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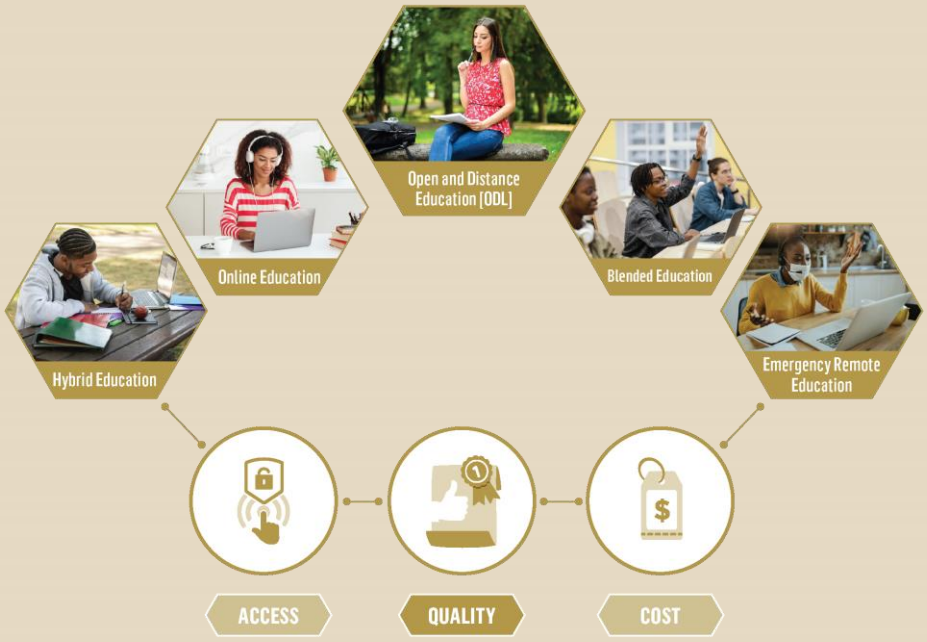
Unpacking the Future of Open and Distance Learning:

Trends and Policy Considerations for Namibia



12th NCHE Public Lecture

March 2024

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‘Unpacking the future of Open and Distance Learning –Trend and Policy Considerations for Namibia’

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About us:

NCHE is a statutory body in terms of section 4 of the Higher Education Act, 2003 (Act No. 26 of 2003), established to advise the Minister of Higher Education, Technology and Innovation on issues pertaining to higher education.

Our logo embodies the following:

- The 'hut' symbolises a pyramid of which the 'sticks' represent the different academic streams which lead to excellence.
- The different academic streams join and guarantee 'shelter' for the nation.
- The 'hut' also symbolises unity through binding the different academic streams together.
- This unified effort emphasizes coordination among our higher education institutions.

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Our High-Level Statements

Vision

NCHE aspires, to be a valued leader and partner in coordinating quality higher education in pursuit of a knowledge-based society.

Mission

NCHE exists, to ensure a coordinated and a responsive higher education system through equitable access and quality service delivery.

Core Values

In the execution of our mandate and the pursuit of our strategic pillars, we are inspired and guided by the following values;

Accountability	We take responsibility for our policies, decisions and actions and report, explain and answer for resulting consequences.
Professionalism	We exercise high levels of competence in our work and avoid compromises to our set standards and values.
Integrity	We exhibit the quality of an intuitive sense of honesty and truthfulness with regards to our behaviour and motivation for our actions.
Innovation	We strive for continuous learning, seek creative ways to change, solve problems and find better solutions in the execution of our mandate.
Empathy	We endeavour to cultivate empathy amongst ourselves, customers, and stakeholders, with a view to building positive relationships and boost productivity.

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Abbreviations & acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
APHEIN	Association of Private Higher Education Institutions in Namibia
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
IUM	International University of Management
MEAC	Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture
MHETI	Ministry of Higher Education, Technology & Innovation
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
NOLNet	Namibia Open Learning Network Trust
NUST	Namibia University of Science and Technology
NQA	Namibia Qualifications Authority
NSFAF	Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNAM	University of Namibia
Unisa	University of South Africa

Introduction

Since 2010, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has been convening annual public lectures to provide a platform for public debate on topical issues affecting higher education. The public lectures allow the knowledge to be fed back into improving higher education outcomes. Thus, NCHE hosted the 12th public lecture on the 14th of March 2024 in Windhoek, Namibia at Thuringerhof Hotel under the theme; "Unpacking the Future of Open and Distance Learning – Trends and Policy Considerations for Namibia".

In 2023, Minimum Standards for HE Institutions in Namibia were developed and adopted for implementation by the NCHE in July 2023. They are used as supplementary and complementary tools alongside the existing regulatory and policy frameworks such as the Higher Education Act (Act 26 of 2003), the Regulations for Registering Private Higher Education Institutions (2009), the Namibia Qualifications Act (Act 29 of 1996), the Regulations for Accreditation of Persons, Institutions or Organisations (2006) and the Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia (2009) and the laws regulating the quality of professional academic programmes.

In the Minimum Standards document, an open and distance learning institution is considered as an applied institution. The document therefore does not include specific details on education provisions due to the specific approaches to student admission (e.g. open admissions), curriculum design (e.g. freestyle predominantly driven by individual student needs) and methods of delivery (e.g. predominantly distant and online). Thus, minimum standards for those modalities are to be documented separately.

The 12th NCHE Public Lecture theme was therefore selected to set the stage for developing quality assurance criteria and standards for Open and Distance Learning. The lecture created public awareness on the standards, trends and policy considerations for quality, accessible, and effective open and distance provision, including technology integration, faculty development, and learning support services.

The lecture was officially opened by the NCHE Deputy Chairperson, Dr Francie Keendjele, while Professor Paul Prinsloo, an academic expert on open and distance education delivered the lecture. The moderator for the public lecture was Patrick Sam. During the public discussion, the moderator and keynote speaker were joined by Mr Wynand Diergaardt from the Namibia University of Science & Technology (NUST), Dr Ishmael Mubwadanrikwa from the Association of Private Higher Education Institution in Namibia (APHEIN) and Ms. Anna Imalwa from the Namibia Open Learning Network (NOLNet). The audience was allowed to provide comments and questions to the panellists.

This current report documents the NCHE 12th Public Lecture proceedings, and it is also accessible from the NCHE website: www.nche.org.na/publications.

Welcoming remarks: Dr. Francine Keendjele, NCHE Deputy Chairperson

Dr Keendjele welcomed the participants to the 12th NCHE Public Lecture and expressed her excitement at seeing so many people attend. She elaborated that convening public lectures on topical issues affecting and/or impacting the higher education sector is one of the activities that NCHE undertakes annually to fulfil some of its functions as contemplated in the Higher Education Act (Act No. 26 of 2003).

She further explained that NCHE was honoured to have Professor Paul Prinsloo, a renowned expert in Open and Distance Learning, address the lecture. Professor Prinsloo is a research professor at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and is recognised internationally for his remarkable contributions as a speaker, scholar, and researcher in ODL and beyond.

Dr Keendjele revealed the lecture's theme as: “Unpacking the Future of Open and Distance Learning - Trends and Policy Considerations for Namibia”. In her view, the theme was appropriate because Open and Distance Learning was playing an increasingly significant role in education worldwide, and Namibia was no exception.

In contextualising the lecture, Dr Keendjele referred the audience to the origin of ODL of over 150 years. According to Keegan (1996), during the initial stages of its existence, the mode of teaching and learning was referred to as a correspondence study or home study. Furthermore, Koul and Kanwar, 2006, traced the provision of ODL to 1946, when the University of South Africa became the first dedicated distance education university and to 1969 when the British Open University began offering courses using other ODL delivery modes. Ever since, ODL has become a mode of learning to contend with and offers opportunities for a democratic and egalitarian channel of education. The literature further indicates that the evolution of ODL stretched over 5 generations (but at this juncture, we shall not unpack all the five generations), where the first

generation ODL was characterised by correspondence courses, which were predominantly supported by print-based course materials and postal services. Eventually, the fifth generation ODL came about as a result of a further exploitation of new technologies, and it capitalises on the features of the internet and the Web. The fifth generation uses technology for every aspect of educational enterprise such as "administration, learner management, learner preparation for readiness, curriculum construction, instructional design, learner support services, and learner evaluation, among others.

ODL, therefore, offers incredible opportunities to expand access to educational opportunities, empowering students and fostering a more inclusive learning environment. In reference to the local higher education statistics, Dr Keendjele noted that the ODL enrolment has doubled from 7,985 to 15,659 during the period 2013 – 2022. Therefore, the timing for the lecture was right to enable the exploration of the evolving landscape of ODL

Noting that a workshop on ODL learning analytics with selected participants from higher education institutions was planned to take place on Monday, 18 March 2024, Dr Keendjele expressed gratitude to Professor Prinsloo for his extended availability and insight sharing.

She also welcomed the panellists from the local institutions that were already offering ODL programmes. She asserted that their experiences and challenges in the field would enrich the discussions of this evening. She also encouraged the lecture attendees to actively participate in the discussions emanating from the lecture.

Keynote presentation: Prof. Paul Prinsloo, University of South Africa

The keynote presentation was delivered as per narrative below:

Allow me to thank the National Council for Higher Education in Namibia for the invitation to present this 12th Public Lecture with the theme: "Unpacking the Future of Open and Distance Learning: Trends and Policy Considerations for Higher Education in Namibia." It is an immense privilege but also an immense responsibility that I did not, and still do not take lightly.

Allow me firstly to share three acknowledgements or disclaimers.

Acknowledgement and approach to this lecture

- I do not own the copyright of any of the images in this presentation and I acknowledge the original copyright and licensing regime of every image used. This presentation (*excluding the images*) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
- I did not use ChatGPT or any other Large Language Model (LLM) to produce any image or text in this presentation.
- I am presenting in my capacity *as researcher* in open distance learning, and as such, do not represent the University of South Africa (Unisa), the South African Quality Assurance Authority (SAQA), the South African Council for Higher Education (CHE) or any other official structure/organisation.

It is also important for you to have a sense of who I am and what is my claim to 'fame', if any:

I started at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in 1995 as a *student advisor, tutor and registration officer* in a regional office in the northern part of the most northern province in South Africa, the Limpopo Province. Being there allowed me to have a sense of quality assurance from the bottom of the 'pecking order', where students were, so to speak, at the bottom of the hierarchy, followed by administrators, support and professional staff, then academics and management at the tip of the hierarchy or pyramid. Being an administrator and part of the student support team, allowed me to experience the (lack of) quality of educational provision seen through the eyes of students, students who would often travel for a day to get to the regional office, often at great personal costs. As a tutor, I had the sense of students' frustrations with assignment schedules, the (lack of) quality of (some of) the study materials and the desperation that followed when students could not get hold of their lecturers, ICT or administrative staff via phone or email.

After seven years I applied for the position of an *instructional designer and curriculum developer* at the Pretoria campus, and my application was successful - most probably because of the valuable experiences close to the bottom of the hierarchy!

Being an instructional designer and curriculum developer allowed me to work with academics to design hopefully better learning materials and experiences. As an instructional designer and curriculum developer, I was regarded as part of the professional staff, and though it was not one of my key performance areas, I started to do research - ever-curious about the factors that impact student success and attrition. As an instructional designer and curriculum developer (with a PhD), I was often seen as an enemy by academics who were the subject experts and who would often view any suggestions of improving their course materials and pedagogy with suspicion. My previous experience in the regional centre as administrator, student advisor and tutor, together with my research into factors that impact student success, allowed me to bring these experiences to inform the (re)development of curricula, pedagogy, materials and assessment.

The seven years I spent as an instructional designer and curriculum developer gave me a sense of the importance of design, of the sequencing of learning activities, but also a sense of the amazing commitment and often burnout of (many) academics who faced increasing demands from management, increased reporting and being responsive to demands from students and management 24/7/365.

For the last nine years I have been privileged to be a full-time research professor - being allowed to do research, deepening my understanding of distance education, student success and increasingly, collecting, analysing and using student data to improve student success. The last 9 years allowed me to engage with trends in higher education, online learning and teaching and the pure madness of publish and perish. It also gave me insights into how much, if not most of the research done in higher education on student success is not read by the management of institutions.

So, ladies and gentlemen, this public lecture is very much *a bottoms-up and personal approach* to thinking about quality in distance education provision - based on my experiences as student, student advisor, tutor, registration officer, instructional designer, curriculum developer and as a researcher.

In preparing for this public lecture, I was very aware that the National Council for Higher Education in Namibia had certain expectations from me, but I was also aware that you as members of the audience had expectations.

What does one expect of a public lecture? What were your expectations?

It may be that you expected

- *An intellectual giant*: someone who would be awe-inspiring with their breadth and depth of knowledge
- *A wizard:* an individual that reveals hidden secrets
- *An entertainer:* someone who would make you laugh and entertain you
- *A visionary*: someone who shares insights about what to expect in future

I am sorry to disappoint you, but...

I am none of the above -

I am a weaver.

Overview of the presentation

In this presentation I will weave different colours and strings to, hopefully, provide a clearer, and possibly encouraging picture at the end of the presentation of the revolutionary potential of quality open distance education provision.

In this presentation I hope to weave together several broad themes that, hopefully, will allow us to reach some conclusions or some (in)conclusions:

1. Context: Crises and transitions
2. Learning at the backdoor: reclaiming the revolutionary humanitarian potential of distance education
3. Six points of departure to act as guiding principles
   3.1 Distance education and e-learning

1. Context.

We cannot and should not underestimate the impact Covid-19 had on:

- Our understanding of digital access
- The potential of technology
- The importance of instructional design/learning design in facilitating effective and appropriate online learning
- The 'Human" cost in 24/7/365 online education environments

Before COVID-19, the lecture hall, no matter how big, was considered to be the 'gold' standard of education provision. While COVID-19 changed many perceptions about the quality of distributed and online learning, it (further) deepened the crisis in two of the biggest distance education providers – Athabasca University (Canada) and the Open University (UK).

1.1 Are open universities in crisis or transition?

Two of the most known distance education providers, Athabasca University in Canada and the Open University in the UK (OUUK) are in trouble.

In 2015, Athabasca University was faced with insolvency, while in 2018, the OUUK was in trouble. The OUUK's trouble started in 2014-2015 when the vice-chancellor's executive started to close nine regional offices of the university. At that stage, it was foreseen that 700 jobs would be at risk, almost a fifth of the OUUK's full-time workforce. Newspaper headlines claimed, "The change will be the end of the Open University as we know it". In 2017 a radical overhaul was announced: "Change on this scale will inevitably impact on staff because staff make up two-thirds of the OU's operating costs. The proposed transformation in teaching, research, IT systems and the running of the University will inevitably mean that the number and types of roles will change. In coming years, fewer people will be needed overall." In 2018 the OUUK axed 41 undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses, leaving 71 degrees available. A range of courses including science, business, music, and classics are under threat." There were concerns that the OU will become a digital content provider.

As the headlines in 2018 show - the crisis that started in 2014-2015 continued unabated.

The bad news is that the troubles in which both of these institutions found themselves did not end and in 2022 and in 2024 - the crises they faced deepened further.

1.2 So, how do we understand these crises or transitions?

- Institutional factors, legacy beliefs, and structures
- National legislation, regulatory and funding frameworks
- International trends in higher education – e.g., online learning
- Macro-societal factors – e.g., Covid-19

To understand these crises and transitions we need to take a step back and have a look at where it all started…

2. Learning at the back door

Wedermeyer (1981) uses the metaphor of "learning at the back door" to refer to a range of modes of educational delivery such as: distance learning, independent learning, open learning, external studies, correspondence study, home study, radio education, television education, satellite education self-directed learning, etc.

Learning at the back door, also calls into mind, how **the front door**, in many societies, have been and are meant for those with social standing, often of a particular class, race or gender while **the back door** was used for those of a non-acceptable, lower class, different race or gender – the workers and working class, the "Other" – those who did not qualify, meet the admission requirements or could pay the fees.

Now, many years after Wedemeyer wrote this book, *there is still* an enduring belief that distance education continues to be the 'back door', of lesser quality.

2.1 But is there another way to look at educational provision at the back door?

One of the most important theorists of distance education, the German scholar Otto Peters (2010), stated the following about how revolutionary distance education was when it emerged as a form of educational delivery:

We have experienced a revolutionary adaptation of teaching and learning to new technological and social conditions. There is no other form of teaching and learning that has broken away from tradition so sharply that is so flexible and conducive to further societal changes in the post-industrial knowledge society. Distance education achieved a first significant breakthrough in the reform of higher education (p. 56).

Peters (2010) continues by stating that distance education has, primarily, a humanitarian task of providing access for all learners, with special focus on those disadvantaged by distance, by precarious economic conditions, by belonging to discriminated minorities, or by being disabled. Obviously, this mission is now relativised by a growing number of privileged students who do not

learn at a distance because they are forced to do this by unfavourable circumstances, but rather for reasons of convenience only (p. 32).

Reflecting on the words of Peters (2010) but also considering persisting questions about the quality of distance education provision, we need to ask ourselves: How do we re-embrace the revolutionary beginnings of distance education – celebrating the opportunities it creates especially to those excluded, those 'outside' of normal admission requirements?

We also have to ask: "To what extent does distance education produce qualifications to keep their graduates at the back door, providing them access to only parts of the Masters' house – the kitchen and the warehouse?" and" To what extent does distance education deserve the label of "second best" and as 'learning at the back door'?"

More importantly, in the context of this public lecture, we need to consider "What can we do to ensure distance education as a quality, affordable and equitable educational opportunity?"

3. Five points of departure to act as guiding principles

1. In embracing (open) distance learning, the exact parameters of 'openness' should be clearly stated in terms of registration periods, admissions, curricula, time-to-completion, prerequisites, registration requirements and reregistration.
2. When a program or course is offered (and funded) in an online mode, it should be made clear what the minimum requirements are for institutions and students.
3. The cost, quality and access in online distance education are dependent on a range of variables and are interdependent.
4. Appropriate and effective distance education requires a whole-system design, development and delivery process and quality assurance
5. Student success in distance education contexts need to be understood as different – with respect to student and institutional responsibilities

3.1 Distance education and e-learning

Let us use these clarifications to engage and discover the strange family of Distance Education ranging from dedicated to hybrid, offline to fully online, and a range of other combinations:

We find a rich variety in this 'family' of distance education:

- **Dedicated** distance education institutions
- **Open distance learning** institutions
- Traditional higher education institutions **with distance education departments centres** or schools/dual-mode
- Traditional higher education institutions offering some courses and/or programs **only** online
- Different combinations such as blended, hybrid and during Covid - Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL)

The following table (Table 1) illustrates some elements of this 'family' of distance education provision.

	Campus	Open	Distance	Printed only + digital or internet supported	Online	Blended – f2f plus online	Blended – *printed* plus online
A		(X)	X	X			
B		(X)	X		X		
C		(X)	X				X
D			X		X		
E	X				X	(X)	

Table 1: An overview of a selection of different types of teaching and learning modalities

Institution A is a distance education institution (that can also be open) and offers printed and digitally supported learning materials and experiences, compared to institution B who is offering fully online learning. Institution C falls in the same 'class' - being a distance education institution (that can also be open) but offers a blend of printed materials and online learning components. Institution D is a distance education institution that is *not* open and offers fully online learning. In contrast, institution E is a campus-based, residential institution offering online or a blend between online and face-to-face learning opportunities.

Considering the different possibilities in this broader family of distributed learning, we need to consider:

- How do national governments decide *how to fund* these different possibilities in public higher education?
- How does one q*uality assure* these different possibilities – public and private?
- How do changes in modes of delivery impact on accreditation and quality assurance?
- Are there qualifications that should not be offered/accredited in some forms of delivery?

Finding the answers to these questions, we now turn to *six pointers or points of departure* to help us make sense of how to approach quality assurance:

1. Distance education and e-learning overlaps but are not the same
2. Not all e-learning are equal
3. The costs and economics of open and distance learning
4. Breaking the iron triangle – cost, quality, and access
5. Distance education as industrialised process
6. Providing online, distance education in low bandwidth contexts

Distance education and e-learning is, furthermore, not the same. In 2005, Guri-Rosenbilt (2005) highlighted the distinctions between 'distance education' and 'e-learning' . It is essential to remember that this analysis was conducted in 2005. As alluded to earlier, one of the issues we face is the fact that COVID-19 and technological developments and changes in student expectations after COVID-19, made the strict boundaries between these two forms of delivery possibly more porous.

Guri-Rosenbilt (2005) points to three central points of differentiation - distance (remoteness and proximity), target clientele, and cost considerations (economies of scale). As we will see later on, the fastest growing trend in e-learning is that residential students, or students who are studying through a face-to-face mode of delivery, increasingly opt to take at least one of their courses fully online - to optimise the flexibility it offers. But can that online course be regarded as distance education? The author, Guri-Rosenbilt (2005) emphasises the geographical separation between

students and the delivering institution. While technology does make communication at times synchronous, geographical separation remains a crucial element in understanding the differences between distance education and e-learning. There is also the fact that these two delivery modes serve different populations and have different cost structures.

But the plot thickens even further...

3.2 Not all e-learning are equal

We can think of e-learning or online learning as a continuum ranging from low-cost e-learning - which I call drop-off-and-go to, on the other side of the continuum, "business class e-learning" - which comes at a price tag for both institutions and students. In the low-cost version, there is very little, if any, interactivity, the course is delivered, posted on an online delivery platform, and runs on autopilot depending on students' self-regulatory learning, and students engage, at their own time and pace, with content, and at times, if they so wish, with other students. There is little or no engagement with lecturers or tutors, and with developments in Intelligent Tutoring systems, algorithmic decision-making systems personalise students' learning.

On the other side of the continuum, there is "business class online learning" - taking place in a highly structured, interactive learning environment where students engage with tutors or lecturers, with content and with each other in small, intimate groups with ratios of 1 tutor to 15 students.

In the South African context, the government adopted a policy for the provision of distance education in universities within an Integrated post-school system in 2014 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2014).

Seminal to understanding the South African approach, the Policy distinguishes, on a continuum, from fully offline, digitally supported, internet supported, internet dependent and fully online (see vertical axis, figure 1 below). '*Digitally supported*' means that the support is in digital format (e.g. PDF), and not an integral or compulsory part of the educational experience. '*Internet supported'* refers again to support available when an internet connection is available, but it is not an integral, compulsory part of the learning experience. The notion of *'internet dependent'* makes it clear that the learning experience is dependent on the internet and that having access to an internet connection is an integral and compulsory part of the learning experience, though there may be non-digital elements. Lastly, *'fully online'* refers to learning without physical compulsory elements.

On the horizontal axis, the Policy (DHET, 2014) furthermore presents another continuum from campus-based, to blended/hybrid to fully remote. The different possibilities presented by these two axes offers a rich and nuanced understanding on the possible range of modes of delivery.

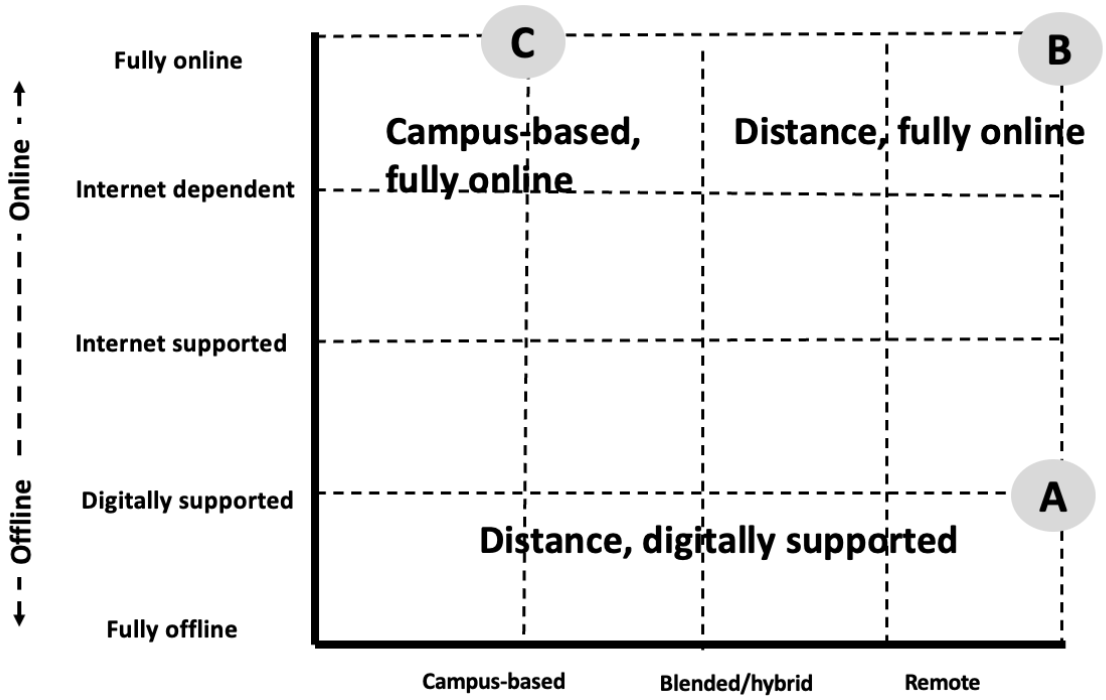

Figure 1: An illustration of different modes of delivery (adapted from DHET, 2014, p. 9)

To illustrate the use of the diagram, let us consider *position A*, referring to a fully remote, digitally supported mode of delivery. This would, in effect mean that students have access to printed study materials, with some additional support available in digital formats. *Position B* in the diagram once again presents a fully remote option, but this time also fully online. Position C presents a very interesting scenario namely a campus-based, fully online option. This would present fulltime students, most probably living on campus, the option to take one of their courses as a fully online course allowing them more flexibility in their arrangements.

The Policy furthermore provide a number of definitions that are very useful to reflect on for the purposes of this public lecture.

The Policy defines distance education as

> ...a mode of provision 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 (emphasis added).

Of particular importance is the Policy's clarification that while some face-to-face, physical elements may be present in distance education offerings,

> 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* [first and second-level]*,* and *25% or less* in courses at NQF Level 7 [third-year] and initial post-graduate courses at *NQF* Level 8 [or fourth-year level], in staff-led, face-to-face, campus-based structured learning activities (emphasis added).

The definitions also make it clear that "Institutions opting for distance education as a mode of delivery *need to establish systems and processes* for decentralised distribution of learning resources, communications, learner and learning support, as well as formative and summative assessment" (emphasis added).

Of further importance for our considerations in this public lecture is the references to the scope and affordances of open learning as principle. The Policy states

> Open learning typically involves making provision to support *a wider range of student choices* regarding access, curriculum, pacing, sequencing, learning modes and methods, assessment, and articulation. *Students studying through ODL approaches typically take longer to complete their studies as they need to balance study and other commitments.*
>
> Guiding students towards making informed choices based on workload, and the assumption that completion of a course or programme of study *will typically take twice as long to complete is an important feature of responsible ODL practice*; as is trying to assist *students not to take longer than three times minimum time to complete* for the sake of coherence and the complications arising from curriculum renewal processes.

These clarifying statements have clear implications for accreditation of distance education offerings as well as funding arrangements.

3.3 The costs and economics of open and distance learning

A golden thread running through this presentation, and my understanding of quality provision of distance education is the interdependence between cost, quality, and access. But for now, let us firstly turn to the cost and economics of open and distance learning, and in particular then work of Greville Rumble (1997). Though the bulk of Rumble's contribution to our understanding of the costs of open and distance learning precedes the mid-2010s, his thinking continues and should inform our understanding of the economics and cost of open distance learning.

Much of this early work refers to the claims that distance education is a cheaper form of education provision. Rumble makes it clear "Of course, not all distance education systems are cheaper than the alternative, conventional means of teaching and training" (Rumble, 1997, p. 2). Towards the end of this work, Rumble (1997) states "There is plenty of evidence that open and distance education *can be more cost efficient* than traditional forms of education, *but this is not necessarily the case*" (p. 204; emphasis added).

Referring to the fact that policymakers often borrow from other contexts and because something works in one particular context, then imports it into a different context, he warns that "… there is very little that can be concluded with certainty. Policymakers and institutional leaders should be aware of lifting solutions off the shelf, hoping that the economic benefits that may be said to apply in one socio-economic environment will transfer, along with the media and the technologies, to another" (Rumble, 1997, p. 204).

If I could add a footnote here, we should take this to heart in the context of this public lecture. The temptation to borrow and to apply quality assurance criteria and systems working in other contexts to the context of higher education in Namibia, is indeed tempting.

3.4 Breaking the iron triangle of cost, quality, and access

The fourth pointer for consideration brings us to what is called the iron triangle - referring to cost, quality, and access. The notion of the iron triangle refers to the reality that often, in distance education contexts, when we attempt to increase the quality of distance education provision, we increase costs, or we have to limit access. On the other hand, increasing access results in economies of scale, therefore lowering costs, but there is a real risk that quality may be compromised.

Daniel, Kanwar, and Uvalić-Trumbić, (2009) was concerned with the need to increase access to higher education, but then considered how to ensure quality. In their assessment they indicated that "traditional modes alone cannot accomplish this [the massification of higher education] task". They indicated there were only two options – to grow private higher education and/or Open and Distance Learning.

Considering the options, Daniel and his colleagues state "Quality is identified with exclusivity. The lecture bazaar model brings in another dimension of quality, namely expenditure per student: the more the better" and

> The costs of reproducing and distributing eLearning materials are tiny, so it costs little to widen access to them. An examination system, allied to elements of distance learning, could give wide access and consistent quality at low cost. Supporting examination candidates and distance learners is much easier today because of the development of the Web, eLearning, and open educational resources.

They further propose:

> …instead of expecting students to enroll for a complete package of teaching and assessment, *institutions will need to unbundle and personalize the different elements of their support*, allowing students to pick the amount and kind of assistance that they need and can afford (emphasis added) and

"Placing the functions of teaching and examining in different institutions makes issues of quality and standards much easier to address."

Though the proposals by Daniel and his colleagues should certainly be considered, other scholars were more skeptical. For example, Power and Morven-Gould (2011) refers to Kanuka and Brooks (2010, in Power and Gould-Morven, 2011, p. 23) who said: "[D]istance education can achieve any two of the following: flexible access, quality learning experience and cost-effectiveness – *but not all three at once*" (emphasis added). Power and Morven-Gould (2011) also consider how three stakeholder groups – students, faculty, and administrators – regards the different aspects of cost, quality and access and they ask, who values which aspect the most and how does this impact on other stakeholders? Students prefer accessibility, academics quality and administration prioritise cost-effectiveness.

It is therefore important to consider the interplay between cost, quality, and access when, evaluating the different possible modes of teaching and learning as presented in Figure 1.

The inherent tensions in the 'iron triangle' get even more complication when we think about the description of deep and meaningful learning by Anderson and Garrison (1998) as illustrated in Figure 2. While these two authors do not explicitly state that deep and meaningful learning is equated to high quality, it is hard to imagine quality learning experiences as *not* also being deep and meaningful. Anderson and Garrison (1998) propose that deep and meaningful learning experiences result when there is student-student, student-content, and student teacher engagement, inclusive of content-content, and teacher-teacher engagement.

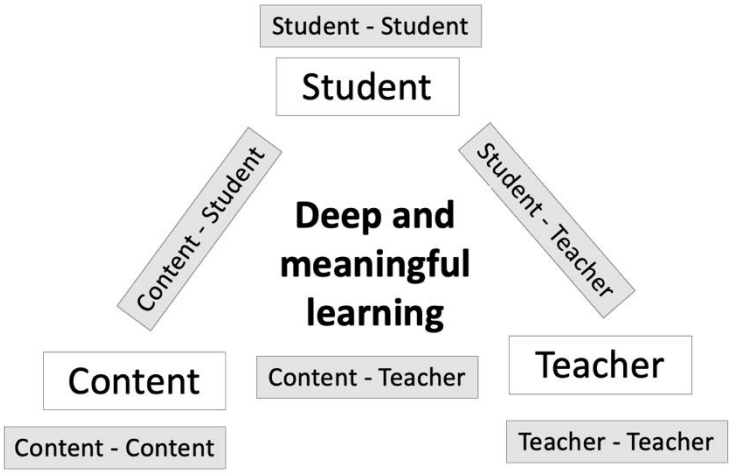

Figure 2: Deep and meaningful learning (adapted from Anderson & Garrison, 1998).

Let us, in a thought-experiment think of the cost, access and quality implications of the proposal by Anderson and Garrison (1998).

For example, let us consider institution X where 14,000 students are enrolled in Micro-economics on first-level. We have to ask, how much deep and meaningful learning is possible with an enrolment of 14,000 students? How much meaningful student-student interaction is possible, at which ratios of students: tutors or teachers? While the cost of developing such a course for 14,000 students illustrates the notion of economies of scale, how does one ensure that the economies of scale also allows for high quality? Should we assume that deep and meaningful engagement between students and students, and students and a teacher is, most probably, possible with a student-teacher ratio of 20:1, then this means that the institution has to appoint 700 tutors - which has, not only, cost implications and possibly cancel the cost savings from the initial economies of scale, but the appointment of 700 extra tutoring staff, does not, necessarily impacts on the quality of student-student, or student-content interaction. Ensuring that the appointment of these 700 tutors do impact positively on the quality of learning, another level of quality assurance may be needed.

But, do we really need all three levels of engagement at equal levels of intensity - student-student, student-content, and student-teacher - to ensure the quality of learning? Is it possible to have a high quality learning experience, at low cost, if we think of the earlier example of flying to your destination with a low-cost, no-thrills airline compared to flying business class?

Anderson (2003) poses the question in what has become known as the equivalency theorem - do we really need all three types of engagement, in equal measure? He suggests that if one form of engagement is particularly strong, the other two may not need to be as intense. This therefore raises the question: How much interaction is (really) needed for effective (online) distance learning? How does the amount of interaction impact on the quality and cost?

3.5 Distance education as industrialised process

Our fifth consideration is: How does distance education as 'the most industrialised form of education' survive *and thrive* in the digital era? Figure 3 (below) illustrates a traditional print-based design and delivery process in distance education.

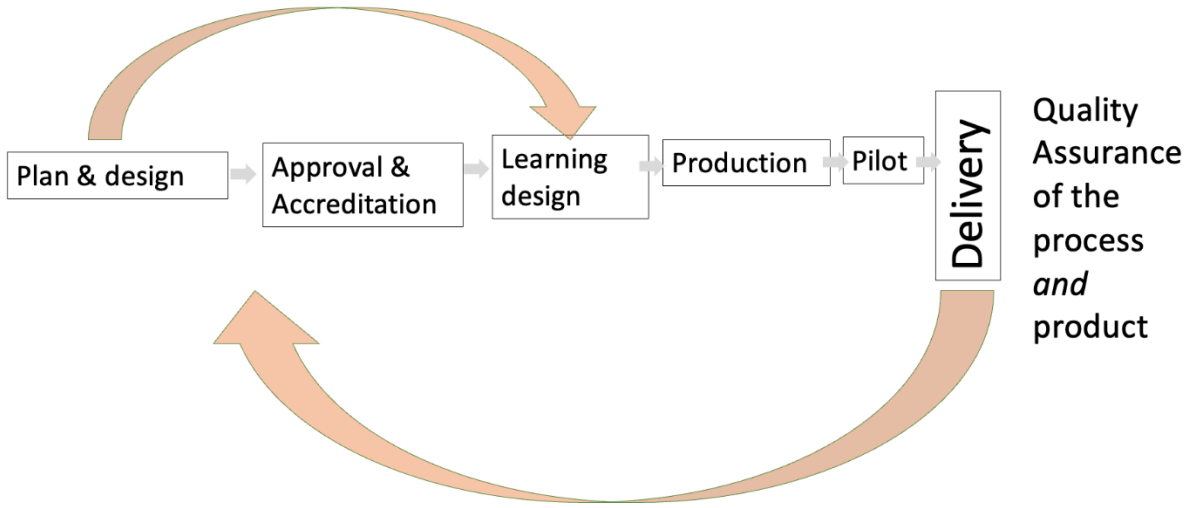

Figure 3: An overview of then planning, design, development and delivery process in traditional print-based distance education

Traditionally, print-based distance education provision had a very clearly defined, and sequenced process consisting of a team-based (including discipline expert, instructional designers, language editors, artists, and industry) planning and design process, getting approval and having the course or program accredited, designing the learning (e.g. designing assessment, writing the printed materials, planning the student support), production, running a pilot, and then delivery. Throughout this process, at every step of the process, quality must be assured.

Traditionally, this process was informed by:

- Economies of scale
- Learning resources (mostly static)
- Mostly asynchronous modes of delivery
- Industrial, sequential processes

Assuring the quality of the process and the product in traditional forms of distance education followed a sequential process of separate, clearly defined but linked sequential processes. Materials first were planned and designed (which had its own sets of quality criteria plus considerations of cost and access), before being submitted for approval and accreditation, and so forth.

Considering the increasing digitisation and datafication of higher education, and open, distance learning, it is crucial to think how the processes used in an industrialised, print-based distance education model as described change when (elements of) the teaching goes digital, and/or online - whether in the sense of digitally supported, internet-supported, internet-dependent, and fully online. The more elements or the whole learning experience moves online, the greater the potential for synchronous, responsive changes to how parts of the curriculum are presented and assessed. For example, a lecturer may, in response to a question raised in a discussion forum, decide to make a podcast or a voice-over PowerPoint presentation in order to provide timely feedback to students' need for understanding a concept better, but the extra material will not be language edited for example, or be done by a professional artist or designer. While the responsiveness of the lecturer should be lauded, it is clear that there may be quality assurance issues, or even issues pertaining to the appropriateness of the format or content of the response. For example, (which also links to the next pointer namely teaching in low-bandwidth contexts), the lecturer may decide to record an hour-long explanation and post it on the online discussion forum. While it may address the need, an hour-long presentation may not be the most appropriate response in low-bandwidth contexts.

In traditional forms of distance education with its clear, sequential stepwise processes, there was little space for individual initiative, or agile responsiveness as the whole learning experience was (predominantly) asynchronous. Moving online (in its various nuances) allows for more synchronous, timely responses - but then may present some compromises between responding to an 'immediate' student enquiry, and the appropriateness of the response in terms of bandwidth, as illustrated in the earlier example.

Which brings us to the final pointer for considering the nature and nuances of (open) distance education namely providing educational opportunities in low bandwidth contexts. Possibly due to the baseless assumption that synchronous, real-time teaching is always better and necessarily, of a higher quality than asynchronous responses, we have to reconsider the role of context on the appropriateness of particular understandings of quality in educational provision.

3.6 Providing online, distance education in low bandwidth contexts

Let us consider the proposal by Daniel Stanford (e-Campus Ontario) regarding issues to consider in choosing a particular modality in low bandwidth environments (Figure 4)(https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/remotecourse/chapter/course-content/). On the vertical access you have a continuum from low to high immediacy and on the horizontal access you have a continuum from low to high bandwidth. Figure 4 illustrates how some forms of delivery are more appropriate in high-bandwidth contexts than in low-bandwidth context such as synchronous video and audio-conference which is high in immediacy, but also very high in bandwidth (the red quadrant). As higher education institutions responded to the challenges offered by the Covid-19 pandemic, many institutions opted for synchronous meetings, or lectures. Though these online lectures were high in immediacy, they also required high-bandwidth - and had data cost implications for both lecturers and students. In a low-bandwidth

context, such as Namibia, this may not have been the most appropriate response. High in bandwidth but with lower levels of immediacy is illustrated by the options of collaborative online documents or group chat and messaging found in the blue quadrant. In the yellow quadrant (high in immediacy but low in bandwidth) are found pre-recorded video and/or audio and synchronous audio and video discussions - on the condition these recordings were short in duration, with less impact on the bandwidth and cost needed.

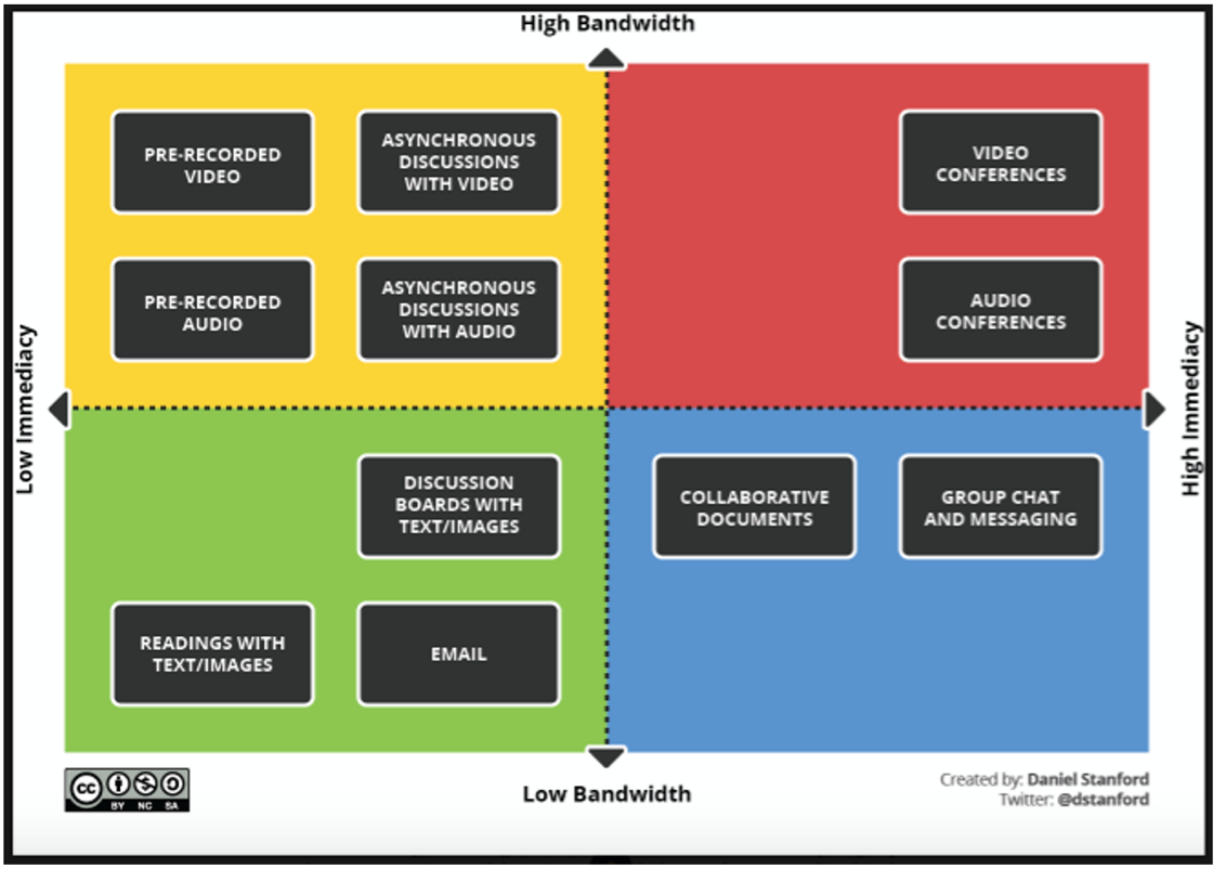

Figure 4: Teaching in low-bandwidth contexts

The green quadrant illustrates the most appropriate forms of educational support/delivery in low-bandwidth contexts and include readings with text/messages, discussion boards with messages and email. While not having the benefits of immediacy like the red quadrant, or the need for high-bandwidth as found in the blue quadrant, the green quadrant offers students opportunities for engagement, albeit asynchronously, but at the benefit of optimising teaching and support in low-bandwidth contexts.

This brings us to the end of exploring six considerations for thinking about open, distance learning namely:

1. Distance education and e-learning overlaps but are not the same

2. Not all e-learning are equal
3. The costs and economics of open and distance learning
4. Breaking the iron triangle – cost, quality, and access
5. Distance education as industrialised process
6. Providing online, distance education in low bandwidth contexts

With these considerations as basis, we now turn to exploring some of the future trends that will impact on the provision of open, distance learning.

4. Some trends to consider

We begin examining several trends identified by EDUCAUSE and compiled by Nicole Muscanell, early in 2024 (Muscanell, 2024). Based on research conducted by EDUCAUSE, Muscanell (2024) outlines 7 trends namely:

1. Increasing need for data security and protection against threats to personal privacy
2. Demands for continued hybrid and remote working arrangements
3. Increased efforts toward creating equitable and inclusive environments and experiences
4. More attention to well-being and mental health
5. More calls for data-informed decision-making and reporting
6. Increased focus on improving hybrid and online learning
7. Growing efforts towards digital transformation and institutional resilience.

Muscanell (2024) further reports, inter alia, that;

1. A majority of respondents (85%) felt that *having access to remote/hybrid work options is important*, and two-thirds (66%) reported that they do currently have options for remote/hybrid work.
2. A majority of respondents (85%) indicated that they have more than one primary area of responsibility. *This number may continue to increase due to understaffing and budget constraints.*
3. A majority of respondents (63%) said that *staffing issues have had a negative impact on their department/unit's services and operation*s, and financial constraints are the biggest challenge for staffing.
4. *Excessive workloads and* burnout are negatively impacting mental health and morale; 82% of those experiencing "a lot" of burnout within the past 12 months reported having an excessive workload as compared to 47% of those experiencing little to no burnout.
5. More than half of respondents are likely to apply for other positions in the next year and those experiencing burnout are significantly more likely to apply for other positions than those not experiencing burnout.
6. The job functions that saw *the largest increase* in time demands were *artificial intelligence (AI); faculty training and development; and online, hybrid, or distance learning*. The job functions that saw the greatest decline in time demands were staff education and training, library, and learning space design and management.

7. *Digital literacy (especially AI literacy) and adaptability and agility* were identified as important competency areas for the future (emphasis added).

Carnegie Learning (2024) identified the following five trends, (1) AI and education; (2) Gamification; (3) Experiential learning; (4) Microlearning; and (5) Soft skills development, while Forbes (2024) identifies the following six trends: (1) Artificial intelligence and the use of new technologies to transform learning; (2) Student engagement, advocacy, and agency; (3) Teacher and leader pipelines; (4) Future-ready education and systems to deliver it; and (5) Rethinking what, when, and how we assess student learning.

In considering the impact of these trends on open, distance learning, we have to contemplate the impact against the backdrop of the preceding section on open, distance learning and specifically, the six pointers. For example, how will AI lower the cost in low-cost online learning provision while, at the same time, offer the potential for personalised teaching and feedback, previously not possible? How will AI impact on the cost and quality of our administrative and admission processes in open distance learning and provide many of the benefits associated with "business class online learning" but at much lower cost?

And before concluding, it may be worthwhile to consider state of digital saturation and provision in Namibia (Dataportal, 2024). What are the implications when the median age in Namibia is 21.5 and 55.2% of the population is urbanised? What access would the 44.8% of the population living outside the urban areas have to education if it is not for open, distance education? What are the implications for open, distance education when 62.5% of the population have access to the internet, and of the 62.5%, 98.7% access the internet from their mobile phones? What are the implications for the design and legibility of study resources on smaller screen sizes that many students may be using?

Time does not allow us to go into detail of the implications of the digital saturation or lack of found in the Namibian context on the potential of open, distance learning - but it is clear that we will not be able to honour the rich and formidable legacy of distance education as providing access to the most marginalised and disenfranchised if we do not consider the digital divide seriously.

5. (In) conclusions: Implications for regulating distributed learning in Namibia - some pointers

Allow me to conclude with 10 points of departure to consider in contemplating the size, shape, and contours of open, distance education in Namibia:

1. (Open) distance education is a many-splendored phenomenon and should be guided what is appropriate in a particular context, taking note of international trends of good practice.

2. Quality assurance and accreditation of institutions/ programs face an incredibly difficult task, especially when funding depends on definitions, students' futures depend on accreditation, and online learning comes in many shapes and sizes.
3. The 'iron triangle' is still a very helpful way to consider the tensions between cost, quality, and access in the context of different stakeholders' expectations.
4. We must consider what form online learning takes in a low bandwidth context as Namibia without ignoring society's seemingly inevitable digital transformation.
5. We should not attempt to replicate residential or face–to–face learning experiences – but find a new liberatory, if not revolutionary, potential of (open) distance education.
6. Effective, appropriate, and quality (open) distance education is *not* possible without effective and response administrative and student support systems and staff.
7. (Academic) staff burnout is real and a huge concern. Without staff who are well and feel appreciated, quality teaching and learning are not possible.
8. What are the implications for 24/7/365 for systems, staff, processes, students, accreditation, and quality assurance?
9. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a major game-changer with cost, quality, and access implications. However, more than cost, quality, and access, large language models have dramatic implications for knowledge, coming-to-know, and validation of knowledge claims.
10. What can/should we automate? What are the quality, cost, and access implications for automating elements of student administration, teaching, and learning, and … assessment? What should we NOT automate

Thinking about the accreditation of and quality assurance in open, distance education provision in Namibia, I conclude this Public Lecture with the following pointers:

1. Was it specifically designed, planned, costed and quality assured for distance education (less than % campus)?
2. Who are the (envisaged) students? How does the course/program address their specific aspirations and needs?
3. What is the distance education/e-learning background/experience of the teaching staff?
4. Were the course materials and the learning experience designed by a team of professionals consisting of at least a discipline expert, an instructional expert, industry, students, ICT, and language editor?
5. How appropriate is the materials/content/interactivity for the technology requirements of the course?
6. Are students informed regarding what materials are included/excluded in their registration fees, as well as additional requirements regarding compulsory aspects (e.g. work-integrated learning/practicums) that may have cost implications?
7. What are the envisaged levels of interactivity (students-students, students-content, student-teacher, student/teacher/AI) and what are the implications for student-teacher ratios, quality, access, and cost?

8. What are the (compulsory)asynchronous/synchronous elements in the offering and are students informed?
9. Do students know exactly what technologies they should have access to, how often, and at what level of competence?
10. What early warning alert systems are in place to alert teachers/support staff of student drop-out/disengagement?
11. What are the support systems in place for staff (administrative, ICT and psycho-social) and students (cognitive, administrative, ICT and psycho-social)?
12. How will the integrity of the summative assessment be assured?

Allow me to conclude - I started this Public Lecture by acknowledging that I am not an intellectual giant, a wizard, an entertainer, or a visionary. I claimed I was a weaver - weaving together some strands/colours that may allow Namibia to shape its design and understanding of open, distance learning.

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Panel discussion

The public lecture brought together distinguished panellists from four institutions actively engaged in accessing, evaluating and/or providing ODL. Through the exchange of experiences

and discussion on lessons learnt, the public lecture aimed to draw insights into how ODL may be able to contribute to the effective implementation of higher education models that are responsive to contemporary needs and expectations.

The panel commenced with the moderator introducing the four panellists, namely;

- Prof. Paul Prinsloo – The University of South Africa (UNISA)
- Dr. Ismael Mubwadanrikwa – Association of Private Higher Education Institutions, Namibia (APHEIN)
- Mr. Wynand Diergaardt – The Namibian University of Science and Technology (NUST)
- Ms. Anna Imalwa – Namibian Open Learning Network Trust (NOLNet)

The moderator opened the discussion afterward by inviting the panellists to share their initial reactions and insights on the keynote presentation.

Mr Wynand Diergaardt, the Director of Satellite Campuses and Lifelong Learning Support at NUST described the keynote presentation as informative and interesting. He reflected on the changes in ODL implemented at NUST post-COVID and emphasised the importance of continuous learning and adaptation in response to emerging trends and challenges in ODL. Furthermore, he expressed interest in leveraging the insights from the presentation to shape future ODL initiatives at NUST.

Dr Ishmael Mubwandarikwa, Director of the Business School at The International University of Management (IUM) and representative of the Association of Private Higher Education Institutions (APHEIN), highlighted his work experience at higher learning institutions, such as NUST and the University of Namibia (UNAM), where he described the process of implementing distance learning options as rigorous. He acknowledged the need to demystify information about ODL and emphasized the importance of quality and the power of changing perceptions in driving effective ODL strategies across institutions. Furthermore, he emphasized the role of collaboration and partnership among institutions to enhance the quality and perception of ODL programs.

Ms. Anna Imalwa, the Executive Secretary of the Namibian Open Learning Network Trust (NOLNet), began by sharing insights into NOLNet's mission and the challenges they have faced. She highlighted NOLNet's role as a national trust that fostered collaboration among publicly funded ODL institutions. She further emphasised the importance of sharing resources and expertise amongst institutions to deliver quality ODL programs. She underscored her six-year tenure with NOLNet, which coincided with the implementation of the national policy on ODL and noted the growing enthusiasm for ODL in Namibia, with private institutions also joining the effort. However, she also acknowledged some challenges facing ODL, including funding, student retention, and implementation of quality assurance mechanisms.

Following the panellists' first impressions of the keynote presentation, the moderator emphasised the contemporary challenges in knowledge production and the need for flexible pathways in higher education institutions. The discussion continued with the moderator directing a question to Prof. Prinsloo regarding the quality of learning experiences in Namibia's context, considering the increase in course enrolment for ODL in Namibia in tandem with persistently high rates of youth unemployment. Prof. Prinsloo urged for the adoption of a holistic approach that goes beyond access to prioritize success and quality outcomes for students in ODL programs. He emphasized the need for a well-developed regulatory environment - citing NUST's comprehensive ODL policy as a positive example - and called for a deeper understanding of existing research principles in distance education to inform policy development and to ensure quality and accreditation standards are fulfilled. Furthermore, he stressed the collaborative effort needed among higher education, government, and industry to address the larger economic factors affecting job availability and his concern about students enrolling with unrealistic expectations about job prospects post-qualification, underscoring the importance of defining success beyond just access. Prof. Prinsloo's response highlighted the unemployment statistics in Namibia, which currently stands at 46% among young people, and cautioned against the misconception that qualifications alone guarantee employment opportunities.

Thereafter, Mr. Wynand and Dr. Ishmael were questioned on their insights into what has worked and what hasn't worked with ODL in their respective experiences. Dr Mubwandarikwa responded by emphasizing the need to demystify ODL and suggested that promoting it as an alternative pathway for qualifications should focus on dispelling negative perceptions through quantitative evidence, and active promotion needs to be prioritised by HEIs.

Mr. Diergaardt responded by sharing what worked well for NUST, such as involving instructional designers and faculty experts in creating study guides, leading to positive feedback from students. However, he also highlighted a current challenge regarding the integration of distance education into faculties, noting a lack of adequate student support as a significant issue. Ms. Imalwa also added to the discussion by emphasizing the importance of collaboration, partnerships, and networking among institutions in the ODL environment. She mentioned the benefits of accessing expertise from various sources through similar collaborations, despite the

persistent public perception issue regarding the perceived lower standard of ODL qualifications compared to traditional learning methods. Regarding these challenges, Dr. Mubwandarikwa highlighted infrastructure limitations in Namibia, specifically regarding learning management systems and broadband connectivity as particularly pertinent. He also mentioned the preference for more affordable platforms due to budget constraints and the ongoing struggle with limited bandwidth and the absence of advanced technologies such as 5G. The moderator highlighted both successes and ongoing challenges in the ODL landscape, ranging from dispelling misconceptions and improving study materials to addressing infrastructure and public perception issues.

Furthermore, a question on the collaborative model among institutions was posed to Prof. Prinsloo, which emphasised the fear stemming from competition in smaller market economics and the incentive in encouraging a collaborative model that aligns with business interests for the respective institutions. In response, Prof Prinsloo highlighted a crucial perspective; the recognition that content alone cannot sustain institutions into the future, as students have access to vast online resources. With numerous educational videos available on platforms like YouTube on various subjects, the suggested focus needs to shift from content creation to value addition through storytelling and comprehensive support mechanisms. Furthermore, he emphasized the importance of providing cognitive, social, economic, and administrative support to students, framing UNISA's value proposition not in material production but in guiding students through their learning journeys and noted the distinct value propositions of different institutions such as NUST and UNAM - suggesting a strategic focus on these unique strengths.

Regarding the distinction between traditional and online learning models, Prof. Prinsloo further highlighted the flexibility inherent in online learning, particularly asynchronous and low-bandwidth options, allowing students to learn at their own pace and convenience, emphasizing that this flexibility is especially appealing to campus-based students, contributing to the significant growth in online learning. Prof. Prinsloo lastly expressed confidence in the quality and value of online learning experiences, suggesting they can rival, if not surpass, traditional lecture room experiences in terms of educational outcomes and overall value.

Questions from the audience

The moderator, opened the discussion to the audience:

- Mr. Simon inquired about the quality assurance provisions in UNISA's regulations and policies at both institutional and national levels, particularly concerning benchmarking from UNISA as a university. Additionally, he sought clarification on the expectations outlined by the presenters, regarding the quality assurance mechanisms?

- Mr. Frans sought insight into the underlying factors contributing to quality higher education, questioning whether it primarily aligns with attitudes, values, income, or rewards.

- Mr. Jemeneus shared personal challenges faced in open learning environments about support systems and contextualizing academic language and questioning the need for accessible education for workers, proposing the involvement of mentors in aiding to understand assignments and academic requirements within flexible learning structures?

- Mr. Jan Nitschke explained the role of institutions like NAMCOL in opening educational opportunities for those historically marginalized due to inequalities and raised concerns about the challenges faced in accreditation efforts for open institutions.

- Ms. Nisha advocated for deeper discussions and workshops on quality and accreditation topics, emphasizing the need for independent learning and clearer communication between education regulators and funding agencies to address access and quality challenges across various sectors.

- Mr. Eureka made a specific observation regarding the exclusion of ODL-related aspects in recent standards issued by NCHE, urging reconsideration and the inclusion of distance learning components within future policy considerations.

Thereafter, the panellists were accorded the opportunity to answer the questions from the audience.

Prof. Prinsloo addressed various questions simultaneously, and in response to Mr. Eureka, he acknowledged the gap in the recent standards issued by the NCHE and noted the importance of addressing such issues with the NCHE directly. He then turned to Ms. Nisha's comments on the challenges of English comprehension skills among students entering the system.

Regarding student support and expectations, Prof. Prinsloo discussed the communication gap between students and academic requirements. He shared experiences from his time as a student advisor, where students often underestimated the time commitment required for their studies. He stressed the need for clearer communication and support systems that meet students where they are, without spoon-feeding them, but rather guiding them effectively.

On flexibility in learning, Prof. Prinsloo referred the example of universities such as Northwestern University in the United States of America, which offers a flexible model allowing students to register and take examinations at their own pace. While acknowledging the benefits of such flexibility, he also highlighted the regulatory challenges and the need for further exploration of

flexible learning models. Responding to Mr. Francs' concerns about the values instilled in graduates, Prof. Prinsloo mentioned UNISA's efforts to embed values through signature courses in each college or faculty. He provided an example of a course titled "Greed and Sustainability" in the College of Economic and Management Sciences, emphasizing the importance of imparting values beyond monetary gain to graduates. Lastly, he addressed Mr. Jemeneus' concerns about referencing and resources for students and encouraged students to explore the wealth of free resources available online for referencing and study techniques, emphasizing the need to guide students to these resources rather than developing additional courses.

Ms. Anna Imwala emphasized the importance of collective effort among ODL practitioners and officials. She underscored the need for unity to progress in a cohesive direction, especially concerning advancements in ODL-related education. Additionally, she pointed out the inadequacies in funding support for academics and researchers wanting to present papers at various platforms and conferences, stressing the vital role of research in informing and advancing educational practices while calling for enhanced backing and support for research initiatives within institutions to facilitate growth and innovation in ODL.

Dr. Mubwandarikwa acknowledged the importance of inclusive consultations and research in exploring and rationalizing ODL. He noted the challenges faced by private institutions in terms of funding and the need to carve out a space in the education landscape. Additionally, he highlighted the need for honesty and inclusivity, urging organizations like NCHE to be more open and collaborative in their approach, and also highlighted the importance of creating educational materials that resonate with self-learning individuals. Dr. Mubwandarikwa expressed optimism about the journey towards adopting e-learning platforms and distance education, acknowledging the courage and determination required to navigate challenges in the education sector. Regarding the differences between public and private institutions in implementing ODL, Dr Mubwandarikwa added that public institutions generally have more capacity and easier access to funding compared to private institutions. He emphasized the financial challenges faced by private institutions in producing and distributing educational materials, calling for collaboration with NCHE to make informed, data-driven decisions in improving ODL as HEIs move forward.

Mr. Wynand Diergaardt addressed the audience's questions by highlighting ongoing efforts to revise the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policy through NOLNET. He emphasized the importance of collaboration among institutions and the support currently available, expressing optimism about the potential for swift revisions with collective effort. Mr. Diergaardt underscored the need to focus on enhancing flexibility within ODL, noting that current structures often lack the necessary adaptability. He suggested that revisiting flexibility could lead to improvements in open access, ultimately benefiting a broader range of learners, particularly those facing financial challenges. Furthermore, Mr. Diergaardt called attention to the funding issues that many students encounter, leading to high dropout rates. He urged stakeholders, including the Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund (NSFAF) and the government, to consider measures that could alleviate financial burdens for students pursuing ODL programs. By

addressing these challenges and promoting greater flexibility and accessibility, Mr. Diergaardt emphasized the potential to enhance educational opportunities and outcomes for a broader segment of the population.

The moderator acknowledged the significance of the 12th public lecture in providing relevant insights into the dynamics of ODL. Given the uncertainties of the future, for instance, with the increased prevalence of artificial intelligence (AI) and other large language learning models, the development and support of flexible learning pathways embedded in ODL were deemed to be significant to the success of HEIs. Thus, the discussion under the theme 'unpacking the future of ODL- trends and policy considerations for Namibia' was a fundamental step in ensuring that many marginalised students were able to enter higher education and that the system is able to provide quality higher education in more dynamic ways that ensure the teaching and learning is central to the student experience and the HEIs ability to enhance learning experiences in changing physical and digital environments.

Appendix A: Media advert

Appendix B: Programme

NCHE
EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION

12TH PUBLIC LECTURE

THEME:
"Unpacking the Future of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)
- Trends and Policy Considerations for Namibia"

PROGRAMME

Mode: In person Moderator: Patrick Sam

TIME	ACTIVITY	PRESENTER
17:30	Arrival & registration	NCHE Secretariat
18h00	Welcoming remarks	Dr. Francina Keendjele, NCHE Deputy Chairperson
18h15	Keynote presentation	Prof. Paul Prinsloo (UNISA)
19h00	Panel discussions	Prof. Paul Prinsloo Dr. Ishmael Mubwadanrika (APHEIN) Ms Anna Imalwa (NOLNet) Mr Wynand Diergaardt (NUST)
19h40	Audience Engagement	Patrick Sam
20h00	Closing	Patrick Sam

We would like to involve you in the planning of public lectures on higher education. Please share your ideas on theme(s) you would like us to consider for the next lecture. _____

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NCHE would like to thank you sincerely
for your participation in the 12th Public Lecture.

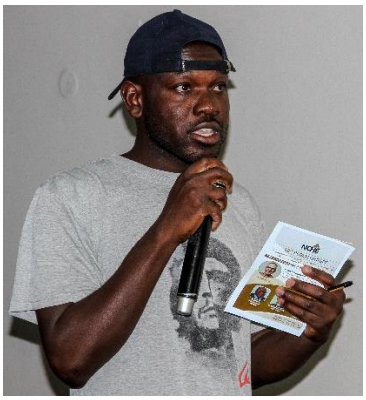
Appendix C: List of participants

Representative	Institution Name
1. Theo Ickua	Agra Provision
2. Ishmael Mubwadanrikwa	APHEIN
3. Ellis Tjiueza	Ellis Investments
4. Sifani Sifani	Intelligent Data Dynamic
5. Ilana Calitz	IOL
6. Bianca Tjiuoro	Limkokwing
7. N Tjihukununa	Limkokwing
8. Mwaka C	Lingua
9. Hope Tshuna	Lingua
10. Frans Koolike	Media
11. Tuwilica Kahuika	Min of ICT
12. Jona Haukongo	NAMCOL
13. Jan Nitschke	NAMCOL
14. Hanna Garises	NAMCOL
15. Abisai Kamati	NAMCOL
16. Sifani Sifani	NAMRA
17. Vigilant Hangula	NCHE
18. Francine Keendiele	NCHE
19. Eveline Shinana	NCHE
20. Rochelle Januarie	NCHE
21. A N Mbulu	NCHE
22. Sylvia Demas	NCHE
23. Indileni Shavuka	NCHE
24. L Oarum	NCHE
25. Sem Shikongo	NCHE

Representative	Institution Name
26. Astrid Mughongora	NCHE
27. Anna N Imalwa	NOLNET
28. Indileni M	NQA
29. Josef Shongela	NQA
30. Fillemon Iyambo	NQA
31. Petrina Uugwanga	NQA
32. Fillemon Iyambo	NQA
33. S Hangalo	NTA
34. Tobias Nambala	NTA
35. Letu Demas	NUST
36. Colen Tuaundu	NUST
37. S Pule	NUST
38. Moses Tjirae	Okakarara VTC
39. Augustine Odo	Personal capacity
40. Theo Kamupingene	Personal Capacity
41. Shangula	Personal Capacity
42. Jemeneus Paavo	Personal Capacity
43. Ndeshi Afunde	Personal Capacity
44. Atict Thathikica	Personal Capacity
45. Hileni Nangolo privela	Personal Capacity
46. Severina Nahgo	Personal Capacity
47. Ndapewa Nghaamua	Personal Capacity
48. A Namtiala	Personal Capacity
49. A Nangombe	Personal Capacity
50. Shangula	Personal Capacity
51. Austin Uno	Sedis cc

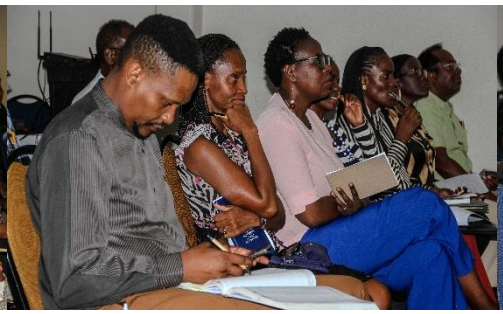
Representative	Institution Name
52. E S Ndala	Spacatu
53. B Simasiku	Stadio Namibia
54. Alfred Kaumupingene	Triumphant College
55. B K Thekwane	Triumphant College
56. L Gorases	Triumphant College
57. Oluwale M	Triumphant College
58. Simon N S	UNAM
59. Nicollette Mutenda	UNAM
60. Godwin V Murangi	UNAM / CILT
61. H Petrus	WHTC
62. Robert Kopano	WHTC
63. Moses A	WHTC
64. Neville Uandae	WVTC

Appendix D: Photo Gallery








Notes

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CONTACTS

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Klein Windhoek

NAMIBIA