

The Rhodes University Digital Education Policy

Policy Volume	Academic Teaching & Learning	
Policy Chapter	Teaching and Learning Policies	
Responsible Committee/Unit/Division/Faculty	Teaching and Learning Committee	
Responsible Chairperson/Director/Manager	DVC: Academic and Student Affairs	
Dates of First and Subsequent Council Approvals	2019	
Policy Approval Pathways (e.g. committee, Senex, Senate, Council)	Teaching & Learning Committee → Faculty Boards → Senex → Senate → Council	
Revision History: Approved Reviews	1st revision 2024	
Review Cycle (e.g. every 2/5/7 years etc)	Every 3 years	
Next Review Date	2027	

1. POLICY PARTICULARS

1.1. Policy Title	The Rhodes University Digital Education Policy			
1.2. Policy Statement	This policy guides the processes and procedures related to the design and quality assurance of blended learning (undergraduate and postgraduate level) and fully online provision of courses offered by Rhodes University.			
1.3. Reason for Policy	Rhodes University is a residential, contact and research-intensive institution located a major urban area. While the dominant mode of provision is contact learning (face-to-Rhodes University is moving towards enhanced blended learning approaches (undergrand postgraduate level) and fully online provision in selected programmes/qualification			
	short courses. The 2023-2028 IDP notes that digital technology will assume a more central			
	role in complementing face-to-face teaching and learning.			
	The Institutional Development Plan 2023 – 2028 notes that the University plans to grow and meet its enrolment targets by embracing different modes of provision. Growth at the postgraduate level is a particular focus. The IDP states that blended learning will serve as the primary mode of, and approach to, teaching and learning at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study. Fully online provision is envisioned to leverage technology to expand students' access and the reach of the University, increase student enrolment numbers especially at the postgraduate level and generate income from targeted online short courses for continued professional development and skills development.			
	The purpose of this policy is to guide the delivery of a range of digital education options at Rhodes University, from blended learning for on-campus undergraduate and postgraduate students to fully online approaches for selected programmes and short courses. It encompasses credit-bearing courses, programmes and degrees and non-credit-bearing courses. The Policy aims to ensure that online delivery is quality-assured, aligned to the same exit requirements as in-person offerings, and uses appropriate technologies, curriculum design methodologies and assessment strategies.			
1.4. Policy Objective/s	The policy aims to ensure that: - the University's offerings are aligned with national standards and quality assurance criteria for the different modes of provision, including blended and online. - the University provides high-quality, blended and online programmes and courses, aligned with the same policies as its in-person offerings. - the Policy on Curriculum Development and Review sets out the principles for curriculum development for all courses/programmes offered by the Institution. All programmes (irrespective of mode of provision) will need to draw on these principles. One principle involves the need for 'alignment' whereby all elements of the programme (for example, purpose, learning outcomes, associated assessment criteria, learning materials, pedagogical approaches, and assessment tasks) are congruent and support students' attainment of learning outcomes. Assessment needs to be aligned with the Rhodes University Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning. Online provision should be evaluated in line with the principles contained in the Policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Course Design. - the University provides ongoing support to both students and lecturers undertaking digital education. - University staff have adequate professional development opportunities, infrastructure and support to design and deliver programmes and courses, from on-campus blended provision to fully online. The objectives outlined in the 2023-2028 IDP include developing and strengthening academic staff's digital pedagogical capability and capacity to design and implement blended and online teaching and learning.			

1.5. People affected by this Policy	All teaching staff All students Centre for Higher Education Research Teaching and Learning (CHERTL) Institutional Research, Planning & Quality Promotion Division (IRPQP) Academic Programmes and Curriculum Quality Committee (APCQC) Information and Technology Services Division (I&TS) Centre for Postgraduate Studies Division of Student Services and Development
1.6. Who should read this Policy	All teaching staff All students
1.7. Implementers of this Policy	Deans, HoDs, all teaching members of the academic staff, CHERTL, I&TS and IRPQP, People & Culture, Registrar, DVC: A & SA, DVC: RISP
1.8. Website address/link for this Policy	https://www.ru.ac.za/institutionalplanningunit/policies/policiesa-z/

2. RELATED DOCUMENTS FORMS AND TOOLS

Relevant	Legislation	
	9	

Rhodes University Statute

Related Policies

The Rhodes University Digital Education Policy needs to be read in conjunction with the following:

Rhodes University Teaching and Learning Policy Volume (2019)

The Rhodes University Policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses (2014)

Rhodes University Admissions Policy (2010)

The Recognition of Prior Learning Policy (2020)

The Rhodes University Policy on Short Courses (2024)

Rhodes University Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning (2024)

Rhodes University Policy on Curriculum Development and Review (2024)

Rhodes University Policy on External Examining for Exit Level Undergraduate Courses, Honours, and Coursework Components of Postgraduate Degrees (2023)

Common Faculty Policy and Procedures on Plagiarism (2021)

Rhodes University Quality Promotion Framework for Teaching & Learning

Rhodes University Language Policy (2019)

Acceptable Use Policy

ICT Governance Policy and all associated guidelines and Protocols

Access to ICT Accounts & Information Policy

Web Policy

Rhodes University Privacy Policy

Collection Development Policy (2011)

Library Display Policy (2000)

Related Plans and Protocols

Rhodes University Institutional Development Plan 2023 – 2028

Rhodes University Blended Learning Guide (2024)

Educational Technology Strategy (2024)

Brief Guide to the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses (2015)

Brief Guide for Designing a Curriculum and Constructing a Course Document (2018)

Process Flowchart for Applications for New Programmes

Forms and Tools

Policy Template

3. POLICY DEFINITIONS

No	TERM	DEFINITION			
3.1.	Blended Learning	Refers to the provision of structured learning opportunities using a combination of contact, distance, and/or ICT supported opportunities to suit different purposes, audiences, and contexts (DHET, 2014). Blended learning is not a mode of provision, it is a strategy or approach. Blended learning involves purposefully integrating technology-mediated activities to support face-to-face learning, teaching and assessment. It can involve different approaches, such as the flipped classroom. Thus, the term blended learning implies that the dominant mode of learning is enhanced with supplemented learning which may be enabled by technology, contact or tools.			
		Since contact and distance programmes are funded differently, the definitions of these modes of delivery not only have pedagogical implications but also financial implications. The DHET stipulates that for contact qualifications, the following should be adhered to:			
		Summary of contact time required for contact-based modules			
		 Undergraduate courses (NQF Levels 5 – 6): more than 30% of the stated Notional Learning hours must be spent in staff-led, face-to-face, campus-based, structured learning activities. 			
		 Undergraduate courses (NQF Level 7): more than 25% of the stated Notional Learning hours must be spent in staff-led, face-to-face, campus-based, structured learning activities 			
		 Higher undergraduate courses (NQF level 8): more than 25% of the stated Notional Learning hours must be spent in staff-led, face-to-face, campus-based, structured learning activities. This includes professional degrees that are 4-year undergraduate degrees at NQF level 8, not classified as Honours degrees and pre-masters postgraduate diplomas. 			
		 Initial postgraduate courses (NQF Level 8): more than 25% of the stated Notional Learning hours must be spent in staff-led, face-to-face, campus-based, structured learning activities. 			
3.2.	Contact mode or face-to-face provision	Refers to courses involving face-to-face or personal interaction with institutional teachers or supervisors, through lectures, tutorials, seminars, practicals, supervision, or other forms of required work, which occurs at the institution's premises or at a site of delivery of the institution (CHE, 2022). All teaching, learning and assessment are facilitated and designed for face-to-face interaction on campus and generally follow a conventional timetable. This is also known as in-person, face-to-face or on-site teaching as the educator and students are in the same physical space at the same time. Contact mode includes all learning environments and activities such as lectures, seminars, fieldwork, laboratories, and tutorials.			
3.3.	Course	Refers to one of the following: a credit-bearing component attached to a qualification; or a non-credit-bearing offering used for the purpose of continuing education and professional development. Accredited courses are identified by a course code in the University handbook. Courses can be			

		broken down into smaller modules or units addressing specific topics or taught by different individuals.
3.4.	Digital Education	Refers to the continuum of digital education provision at Rhodes University, from blended learning for on-campus Rhodes University undergraduate and/or postgraduate students to fully online approaches for selected programmes and short courses. Digital education includes curriculum design and online assessment.
3.5.	Distance Education (DE)/ Learning	The DHET defines DE as the interaction with institutional teachers or supervisors which is undertaken through distance education techniques such as correspondence, telematics, learning support centres or the internet. The DE Policy acknowledges the continua of pedagogy and modes and does not consider online as essential to distance education (DHET, 2014). DE is based primarily on a set of teaching and learning strategies (or educational methods) that can be used to overcome spatial and/or transactional distance between educators and students. It avoids the need for students to discover the curriculum by attending classes frequently and for long periods. Rather, it aims to create a quality learning environment using an appropriate combination of different media, tutorial support, peer group discussion, and practical sessions. Institutions opting for distance education as a mode of delivery need to establish systems and processes for decentralised distribution of learning resources, communications, student and learning support, as well as formative and summative assessment. The term' distance education' as a mode of provision therefore refers to provision in which students spend 30% or less of the stated Notional Learning hours in undergraduate courses at NQF Levels 5 and 6, and 25% or less in courses at NQF Level 7 and initial post-graduate courses at NQF Level 8, in staff-led, face-to-face, campus-based structured learning activities (DHET, 2014).
3.6.	Learning Management System (LMS)	Refers to a platform or software that assists the delivery of content online for learning purposes and is therefore used to organise and distribute learning materials, assignments, and assessments; track and calculate grades; and facilitate communication among students and teachers. An LMS integrates interactive learning environments and administration and facilitates customised online instructional materials. At Rhodes University, the institutionally supported LMS is RUconnected which is browser-based and has associated mobile applications for both Android and iOS.
3.7.	Mode of provision	A mode of provision refers to the mode through which a student interacts with institutional lecturers, supervisors, peers and/or study material. It is the mode that determines the manner through which teaching and learning happen (Czerniewicz, 2022)¹. Refers to the dominant mix of methods by which institutions mediate their curricula. In a single-mode institution, all courses and programmes are mediated either by distance or contact-based methodologies; in a dual-mode institution courses and programmes may be mediated by either distance- or contact-based methods and often equivalent forms of the same course or programme may be offered in either mode; in a mixed mode institution, all courses and programmes involve a mix of methods associated traditionally with distance- and contact-based provision with the blend of methods varying from context to context. However, individual programmes will be accredited either as contact or distance provision (DHET, 2014).
3.8.	Online Education	Refers to a mode of instruction in which students receive course materials and interact with instructors and peers in a digitally mediated context or LMS, typically via the Internet. All learning, teaching and assessment are designed for and happen fully online. Activities are intentionally designed for online and offered synchronously (at the same time) and/or asynchronously (in own time). Online learning may include limited non-compulsory contact time for particular activities (such as study groups) and/or venue-based final assessment.
3.9.	Qualification	Refers to the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement awarded by a higher education institution.

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¹ Czerniewicz, L. (2022). *Mapping provision in HE: the present and the possible*. Report for the New Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) Project of the South African Department of Higher Education and Training.

4. PRINCIPLES GOVERNING THIS POLICY

OVERVIEW

Digital Education expands access to knowledge and values and enables innovative pedagogic approaches. Quality curricula, teaching and learning, assessment and evaluation practices that enable meaningful learning experiences must be maintained across all modes of provision.

Rhodes University strives to carry out the following, as far as is reasonably practicable:

- 4.1. Ensure that online provision complements face-to-face teaching in a coherent fashion so that the best aspects of both modalities are drawn upon, and risks are mitigated and managed within the framework of the overall programme.
- 4.2. Ensure that all programmes and courses offered intending to make use of various forms of modes of provision other than which they are already accredited for are scrutinised and approved by academic governance structures.
- 4.3. Ensure that technical and pedagogic support is available for staff wanting to design and teach courses/programmes across modes of provision.
- 4.4. Ensure that where a qualification can be achieved through either the fully online modality or through contact-based provision, the DHET approval process for the mode of provision has been completed and is active on the PQM.
- 4.5. Undergraduate studies will remain on-campus, face-to-face supported by blended learning, apart from where national concessions have been granted by accrediting bodies such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE) as a response to emergencies (eq. COVID-19).

5. DIRECTIVES FOR IMPLEMENTING THIS POLICY

5.1. DELIVERY OF DIGITAL EDUCATION

- 5.1.1. The design and assessment of a programme, including blended learning and online offerings, will follow the principles laid out in the Rhodes University Policy on Curriculum Design and Review.
- 5.1.2. Online and blended learning will be considered as integral to the design of the programme. The same academic standards for quality and other requirements for traditional courses apply to courses that are offered using blended learning and fully online.
- 5.1.3. Support for programme design will be available from the Educational Technology specialists located in the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL).
- 5.1.4. CHERTL will provide technical and pedagogic support for courses hosted on institutionally supported platforms. Support will not extend to courses whose design has been outsourced to private providers or that are offered on platforms not normally supported by the EdTech team or the I&TS.
- 5.1.5. Permission to offer a new fully online programme (or when an existing programme changes from contact-based to fully online, requiring a new accreditation) will be sought via the Faculty Boards, APCQC, the IPC Size and Shape, Institutional Planning Committee, Senex, Senate and Council and will be subject to scrutiny regarding the availability of resources, including information and communication technologies. A programme will only be submitted for accreditation once approval has been obtained via these structures. Furthermore, application for DHET PQM approval, CHE accreditation and SAQA registration must be successfully processed before offering such new online programmes.
- 5.1.6. No special permission is required to change the provision of an existing course/programme/short course from contact mode to blended learning, as this entails a shift in approach rather than a change in the mode of provision. However, should more than 25% of an undergraduate course need to be offered fully online, it needs to be discussed with the HOD or line manager and a written request needs to be made. Only upon receiving an approval letter can the change in mode be offered. It is important to ensure that online components of all courses are designed, facilitated and assessed in an educationally sound manner. Support for such course/programme design will be provided by CHERTL.
- 5.1.7. The development of digital course materials will be guided by pedagogically-informed learning design principles. Materials for new fully online courses and programmes will be reviewed by CHERTL to ensure that they are of a high quality.
- 5.1.8. Course offerings require entry into the calendar and marketing before it can be offered.
- 5.1.9. Correspondence and communication between academics/tutors and students should be via institutionally supported platforms i.e. Rhodes University email and RUconnected.

5.2. EXPECTATIONS ON THE UNIVERSITY, ITS STAFF, AND STUDENTS

Learning results from a partnership between staff across the University and students. There is a shared set of expectations between staff and students, and the following apply specifically in relation to digital education:

5.2.1 Departments/Institutes/Divisions offering online courses/programmes shall ensure that students are provided with:

- structured opportunities to learn to use the various online course delivery applications/tools prior to the official commencement of a course or programme;
- study materials for a course or programme that meets the expectations of Rhodes University with respect to the quality of teaching and learning;
- an appropriate contingency plan, which would come into operation in the event of failure of the designed mode of delivery;
- from the outset of the student's study, at least one identified contact person, either local or remote through email, telephone and post, who can give constructive feedback on academic performance:
- information about when and how they may contact staff, a clear schedule for the delivery of their study materials and for assessment of their work;
- regular opportunities for communication and engagement with teaching staff;
- a clear and realistic explanation of the expectations placed upon them for the study of the programme or module, and for the nature and extent of autonomous, collaborative and supported aspects of learning;
- details of the minimum technical requirements for the computer facilities required to access the online materials or engage in online course-related activities;
- appropriate opportunities to give formal feedback on their experience of the programme;
- access to all relevant academic policies, protocols and guidelines including the Rhodes University Digital Education Policy.

5.2.2. Faculties shall ensure that:

- courses are offered by members of the teaching staff who have appropriate skills, and opportunities to receive appropriate training, development and support;
- all aspects of assessment are provided in line with the institutional Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning.

5.2.3. Students shall ensure that:

- they have regular and reliable access to the internet with appropriate firewall protection and a computer that meets the minimum technical requirements set by the programme;
- they engage with LMS (i.e. RUconnected) training opportunities and resources offered by CHERTL;
- when not in attendance as an on-campus student, they make their own arrangements for IT support to resolve technical
 failures relating to their internet service provider, firewall protection and their computer hardware and software as the
 University can only answer queries or provide support for University-owned equipment; or via the Student helpdesk based
 in the Library;
- when not in attendance they seek support when necessary, such as that normally provided by their lecturers and units such as Student Services and Development (DSSD); such support will be provided wherever possible and practicable;
- they understand the basic terms and descriptions used in computing so that they can follow instructions about how to use their computer to study and communicate;
- they engage with the learning materials and mode of delivery;
- they conform to the schedule for the programme delivery and assessment, monitor the receipt of materials and alert the University if materials cannot be accessed;
- they take responsibility for developing their IT skills, where appropriate;
- they regularly check their email accounts to which essential information may be sent by the University.

5.2.4. The Information and Technologies Services Division shall ensure that:

- institutionally supported systems have the capabilities for the design of educationally sound online courses and programmes;
- they resolve technical failures relating to institutional internet provision and firewall protection;
- delivery of systems for the blended and online provision of courses/programmes are secure, reliable, fit for purpose, and have an appropriate availability and life expectancy;
- a help-desk facility is available to all students, whether they live and learn on-campus or conduct a large part of their studies while off-campus.

5.2.5. CHERTL will ensure that:

- they provide professional development opportunities for online and blended provision, including consultation about course design, facilitation, assessment and the evaluation of teaching and courses;
- they provide opportunities for consultation and advice regarding the development and use of specialised digital materials and other media appropriate to the different modes of provision;
- Educational Technologies specialists provide technical assistance to lecturers and students who make use of
 institutionally funded and supported educational platforms and tools. This includes LMS training opportunities and
 resources for staff and students.
- Technologies in use are fit for purpose and there is a suitable chain of support from either I&TS, CHERTL or a third party vendor.

5.2.6. The Library will ensure that:

- academic materials are accessible by all authorised students through the web;
- simultaneous access to the same electronic documents is available when necessary;
- access to content in different formats (text, audio, video, animation) as required for teaching and learning is available.

5.3. ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

- 5.3.1. Assessment is integral to teaching and learning and has the capacity, not only to measure learning but also to develop learning. It is therefore important that the assessments for blended learning and online courses/programmes are well planned. It is imperative that online assessments and feedback practices are conducted in principled ways that are in line with the Rhodes University Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning. Course designers and teaching staff should consider ways in which educational technologies can be used to design formative assessment tasks that contribute to students' development of disciplinary knowledge and summative assessments.
- 5.3.2. Strategies for authentication of student identities (such as personal logins on RUconnected) for assessment purposes should always be in place and enhanced when necessary. Oral assessments (via MS Teams, Zoom or any other emerging technology) with internal and external examiners should be arranged where feasible or necessary as a way of authenticating student identities and to complement written submission/s.

6. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY
ROLE 1 Heads of Departments / Directors of Institutes	Responsible for gaining permission from all relevant university structures and committees, Faculty Boards, APCQC, the IPC, Senex, Senate and Council before a programme is submitted for accreditation.
ROLE 2 Course Coordinators	Responsible for following the principles outlined in the Rhodes University Curriculum Development and Review Policy as they design programmes incorporating blended learning and/or online provision. They are also responsible for ensuring that the assessment plans of programmes are in line with the principles of the Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning and that courses are reviewed on a regular basis. As per the Rhodes University Curriculum Development and Review Policy, curricula should be reviewed according to the timeframe set out in the Rhodes University Quality Promotions Framework.
ROLE 3 Lecturers and tutors	Responsible for the design, assessment and evaluation of courses. Lecturers are responsible for facilitating courses and working with tutors to provide assistance to registered students.
ROLE 4 CHERTL	Responsible for providing professional development opportunities, support for teaching and learning and the quality assurance of curricula across levels of study and modes of provision. CHERTL can advise and offer consultation to assist lecturers in making appropriate choices in relation to blended learning and/or online course design, facilitation, materials development and online assessment. The design of online assessments through the use of institutionally supported tools is required to ensure that student identities are verifiable and that their online submissions are their own work. Pedagogic support includes assessment practices that are responsive to an evolving digital landscape (i.e. GenAl).

	CHERTL shall ensure that all new technologies are assessed for cyber risk and approved with I&TS support or where there is risk, this is mitigated or documented for the institutional risk repository.	
ROLE 5	The Information and Technologies Services Division shall ensure that:	
I & TS Division	 institutionally supported systems have the capabilities to support the design of educationally sound online courses and programmes; 	
	 institutionally supported systems are reviewed for relevance and modernised regularly 	
	 students have regular and reliable access to the internet with appropriate firewall protection when on campus; 	
	 students have authenticated roles granting access to relevant systems associated with the programme for which they are registered; 	
	 they resolve technical failures relating to the institutional Internet Service Provider and firewall protection on campus; 	
	 the tools and technology used in centralised teaching venues are up to date and functional in line with the Lecture Venue standards and have the capabilities to deliver blended learning; 	
	 the tools and technologies used for remote sessions are operational and accessible; 	
	 a student help-desk facility is available to both face-to-face and fully online students via the team of student support technicians and a ticketing system; 	
	 in conjunction with the Education Technology specialists who will facilitate the adoption of strategy and training in the use of tools, ensure that the latest technology is researched and supported in line with established protocols, in particular regarding cyber security and risk. 	
ROLE 6	Responsible for	
IRPQP	 providing support for internal and external applications for accreditation of programmes and the quality assurance of courses and programmes; 	
	 ensuring the PQM is accurate and up to date with approved programmes; 	
	 reviewing the mode of provision of programmes and courses and the need for PQM/CHE approval when necessary. 	
ROLE 7 APCQC	Responsible for approving new programmes and curricula changes to existing courses and programmes.	
ROLE 8 People & Culture	Responsible for facilitating the appointment and employment of approved positions as and when required, working with each Division associated with the delivery of Digital Education.	

7. CONTACTS

Area of Concern	Division/Faculty/Department	Telephone	Email
Policy statements, objective and directive	DVC: Academic & Student Affairs	8149	dvc.academic@ru.ac.za
Quality assurance concerns	Director: IRPQP	8060	R.Nnadozie@ru.ac.za
Digital education course design and support	CHERTL	8171	Chertl-admin@ru.ac.za
IT-related concerns	Director: I&TS	7456	n.ripley@ru.ac.za

8. POLICY REVIEW PROCEDURE

8.1. Any changes to this policy may be recommended to the Teaching and Learning Committee. This policy and any subsequent amendments will be published and distributed to all concerned within the University.

- 8.2. Communication of the review process will be via the Teaching Learning Committee, Faculty boards, consultation with relevant stakeholders (e.g. library committee, I&TS), Senex, Senate and Council.
- 8.3. If revisions are recommended and approved, a copy of the revised policy is widely distributed to all Heads of Departments by the Committee Secretariat, and the web version is replaced by the new policy.

9. POLICY CONTEXT: RELEVANT DOCUMENTS CITED/CONSULTED/ADOPTED

DHET's Position on Online Programme and Course Offerings (2017)

DHET Draft Policy Framework for the Provision of Open Learning and Distance Education in South African Post-school Education and Training (2017)

DHET Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Postschool System (2014)

DHET White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013)

DHET Draft Policy Framework for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities (2012)

Council for Higher Education (CHE). Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for HE in South Africa (2021)

Council for Higher Education (CHE). Distance Higher Education Programmes in a Digital Era: Good Practice Guide (2014)

UCT Vision 2030 Digitally Enabled Education (2021)

UCT Online Education Policy (2017, 2024)

An overview of the modes of provision at Stellenbosch University (2022)

LIST OF APPENDICES

Rhodes University Blended Learning Guide 2024 https://bit.ly/RUblended

Student Guidelines for the Use of ChatGPT and other Generative Artificial Intelligence tools and services https://bit.ly/3HW4xPr

Learning and Teaching with AI tools https://bit.ly/3UBO9eD

Guidelines for Assessment in the time of AI https://bit.ly/3UEIT9U

Reimagining Assessment Practices at Rhodes University