delineates three dimensions for consideration:

- **geographic proximity** (where students are located),
- **digital mediation** (extent of reliance on technology), and
- **temporal immediacy** (when students and teachers are together), with each dimension operating a set of attributes along a continuum.

These dimensions encompass the traditional contact and distance learning and teaching modes, but also allow for a better understanding of the fluidity and flexibility of different forms of blended modes. There is no single 'blend'. Blended learning is designed to enable students to have greater access, flexibility, participation and choice about how they learn (see Blended Learning, CILT, 2023). The intentional selection of components along the dimensions then allows for particular approaches to emerge that are most appropriate for qualification designs.

[1] This section draws on Enabling accessible blended learning for equity (ENABLE): A framework developed for the University of Cape Town from the 2021-2023 UCDG grant: Redesigning Blended Courses

Since January 2022 all applications for accreditation have had to indicate to the HEQC whether the application is for a contact (campus-based, face-to-face), blended (components of both online and face-to-face teaching) or distance learning programme (online or print-based material only).

When describing an application for a blended mode, the context will determine the most appropriate blended format, and which aspects will be taught synchronously and/or asynchronously. For a blended accreditation, the design assumption is that students are on or around campus (i.e. in close geographic proximity), even if some learning activities are online. However, for blended applications, institutions are still required to indicate the proportion of in-person versus online provisioning for the programme.

Creating well designed course sites on UCT's digital learning platform, Amathuba, provides the basis for **resilience and adaptability** in the provision of education. Using forms of blended learning to increase flexibility for staff and students can contribute both to increased student engagement (a key tenet of Universal Design for Learning) and make it easier to respond to unexpected disruptions.

3. Policy environment

Documents that have framed initial institutional policy directions include:

- the 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training,
- the 2014 DHET Policy for provision of distance education in South African universities in the context of an integrated post- school system,
- the draft Policy Framework for the Provision of Open Learning and Distance Education in South African Post-school Education and Training (2017), and
- the National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (2023), a roadmap for the realisation of the goals of the White Paper.

Until 2014, UCT and other contact institutions could offer "mixed mode" but never fully online programmes. However, with the publication of the 2014 Policy, UCT commenced with planning for a few distance mode offerings, and subsequently a number of new applications for accreditation were approved by the HEQC.

Distance mode was (and remains) defined as follows:

<table>
<tr><td>In undergraduate courses at NQF levels 5 and 6</td><td rowspan="2">students spend</td><td>30% or less</td><td rowspan="2">of the stated notional learning hours in staff-led, face-to-face, campus-based structured learning activities.</td></tr>
<tr><td>In undergraduate courses at NQF level 7, and PG courses at NQF 8</td><td>25% or less</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">In postgraduate courses at NQF level 9 and 10 there is no minimum requirement for face-to-face, campus-based structured learning activities.</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1 Classification of distance mode by notional learning hours

Individual courses that are defined as distance (at NQF levels 5-8) attract half the **input subsidy**. The **output subsidy** (the subsidy received for students who graduate) is not affected by mode of provision.

The Council on Higher Education is developing Higher Education Practice Standards (HEPS) on modes of provision. HEPS set standards for learning, teaching and assessment, learning environments, articulation, and programme design and review, and the HEPS will require institutions to consider quality arrangements for particular modes and will bring into focus the notion of design[2]. Thus, the policy environment at a national level is also shifting towards a paradigm that endorses flexibility and sets expectations for accountability and development in learning and teaching.

4. Principles and practices for Digital Education

Beyond the conceptualisation and technical understanding of digital education and associated definitions, this policy asserts a set of principles and associated practices:

In relation to UCT's identity as a residential institution:

a. UCT is committed to **a residential student experience** where students and staff come together in communities of learning to foster academic success, and social connections. At the same time, digital technologies can support flexible and innovative modes of teaching and therefore UCT embraces the continuum of educational provision across in-person, blended and fully online modalities, where appropriate to students' needs.

b. UCT encourages the appropriate integration of technology through blended learning design for campus-based **Undergraduate Programmes**, as long as the overall programme retains at least 30% of notional hours in staff-led, structured

[2] CHE Communiqué 3 of 2022

learning (as per DHET regulations).[3] This means that individual undergraduate courses can be taught in blended, hyflex or even fully online modes, as long as the full programme is not offered fully online. Qualifications that include 70% or more of students' notional learning hours fully online would be considered new applications for accreditation.

c. Different types of **Postgraduate qualifications** have an increasing range of student profiles and this policy encourages the development of new online and blended postgraduate qualifications that better meet work-place, industry and professional needs[4].

In relation to providing an equitable student experience:

d. UCT recognises the importance of **equitable access to technology** to enable all students to participate, use the latest technologies and develop digital literacies through innovative curricula. This requires the institution to maintain sufficient quality computer labs and reliable wifi on campus and in residences, and to facilitate the acquisition of laptops for incoming first year students. Students should be provided with digital literacies training during first year orientation and as an ongoing part of their courses.

e. Support for students with disabilities includes services and specialised software through the Disability Service and via the learning management system, while course designs should incorporate Universal Design for Learning principles and accessibility best practice in digital platforms and learning content (see UCT Disability Policy).

f. UCT is committed to engaging students and lecturers in an active learning community through relationships of care which privileges human mediation of digital education. The use of artificial intelligence technologies should be based on responsible and ethical practices that enhance and support active learning and teaching.

g. UCT promotes the development of contextually relevant, accessible digital learning materials, including where possible in multiple languages, and as shareable learning resources that offer opportunities for students' contributions.

[3] Fully online courses will be coded on Peoplesoft as distance. Courses at NQF levels 5-8 will attract half the input subsidy.

[4] Different qualifications have different associated graduate attributes; traditional academic route in HEQSF vs professional route. This also supports the notion of fitness for purpose.

h. Support for students in self-management of their learning in digital learning spaces includes access to time management tools and strategies to become self-directed learners.

In relation to providing an optimal staff teaching environment

i. UCT recognises the need for an excellent environment for teaching to promote disciplinary innovation and choices. Mechanisms to achieve this include appropriate digital learning infrastructure, an integrated digital administrative ecosystem, student support services and appropriately resourced teaching teams which include TAs, tutors, learning designers and learning technologists.

j. UCT aims to support staff to provide flexible ways of teaching using digital technologies to provide continuity of educational provision during times of crisis and uncertainty.

5. Digital and online education governance

This policy covers the continuum of digital education possibilities pertaining to formal courses, formal qualifications and continuing education.

All use of digital education is included because the linkages between these need to be made explicit and because it is anticipated that there will be greater articulation between credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses in future.

The responsibility for oversight of digital education at UCT lies with the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee and its relevant sub-committees, and the Senate Academic Planning and Development Committee.

The Online Education Sub-Committee will supervise the execution of this policy, ensure UCT's digital education meets national standards, and collaborate with other committees for the improvement of digital education and policy updates.

Academic accountability will be in line with the standard governance processes in the Institution, including Faculty Boards, the University's accreditation structures, and Senate.

6. Roles and Responsibilities

Digitally enabled education brings with it a concomitant development and reshaping of roles and responsibilities of staff and students in the academic project.

The success of the use of blended learning methodologies will hinge on:

a. Infrastructure that supports and capacitates teaching staff, and provides insights about teaching and learning practice and student performance

b. Informed governance structures that can interrogate programme design and feasibility of technologies incorporated into a teaching and learning strategy

c. Staff who are capacitated to engage in appropriate and relevant practices

d. Students who are able to engage in a digital learning environment

The roles and responsibilities of:

Academic staff (including teachers, convenors and heads of department) and academic administrative staff at faculty and departmental levels:

e. Implementing and monitoring the adoption of quality inclusive blended learning practices in line with the institutional principles of digitally enabled education

f. Consulting with professional departments including CILT and IPD for learning and programme design support services and support on national and institutional policy and guidance on digital education

g. Familiarising themselves with and taking advantage of staff development opportunities, including understanding the educational risks and opportunities of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

h. Engaging in evaluation of learning and teaching with a view to improvement

Students:

i. Taking responsibility for their own learning by actively participating and reaching out for support if needed. Ensuring their personal online conduct is respectful to peers and teachers

j. Taking up opportunities for learning digital literacies, and for gaining confidence in using digital platforms and tools

k. Adhering to the principles of academic integrity, including learning the ethical use of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence tools to avoid plagiarism

l. Providing feedback about their online learning experiences and improvements to the digital learning environment for the future

Professional support departments related to the provision of digital education:

m. Providing appropriate learning design and production services for courses and programmes, and where appropriate on a cost recovery basis.

n. Supporting staff to develop resilient course designs and enhance flexibility of courses.

o. Providing technical support and consultations for use and integration of learning technologies and tools, including advising on the ethical and appropriate use of artificial intelligence.

p. Designing and offering relevant capacity and professional development programmes for staff and students.

q. Interpreting and mediating relevant national and institutional policy and guidelines for the development of courses and programmes.

r. Collecting and analysing data (including learning analytics) about course modes of provision, teaching and learning practice and student results.

7. Capacity provision for digital and online education

The expansion of digitally enabled education requires the requisite capacity and expertise within the university.

a. UCT maintains core in-house digital education expertise through capacity in CILT in CHED and initiatives such as DASS.

b. The university aims to enhance its digital capabilities for teaching within existing structures, offering training opportunities to staff and tutors.

c. Funding support for developing blended and online courses should be based on financial sustainability.

d. All teaching, assessment and learning support roles for formal credit bearing courses requiring subject knowledge must be filled by staff directly employed by UCT. For non-credit bearing short courses the terms of the Continuing Education policy (forthcoming) apply.

e. UCT should utilise a variety of digital education suppliers based on educational needs across faculties and in line with institutional strategy. The Online Education Sub-Committee provides appointment criteria and builds capacity for project management oversight.

8. Technology

a. UCT expects educational technology decisions to be made at a level appropriate to the scope and impact of the choices. Decisions with limited scope may be made at the course, programme or Faculty level, while major decisions with possible long-term university-wide impact must be agreed at university level.

b. The requirements of specific learning and teaching situations should drive the selection of appropriate technology, which should be fit for purpose, compatible with the UCT ICT architecture and not duplicate solutions already in place.

c. The university encourages innovation and flexibility but may adopt shared solutions ("core services") like learning management systems and academic integrity tools for efficiency, which in some cases may limit choices for individual Faculties or Departments.

d. UCT's digitally enabled education requires technology solutions that support an end-to-end student experience.

e. The determination of which educational technology services are core systems, and exceptions from the policy, should be made by the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee in consultation with the Director: CILT and ED: ICTS and UICTC, following recommendations from the Online Education Sub-Committee. The policy recognises the need for classroom technology and physical space design that supports different models of learning.

Departures from this provision of the policy should be of limited scope and duration and reviewed every 2 years.

Revision and Consultation History

Date	Notes
22 May 2017	Draft by Amanda Barratt, Laura Czerniewicz, Jeff Jawitz, Stephen Marquard and Alison Meadows (condensed from the *Online Education at UCT Position Paper*)
30 May 2017	Approved at the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee
3 July 2017	Approved at Senate Executive Committee
15 September 2017	Approved at Senate; to be published in a Principal's Circular
September 2017	Published in Principal's Circular September 2017
February - March 2023	Revisions by Amanda Barratt, Sukaina Walji and Janet Small
March - May 2023	Online Education Sub Committee consultation
June 2023	Senate Teaching and Learning Committee consultation
August - October 2023	Online Education Sub Committee and Senate Teaching and Learning Committee consultation
January 2024	UCT SRC undergraduate and postgraduate reps consultation
February - May 2024	Faculty consultations: • Science Teaching and Learning Committee • Humanities Faculty Board • CHED Teaching and Learning Committee • Commerce Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Committee • EBE Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Committee • Law Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Committee • Health Sciences Teaching and Learning Committee
June 2024	Revisions by Amanda Barratt, Stephen Marquard, Janet Small and Sukaina Walji
July 2024	Approved by Senate Teaching and Learning committee via circular
August 2024	SEC consultation and approval
August 2024	Approval by Senate

Glossary

The following section briefly defines concepts that are relevant for programme design in general and in the context of digitally mediated education:

Asynchronous teaching refers to a learning environment where students and lecturers/tutors do not have to be online or studying together at the same time

Blended learning is an approach to education that thoughtfully considers the integration of in person and online modes of teaching and learning. Choices about using technology are not independent of the other educational considerations, such as students' context, learning purposes, institutional values and teaching methods. Read more about blended learning.

A **course** is defined as an instructional credit-bearing component attached to a qualification registered on the National Qualifications Framework. All courses offered at UCT are identified by a unique course code that also indicates the home academic department.

A **credit** is a measure of volume of learning required for a qualification or part-qualification whereby one (1) credit is equated to ten (10) notional hours of learning.

Hyflex enables one single learning event to have in-person students alongside remote students who would participate through livestream video conferencing. This requires technology set up in the classroom and students who connect remotely to have a stable connection. The concept is founded on parity of participation for both online and in person students. Read more about Hyflex.

The **mode** of a course or programme describes the dominant mix of methods of delivering, interacting, and mediating the curriculum.

Contact mode: Interaction with institutional teachers or institutional supervisors, through lectures, tutorials, seminars, practicals, supervision, or other forms of required work, and which occurs at the institution's premises or a site of the institution. Contact is traditionally associated with instruction in close proximity but it has expanded to include virtual, real time, high touch engagement. The perception of contact has also assumed that such provision engages with students successfully by virtue of the fact that the student and teacher are in close proximity. Note that while the perception has expanded, for subsidy purposes the traditional notion stands.

Digital mediation is one of the aspects to consider in blended learning design - the extent to which online tools are used to mediate the learning. It might be as simple as having a course site to supplement face-to-face teaching or offering a course entirely online through a digital learning platform and video conferencing media. In the middle

of the spectrum, would be a 'hybrid' approach by deliberately prescribing various in person teaching sessions and online learning tasks.

Distance education is concerned with a set of teaching and learning strategies (or educational methods) that can be used to overcome spatial and/or temporal separation between educators and students. Distance education has traditionally been associated with independent self-study.

Distance mode is defined as interaction with institutional teachers or institutional supervisors undertaken through "distance education" techniques (e.g. through the use of correspondence, telematics, or the internet). It avoids the need for students to discover the curriculum by attending classes frequently and for long periods.

Geographic proximity is a key consideration when designing learning - whether the students and lecturers are together in the same physical location or living in different physical locations ('remote or distance'). There are increasing variants on the on-campus vs distance learning dichotomy, including hyflex (which allows those at a distance to join an in-person event through live streaming link ups).

Notional hours refers to the estimated learning time that it would take an "average learner" to meet the defined learning outcomes of a course or programme. This includes all learning activities, including a consideration of contact hours, self-study and assessment. Given UCT's commitment to the principles of Universal Design for Learning which emphasize student diversity, notional hours are a rough guide used to estimate student workload.

Online education is the use of educational technologies to mediate the curriculum and can refer to offerings where learning activities take place fully online as well as the use of blended or mixed methodologies.

A **programme** is a purposeful and structured set of core and elective learning components that leads to a qualification.

A **qualification** is the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement awarded by a higher education institution. All qualifications are approved by the Department of Higher Education for inclusion in the institution's Programme and Qualification Mix (PQM), accredited by the Council on Higher Education and registered on the National Qualifications Framework.

Resilience in education means the capacity to recover from disruption and maintain academic continuity as well as a dynamic capability[5] to continually adapt to changing

[5] Borazon, E. and Chuang, H. (2023) Resilience in educational system: A systematic review and directions for future research, International Journal of Educational Development, Volume 99, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102761.

circumstances. Resilient teaching and learning is centred around the adoption of flexible learning pedagogies[6]. Proactive strategies such as a well organised course site, digital learning materials, an inclusive virtual community and flexible teaching approaches enabling students and teachers to change their modes of engagement from in-person to online if required. Such preparation can have dual value for short-term changes such as illnesses or sabbaticals, as well as for larger unplanned disruptions.

A **short learning programme, short course, or continuing education course** is a course offered for a short duration, outside of formal, credit-bearing, structured undergraduate and postgraduate education.

Synchronous digital / online learning and teaching includes virtual lectures, tutorials, presentations using tools such as MS Teams or Zoom. When a teaching and learning event includes both in-person and online participants simultaneously it is known as hyflex. Synchronous learning activities, whether online, in-person or hyflex that are staff-led can be considered 'contact'.

Temporal immediacy is another dimension that lecturers and students can adjust when creating the learning environment. Traditional university education had synchronous lectures / practicals / tutorials and asynchronous self-study time. But these two modes (synchronous and asynchronous) are no longer so distinct since recorded lectures have become ubiquitous in recent years which has separated the delivery of the lecture (synchronous) from the consumption of the lecture (now asynchronous).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)[7] is an educational approach which draws on neuroscience research to advocate for the design of learning to accommodate the widest range of students' needs and abilities. This focuses on developing a flexible learning environment in which information is presented in multiple formats, students are offered a variety of ways of actively engaging in learning and provided with multiple options to demonstrate their learning.

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[6] Dohaney, J., de Róiste, M., Salmon, R. and Sutherland, K. (2020) Benefits, barriers, and incentives for improved resilience to disruption in university teaching, International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction,50, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2020.101691.

[7] CAST https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl