QCTO

Quality Council for Trades & Occupations

Guidelines for the standards of eLearning for Registered Qualifications on the OQSF

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List of Acronyms

ADEA	-	Association for the Development of Education in Africa
CHE	-	Council on Higher Education
CHEA	-	Council for Higher Education Accreditation
ICTs	-	Information and Communication Technologies
LMS	-	Learner Management System
NQF	-	National Qualifications Framework
ODL	-	Open Distance Learning
OER	-	Open Education Resources
OQSF	-	Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework
QCTO	-	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
SAIDE	-	South African Institute for Distance Education
SDP	-	Skills Development Provider
SETA	-	Sector Education and Training Authority

Glossary of terms

Accreditation	The certification, usually for a particular period, of a person, a body or an institution as having the capacity to fulfil a particular function in the quality assurance system set up by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO).
.Assessment	The process of collecting evidence of learner's work to measure and make judgements about the competence or non-competence of specified National Qualifications Framework (NQF) occupational standards or qualifications and part qualifications.
E-Assessment	Any type of assessment that involves an electronic component and incorporates one or more of e-testing, e-portfolios and e-marking.
E-Learning	Various forms of electronic learning where technology is used to deliver part, or all of a course whether it is within a school or in a distance learning environment.

Introduction

The advent of educational technologies has brought about profound change in how education is delivered internationally. Increasingly, educational institutions at all levels are changing what they teach and how they teach in a digital era. One of the advantages of using technology is that it has great opportunity to expand access, it increases openness and flexibility thereby making it possible to attract and retain a broader range of learners. Adoption of technology for teaching and learning also entails developing new delivery tools and resources for learning. As they do so, the business models and organizational design of universities and colleges are constantly changing (Contact North, (2017). In the United States of America, 2.85 million learners are taking all of their courses online, and a further 2.97 million are taking some, but not all, of their courses online (Contact North, 2017). In both the United States of America and Canada, blended learning for all learners is now the norm. There are few courses not making use of technology-enabled learning, whether it is access to learning materials with an LMS, using digital libraries, OERs and other resources.

The introduction of technology into classrooms around the world has not been without controversy as educators, principals and education specialists debate concerns around pedagogies and appropriate devices. In a context like South Africa where infrastructure and technological support is not widely available to all, questions around access, affordability, adequate school-based support and teacher development pose very real challenges to the dream of having all learners connected to the worldwide web. This is particularly so in the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) where workplace experience learning forms an integral part of the training process.

Audience and applicability

These guidelines apply to all QCTO accredited Assessment Centres and Skills Development Providers conducting training and assessments via the digital mode. The guidelines are applicable to the provisioning and assessment of occupational qualifications and part qualifications registered on the NQF.

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with the QCTO Policy on Accreditation of Skills Development Providers, Assessment Policy for Qualifications and Part qualifications on the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF), E-Assessment Policy and Policy on accreditation of assessment centres.

Quality Assurance of Occupational Qualifications Programmes

In terms of the NQF Act Section 27 (i), with regard to quality assurance within its sub-framework, the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) is required to:

(i) develop and implement policy for quality assurance;
(ii) ensure the integrity and credibility of quality assurance;
(iii) ensure that such quality assurance as is necessary for the sub-framework is undertaken.

In the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF), quality assurance of training provisioning is the responsibility of the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). This includes quality assurance of any distance and technology-enhanced programmes, like blended learning and eLearning.

1. General guidelines for accreditation of OQSF eLearning programmes

This document provides generic guidelines on good practice in using educational technologies for teaching and learning purposes. The guidelines are useful to Skills Development Providers in the Trades & Occupations sub-sector as well as to SETAs that ensure training in this sector. The guiding principles are underpinned by international research on how providers can harness the affordances of educational technologies to maximise benefits on the part of learners. The QCTO's mandate to ensure the setting of standards for teaching and learning that takes place for all qualifications on the OQSF includes the setting of standards for eLearning.These standards are indicated at a high level in order to make them applicable to the wide range of provision modes for the OQSF. Whilst they will be used by the QCTO to accredit qualifications, Skills Development Providers will also find them equally useful when they review their own practice. In fact, it is envisaged that these guidelines will be more valuable to Skills Development Providers as a reference document than to any other users.

2. Quality Guidelines for accreditation of eLearning programmes

The eLearning Standards defined herein will be used for accrediting qualifications offered within the OQSF. The standards merely define minimum requirements that qualifications offered via eLearning should meet; Skills Development Providers are encouraged to go beyond the minimum standards and maximise learning benefits for their learners.

3. Background and definition of terms

3.1 Distance education

Due to the variety of ways in which distance education or eLearning is used, it is increasingly becoming a very elusive concept to define, both from a theoretical as well as from a practical point of view. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) contend that due to its phenomenal expansion, distance education now refers to any educational activity in which learners are separated from

faculty and their peers, and this may include, in addition to independent learning, synchronous or asynchronous environments with a variety of instructional modes[1].

The University of Idaho's notion of distance education is that it is teaching and learning that takes place when a teacher and learners are separated by physical distance. They also argue that technology is used to bridge the instructional gap[2]

Distance education focuses on the pedagogy/andragogy, technology, and instructional systems design that aim to deliver education to learners who are not physically "on site". In distance education, learners are separated from the instructional base or teacher, either in space or time, for a significant portion of their learning.[3] As an approach, distance education does not preclude face-to-face contact; on the contrary, it provides learners with a range of support mechanisms that allow them to interact with content independently at the same time accommodating occasional face-to-face interactions. In distance education, learning does not necessarily have to take place at school or in the presence of a teacher; neither does it have to be based on a "group structured" programme. There is freedom of space and time, and there is also much learner flexibility in the learning process.

The common usage of open learning together with distance education tends to create the false impression that the two are synonymous. Although there is some overlap between the two, they refer to different things. Conceptual clarity between the two terms is important, as there is often confusion between them. In order to strike some common understanding, it is necessary to explain the two concepts in this analysis.

Open Learning is a philosophy of learning that is based on the principle of flexibility to increase access to and equity in education. An open learning philosophy implies that a provider will try to find a variety of ways to open access to credible learning opportunities to a diverse range of learners. In this context, learners are allowed to determine what they want to learn, how they want to learn, when and where they want to learn and what to do next in terms of career direction.[4]

At the heart of open learning is enhancement of educational access and achievement through the removal of all unnecessary barriers to learning. It also entails an approach to learning that is learner cantered, rather than teacher or content-centred, and geared to meet the idiosyncratic needs and preferences of individual learners. Over the years, many education stakeholders have engaged with the notion of open learning, both from a theoretical as well as from a practical point

[1] CHEA (2002) Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Education: CHEA Monograph Series 2002, Number 1, CHEA, Washington DC.
[2] University of Idaho (1985) Distance Education: An Overview http://www.uidaho.edu/eo Accessed 14 Feb 2013

[3] ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning
[4] ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (2002:19) Open and Distance Learning in Sub-Saharan Africa; A literature survey on Policy and Practice, ADEA

of view. Through this engagement, the organisations like SAIDE have come to believe that open learning is premised on the following key principles:

- Learners are provided with opportunities and capacity for lifelong learning
- Learning processes centre on the learners and contexts of learning, build on their experience and encourage active engagement leading to independent and critical thinking
- Learning provision is flexible, allowing learners to increasingly determine where, when, what and how they learn, as well as the pace at which they will learn
- Prior learning and experience is recognized wherever possible; arrangements for credit transfer and articulation between qualifications facilitate further learning
- Providers create the conditions for a fair chance of learner success through learner support, contextually appropriate resources and sound pedagogical practices.

The QCTO would also like to refer providers to the DHET's *Open Learning Policy Framework for Post-school Education and Training*[5] for details regarding how it is envisaged to operationalise the concept of open learning in the post school education and training sector in South Africa.

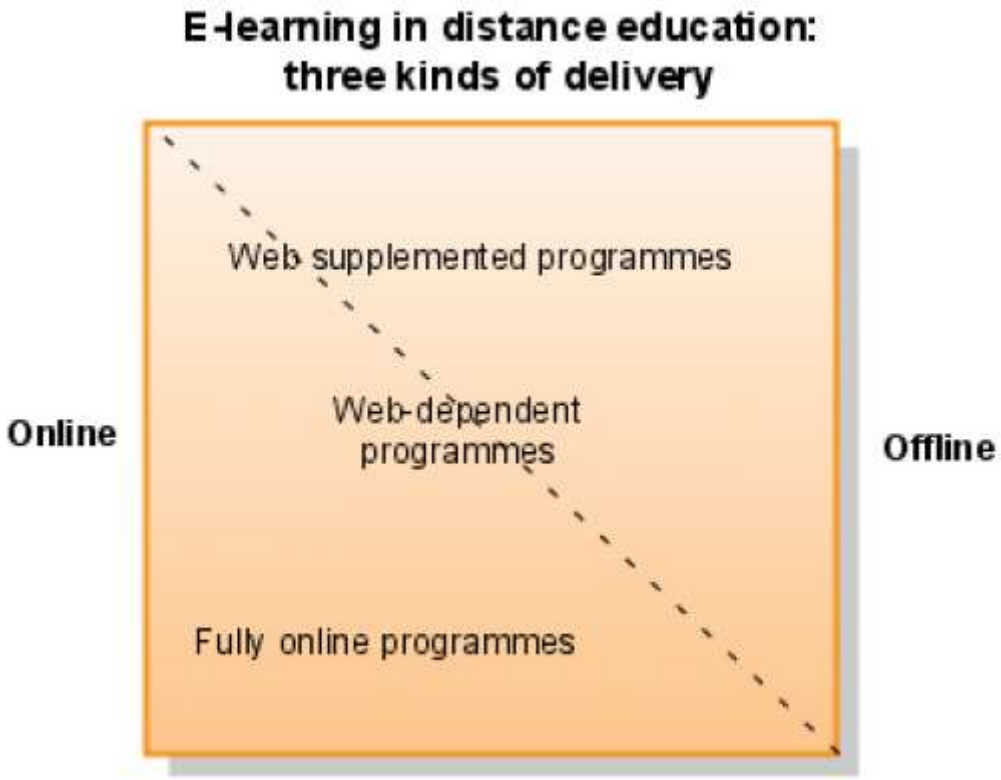
3.2 e-Learning

e-Learning is fundamentally about learning and not about technology. It refers to all forms of electronically supported learning and teaching, and therefore assumes different characters in different institutional contexts. Whatever approach an institution uses to support learners will depend, to some extent, on the type of e-learning adopted. There are three main types of provision of technology-enhanced distance education, namely Web-supplemented (WS) programmes, web-dependent programmes and fully online programmess. Use of technology in higher education spans these three forms of provision.

In web-supplemented (WS) programmes, online participation is optional for learners. Enrolled learners have the option to access information about the course and other online learning resources. This information supplements face-to-face instruction, and also print-based distance education. In **web-dependent (WD) programmes,** online participation is required for accessing course content or for communicating with staff and or other learners, or for both. Other methods are also used, such as face-to-face instruction. Web-supplemented and web-dependent

[5] Department of Higher Education and Training (20170 Open Learning Policy Framework for Post- school Education and Training, Government Printers, Pretoria.

programmes are often referred to as 'blended learning', or 'hybrid' programmes, because they include both online and offline components. In f**ully online (FO) programmes,** all interactions with staff and learners, educational content, learning activities, assessment and support services are integrated and delivered online. The diagram below shows how these different ways of delivering distance education form a continuum:



3.3 *Source: SAIDE, (2017) Supporting Distance Learners:* http://www.oerafrica.org/supporting-distance-learners/supporting-learners-blended-and-fully-online-environments*. Accessed on 12 October 2017*

3.4 Blended Learning

Blended learning refers to the provision of structured learning opportunities using a combination of contact, distance, and/or information communication technologies (ICT) - supported opportunities (modes of provision) to suit different purposes, audiences and contexts. While educational ICT can play an important role in teaching, learning, assessment, management and professional development, technology in itself supports skills development but can never supplant the importance of a teacher. Learning online still needs human teachers because the human element is the most important “technology” involved in digital and online

learning.[6] Moreover, pedagogical approaches that use ICT in education are more important than the technology itself. Educational technology is viewed as a tool to enhance teaching, learning, assessment, management and professional development. How it is used depends on human ingenuity and creativity. The benefits of using ICT in education lie in the ability of educational practitioners to use the technology appropriately in order to enhance access as well as improve the quality of learning.

4. The intersection of distance education and technology

The increasing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for teaching and learning has made it possible to engage learners that are not in the same place at the same time, i.e. to reach learners 'at a distance' and to do so in ways that allow for immediate automated and individualised feedback in a way that is not possible with a classroom-based model for large numbers of learners. This has meant that many institutions/programmes that would characterise themselves as contact/face-to-face are often moving without realising it into distance delivery. The wealth of possibilities offered by mixed-mode learning is increasingly being realised by educational institutions. Thus, due to increased use of technology the distinction between distance education and face-to-face delivery is increasingly becoming blurred. At the same time, the advent of information and communication technology and its increasing ubiquity is making it more and more feasible to interact with a course facilitator and with peer learners at a distance, both synchronously and asynchronously. Distance education providers are increasingly harnessing the affordances of this technology to enhance their teaching and learning processes. The challenge however is where, on the continuum of endless possibilities, to draw a line between what constitutes face-to-face and distance learning. Saide acknowledges the complexity at the interface of distance education and technology supported learning, and has developed a grid that serves to illustrate a number of delivery modes lying on the two continua of spatial distance on one hand and technology use on the other. Figure 1 illustrates the various delivery permutations based on the two variables.

[6] Morris, S. M. (2017) Critical Pedagogy and Learning Online. Keynote address given at the Open University on 1st November 2017,

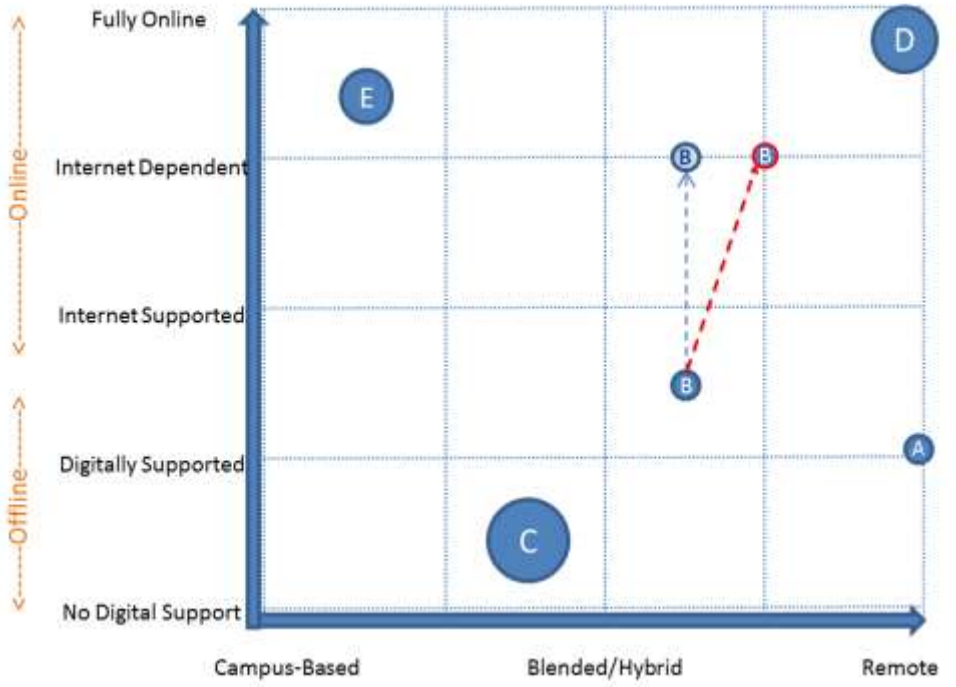


Figure 1: Possible options for technology supported learning

As the CHE Good Practice Guide explains, a particular factor that emerges as being particularly important in defining what the possibilities are in how a course is delivered is the **class size**. The size of the cohort enrolled for a course would appear to be a **major determinant of the nature and extent of the interactions possible** between lecturer-learner and learner-learner, the need for the deployment of tutors, **the level of mediation** employed by the lecturer and tutors, the level of support for the learners, the nature of the assessment, and could in fact be the **determinant for the pedagogical approach**.[7]

It would therefore be opportune to depict class size when locating a course or programme on the grid in order to indicate the extent to which the underlying aspects identified and discussed would need to be considered. In addition, if the plan is to migrate a course to a different position on the grid over time, an indication of this aspect would provide a cautionary flag to prompt examination of the practical aspects that would need to be considered to effect such a migration. The class size could be depicted on the same grid by simply **varying the relative size of the circles denoting a particular course**. For example, it can be easily seen that the group for course C, is larger than the group for course D, which is turn is larger than E[8].

[7] Council on Higher Education (CHE), (2014: 85) Distance Higher Education Programmes in Digital Era: Good Practice Guide, CHE, Pretoria.

[8] Council on Higher Education (CHE), (2014: 85) Distance Higher Education Programmes in Digital Era: Good Practice Guide, CHE, Pretoria.

5. Consolidated quality guidelines for OQSF eLearning programmes

The literature reviewed shows striking convergence in terms of the key aspects of distance education and e-learning that need to be quality assured. It also shows that at a high level, the quality issues in distance and e-learning are similar to those relevant for conventional face-to-face learning. High level quality standards therefore tend to remain the same, whether it is in face-to- face or in distance or e-learning. Whichever delivery mode is used, the fundamental principle that should guide providers is how the learning is designed. Any chosen mode of provision should be able to create an environment that facilitates effective learning. Key areas around which quality guidelines should be developed have been distilled from literature on international best practice in using technology to support distance education. The following section gives a set of consolidated guidelines that can be used by distance and technology-supported learning in the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework

5.1 Institutional Mission and Vision

eLearning Standard 1: *The Skills Development Provider (SDP) has a clear vision and mission that reflects its academic commitments, the needs of the learners and of society.*

In order to meet this standard, the following are the minimum requirements:

- The provision of online or distance learning is in keeping with the institution's mission and purposes. Institutional and program statements of vision and values inform how the online learning environment is created and supported. The institution incorporates into its online programmes methods of meeting both the goals of the institution and those of the learners;
- The recruitment and admissions processes for online learning courses and programmes appropriately target the learner populations to be served. The learners enrolled in the SDP's online courses and programmes fit the admission requirements the institution targets through these programmes. This ensures fit between the designed programme, support mechanisms and the capabilities of the learner. Sufficient information is provided to prospective learners to enable them to make informed choices.
- Institutional staff, especially programme managers can articulate how online learning is consonant with the institution's mission and goals;
- The programme promotes the learners' understanding of the specific occupation for which they are being trained.

5.2 Planning

eLearning Standard 2: *Sufficient planning of technology supported courses takes place before learners are registered. The planning process takes into account the technology available and the profile of the course target group.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- Online programmes are not introduced overnight and are informed primarily by the needs of the learners, and not the interest of technology or the convenience of the providing institution;

- The SDP's plans for developing, rolling out, and expanding online learning offerings are integrated into its regular planning and evaluation processes;

- SDP planning documents are explicit about any goals to increase enrolments through online learning courses and programs;

- Plans for online learning are linked effectively to budget and technology planning to ensure adequate support for current and future offerings;

- The SDP provides evidence of a multi-year technology plan that addresses its goals for online learning and includes provision for a robust and scalable technical infrastructure;

- The SDP conducts regular needs analysis in order to continually adapt to the changing needs of the market and of the learners who enrol on the programmes.

5.3 Management and Administration (including Financial Administration)

eLearning Standard 3*: The Institution has a clear process of internal programme management to ensure programme quality.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- Right from programme design to assessment, online programmes are well managed and effectively administered to ensure programme coherence, appropriate articulation, and smooth rolling out;
- There is sufficient resourcing of key activities to ensure the rigor of the offerings and the quality of the instruction;

- Approval of online courses and programs follows standard procedures used in the institution;

- Providers of online programmes should identify and administratively monitor online, hybrid, and off campus programs. Enrolment data for such programs should be available;

- Qualifications in the Occupational Sub-Framework often require workplace experience as an integral part of the training process. Contractual relationships and arrangements with consortia partners, if any, are clear and guarantee that the institution can exercise appropriate responsibility for the academic quality of all online learning offerings provided under its name. Although learners undertake

work-based learning in other organisations that are not the education providers, the responsibility for that component of training lies with the providing SDP.

5.4 Training Programme and course design and review

eLearning Standard 4*: Programmes are designed and developed to meet the needs of learners and stakeholders, and to encourage access to quality education; assessment methods, effectively assess and measure learners' achievement of the stated learning outcomes of the programme.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- Curricula for the SDP's online learning offerings are coherent, cohesive, and comparable in academic rigor to programs offered in traditional instructional formats;
- The curricular goals and course objectives show that the SDP or programme has knowledge of the best uses of online learning in different disciplines and settings;
- Scheduling of online learning courses and programs provides learners with a dependable pathway to ensure timely completion of degrees;
- Course design and delivery supports learner-learner, learner-content and learner-department interaction;
- The institution evaluates the effectiveness of its online learning offerings, including the extent to which the online learning goals are achieved, and uses the results of its evaluations to enhance the attainment of the goals;
- There is effective communication between members who design curriculum, members who interact with learners, and SDP members who evaluate and assess learning;
- There is regular evaluation of the effectiveness of the tuition and support services provided to learners in online courses and the results of such evaluation are used for improvement;
- The SDP demonstrates the appropriate use of technology to support its e-assessment strategy;
- The SDP uses technology to promote active learning by learners;
- The SDP sets appropriate goals for the retention and persistence of learners using online learning;
- Where applicable, there should be clear instructions for each and every eLearning page in order for learners to follow easily;

- Exemplar response are provided for each and every question to enable learners to check the correctness of their answers.

5.5 Staffing and Staff Development

eLearning Standard 5: *The human resource provision is appropriate for the education and training services provided. The Skills Development Provider (SDP) offers appropriate staff development support that equips the personnel to perform their tasks effectively.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- The unit responsible for delivering the online learning curricula and evaluating learners' success in achieving the online learning goals are appropriately qualified and effectively supported;

- Staff supporting online learning is carefully selected, appropriately trained and frequently evaluated;

- The SDP has a clear policy on staff development and implementation of such policy is monitored to ensure that training is periodic, incorporates tested good practices in online learning pedagogy, and ensures competency with the range of software products used by the institution;

- Unit is proficient and effectively supported in using the course management system;

- Staff supporting online learning share in the mission and goals of the institution and its programmes and are provided opportunities to contribute to the broader activities of the SDP;

- The SDP has mechanisms in place for measuring learner satisfaction with the quality of the instruction provided by online learning facilitators;

- Continuous professional development of staff takes place regularly enough and is regulated by staff development policy.

5.6 Learner Support

eLearning Standard 6: *Learners are supported by the provision of a wide range of opportunities for tutoring at a distance through the use of various forms of technology. Contact tutoring, e-tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and the stimulation of peer support structures are employed to facilitate their holistic progression.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- The SDP provides comprehensive and accurate information on the website to prospective learners about the nature of the online learning environment, and assists them in determining if they possess the skills important to success in online learning;

- The SDP provides an online learning orientation program;

- The SDP provides support services to learners in formats appropriate to the delivery of the online learning program;

- Learners using online learning have adequate access to learning resources, including library, information resources, laboratories, and equipment and tracking systems;

- Learner complaint processes are clearly defined and can be used electronically;

- The SDP rationalises fees for online programmes in such a way that access is promoted.

5.7 Integrity of Online Learning Programmes

eLearning Standard 7*: Effective systems are put in place to ensure that (a) cases of plagiarism are detected and (b) the right learners are rewarded.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- The SDP has in place effective procedures and processes through which to ensure that the learner who registers in a distance education/online course or program is the same learner who participates in and completes the course or programme and receives the qualification credit;
- The SDP makes clear in writing that these processes protect learner privacy and notifies learners at the time of registration or enrolment of any projected additional costs associated with the verification procedures.

5.8 Learner Assessment

eLearning Standard 8*: Assessment and evaluation are essential features of the teaching learning process that are properly managed, and reflect institutional, and national standards. Assessment and Evaluation are based on the stated programme objectives.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- The SDP explains how technology based formative assessments meet the principles of validity, reliability and authenticity. Assessment design and

strategies need to demonstrate that “quality learning” takes place and that the credibility of the Statement of Results met;

- The institution matches specific curriculum standards to particular software packages and computer applications and describes how these standards are supported by these applications;

- The institution has mechanisms in place for helping learners acquire ICT skills within the context of their courses. Learners are not preoccupied with technical challenges at the expense of content during assessment process;

- The institution has ways of checking the authenticity of the assessment system and processes;

- The institution is clear on the type of assessment to be used (formative, essays, e-portfolios, projects); how will these measure the content and skills that learners are expected to master; and how valid and reliable the assessment is;

- Where e-assessment is used, the QCTO’s e-assessment Policy is adhered to in order to ensure credibility of e-assessment.

5.9 Monitoring Learner Satisfaction and Progress

eLearning Standard 9*: The Skills Development Provider (SDP) tracks learners in order to identify at-risk learners and provide support before they drop out or fail.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- SDP improvement is based on regular feedback from learners. The institution tracks learners in order to identify those that need support;
- The SDP collects regular data on learner satisfaction and uses the data for improvement purposes;
- Corrective measures are taken where systems do not appear to be working well enough for learners.

5.10 Advocacy

eLearning Standard 10: *A high degree of professionalism and ethics is exercised in the advertising of programmes by the Skills Development Provider. Information provided to potential learners is true and not misleading.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- The institution gives adequate and accurate information in its advocacy to enable prospective learners to make rational decisions regarding their choice to register with an SDP.

5.11 Collaboration

eLearning Standard 11: *Institutional Partnerships and Collaborative relationships for mutual benefits are in place. (Not mandatory but encouraged, where possible)*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- Working together with sister institutions, sharing and joint development of achieving qualification deliverables and materials promotes quality of ODL provision better than working in isolation**.**

5.12 Research

eLearning Standard 12*: Continuous development of educational programmes and services is influenced by research.*

In order to meet this standard, the following is required at minimum:

- Good practice in distance and technology supported education also entails:
    - Conducting continual research into own's practices, particularly education delivery and learner support systems;
    - Updating policies and procedures based on research;
    - Benchmarking nationally and internationally to establish good practice;
    - Using a variety of quality standards to give multiple perspectives on own systems and processes; and
    - Becoming learning organisations.

As the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (2006) states: "Some standards (quality guidelines) represent best practice, and failure to meet them may not necessarily debar a provider from accreditation but will highlight an area needing improvement for continuing accreditation."