

Saide thoughts on an ODL model – draft discussion document



November 2009



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2009

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Saide thoughts on an institutional model for ODL practice

1. Introduction

What does it mean to be an ODL institution?

This document is based on a discussion document prepared initially for engagement with Unisa as the beginnings of a possible partial answer to the above question. However, this version has been revised somewhat to make it more accessible to a more general audience. It is a work in progress and so it is hoped will provoke comment and feedback.

An extensive body of literature exists on the systemic nature of ODL provision and the implications of changing elements of institutional subsystems on the whole system (COL 2001, 2004; GDEnet, Rowntree 1992; Holmberg 1995; Moore and Kearsley 1996; Rumble 1997; Peters 1998; Perraton 2002). We will not debate the notion of ODL itself here however.

In addition, engagement with the Council on Higher Education on quality assurance issues in higher education and a comparison with the quality concerns of the Nadeosa community (CHE 2004 a, b, c, Welch and Reed 2005, CHE 2007) suggests that broad concerns are shared but that particular aspects of practice require nuancing and special attention in an ODL context. What is also clear is that we need to see quality guidelines not in an atomistic checklist way but rather in ways in which inter-dependencies are made clear, that is systemically and holistically. This discussion document makes an initial attempt to do this.

2. Form follows function

This discussion document takes as a starting point the modernist architectural notion that form follows function. In other words, it means recognising that the distinguishing characteristic of an ODL institution (or an ODL unit within a contact-based institution) is the way in which it needs to organise or re-organise systems and resources to support teaching and learning without necessarily requiring teachers and learners to be in the same space at the same time. Secondary to this is the fact that distance education in particular is often linked with large scale provision in an effort to achieve economies of scale and therefore any change needs to be carefully evaluated, planned, piloted and evaluated before being institutionalised as small changes may have enormous impact. As an aside, it is interesting to note that the increasing use of social learning theory in Web 2.0 mediated teaching in both distance and contact institutions is potentially pushing costing back towards the tutorial-based system of education provision (see Rumble 1997, 2004).

This understanding is summarised in Figure 1 below.

The model begins with the institution's (or unit's) vision, mission and policy framework which identify it as an ODL institution or perhaps a contact-based institution also offering ODL programmes.

It notes that the appropriate use of ICTs is critical to all aspects of the institution's operations as is a regional support infrastructure in which well-equipped regional hubs support a flexible network of sites of contact and ongoing professional development.

It argues that the core business of an ODL institution or Unit comprises teaching and learning, research and community engagement like any other higher education institution but that these may take different forms given the ODL context. The model further proceeds from the understanding that human resourcing is based on the following kinds of assumptions (with implications based on a Saide working year model) about the relative weightings of the core business activities:

- Teaching and learning 70% (which implies that the average academic could expect to spend $0,7 \times 220$ days = 154 days a year on teaching and learning activities)
- Research 15% (which implies that the average academic could expect to spend $0,15 \times 220$ days = 33 days a year in research related activities – including research into own ODL practice)
- Community engagement/academic citizenship 15% (which implies that the average academic could expect to spend $0,15 \times 220$ days = 33 days a year in community engagement/academic citizenship activities).

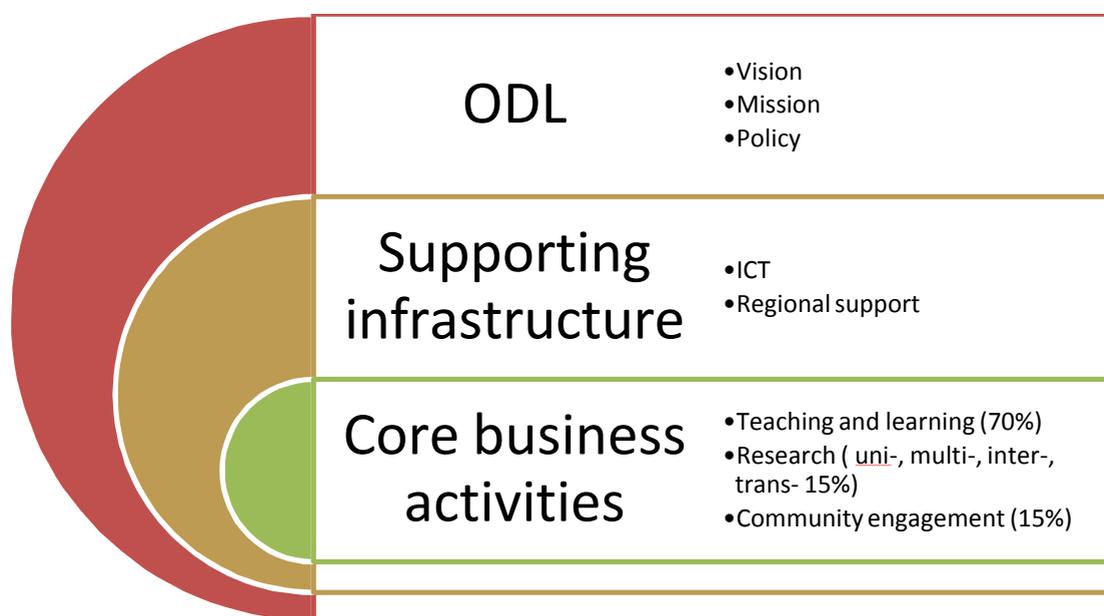


Figure 1: Form follows function

This understanding is in line with Nadeosa Quality Criterion 1 on Policy and planning and has the following practical implications:

- ODL informs vision and mission (note that CHE criteria require institutions to provide a justification in line with vision and mission for the use of ODL approaches)
- ODL policy informs strategic and operational planning and management and in particular the need to design learning opportunities for diverse audiences in diverse contexts and the need to provide decentralised support
- ODL informs organisational architecture
- There is a need for alignment between the human resourcing model and ODL practice: in general ODL is characterised by relatively small numbers of full-time, permanent and centralised staff and relatively large numbers of part-time, decentralised staff.

3. The core business of ODL provision is teaching and learning

Saide sees the core business of an ODL institution or unit to be teaching and learning as this accounts for 70% of the income and expenditure of the institution and is at the heart of its mission. Saide understands that quality learning arises from the integration in a cohesive and coherent learning experience of quality course materials, appropriate assessment and appropriate, decentralised student support as illustrated in Figure 2. Each of these aspects of the teaching and learning experience should be informed by the learner profile which will change over time and therefore trends need to be tracked regarding, for example, the demographic profile of registering and graduating students and their technology profile.

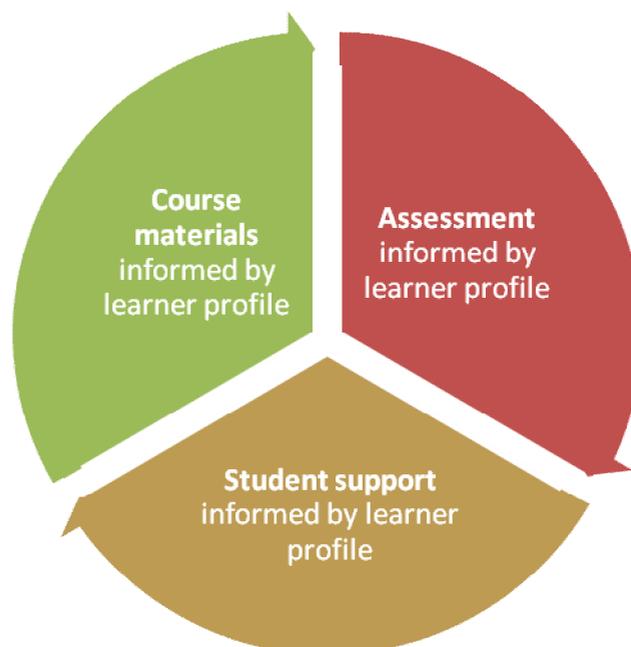


Figure 2: Core business: teaching and learning

Saide further understands that an appropriate teaching and learning experience is not only student audience specific but also context specific and that a one-size fits all approach will not be possible. A very small enrolment course with reasonable pass rates offered in correspondence mode (plus perhaps a limited online presence) might be retained in this mode; but a high enrolment course with low pass rates needs to see more of the income it generates ploughed back into improved support which might move it closer to a generation 4/5 ODL experience. At the same time, it is not possible to manage a large institution if there are no broadly accepted guidelines - there cannot be as many systems and approaches as there are modules for example. Therefore Saide supports the notion of guidelines that set parameters for decision-making which allow for a pragmatic compromise between specific contextual needs on the one hand and the realities of large systems management on the other. So, for example, a guideline like ‘there should be at least two formative assessments and one summative assessment per module’ provides sufficient structure to establish and maintain assessment systems but sufficient openness to allow for appropriate contextually informed teaching and learning decisions e.g. more than two formative assessments, a summative assessment that is not an examination e.g. an art exhibition or a practice portfolio. This means that key decisions made about teaching, learning and assessment will vary from programme to programme as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

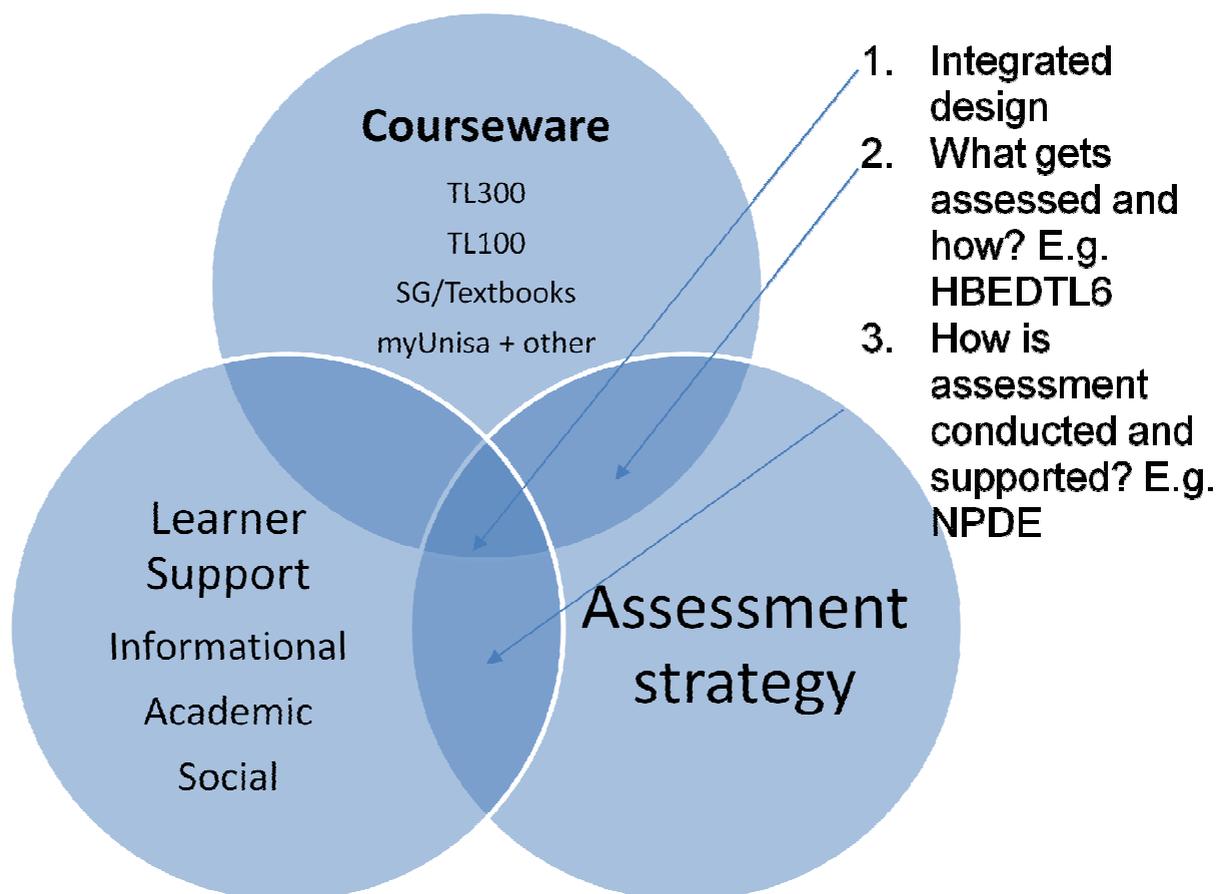


Figure 3: The inter-related nature of teaching and learning design in an ODL context

Figure 3 argues that the design of a meaningful learning experience requires an integrated approach.

For example, the design team needs to make broad decisions about the link between the assessment strategy and the courseware. In Unisa's HBEDTL6 module in 2008/9, the examination paper included both compulsory questions based on the course material and optional questions based on both the course material and myUnisa discussion strands. Thus students who had participated in the myUnisa discussions were able to build on these; but those who had not were not disadvantaged since there were also optional topics based on the core materials.

Another example of a decision that needs to be made by the design team is the link between the assessment strategy and the learner support offered. For example, the Unisa NPDE programme included the development of portfolios as integrated assessment requirements over and above the individual module assessments. These portfolios were subject to self-, peer- and tutor assessment. So tutors needed to be empowered to facilitate this process during the three tutorials offered each year: orientation (what is expected and why); maintenance (progress and problem-solving); consolidation (including time for students to present their portfolios to groups of their peers for peer assessment) – an approach adopted from the University of Fort Hare's distance BEd programme.

The design process must therefore pay attention to what could be called the 'storyline' for each module and programme to ensure coherence and progression from in-text activities to formative assignment activities and then to summative assessment tasks (which are not necessarily examinations); and from fundamental, to core to elective module components of programmes to ensure that all the constituent parts build towards achievement of the programme purpose and exit level outcomes and competences.

These recommendations are in line with Nadeosa criteria 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 and support a teamwork approach and process for programme and module development. This is summarised in Figure 4 below.

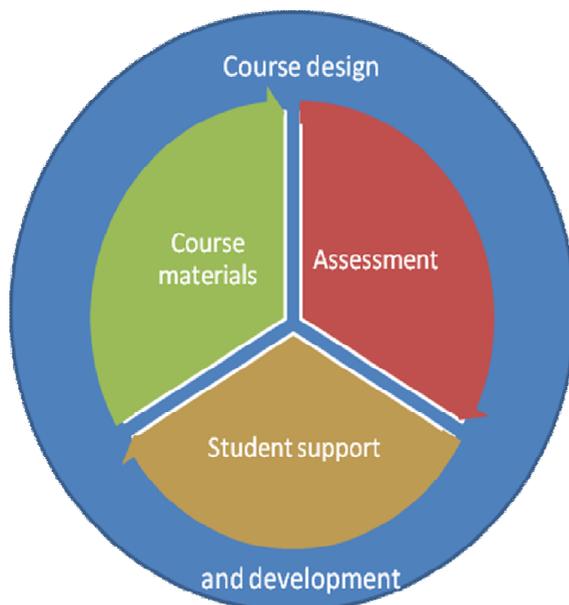


Figure 4: ODL requires an integrated approach to design and development

Achievement of this integrated team design process will require:

- Academic planning office, quality assurance, academic staff at college, school, department, programme and module level, design, student support, production, ICT, past and present students, and external stakeholders are all involved in team decision-making about changed design, development and delivery of programmes and courses
- Decisions integrate outcomes/content/support and assessment in the design stage.

4. Teaching and learning decisions should be grounded in theory, research and practical community engagement

Decisions made about the design and development of courses need to be grounded in appropriate research and courses should have a positive impact on and require students to engage with relevant communities (a key recommendation from a 2007 CHE report on improving teaching by requiring greater active student engagement).

This is illustrated in Figure 5 below.

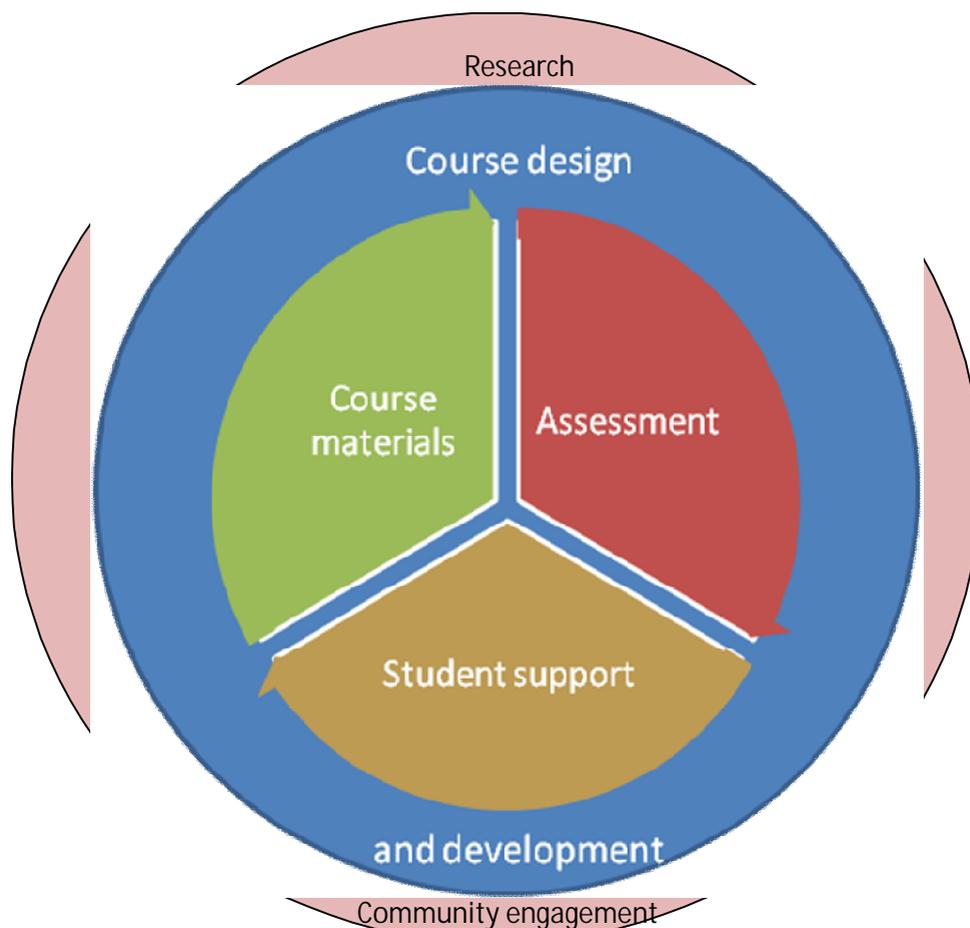


Figure 5: ODL course design informed by research and community engagement

Among other things, the approach advocated above is in line with Nadeosa quality criteria 11 and 13 and indicates the following:

- Need to explore ways to link teaching and learning, research and community engagement needs
- Research outputs need to include both disciplinary (uni-, multi-, inter- and trans-) as well as ODL practice
- Research outputs and community engagement demonstrably feed back into improved teaching.

5. Evaluative research into the link between input, process, output and impact

When we design an ODL programme we do so on the basis of assumptions made about the anticipated impact of design decisions regarding input and process on the quality of outputs and impact. So the design phase needs also to include plans for evaluating whether or not the decisions made had the desired impact in practice. The inter-relationship between curriculum design, development and delivery requires a cyclical iterative process and can be illustrated as follows (Mays and Swanepoel 2009) in Figure 6:

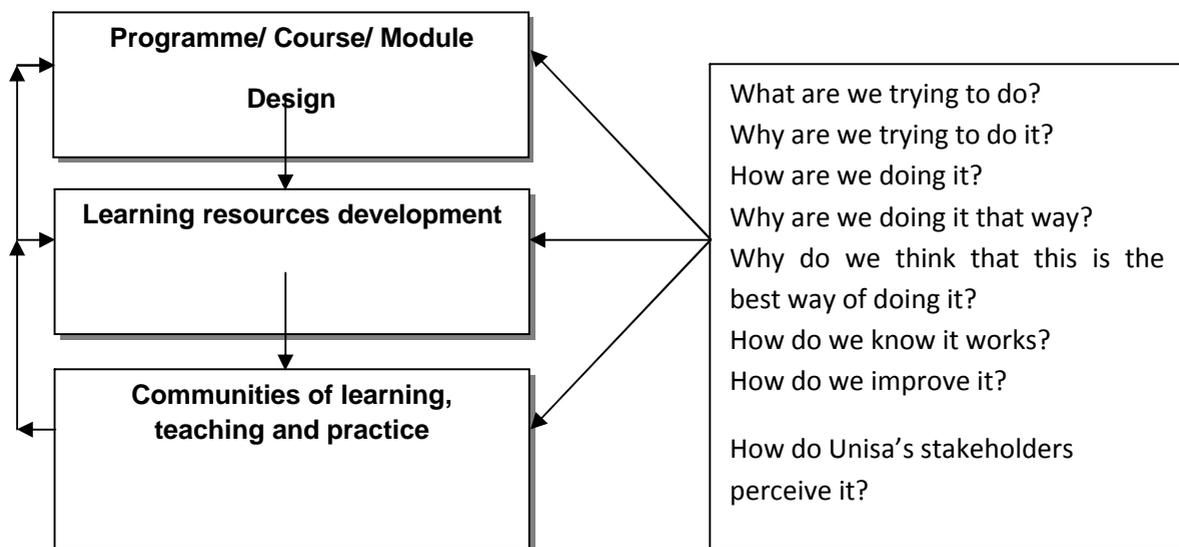


Figure 6: Overview of design/development protocol

The diagram seeks to illustrate the three interconnected phases in the life cycles of programmes and materials and how each of these phases should be informed by critical questions about assuring and improving quality.

All development cycles begin with a design phase. This covers all activities from the initial identification of a learning need, through conception of how that need can best be addressed through to development of a project plan to develop, implement and evaluate the programme and its materials. Even where the focus is on a course or an individual module, cognizance must be taken of the relationship to the larger programme. The design phase includes making decisions about how students will access the programme; the teaching, learning and assessment processes and the identification and mobilization of the necessary supporting resources. Different decisions will be made based on the relevant learner profile and programme exit level outcomes.

The learning resources development phase involves the production, publication and dissemination of the learning resources including the necessary support systems. It covers activities such as the development of templates, drafting, critical reviews, production processes, stock control and dispatch or dissemination. It is possible that during the development phase, questions will arise that result in the design being questioned and perhaps revised. In other words curriculum development is seen as an iterative process not an event and the actual development pathway will vary from programme to programme.

The communities of learning, teaching and practice phase is concerned with how learning resources are utilized and with evaluation of their efficacy. It presupposes a focus on active student engagement, including interaction between students, and with how academic and support staff work together, including with stakeholders external to the institution, to ensure quality teaching and learning and the continuous monitoring and review of practice. During the processes of learning and teaching it is possible that gaps will be identified or assumptions disproved that result in the need to develop new/additional resources, or to revise the use of existing resources or even to revisit the initial design. In addition to ongoing formative evaluation, it is expected that the design phase will have planned activities for the formal summative evaluation of the programme and that these evaluation activities will demonstrably feed back into design and development review processes.

Each phase should be informed by the key questions and self-, peer- and stakeholder-evaluation processes that inform the quality management system (in this example the Unisa *Integrated Quality Management System* - Unisa 2008b).

Managing the process of course delivery requires making decisions in the design phase about:

- Academic course coordination
- What will be dispatched, when and how
- How assignments will be managed
- What student support will be offered, when and how.

This is illustrated in Figure 7 below and in this respect Saide has learned a lot from its engagement with the University of Pretoria, Distance Education Unit.

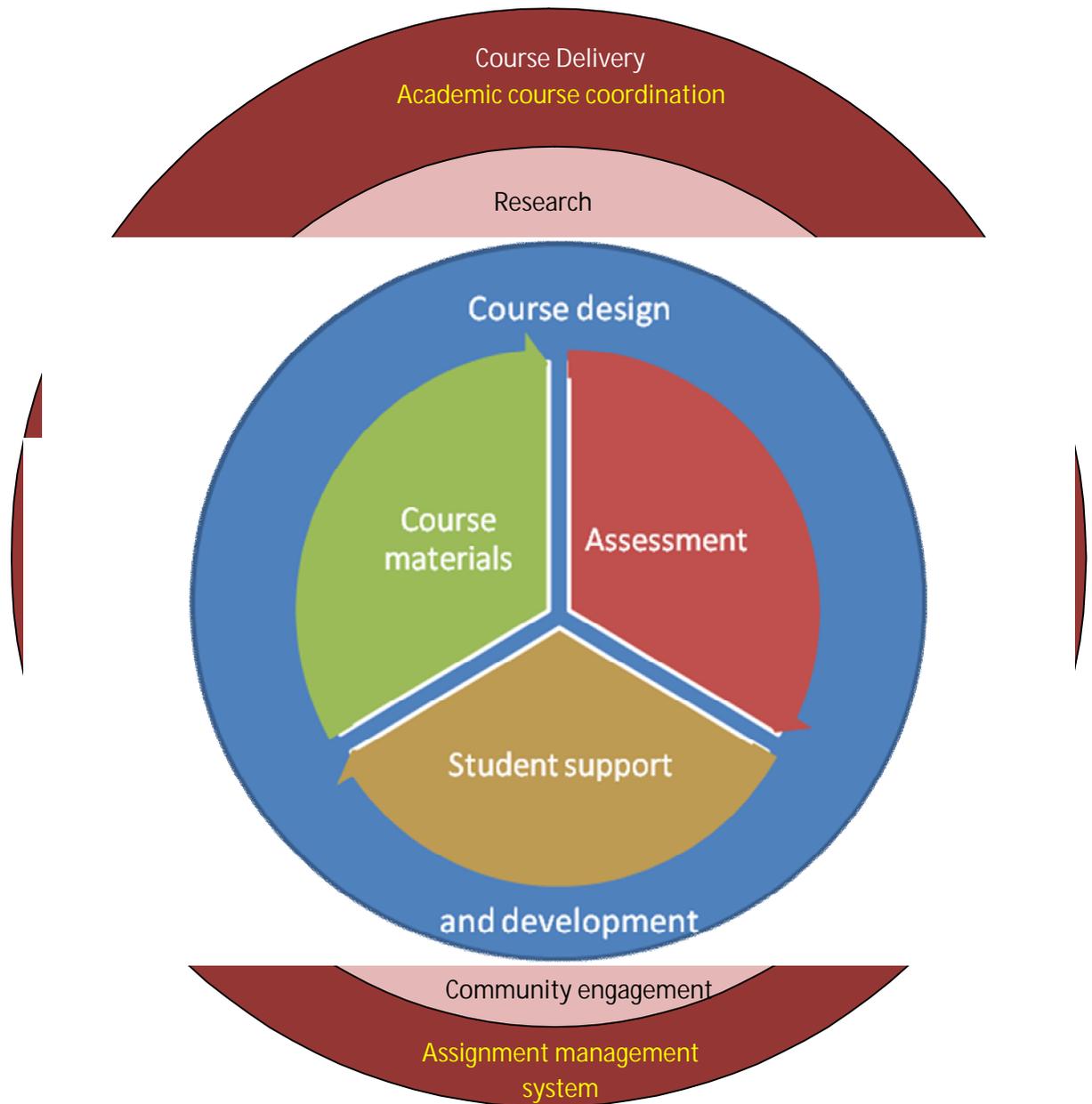


Figure 7: There is a continuous interplay between design, development and delivery

6. Supporting systems

ODL requires a holistic and systemic approach. However, the various sub-systems are not ends in themselves and the key indicator of the quality of the various sub-systems is the extent to which they support the core business of teaching and learning.

This is illustrated in Figure 8 below.

7. Regional coordination and library support	6. Effective operational management	5. Registration
8. Graduation and alumni	Core business activities (See Figure 7)	4. Counselling (incl. Career/ financial).
1. Production	2. Marketing	3. Recruitment

Figure 8: The key sub-systems supporting the core business of an ODL institution

The key supporting sub-systems are numbered in the sequence in which they tend to impact on the core business (and can be mapped to the ‘student walk’ in the Unisa *ODL Policy – Unisa 2008b*).

We begin with 1. Production because in an ODL system we need to ensure that all core learning resources must be available before registration so that students receive a complete study package on enrolment. This is particularly important in a semester system

We then move to 2. Marketing. We should not begin marketing until we are certain that the necessary learning resources will be available. Marketing should be both general and targeted to meet specific national needs e.g. for more potential accountants, scientists, Foundation Phase teachers based in rural areas etc.

We then move to 3. Recruitment. Recruitment here refers to the additional recruitment of mentors/tutors etc (including more senior students to mentor at a lower level) as emerging enquiry and enrolment patterns allow the institution to begin to predict additional areas of need. These new staff members need appropriate induction training.

We then move to 4. Counselling. This is in the belief that student support begins prior to registration with the counseling of students regarding their possible enrolment choices and options. The proposed ROAP system would be included here. If NBTs are used, for example, students must be counseled regarding the options that are open to them on the basis of their NBT performance. All students need guidance regarding subject combinations, possible career pathways, the financial, time and other implications of enrolment choices etc. This support must be available in a decentralised form with both on-line and contact-based modalities.

After being counselled, students can 5. Register. Accurate databases must be established and maintained from registration data to allow the ongoing analysis of trends in the changing student profile for each programme. Students must receive a complete study package on registration or within two weeks of registration given the short study period of the semester system.

Once registration has been completed, 6. Effective operational management and 7. Regional coordination and library support will determine whether or not the “delivery” process is effected as planned. This requires, among other things, effective management of human resources, administration, information and, where applicable, collaborations (e.g. for WIL) and ensuring that regional support hubs (and the networks of centres they support) are appropriately resourced and managed (which is generally NOT the case at present as a recent CHS report attests to). This will require active monitoring and pro-active intervention where necessary.

It is suggested that this requires:

- A recognition that responsible open access also means responsible registration in line with institutional capacity to deliver and hence the implementation of quotas
- Strengthened accountability at module and programme level backed by appropriate human resource allocations; and
- Human resource monitoring and support
- Ongoing professional development.

Figure 9 below suggests the mapping of existing Unisa structures onto the core business and supporting key sub-systems as an example. Other institutions will have different structures and consideration of the diagram may suggest new structures that need to be considered either at Unisa or at other institutions.

<p>7. Regional coordination and library support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Regional Offices ○ Ethiopian Satellite ○ Tutorial Services, Discussion Classes & Work Integrated Learning • Library 	<p>6. Effective operational management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Assessment Administration • Finance • Enterprise Risk Management • Legal Services • Human Resources • International Relations and Partnerships • Community Engagement and Outreach • Information and Strategic Analysis • Strategy, Planning and Quality Assurance • IODL ongoing professional development 	<p>5. Registration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Admission and Registration
<p>8. Graduation and alumni</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact Centre, Graduations and Record Management 	<p style="text-align: center; color: red;">Core business activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic departments, schools and colleges • Directorate of Curriculum Design and Development • IODL • Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities • Programme Accreditation and Registration • Student Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Regional Offices ○ Ethiopian Satellite ○ Tutorial Services, Discussion Classes & Work Integrated Learning • Library • Research • Bureau for Market Research • Indigenous Technological Knowledge Unit. 	<p>4. Counselling (incl. Career/financial).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directorate for Counselling, Career and Academic Development • Contact Centre, Graduations and Record Management
<p>1. Production</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study Material, Publication and Delivery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Despatch ○ Planning and coordination of study material ○ Print production ○ Language services ○ Unisa Press ○ Sound, video and photography 	<p>2. Marketing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate Communication and Marketing 	<p>3. Recruitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate Communication and Marketing • Human Resources • Student Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Regional Offices ○ Ethiopian Satellite ○ Tutorial Services, Discussion Classes & Work Integrated Learning • IODL induction

7. Supporting the system

The model outlined so far is based on the assumption that the overall system itself needs to be designed for purpose, maintained and adapted as needed. The two key pillars for this are seen to be:

- ICT – maximum use made of appropriate ICT to maximise efficiency and effectiveness and minimise disruptions and the challenges of manual manipulation e.g. of assignments etc. for large numbers but at the teaching level sensitive to audience constraints e.g. it can probably be anticipated that young working students will be more comfortable with mobile technologies and digital social interaction; more mature working students will probably be more comfortable with computer-based interaction and video-conferencing; and some student populations may be actively resistant to the use of new technologies for reasons like the added cost for rural students of getting access and/or because their profession itself is premised on direct human interaction e.g. teachers and health workers.
- Decentralised/regional support – in the design of ODL courses, designers must constantly give attention to the needs of students in diverse and remote locations – among other things this suggests the need for – COMPLETE study packages; open-ended assessment tasks that allow for contextualised responses; decentralised counselling, tutorial support, mentoring and/or peer collaborative learning.
- ODL induction for new recruits and ongoing professional development opportunities and expectations for experienced staff.

This is illustrated in Figure 10 below.

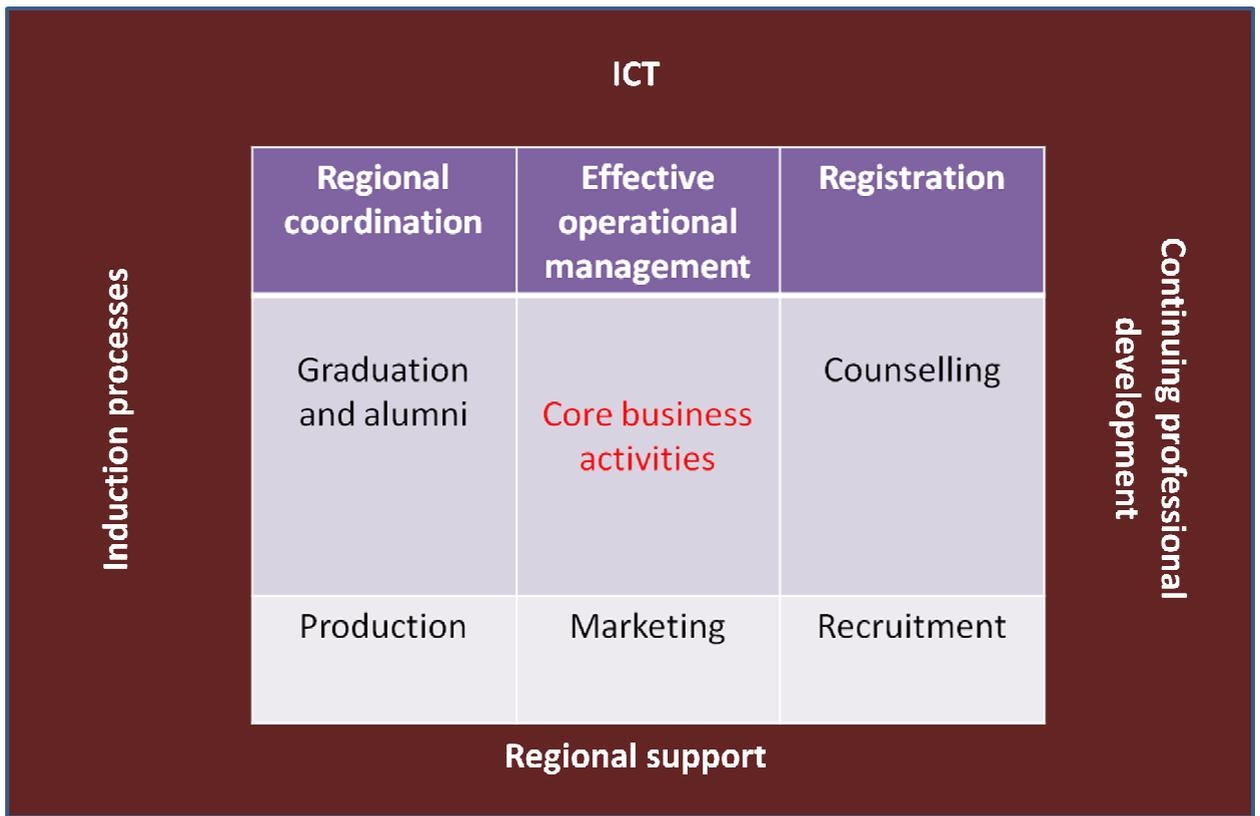


Figure 10: The key pillars supporting ODL practice

As Saide has noted in its ongoing engagement with Unisa, guidelines for judging the quality of core teaching and learning issues in an ODL context already exist and can be mapped onto the Unisa student walk as conceptualized in the *ODL Policy* (Unisa 2008b). This is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Saide has also been noted, that while the student walk is useful for reinforcing the idea of the student rather than the product as being at the heart of University activity and planning, there is need for a step 0 or step 6 which considers all the supporting structures and processes such as management, finance, HR and professional development etc.

Table 1: Mapping of selected existing quality indicators onto the ODL student walk at Unisa

Walk:				COL2004	NadQ 2005	CHEPA2004	CHEIA2004	Unisa IQMF				
1. Awareness and information				The target group and their needs Recruiting and enrolling students	NADQ1 NADQ2	Criterion 2.		Bench-marking	←	↑		
2. Application										↓		SLAs
3. Registration										Satisfaction surveys		↑
4. Teaching, learning and assessment	QPQM Project	HEQC Process	Framework (Current)					↓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are we trying to do? • Why are we trying to do it? • How are we doing it? • Why are we doing it that way? • Why do we think that this is the best way of doing it? • How do we know it works? • How do we improve it? • How do Unisa's stakeholders perceive it? (IQMF Unisa 2008:7)	Peer review		
	Design	Input	Steps 1-7		NADQ3 NADQ4	Criteria 1, 5, 6 and 9	Criterion 8			↑		
	Development	Input	Step 8	Developing and acquiring materials	NADQ5							
	"Delivery"	Process	Step 9	Tutoring and supporting students Assessing students	NADQ6: NADQ7:	Criteria: 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16	Criteria: 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 12,13, 14					
Output			Step 10		NADQ13	Criterion 17						
5. Graduation, certification and lifelong learning		Impact		Evaluation	NADQ11	Criteria 18 and 19	Criteria 6 and 10	→	Self-evaluation	→		

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