Regional Open and Distance Learning Strategic Plan 2022-2030

March 2022

Acknowledgement

Preface

No learner should be denied access to quality education and training. In fact, irrespective of the colour, creed, gender, socio-economic status, and place of residence, everyone must have the opportunity to benefit from the best teaching and learning systems. With the growing exponential demand for education coupled with the fact that several countries are struggling to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, as reported in the UN SDG 2021 Report (UN, 2021), the SADC Secretariat with the support of UNESCO-ROSA, and the collaboration of the Member States (MS) and key stakeholders, have developed this Regional Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Strategic Plan 2022-2030. This plan aims at building on existing quality ODL policies and strategies in each MS at ECD, primary, secondary, post-secondary, tertiary, technical, and vocational levels in both public and private sectors, and adopts a lifelong learning approach.

ODL, especially when it is supported by digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, does not only have the potential of meeting the individual learning needs of each learner but also to take quality education and training to the doorsteps of everyone who is desirous to learn. Quality materials, which can be developed centrally together with audio, video, multimedia and animated lessons, can be made available to everyone. Of course, if there is sufficient bandwidth the learning can be done synchronously, and asynchronously through blended mode. The present report has also recommended the use of virtual labs in science subjects. .

MS have been involved throughout the development of this strategic plan. It started with a baseline study to gauge the status of ODL in the MS in 2019 (SADC & UNESCO, 2020). The findings of the baseline study were used to develop the current strategic plan. MS have been collaborating with the consultants so as to craft a plan that is relevant, impactful, and will empower learners, teachers and education management at institutional and system levels with skills and competencies that would allow them to contribute meaningfully in the progress of their communities and countries.

The implementation of this plan depends on a large number of stakeholders including donor partners, benefactors, MS, educational and training institutions, regulators, quality assurance agencies, and local partners. The SADC Secretariat will coordinate the implementation of this plan. One of the key elements of this plan is the establishment of the National ODL Councils that will bring together representatives of the of the ODL stakeholders in each MS. Representatives of the National ODL Councils will form part of the SADC ODL Council. Thus, the key ODL players in each MS will be working together with their counterparts in other MS. This network will be strengthened through the sharing of the best practices. This plan includes a monitoring and evaluation plan as well as an itemised budget. A mid-term review of this plan will be conducted in 2025.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AEP	Alternative Education Programme
AfDB	African Development Bank
AI	Appreciative Inquiry
BEC	Botswana Extension College
BOU	Botswana Open University
BOCODOL	Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (Now Botswana Open University)
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
CQF	Continental Quality Assurance Framework
DE	Distance Education
DEASA	Distance Education Association of Southern Africa
DEATA	Distance Education Association of Tanzania
DED	Distance Education Division (Ministry of Education, Botswana)
DEU	Distance Education Unit (University of Botswana)
DFNE	Department of Non Formal Education (Botswana)
DMU	Dual Mode Universities
DPE	Diploma in Primary Education
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EFA	Education For All
ETSIP	Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme
F2F	Face-to-Face
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation
FSU	Free State University
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	German International Technical Cooperation
HE	Higher Education
HEXCO	Higher Education Examination Council
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IP	Intellectual Property
IRI	Interactive Radio Instruction
KMS	Knowledge Management System
LDTC	Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre
MCDE	Malawi College of Distance Education
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MOA	Memorandum of Agreement
MoET	Ministry of Education and Training
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NADEOSA	National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa
NAMCOL	Namibian College of Open Learning
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development

NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NOLNet	Namibian Open Learning Network Trust
NQAF	National Quality Assurance Framework
NQF	National Qualification Framework
ODEAMA	Open and Distance Education Association of Malawi
OERs	Open Educational Resources
OERu	Open Educational Resources University
ODeL	Open Distance and e-learning
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
OLSET	Open Learning Systems Education Trust (South Africa)
OUT	Open University of Tanzania
OVC	Orphans and Vulnerable Children
PPP	Public(..)Private Partnerships
REC	Regional Economic Communities
RETIP	Regional Education and Training Implementation Plan
RISDP	Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan
RQAF	Regional Quality Assurance Framework
RQF	Regional Qualifications Framework
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAIDE	South African Institute for Distance Education
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SGP	SADC Gender Policy
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
SDPR	Strategic Document for Poverty Reduction
SEDE	Secondary Education by Distance Education
TEVET	Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNAM	University of Namibia
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNISA	University of South Africa
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VIPP	Visualisation in Participatory Programmes
VUSSC	Virtual Universities for the Small States of the Commonwealth
ZADE	Zambia Association for Distance Education
ZEDCO	Zimbabwe Distance Education College
ZIMQUA	Zimbabwe Qualifications Authority
ZINADOL	Zimbabwe National Association of Distance and Open Learning
ZOU	Zimbabwe Open University

1.0 Introduction and Background

This document outlines a Regional ODL Strategic Plan for the period 2022-2030 for the 16 Member States of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The (SADC) is a Regional Economic Community (REC) comprising 16 Member States (MS) namely Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Figure 1 provides a map of the 16 MS.

Figure 1. Map of SADC Member States 2021. Source: SADC Secretariat

The development of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan (2022-2030) is led by the SADC Secretariat in partnership with the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Regional Office of Southern Africa (ROSA) and the representatives of the 16 Member States. It builds on and draws lessons from its predecessor, the Regional ODeL Strategic Plan (2012t-2017).

The scope of the ODL Strategic Plan (2022-2030) adopts a lifelong learning approach. Here lifelong learning refers to learning as a process that continues throughout life to address an individual's learning needs. The concept is widely referenced in existing SADC and UNESCO policies and in education policies of Member States to refer broadly to many learning forms, at many levels at any age inclusive of non-formal, informal and non-traditional learning. Thus, the scope of this strategic plan spans the lifelong learning systems in MS inclusive of early childhood development (ECD), primary schooling, secondary schooling, post-schooling, tertiary and higher education, adult basic

education, as well as formal, non-formal, informal, and non-traditional learning. The scope also includes all relevant education stakeholders involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of open and distance learning within MS inclusive of learners (as children and adults); teachers (inclusive of trainers, facilitators, lecturers), institutional and system managers (inclusive of principals, senior management teams), parents (including guardians and carers such as siblings, relatives and families), Ministry of Education officials, and education system partners in the public, private and civil society sectors.

1.1 Regional Policy Frameworks

1.1 Protocol on Education and Training in SADC

Since its inception in 1980, SADC has developed wide-ranging policies, strategies, guidelines and frameworks that have been informed by changing political, economic, social and educational contexts over time. Article 9(A) of the Protocol on Education and Training in SADC, published in 1997, lays a strong focus on national policies on distance education in order to improve access to education and training while reducing the cost. This Regional ODL Strategic Plan (2022-2030) draws on the extensive historical experience within SADC and builds upon the past Regional strategies and policies.

1.1.1 Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan 2020-2030

The SADC Vision 2050 as spelt out in its Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020–2030 (SADC, 2020a) is one of a Common Future, a future in a regional community that will ensure economic well-being, improvement of the standards of living and quality of life, freedom and social justice and peace and security for the peoples of Southern Africa anchored on the common values and principles and the historical and cultural affinities that exist between the peoples of Southern Africa (SADC, 2020).

The SADC Mission is to promote sustainable and equitable economic growth and socio-economic development through efficient productive systems, deeper co-operation and integration, good governance, and durable peace and security, so that the region emerges as a competitive and effective player in international relations and the world economy. The mission is guided by the principles of sovereign equality of all Member States; solidarity, peace, and security; human rights, democracy, and the rule of law; equity, balance and mutual benefit; peaceful settlement of disputes.

To realise and implement the organisation's mission, SADC's RISDP (2020-2030) established a common agenda which consists of policies and strategies which amongst others, promote sustainable and equitable economic growth and socio-economic development that will ensure poverty alleviation and ultimately its eradication as well as to enhance the standard and quality of life of the people of Southern Africa and support the socially and economically disadvantaged through regional integration.

The SADC RISDP (2020-2030) is centred on Peace, Security, and Good Governance as a foundational pillar and is further anchored on three core pillars, which are interlinked with Gender, Youth, Environment and Climate Change, and Disaster Risk Management as cross-cutting Issues. The three core pillars are:

- Pillar I: Industrial Development and Market Integration;
- Pillar II: Infrastructure Development in Support of Regional Integration; and
- Pillar III: Social and Human Capital Development.

The development of this Regional ODL Strategic Plan (2022-2030) is informed by the stated strategic objectives and outcomes for education and skills development within Pillar III on Social and Human Capital Development. The strategic objective is to increase access to quality and relevant education and skills development, including in science and technology, for SADC citizens, with the following stated outcomes:

- Outcome 1: Enhanced equitable access to quality and relevant education
- Outcome 2: Enhanced skills development for regional industrialisation

The SADC RISDP (2020-2030) is summarised briefly in Figure 2.

Figure 2 SADC RISDP (2020-2030) in a nutshell

The SADC RISDP (2020-2030) identifies ODL strategies in Member States as a key intervention to promote greater access to education at all levels, including in the context of unforeseen disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, among others.

1.1.2 SADC ODL Policies and Strategies

As mentioned previously, the Regional ODL Strategic Plan 2022-2030 draws on the RISDP (2020-2030) and builds upon the progressive development of ODL policies and plans by SADC and its partners, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. SADC ODL and related Policies and Strategies

Year	SADC Education, Training & ODL Policies and Strategies
1997	SADC Protocol on Education and Training
2009	Regional Gender Mainstreaming Strategy for ODL Programmes
2011	Regional Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
2012	Regional ODL Policy Framework
2013	Regional ODL Strategic Plan (2012-2017)

Table 1 shows that SADC has developed and adopted a Regional ODL Policy Framework in 2012, followed by a Regional ODL Strategic Plan which was adopted by SADC MS in 2013. This Regional ODL Strategic Plan 2021 to 2030 draws lessons from the experience of the 2013 strategic plan and makes attempts to engage with the changes and complexities that have emerged since 2017 when the previous strategic plan was concluded.

Unless the students succeed, the SADC region won't have competent human capacity that can contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of the Member States. This plan focuses on digital innovations that can fuel the process of empowerment of the citizens and increase the number of educated and highly skilled personnel through effective education and training systems of Member States.

The development of this Regional ODL Strategic Plan is an important milestone in the realisation of SADC's integration agenda. With the collaboration of all the Member States, stakeholders, and authorities, it would be possible to achieve the objectives set in this plan.

2.0 Working Definitions

The SADC-UNESCO ODL Strategic Planning process recognises that the conditions, policies and practices of open and distance learning have shifted over the years and that these shifts were accompanied by nuancing and refining the concepts that frame the development of national and regional strategies on ODL. The following working definitions have thus been adopted so that varying conditions and contexts across the 16 Member States are considered.

Blended learning or "blearning" is defined as a quality assured and seamlessly integrated process based on sound curriculum and relevant learning theories, whereby the learner, who is independent but not isolated, manages his or her own learning with ample flexibility; can access well designed, comprehensive, and online text-based and multimedia learning materials that meet his or her

learning styles, from anywhere and at any time using multiple platforms including smart mobile phones; interacts synchronously with the tutors, programme managers, non-academic staff and peers in either real or virtual set-ups or both; has both on-campus and online learning support from staff of the university; has access to both physical and online libraries; is guided in his or her learning path by finely crafted assessment and Internet tools, such as discussion forums, with effective and efficient feedback mechanisms; and is driven by artificial intelligence in his or her decision making (Sukon, 2021).

Distance education is an organized, planned learning process that is delivered and supported by a clearly defined system of education delivery with modified teaching techniques and a system of administration and management which supports learners being taught by teachers who are geographically removed and who engage and communicate via electronic or print media (SADC, 2012).

Emergency multi-modal remote learning refers to multiple modes of educational delivery through which contact and face-to-face delivery has either been supplemented or replaced through the enabling support of a range of non-digital and digital technology platforms under emergency conditions.

Information and communications technology (ICT) refers the convergence of information and communications technologies over time. ICT incorporates a widening range of digital technologies and the rapid changes in their design, affordances and functionalities. When ICT are designed, appropriated and applied in context, under certain conditions, they have the potential to enable equitable access to quality learning and teaching for all.

Learning technologies encompass a broad range of digital and non-digital technologies that enable access to learning resources, learning opportunities and learning processes. They range from print media to educational television and radio to the use of cloud-based online learning platforms and are rapidly changing to include the growing diffusion of exponential technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), Blockchain and the Internet of Things (IOT) in education systems across the world, that are also becoming manifest in the SADC regional education and training system.

Massive open online course (MOOC) is an online course aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the open web. The open reference in MOOCs often refers to open registration, and not necessarily courses that are openly licenced. Many institutions that offer MOOCs award a non-formal certificate of completion, often at a fee and often these are not always accredited based on national or global accreditation systems.

Micro-credential is not a new concept but has emerged more prominently in recent years as an umbrella term that "encompasses various forms of credential, including 'nanodegrees', 'micro-masters credentials', 'certificates', 'badges', 'licences' and 'endorsements'" (UNESCO, 2018). Micro credentials have also become synonymous with certificates of assessed learning earned through the major MOOC platforms, with many providers adopting their own labels: MicroMasters (EdX), Nanodegree (Udacity) and Specialisation (Coursera) (Brown et al., 2021).

Open and distance learning (ODL). This document adopts ODL as the overarching umbrella definition to describe a range of approaches to learning including open and distance eLearning

(ODeL). In so doing it adopts the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) definition of ODL which refers to the provision of distance education opportunities in ways that seek to mitigate or remove barriers to access, such as finances, prior learning, age, social, work or family commitments, disability, incarceration or other such barriers. "Open" refers to a commitment that removes any unnecessary barriers to access learning. Distance education refers to teaching and learning that temporarily separates teacher and learner in time and/or place; uses multiple media for delivery of instruction; involves two-way communication and possibly occasional face-to-face meeting for tutorials and learner-learner interaction. Open learning is not the same as distance learning, but both are complementary and hence the two terms are often used together as open and distance learning (COL, 2020)

Open distance and flexible learning (ODFL). Some MS and their education and skills development institutions have utilised the concept of ODFL to refer to the flexible broadening and expansion of learning opportunities and practices that include and transcend the boundaries of formal structured learning so that all communities can participate, especially communities who are socially, educationally and economically marginalised. Flexibility refers to flexible pedagogies and flexible learning in terms of time and space.

Open distance eLearning (ODeL). Some MS have adopted the concept of ODeL in their policies and strategies as a reference to the growing adoption of digital technologies that enable learning that is flexible and open, learner-centred, that can be self-paced and self-directed as well as teacher facilitated in real time at a distance. e-Learning is also referred in MS policies and strategies on ODeL from the perspective of digital access that enables access to digital learning resources for to support flexible learning. As per the Commonwealth of Learning definition of ODL, it incorporates ODeL as an approach to ODL that removes barriers to learning access, where learners and teachers are separated in time and space and eLearning, multimedia technologies are used to enable the delivery of instruction, communication, and collaboration. (COL, 2020)

Open Learning. Some MS have adopted policies on open learning as a system-wide educational approach that combines a range of principles, practices and institutional mechanisms including learner-centred learning, lifelong learning, the flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experiences, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems.

This document adopts the Commonwealth of Learning definition of open learning as an educational philosophy focused on giving learners choices about

- medium or media, whether print, on-line, television or video; ·
- place of study, whether at home, in the workplace or on campus; ·
- pace of study, whether closely paced or unstructured; ·
- support mechanisms, whether tutors on demand, audio conferences or computer-assisted learning; and ·
- entry and exit points (COL, 2013)

Open Education Resources (OER) are learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open license, that permit no-cost access, re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution by others (UNESCO, 2019).

Open education practice (OEP) refers to teaching and learning practices that are made possible and practical through the creation and use of OER. They include in the context of the reusing, revising, remixing, redistributing and retaining permissions that are characteristic of OER (Huang et al., 2020).

Output is the immediate product realised after completion of activity implementation. Outputs are realised at the programme level.

Outcome is a result that is realised at the population level and shows some behavioural and/or systematic changes

Remote learning is a concept that emerged more prominently during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In some instances, remote learning replaced references to distance learning while in others it is used interchangeably with online learning. For the purposes of this strategic process, remote learning will encompass the broad reference to learning remotely from the physical school and classroom environment when the learner and instructor are separated by time and place and do not meet face-to-face in a traditional classroom setting. Remote learning can take place 'offline' and online.

Strategic Objective is a general, high-level statement of the direction in which an institution or group agrees to go to address a critical issue it has identified to achieve its vision.

3.0 Current Status of ODL in SADC

This section provides a brief analysis of the status of ODL among MS in SADC by 2020. It highlights the findings of a baseline study on ODL commissioned by the SADC Secretariat and the UNESCO Regional Office of Southern Africa (ROSA). It also provides brief highlights from the extant literature on specific ODL themes within SADC MS and the Region as a whole.

3.1 Baseline Situational Analysis on ODL in SADC 2020

A baseline study published by the SADC Secretariat and UNESCO ROSA (2020) found that of the 16 MS, six had adopted dedicated ODL policies while six had draft ODL policies in place and four countries had not yet adopted any ODL policies. It also found that most of the policies that were adopted in draft form linked their ODL policies with related education, training and ICT policies. Furthermore, it found that the policies served as important enabling framework for the implementation of ODL at national level, however because they were mainly visionary and aspirational frameworks, many MS reported challenges with infrastructure, funding, system capacity and staff capabilities upon which the successful implementation of ODL policies continue

to be dependent. Additionally, MS reported that they experienced challenges with policy coordination and that the implementation of their respective policy focus areas was uneven and limited. The baseline study raised important implications regional bodies such as the SADC Secretariat and UNESCO ROSA to support MS with policy implementation.

Moreover, it highlighted the continuing need to support those MS who do not have policies in place to date. Makoe and Gatsha (2020) showed that the absence of policies makes it difficult for MS to respond effectively in times of crisis. The value of ODL policies and support systems were demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The successive COVID pandemic waves since March 2020, also had a strong influence on an already crisis-prone ODL context in SADC and worldwide, which in turn highlight the critical importance of establishing crisis-resilient emergency ODL response policies and systems. The initial emergency response period in 2020 gave way to a focus on education and skills development recovery strategies with increasing attention to strategies to build back better or what Makoe and Gatsha (2020) called the consolidation of ODL offerings, systems, models with a need to focus on broadening equitable access to relevant and quality programmes and services.

It also found that

- most Member States have already established or are in the process of establishing National Qualification Frameworks, systems, and structures to support the quality assurance aspects of ODL being rolled out in their respective countries. However, none reported dedicated standards and specified rubrics for ODL provision and ODL courses.
- across the Region, access to quality ODL infrastructure to support the delivery of ODL for all, remains a significant challenge. These include absence of strategies to ensure universal quality access to an affordable digital learning infrastructure that can support teachers and learners. In addition, the results also show that almost all 16 Member States have some form of ICT policy that promotes universal, equitable quality access to the Internet and digital devices in education at national level. However, the implementation of these policies to realise their policy goals, have been limited.
- in most Member States, there is no dedicated budget for ODL provision, except for a few Member States that have outsourced this function to specialised structures and institutions;
- the COVID-19 pandemic has catalysed ODL to greater prominence in each of the Member State. Member States' strategies included the promotion of access to digital devices to students, lecturers and teachers, particularly in higher education institutions. A few Member States had forged partnerships with the private sector to zero-rate or reduce data costs in education. Member States have also made use of radio and television education broadcast and also reported on the widespread use of chat platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram to communicate among teachers and between teachers, learners and parents. However, the COVID-19 crisis also revealed limited and sometimes inadequate national preparedness for rolling out ODL initiatives. In only very few Member States did the institutions have online materials and the requisite infrastructure to cope with the vast number of learners, especially in remote regions during the lockdown restrictions, which were enforced.

The implications for the development of a regional strategy are that consideration needs to be given to developing crisis-resilient ODL strategies at national and institutional levels. The baseline also

offers examples and case studies of institutional and national ODL strategies that have had successful outcomes albeit in the short term in many MS.

A study by Shonhiwa and Ndudzo (2017) on the Imperatives for Successful Strategy Execution in ODL Institutions in Southern Africa found that beyond policy, strategy execution could be enhanced through the identification of institutional competences, translating strategy into explicit implementation guidelines, adapting to rapidly changing conditions, knowledgeable and engaged leadership, prudential use of resources and worker buy-in.

The findings of the ODL Baseline Situational Analysis was endorsed at a virtual joint meeting of Ministers of Education and Training and Science, Technology and Innovation on 14-16 June 2021. This meeting also endorsed the decision to develop the next iteration of an ODL strategic plan for the Region (SADC, 2021).

3.2 Governance and Management

Writing from the experience of a Namibian ODL institution and particularly from the perspective of student experiences, Jackpellins (2020) highlights governance and management concerns featured particularly among the students. With reference to governance, Jackpelllins highlights the importance of accountability of institutional leadership especially when services are not delivered adequately to students. With reference to management challenges, the most identified shortcomings related to human resource capacity, infrastructural limitations particularly with reference to enabling meaningful access to digital infrastructure for students and staff and administrative challenges related to the lack of appropriate student support services as well as challenges with effective communication within the institutions between teaching staff and students in particular.

3.3 Staffing, Training and Development

The baseline study on the state of ODL in SADC MS in 2019 and 2020 found that the foremost challenges for MS related to the limited skills and knowledges of teachers across their systems in both in-service and pre-service levels. The lack of skills is exacerbated by high teacher turnover in education institutions, low teacher moral and motivation, negative perceptions and attitudes towards ICT and their limited awareness and use of ICT to support their teaching practice. An important emergent strategy to address many of these inter-related strategies include ways to open online and remote professional learning pathways for teachers, lecturers and facilitators who are involved in teaching through ODL. The study also points to various national frameworks to enable teacher motivation, teacher support and on-going teacher professional learning. Key among these, amid the COVID-19 crisis also included the need to consider teacher wellbeing and the provision of psycho-social support to teachers, trainers and facilitators of ODL institutions (SADC and UNESCO, 2020).

Whilst acknowledging various frameworks for the development of staff and the professional development of teachers at global levels with the UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers, the SADC Teacher Development Standards, and national frameworks in many MS, Konayuma (2019) offers a further framework for consideration that draws on the Zambian institutional experience. He suggests that in Zambia, they have learnt of the value of having a

combination of institutional, pedagogical, technological and personal areas of focus when addressing the continuous professional development of staff, trainers, lecturers, teachers in open distance and flexible learning.

He proposes a model for strategic stakeholder participation and regional institutional collaboration in the effective integration of educational technologies in public TVET institutional contexts, particularly those that are offering ODFL programmes.

3.4 Institutional Capacity

According to Maritim et al., (2012) the lack of qualified ODL practitioners to manage the ODL provision process hinders the possible expansion opportunities. ODL requires qualified practitioners to manage change, people, risks, and costs to effectively clarify the social, economic, and political environmental changes. ODL also requires academics who can adjust methodologies that can have greater reach at a distance with packaged information using support of other expertise in ICT (Maritim et al., 2012). Maritim et al., (2012) argue that the growth of ODL in the SADC region requires continuous training to build capacity which is likely to lead to the sustainability of the quality of SADC ODL programmes.

Mwale (2019) argue dthat teachers pursuing ODL for education and professional development purposes are faced with **numerous challenges, which are inherent in the institutional, individual and community aspects of the ODL system.** One of the notable ODL aspects is its ability to admit adult students who ideally have family commitments. However, **these students are constantly faced with family commitments** simultaneously while studying. Teachers that upgrade through ODL in most cases **fund their own costs (tuition, accommodation, stationary, etc.)** (Mwale, 2019). For example, in Malawi, the teachers come from public institutions and **little effort is made to financially support such teachers** with their studies. The lack of financial support manifests in the form of an inability to pay by teachers partaking in the ODL programme and subsequently, universities find it difficult to effectively run ODL programmes (Mwale, 2019).

The **lack of political will** to support teachers undertaking ODL for professional development purposes is a challenge (Mwale, 2019).

ODL is recognized as a cost-effective measure for improving teachers, however, it continues to be **underfunded in countries such as Malawi** (Mwale, 2019). According to Mwale (2019) ODL was part of the National Education Sector Plan in Malawi, but it **does not receive a priority with regards to national budget** funding. Age forms another challenge for teacher ODL adoption for professional development. **Older teachers are challenged with possessing the relevant knowledge** to use online services and this affects the instruction delivery (Mwale, 2019).

3.5 Strategies for ODL Capacity Building in SADC

Increased education, school leaver and worker training demands, coupled with the rise of ICT in the SADC region, present opportunities for ODL expansion (Maritim et al., 2012). The SADC secretariat established the ODL capacity building project following the signing of an education

protocol in 1997 to recognize the significance of distance education in addressing education access and quality challenges in the region (Maritim et al., 2012). The ODL capacity building project was also motivated by recognizing the possibility of not achieving much human capacity development through ODL without good policy directions. The capacity building project thus is premised to facilitate regional ODL and national policy development in its first component and facilitate regional ODL capacity building in its second component (Maritim et al., 2012).

ODL presents employers with the possibility to organize in-service training for staff without having to release them for long periods of productive time (Olusa, 2019). ODL presents governments with the possible solution to the provision of equitable and accessible education that is affordable (Olusa, 2019).

3.5.1 Gender Equality in ODL

According to Masoffe (2016), women are generally underrepresented in highly skilled and professional employment, designing, and developing of policies and strategies, and in politics until recently. Education gender inequality may lead to the exclusion of women from the mainstream economic, social, and political life. The development goals now focus on women empowerment and gender equality as an attempt to eliminate gender inequality in education.

In recent years, Tanzania has witnessed the robust expansion of university education as marked by an increased number of public universities including the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). This would mean that there is an improved access to higher education. Through OUT, the majority of the students receive higher education to cater for their learning needs of which could not be able to get it through a conventional mode due to limited chances. However, evidence prove that compared to their male counterparts, women have, for the most part, attained only low levels of formal education. This tendency has led to widened gap in terms of access to higher education between males and females. Since the establishment of Open University of Tanzania (OUT), there has been an influx of enrolments. While literatures have widely argued on the increased need to access higher education as the reason for 8 students' massive enrolment in ODL programmes, the issue whether OUT has been promoting gender balance or not has not been addressed adequately. This study strived for this aim. (Peter, 2017)

The literature also shows that women enrol in ODL for various reasons which include but are not limited to, self-improvement, self-actualization, the need to acquire a vocation, the need to engage in a right career, the need to uplift the families' living standards, and social factors among other reasons(Ebabhi & Agejivwie, 2019). Ebabhi & Agejivwie (2019) proceed to that ODL has provided a benefiting mechanism for women to equip themselves intellectually through knowledge acquisition, leading them to new radical thinking methods and taking them out of poverty (Ebabhi & Agejivwie, 2019).

Masoffe (2016) notes how the last 25 years saw the use of ODL by developing countries as a response to the challenge of education gender inequality. The developing countries used ODL to expand access to education beyond the traditional mode of delivery in institutions of higher learning (Msoffe, 2016).

Koseoglu et al. (2020) argue that the benefits to learn anytime, anywhere and at an affordable cost, present some of the benefits of ODL. ODL thus affords the country the opportunity to effectively expand educational benefits to all citizens (more of those that are normally unreached or denied access on the basis social considerations) in a cost-effective manner (Koseoglu et al., 2020). These benefits are also presented as strategic responses to the challenges related to women's education. According to Koseoglu et al. (2020), education presents an opportunity and choice for women and access is the significant part of education equity in countries that have limited resources for quality education. ODL thus presents an opportunity for equity and also, it presents the opportunity to transcend the limits of traditional education (Koseoglu et al., 2020).

ODL is considered as a cost effective, convenient, and conducive system to educate large student numbers and prepare them for global economy. According to Koseoglu et al. (2020), ODL can help women to meet their educational aspirations simultaneously to them meeting their 'societal' and career obligations, and as they achieve their 'family responsibilities'.

Masoffe (2016) suggest that ODL has become a policy option for most of the African states because the important role it plays towards the advancement of African development through participation promotion in, and access to higher education, during the time when demand exceeds resources and opportunities available in the traditional education system (Msoffe, 2016). The SADC region has utilized ODL to expand access to basic education. For example, the Zimbabwean government introduced ODL in 1999 to bring higher education to the disadvantaged groups including women and the disabled (Msoffe, 2016).

In quest for gender balance many ODL institutions have launched gender mainstreaming strategy for open and distance learning with the objective of promoting equal opportunity for staff and students (OUT, 2017) as well as providing a framework for mainstreaming gender in ODL programmes (SADC, 2008). It should be understood that promoting gender balance through ODL will contribute to the development and deployment of effective and harmonious ODL, equal access and achievement for both men and women to quality education and training (SADC, 2008).

Research evidence has proved presence of strategic actions geared to promote gender balance in ODL institutions. A study by Abiodum (2008) identified an array of techniques that can be used to reduce or eliminate the tendencies of marginalization and improve on the experiences and opportunities of women in ODL. The techniques among others include: educating and equipping women to contribute their useful quota to the society and eliminating all forms of illiteracy; institutionalizing greater 25 dimensions of openness and flexibility; whether in terms of access, curriculum or other element of structure, promoting cost-effective, convenient, conducive and efficient ODL; and enhance skills acquisition and capacity building to enable women develop self-awareness and self-esteem.

SADC (2008) has developed a gender mainstreaming strategy for ODL, which indorses key strategic intervention areas and strategic actions leading to gender balance in ODL. Below is brief description of two strategic intervention areas related to promotion of gender balance in ODL: intervention area one and intervention area three. Intervention area 1: policy development, review and harmonization, which aim at facilitating the creation of conducive and supportive policy environment for gender mainstreaming in ODL. This initiatives uses the following strategies

among others: review or develop ODL policies with a gender perspective; develop a gender policy for education sector with evidence interventions to address gender inequalities in ODL; implement gender policies and affirmative action like 50:50 enrolment policy in ODL to raise female or male participation in tertiary education; facilitate advocacy 26 campaigns targeted at women to enrol with ODL and facilitate utilization of gender mainstreaming guidelines for ODL institutions. The intervention area 3 focuses on ODL service delivery with a gender lens at secondary, TVET, teacher and tertiary levels. The intervention utilizes the following strategies: conduct robust social marketing programmes of courses that are science oriented to attract more females; review curriculum for gender sensitivity; design systems and programmes that meet students gender specific needs for example flexibility in school time, modes of delivery in instruction and accessibility of learning for females; promote role modelling in ODL institutions through deployment of academic staff and management structures that ensures equal representation of male and female for both students and staff in ODL; conduct intensive community advocacy and gender sensitization at all levels to encourage girls to study science and participation in technical field and implement affirmative action to facilitate equitable access of male and female in ODL

3.5.2 Learner Support

The SADC ODL Policy Framework adopted in 2012 highlighted the importance of structured and systematic student support. Here learner support includes economic and educational support for many students particularly those situated in marginalised communities as well as psychosocial and wellbeing support as has been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A study commissioned by UNESCO ROSA on a number of higher education institutional responses under COVID-19, highlighted the need for establishing wellness and protection support mechanisms as essential support services offered by higher education institutions in the SADC region (UNESCO ROSA, 2021).

Khairuddin et al., (2020) also found that students' readiness to learn virtually is an important aspect to be considered for significant learning experiences and outcomes. Khairuddin et al. (2020) note that students should possess online learning readiness to benefit from ODL. ODL is thus referred to as the degree to which learners are ready to partake in virtual learning (Khairuddin et al., 2020).

Khairuddin et al. (2020) note some of the factors that are likely to affect students' ODL readiness and these factors include internet and technology-related self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner control, learning motivation and online interaction self-efficacy (Khairuddin et al., 2020). Accessible learning resources and self-direction form part of the additional variables that contributes to online learning readiness (Khairuddin et al., 2020).

Rahim et al. (2020) explored students' perceptions of ODL. They present their findings under four main themes which are, delivery materials (lecture and lab notes or slides prepared by the lecturers), medium of communications (communications with friends and lecturers, mainly to discuss about group work or project), flexibility of the lecturers (time and the way the lecturers respond to the questions raised by the students via WhatsApp and other mediums of communication), and the ODL environment (location and environment of where ODL takes place) (Rahim et al., 2020).

With reference to delivery materials, they note that the students appreciate the provision of lecture slides coupled with voice recordings explaining the content. Mydin et al. (2021) carried out a survey on students' perceptions on ODL and found that most of the sampled students, preferred learning online. There were events where slides were shared without attached explanatory audio and this presented a challenge for the students to understand the content by themselves (Rahim et al., 2020). Rahim et al. (2020) found that the students used WhatsApp and Telegram to communicate with peers and lecturers. Google Meets, Teams or Zoom would be adopted for in-depth collaborations among the students. There was a level of communication depth that was raised by the students, which pointed out, that theoretical content communication seemed to run more effectively as compared to lab-related content discussions, which had a practical element, attached to them. The findings further revealed the challenge with having real-time engagement with lectures online as they may not be responsive to students' inquiries (Rahim et al., 2020). The issue of reaching out to lectures online feeds into the theme of lecturer flexibility as the findings further reveal that some of the lecturers are responsive and engage online with the students. The learning environment presented students with challenges and opportunities. The challenges were that of focusing while learning from home, as there are a lot of distractions, the challenge of connectivity, access to devices and the necessary software's. The benefits include having more time to study, the flexibility to study at one's preferred pace and upskilling in terms of ICT engagement.

3.5.3 Quality Assurance

The extant literature highlights the continuing perceived and actual challenges with the quality of ODL provision across all MS as well as challenges and limitations with quality assurance systems. The perception of poor ODL quality has caused public negative attitude towards ODL in general (Maritim et al., 2012 Maritim et al. (2012) recommends working on the quality assurance policy along the programme development and implementation, to develop institutional ownership. They advise on the possibility of receiving resistance from stakeholders in the event of adopting an imported quality assurance framework for an ODL framework (Maritim et al., 2012). They proceed to argue that importing a quality assurance framework for ODL may be perceived as an attempt to impose a perceived dominant culture on the developing programme, which may pose a threat to the current academic freedom in dual-mode teaching and learning (Maritim et al., 2012).

The SADC Secretariat and UNESCO baseline study on ODL policies in SADC also found that all MS had national qualification frameworks, systems, and structures in place to support the quality assurance of ODL in their respective countries. However, none reported dedicated standards and specified rubrics for ODL provision and ODL courses. It also highlights studies by Joy (2019), Nguyen (2015), Charlotte et al. (2019) and Larson et al. (2009) which indicate little or no significant difference between ODL and face-to-face delivery on student outcomes and that ODL quality assurance requires specified quality metrics and indicators, hence reiterating the need for specified rubrics and standards (Mohee et al., 2019). The baseline study recommended that quality assurance frameworks and standards be monitored by UNESCO and the SADC Secretariat across the 16 MS.

Butcher et al (2017) study of QA systems across SADC found that by then the SADC Quality Framework was adopted, the purpose of which is to facilitate easier movement of learners and workers across the SADC region and internationally. At the time of their study, pilot countries are

conducting self-assessment to position their countries to align with the SADCQF. They also found that the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN), a voluntary-membership organization open to all Southern African countries was also under way at the time as well as the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) which operates at a continental level focused on supporting institutions concerned with QA in higher education in Africa. Harmonization of quality assurance on the African continent is being driven by the Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) Initiative. The African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) have been developed within the frame of the HAQAA project.

Moreover, the SADC Secretariat and UNESCO ROSA baseline study also found that African Union Commission (AUC) had also adopted a process towards an African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF), which in 2020, planned to integrate quality assurance monitoring. In this regard, the report recommended that the SADC Secretariat and UNESCO integrate and align their strategies with the AUC's process and based on the findings from the literature, the same suggests the need to align with existing QA initiatives under way at regional level.

The literature also points to the need for capacity building on QA systems across the region with a focus on the following raising awareness and understanding of QA, developing specific skills such as conducting institutional audits and programme reviews, standard setting and designing and developing QA tools for assessment, analysis of data and develop and implement improvement plans (Butcher et al, 2017).

3.5.4 Funding, Budgeting and Resource Mobilisation

The implementation of ODL policy relies heavily on the availability of well-designed budgets, funding, and strategies for mobilizing resources sustainably in support of implementation. The SADC Regional ODL Policy Framework highlights these points. However, the baseline study conducted by the SADC Secretariat and UNESCO ROSA on the status of ODL in 2020 found that most Member States, there is no dedicated budget for ODL provision except for a few Member States that have granted powers to specialized structures and institutions. The latter includes Mauritius and Malawi, where the Open University of Mauritius and the Malawi College of Distance Education play the role of specialized ODL institutions. In these cases, funds have been earmarked for ODL provision. Here, the study recommended that strategies of successful funding and resource mobilization could be monitored and shared among Member States in the Region.

Resource mobilization involves expansion of relations with resource providers. Resource mobilization does not only mean use of money, but its extensiveness denotes the process that achieve the mission of the organization through the mobilization of knowledge in human, use of skills, equipment, services, and infrastructure. It also means seeking new strategies of resource mobilization and effective and efficient use of available resources. The process of resource mobilisation can facilitate flow of resources from various sources and catalyse the flow of additional resources from public and private institutions (Nyaruwata, 2012)

In education the quality of programmes, research, teaching, and learning depends primarily on the quality of resources used. In open and distance learning (ODL) institutions these resources include financial, human, physical, learning material and technology. According to Ojo and Olakulehin (2006:1) "The dynamics of globalization, plus the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) have resulted in a tidal wave of information that has, in many cases, overwhelmed many countries" around the world. In turn, these radical changes have led to greater need for resources to sustain this tidal wave and improve the quality of education in an information age context. In developing countries such as Zimbabwe, the growth of ODL is severely constrained due to lack of financial, human, physical and technological resources and infrastructure. ODL organisations lack finances for developing e-learning infrastructure, equipping staff with eLearning expertise and construction of permanent buildings (Nyaruwata, 2012).

3.5.5 Research, Development and Dissemination

Letseka (2021) writes about the establishment of a UNESCO Chair as a strategy to stimulate research on ODL based on the experience of the University of South Africa (UNISA). He highlights how the most critical challenges faced by ODL institutions like UNISA is the lack of research capacity and as a result, the lack of ODL research output from UNISA.

Clarifying a research agenda, mobilising resources to support ODL research and innovation and building research capacity are among the key strategic areas. Prinsloo and Coetzee (2013) suggest further, that critical reflections on current practices should also form part of the research agenda as should research into teaching, learning and assessment praxis in different ODL contexts, the impact and role of technology, student success and retention, issues regarding the design, methodologies and processes in ODL research as well as policy development and implementation.

3.5.6 Blended Learning Model: PTBM

One of the ways to decrease the disparity in the perceptions about blended and conventional learning methods is the adoption of blended learning strategies. Sukon (2021) presents a practical model called the Practical (Blended) Teaching and "Blearning" Method (PTBM) that attempts to address various challenges of blended learning identified by researchers while enhancing the learning experience so that learners feel independent but not isolated. The PTBM is shown in Figure 2.

The learner is at the centre of PTBM. All learners come to the university with their characteristics. If the university can hardly help in some instances, such as boosting the IQ level before the learner starts the course, the model recommends to provide the effective initial support and the right environment to ensure that learning takes place. PTBM recommends that, distance education students must use their time judiciously and must follow a short course on time management. According to this model, it is neither sound to assume that a learner is ready to learn through the distance or blended mode nor that all learners in the same cohort can learn at the same pace. Learners who have spent several years learning through the face-to-face mode may face serious hurdles when adapting to the blended mode. Therefore, it is important to teach learners how to learn through this mode. It also recommends using AI to provide instantaneous feedback throughout the learning process in order to influence the learner's behaviour and develop a higher level of thinking and mastery of skills. This is an added advantage of online learning and "blearning". Feedback related to assessment will be discussed later. It also asserts that both the curricula and learning materials must be prepared carefully with the support of experts such as instructional designers. On top of it an e-library is vital to support learners. Non-academic support is as important as technological support such as Learner Management System, Student Information System, virtual classrooms, and digital assessment tools.
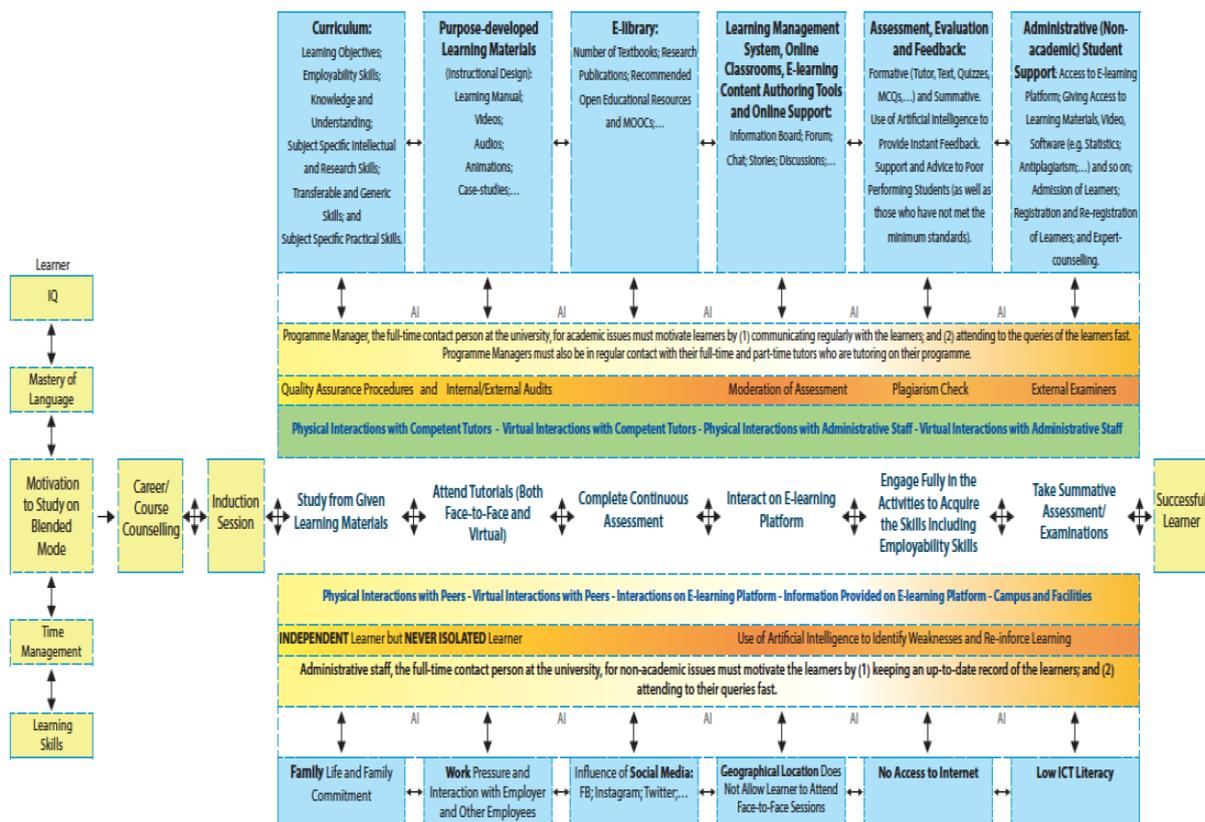

Figure 2. Practical (Blended) Teaching and "Blearning" Model (PTBM)
Source: Sukon (2021)

4.0 The Regional ODL Strategic Plan 2022-2030

This section outlines the process of strategy development and consultations that were conducted by the SADC Secretariat in partnership with UNESCO ROSA.

4.1 National Consultations

The genesis of this strategy process was the ODL Baseline Situational Analysis conducted in all MS to gauge the state of ODL and which was presented at a virtual workshop of representatives of MS in December 2020 and a virtual joint meeting of Ministers of Education, Training, Science, Technology and Innovation in June 2021. The process was further informed by research that was conducted in twelve SADC Member States on secondary, teacher, TVET and higher education.

The first stage pertained to the convening of an Inception e-meeting on 3 August 2021. This was attended by ODL practitioners from the four sub-sectors of education, that is, secondary, teacher, TVET and higher education; academicians from Universities in the SADC region, educational planners, gender experts and ICT experts.

The objectives of the e-meeting were to:

- gather information from Member States to inform the content of the SADC ODL Strategic Plan, with its accompanying M&E Framework 2022-2030 to implement measures enunciated under the regional SADC ODL policy and strategy;
- gather information from MS on the new realities which the Education Sector in the Region is facing, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to inform the proposals made under the Proposed ODL Strategic Plan; and
- Agree on the Methodological Approach to be adopted for the proposed assignment.

Unless accurate information and data is available, the SADC and its partners will not be able to develop the desired strategic objectives that will contribute to the realisation of education's promise. That is why in the second stage, MS were invited to conduct national consultations.

The national consultations were very important because it involved stakeholder engagement and given the influence that this regional strategic plan will potentially have on national ODL strategies. Each MS was requested to organise stakeholders' consultations. The main aim of these national consultations was to better understand the needs of all the MS by providing a forum to discuss and seek resolution of current and future problems and gather ideas for creative, innovative, and workable options. Moreover, seeking early inputs, views, experiences, and aspirations from MS would allow for the development of a strategic plan that would benefit all. This also ensured compliance with statutory requirements and minimise disagreements while ensuring that the interests of all groups, including minorities, have been considered.

4.1.1 Two-stage Consultation

In the first stage, MS organised national consultations to collect necessary information and requirements that have been used to develop the first draft of the Strategic Plan. During the second

stage, which has been planned for early 2022, it is expected that each MS would collect feedback from stakeholders on the draft plan.

4.1.2 Consultation Principles

Consultations were conducted in line with the following principles:

Openness

This process was opened to stakeholders' input and contributions. The Overarching objective has been to reach all relevant and interested stakeholders who are likely to be impacted by the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

Access to Information

All relevant information was provided in a form that was easy for the stakeholders to comprehend and make informed decisions.

Accountability

The input and feedback from each stakeholder were collated and analysed before sharing back with stakeholders in the second stage of the consultation process.

Transparency

The consultation process was transparent.

Accessibility

Each MS was free to choose the best method suitable for the intended stakeholders and for the consultations.

4.2 Guiding Principles

The development and implementation of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan for Open and Distance Learning (2022-2030) are informed by and follow the Guiding Principles below:

Enhanced Access to Education Irrespective of Socio-Economic Background

The aim of this Plan is to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to learn irrespective of his or her socio-economic background. This plan gives alternative modes of learning to all so that everyone can learn at their own place and at their own pace through ODL. The flexibility that ODL offers allows learners to shoulder their responsibility both at work and at family levels. Hence, continuity of learning is ensured.

Meeting Learning Needs

It is important to ensure that learning and training takes place through a range of learning strategies and courses that are delivered through effective teaching methods that are customised to the

differential needs of learners. Today with lessons that embed components of text, audio, and video and which are supported by artificial intelligence and include elements based on augmented and virtual reality, it is possible to meet the needs of almost all learners. In fact, through ODL, it is possible to offer courses on a one-to-one basis. For example a learner can read a text, watch a video, and then take an online test that helps to identity the strengths and weaknesses. Based on the weaknesses identified, relevant material can be given to the learner immediately.

Quality of Education and Training

Unfortunately, despite the fact all the ODL materials are under public scrutiny, ODL is not always considered at par with the traditional face-to-face teaching. That is why this Plan focuses on quality of the offerings at all stages. The aim is to ensure that all the actors understand the importance of ensuring that the standards are met at the design, development, delivery, and assessment stages. Moreover, this plan focuses on advocacy initiatives through the delineation of awareness campaigns to ensure that all the stakeholders understand that ODL is not a second a choice but an alternative method to acquire knowledge and understanding.

Partnership and collaboration

Member States are expected to promote partnership and collaboration in the areas of materials development, open educational resources, learner support, quality assurance systems, credit transfer and portability of qualifications, research and exchange programmes.

Standardisation and harmonisation

Member States are expected to promote domestication of regional instruments to ensure harmonised and standardised approaches to the development and delivery of ODL programmes in order to promote harmonisation of national policies on education and training with regional, continental and international instruments on both gender and development and education and training.

Equality and non-discrimination

Member States shall be guided by the fundamental principles of gender equality and inclusive education which seeks to actively involve all social groups including people with disabilities, and address other cross cutting issues such as sustainable development and HIV and AIDS in the provision of ODL programmes to ensure that all ODL programmes respond to gender differences and other forms of discrimination.

5. Focus of the Strategic Plan

5.1 Vision, Mission and Goal of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan

The inputs from the MS were used to develop the following Vision, Mission and Goal of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan:

The **Overarching Goal** of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan 2022-2030 is aligned with the SADC RISDP's theory of change and strategic goals for human capacity development in the Region, which in turn are aligned with the African Union Agenda 2063 on Improvements in Living Standards (AU, 2014) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4 which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, 2015).

> *Educate all people so that everyone can lead a healthy, productive, and meaningful life with dignity as well as make positive contributions to society.*

Vision:

> *All Member States have robust, responsive, and inclusive ODL systems that provide equal access to quality education and training to all.*

Mission:

> *To make the ODL systems work for all learners, educators, education and training institutions, and regional academic networks.*

5.2 Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives have been formulated so that they are applicable to varying national contexts across SADC and various sectors including secondary education, teacher education, post-secondary education, TVET, and higher education. The 15 Policy Focus Areas articulated in the Regional ODL Policy Framework have served to inform the ten strategic objectives:

1. Effective National and Regional ODL Policy Frameworks;
2. Successful Governance and Management of ODL programmes, institutions and networks;
3. Professional Training and Development;
4. Strong Image of ODL;
5. Institutional Capacity Strengthening;
6. Learner Support and Mobility;
7. Quality Assurance and Peer-review;
8. Assessment, Evaluation and Monitoring;
9. Collaboration, Networking and Partnership;
10. Funding, Budgeting and Resource Mobilisation;
11. Inclusive Education including participation of girls, women, and disabled person;
12. Curriculum Design and Development;
13. Open Educational Resources;

14. Application of ICT, data, and artificial intelligence in ODL; and
15. Research, Development and Dissemination.

Strategic Objective 1:

Encourage and support Member States (MS) to develop national ODL strategic plan and a related high-performing ODL education and training system

This first strategic objective aims at integrating ODL into institutional, national and regional education and training systems in MS. Thus, ODL policies are linked to the institutional, regional, and national development plans. MS have expressed their desire to have an enabling environment to implement ODL effectively. This regional Plan is also expected to guide the development of the national and institutional ODL strategic plans.

There is consensus on the urgent need for either developing or strengthening institutional, national and regional ODL policies, which cater for all levels of education, that is embraced and owned by all stakeholders, and that is supported by the governments. Indeed, this would facilitate the successful implementation of the 'education for all' policy. ODL is considered to be an important tool to increase access to education and training as well as to boost inclusiveness and equality. It is also seen as a means to provide a wide range for the acquisition of skills and competencies.

The institutional, national and regional ODL policies must be aligned in order to ensure that it is well anchored. The policies must effectively guide the delivery of ODL programmes as well as set the standards that must be met. This includes the quality of materials; the duration of face-to-face or online teaching in case of blended learning; the arrangements that are acceptable for assessment; and the minimum level and quality of support that must be given to the learners.

It is also important to ensure that the regulatory bodies are empowered to understand and support ODL institutions. Representatives of MS have voiced out their frustration to see regulatory bodies often failing to understand the difference between traditional and ODL methods. Therefore, it is vital to empower the officers who have a supervisory role so that they support the implementation of ODL strategic plan.

Strategic Objective 2:

Enhancing impact of ODL to realise education's promise

The second strategic objective aims at ensuring that ODL helps to reduce poverty, contribute to cure societal ills, and support students to secure a decent employment and lead a meaningful life. It is also expected that ODL students make significant contributions to the innovative and socio-economic development of their society and nation as well as strengthen social cohesion. Employers must also be made aware of the advantages and benefits of ODL programmes. The aim of advocacy programmes is to ensure that ODL students are not treated unfairly during job interviews. At higher

education, TVET and open schooling levels, ODL students are often working and studying at the same time. Consequently, ODL students have both labour market experience while they are learning and gaining knowledge.

Strategic Objective 3:

> *Establish National Council of ODL in all Member States and SADC Council of ODL that will make all ODL related policy decisions and set the standards*

This third strategic objective aims at having the right set of policies and guidelines through the establishment of regional and national councils that would have the capacity and power to make policy decisions. The councils will also be responsible for the development of guidelines for the implementation of the policies. National Councils will also be the link with councils in other MS and it will also advise local ODL institutions, especially those negotiating digital shift due to pandemic, riots and disasters, on best practices and minimum acceptable norms. These may include for instance: the minimum requirements for institutions to make the digital shift; how to support institutions to have access to virtual labs; is teaching in class different from teaching online; and how to maintain the quality of the teaching and learning process? It is strongly recommended that the national councils have selected representatives of institutions offering courses on ODL mode including primary, secondary, post-secondary, TVET and tertiary institutions from both public and private sectors.

Strategic Objective 4:

> *Support education and training institutions to transform themselves into excellent providers of ODL*

The fourth strategic objective aims at providing direct support to institutions, from both public and private sectors and at primary, secondary, post-secondary, TVET and tertiary institution levels, to transform them into excellent providers of ODL programmes. These institutions can be generally divided into three categories: those with no ODL infrastructure; those who have a limited number of tools; and those who are structured in the delivery of ODL courses. As such, the needs of the institutions would vary. This was evident during the pandemic where many struggled with the acquisition, development and application of new tools and resources including accessible and assistive technologies. There is a need to support institutions to develop their ODL plans as well as help them to execute the plan. As far as possible, there is a need to create or enhance studios for production of multimedia materials for ODL courses and services. Governments must be encouraged to provide the necessary financial and technological support to institutions so that they can implement ODL plans. The establishment of cooperation projects that support the transformation of education and training institutions, including primary and secondary schools, vocational education and training, higher education and adult learning institutions is also recommended.

It is also vital to ensure that educational and training institutions have electricity, the digital tools, and access to sufficient bandwidth. The use of mobile learning must also be explored wherever possible. In extreme cases, traditional methods of taking quality educational materials to the learners and supporting educators must be pursued till such time that digital technology can be used.

During the confinement, many institutions conducted online examinations. Member States have requested support in the establishment of online examination systems. It is proposed to proceed carefully towards online examinations. In this connection, it is proposed to support institutions to acquire proctored examination software as well as trained the officers in administering online examinations. Exam proctoring, which is dependent on an adequate bandwidth, allows anyone to take the exams from anywhere while being monitored in real-time by a proctor who is an experienced supervisor trained to monitor learners during online examinations. Today we also have AI-enabled systems that do not require human proctors. Learners must have a functional webcam and a microphone.

Moreover, because the design and implementation of ODL across institutions and national systems is a complex systems change and transformation endeavour, the integration of change management strategies that engage with the challenges that invariably arise, are recommended. Such strategies can include ways to navigate and manage behavioural changes required of institutional managers and teachers as well as changes in institutional systems and structures that accompany ODL policy and strategy implementation. The approaches to managing transformational change will be informed by the respective institutional and national contexts and capabilities.

Strategic Objective 5:

Promote effective use of ICT in ODL programmes across Member States

While the fourth strategy considered the various ingredients necessary to implement ODL processes, the fifth strategic objective aims at focussing on the use of digital tools in the design, development and delivery of ODL programmes. There is a wide range of technologies that can be used to ensure that ODL guarantees learners' success. However, it is vital to ensure that the technology is well integrated in the teaching and learning process. Technological gadgets should never lead the choice of teaching tools. That's why it is vital to support institutions and MS in their choice of the right set of digital instruments.

According to Sukon (2021), there is a need to reduce the common confusion among a learning management system (LMS), a student information system (SIS), an online classroom or conferencing platform, and e-learning content authoring tools. Of course, they can be ideally integrated into one. An LMS and SIS focus essentially on documentation from the time the learner joins the university to the time he or she leaves, including tracking, administration, reporting, uploading of assignments, storage of test results, and hosting of materials such as video lectures and notes that can be used to deliver the course in asynchronous mode.

MOODLE, a free open source, is widely used by ODL institutions. In this regard, institutions that do not have adequate funding are encouraged to use open sources effectively. Online classrooms and conference facilities, such as ZOOM and Microsoft Teams, connect educators and learners and offer chats, forums, live conferencing for an interactive class and sharing of the screen. Blackboard and Google Suite for Education offer nearly all the features. Those developing and publishing e-learning contents also use e-learning content authoring tools such as Adobe Captivate, Elucidat and iSpring Suite. Most of these tools allow the user to add PowerPoint slides, videos, graphs, texts and assessments to the course. The authoring tools use SCORM or xAPI norms.

It is also recommended to monitor the student's activities on the online platforms to identify those students who are not fully engaged at an early stage and give them the necessary support. The activities of teachers, tutors and facilitators must also be monitored to ensure that standards are maintained. Several tools have been developed for these purposes including a Student Activity Meter to capture students' time in online learning environments, and software to identify students' learning styles by studying the students' activities on the online platforms. Students' performance can also be predicted. Chatbots, powered by artificial intelligence, have shown to be powerful tools to provide online support. Chatbots, which are based on human-supervised machine learning, can be vital in providing fast and efficient answers to the learners' queries. A cloud strategy would also play a pivotal role in the digitalisation process.

It is also recommended that primary, secondary, post-secondary, TVET and tertiary education institutions consider using virtual science labs together with physical labs. Students can use virtual labs from anywhere and at any time. This allows larger number of students to study science and related subjects. Students can conduct experiments online as many times as they want before conducting the experiment in a real lab. There are simulators that allow students from TVET sector to carry out practical works online before carrying out the tasks in the workshop.

It is important to implement the ODL policies in the TVET and non-formal sectors as additional support to reinforce the learning would enhance learning among those who need it most.

Strategic Objective 6:

Enhance Professional Development

Stakeholders opine that improving quality of ODL programmes requires training of staff on distance learning/e-learning/blended methodologies and curriculum re-alignment to the ODL blended mode. Quality, they observe can be enhanced through resource provision for distance learning/e-learning/blended mode. There is need for a shift in policy emphasis to provide support distance learning/e-learning/blended mode. Therefore, the envisaged ODL strategic plan should incorporate this shift. This must be applied at primary, secondary, post-secondary, TVET and tertiary levels in both public and private sectors.

This sixth strategic objective aims at ensuring that there are sufficiently trained academics and professionals such as instructional designers, curriculum designers, data scientists and ICT specialists who can develop, design and deliver ODL programmes. The ubiquity of digital technologies and applications forces ODL experts and educators to have honed digital

competences. All those involved in the design and delivery of ODL programmes must continuously broaden and sophisticate their set of competences in order to meet the changing demands in the teaching and learning process. Thus, it is important to

- Provide on-going training in several important fields including instructional design, curriculum design, design of assessments, both effective pedagogy and technology for ODL delivery and student support;
- Organise discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary forums and activities to discuss all the processes involved in the different stages of the teaching and learning process;
- Offer mentorship programme for ODL instructors; and
- Promote access and parity in training opportunities for all stakeholders.

Strategic Objective 7:

Establish and maintain a database of ODL and subject experts

The seventh strategic objective aims at ensuring that there is an established pool of resource persons whose services can be enlisted by institutions offering ODL courses. Institutions often face the challenge of finding the right type of support. For instance, instructional designers in many Member States are scarce, and consequently, it is harder for institutions to develop effective templates for ODL materials. At all stages, ODL institutions would need external inputs in order to improve the processes. A database of experts, which is accessible to all, will play of pivotal role in the design and delivery of courses. This pool will also help to peer-review the processes. Experts from the database can provide their services as external examiners and quality auditors. Subject to availability of funding, such services can be free or subsidised. Existing networks such as Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) can be tapped to establish this database of experts. The database must allow experts to register at anytime and from anywhere.

Strategic Objective 8:

Make ODL Courses Accessible to all through the establishment of repositories of ODL courses and OERs

This eighth strategic objective aims at ensuring that the implementation of this strategic plan is not hampered by a lack of quality assured courses and open educational resources (OERs). Therefore, it is recommended that each MS establishes national repositories of ODL courses and OERs. These national repositories can be used to establish the regional repositories. Institutions can confidently use materials from the repositories to design and develop ODL courses. With the huge database of ODL courses and OERs for primary, secondary, TVET, and tertiary education, it would be possible to make the digital shift successfully. Those working in the Non-Formal Education sector and the public at large can use these repositories. Quality short courses in the field of Literacy, Numeracy, Agriculture, Arts, Manufacturing, and Technology can help the community to progress.

Strategic Objective 9:

Establish a strong quality assurance mechanism for ODL courses

This ninth strategic objective aims at ensuring that MS are offering quality ODL courses at all levels. It is vital to ensure that there is a strong commitment to achieve the set standards of quality at all stages of the design, development, and delivery of ODL courses in all MS. While the councils will set the standards, the quality assurance framework or model will provide the roadmap to quality implementation, monitoring and enhancement at regional, national, and institutional levels. As the standards are expected to evolve with time, level and environment, inputs, processes and outputs must be reviewed regularly. A new framework or model can be developed or adapted using existing systems such as the African Standard and Guideline–AQ (ASQ), European Standards and Guidelines, and QAA (UK) Standards and Guidelines.

Stakeholders observed that the establishment of regional ODL standards that all institutions should adhere to would improve the quality of institutions. They state that Quality Assurance standards for ODL institutions could be enhanced through: the implementation of national and regional policies that guide ODL institutions regulatory framework for ODL; carrying out research; benchmarking; investing on technology and developing the HR quality of institutions.

Strategic Objective 10:

Strengthen ODL research in the region

This tenth strategic objective aims at ensuring that the initiatives proposed under the present Strategic Plan are sustainable. There are several issues that require further research. For instance, it is vital to ensure that the extent to which learning is taking place when ODL methods are used is extensively researched. In order to reduce the rate of dropouts, it is important to ensure that learners are motivated to learn through ODL. Extensive research is also required to ensure that the learners are having all the necessary support. The impact of digital tools must be researched in order to ensure that institutions are aware of the latest technological tools that can be used to enhance the teaching and learning processes. Institutions offering courses on ODL mode tend to rely extensively on part-time resource persons who teach and help in remote study centres. Therefore, it is important to understand the impact of the part-time resource persons on students' success.

Among others, the research projects that have been suggested include:

- Learner Support
- Online Materials Development/Instructional Design
- Student Finance, Financing ODL, Research in ODL
- Student retention
- Quality of ODL
- Enhancing impact of ODL in TVET sector

- Enhancing impact of ODL in non-formal sector
- Artificial Intelligence-driven ODL
- Impact of enlistment of part-time resource persons
- Promoting Student Interaction and Student Engagement in ODL
- Efficacy of online learning challenges experienced by remote area dwellers in ODL
- Evaluation of ODL collaborations with different service providers/ partners

Strategic Plan Matrix

The Matrix focuses on the ten Strategic Objectives, which describe the desirable ultimate results, which are both at outcome and output levels, actions to be undertaken to realise the outputs, indicators and the responsible entities that will implement the activities. The proposed actions apply to all the four sub sectors (secondary, TVET, teacher and Higher education) including primary level. The proposed time, by which the activities are expected to be completed, is also included in the matrix. However, the implementation and completion will depend on several factors including availability of funding.

5.3 Strategic Plan Matrix

Strategic Objective 1				
Encourage and support Member States (MS) to develop national ODL strategic plan and a related high-performing ODL education and training system				
Results		**Actions**	**Indicator**	**Responsibility and recommended timeline**
Outcome	**Output**			
ODL established on sound foundations in each MS and, hence, in SADC	1. An inclusive national roadmap for the use of ODL at all levels developed	1. Strategic dialogue with MS and political principals on the enabling factors for successful ODL	1. Number of MS that provide support to ODL in order to make it successful	MS On-going
		2. Organise training sessions for key stakeholders of MS aimed at developing national ODL strategic plan	2. Number of key stakeholders trained in each MS	MS December 2022
		3. Assist MS to develop their ODL strategic plans	3. Number of MS that have developed their national ODL strategic plan	MS December 2023
	2. ODL in dual-mode universities Mainstreamed	4. Support conventional universities to adopt ODL mode so as to enhance access to a larger number of students	4. Number of conventional universities that offer courses on ODL	MS On-going
	3. ODL used in Primary, Secondary, Post-secondary, and TVET schools	5. Support Primary, Secondary, Post-secondary, and TVET schools to offer courses in ODL	5. Number of Primary, Secondary, Post-secondary, and TVET schools using ODL	
	4. Access to education through ODL programmes to Females and disabled persons provided	6. Encourage MS to include strategies to have inclusive education for all including females and disabled persons in the ODL strategic plans.	6. Number of strategies aimed at enhancing access to education for females and disabled persons	MS On-going
	5. Authorities empowered so that they better understand and support ODL institutions	7. Organise training for officers of regulatory bodies including qualifications, and quality assurance authorities.	7. Number of training sessions organised	MS and SADC Secretariat December 2023

Strategic Objective 2: Enhancing impact of ODL in order to realise education's promise					
Results		Actions	Indicator	Responsibility and recommended timeline
Outcome	Output			
ODL courses contribute to the success of the learners and, consequently, it reduces societal ills, gender inequality, and poverty and promotes peace, health, employment, and earnings while boosting innovation and fostering social cohesion	1. Learners empowered to obtain a decent job and lead a meaningful life with the use of ODL	1. Conduct ODL awareness campaigns on the benefits and advantages of ODL among stakeholders including employers at level of each MS	1. Number of ODL awareness campaigns conducted in each MS using various channels including social media	MS On-going
		2. Advocate for increased female enrolment in male dominated programmes	2. Number of female learners enrolled in male dominated programmes	MS On-going
		3. Conduct tracer/satisfaction studies with ODL students at Primary, Secondary, Post-secondary, and TVET schools	3. Number of ODL students employed disaggregated by sex	MS 2024, 2028
		4. Form ODL Alumni Associations	4. Number of ODL Alumni Associations in each MS	MS December 2023
	2. ODL is at par with conventional method of teaching and learning	5. Promote success stories related to ODL	5. Number of success stories compiled	SADC Secretariat December 2023
	3. Stronger links between ODL institutions and industry established	6. Establish advisory committee comprising employers and ODL institutions	6. Number of ODL institutions that have set up advisory committee	MS December 2023

Strategic Objective 3: Establish National Council of ODL in all Member States and SADC Council of ODL that will make all ODL related policy decisions and set the standards				
Results		**Actions**	**Indicator**	**Responsibility and recommended timeline**
Outcome	**Output**			
Well established network to • share best practices; • provide advice for on-going challenges; • enhance collaboration, networking and partnership for ODL across and beyond MS; and • propose innovative and comprehensive solutions	1. Authority that can make policy and other decisions related to ODL at regional and national levels established	1. All MS officially set up the team of ODL champions and stakeholders from both public and private sectors. This group will constitute the National Council of ODL	1. Number of MS that have set up the National Council of ODL	MS June 2023
		2. Representatives from each National Council of ODL will form part of the SADC Council of ODL	2. Establishment of the SADC Council of ODL	SADC Secretariat and MS December 2023
	2. Network of ODL champions and stakeholders who can share best practices and discuss related issues at national and regional levels established	3. Continuously empower and support the ODL champions and stakeholders	3. Number of stakeholders trained	MS On-going
	3. Benchmarking exercise to enhance ODL courses at primary, secondary, post-secondary, TVET and tertiary education levels undertaken	4. Document best practices across MS	4. Number of best practices documented	SADC Secretariat and MS Yearly publication

Strategic Objective 4: Support education and training institutions to transform themselves into excellent providers of ODL				
Results		**Actions**	**Indicator**	**Responsibility and recommended timeline**
Outcome	**Output**			
Education and training institutions, from both public and private sectors offering courses at primary, secondary, post-secondary, TVET and tertiary levels, that excel at ODL and promote student success	1. Enhanced ODL and digital capacity for education and training institutions	1. Advise MS to provide financial and technological support to institutions	1. Number of institutions in each MS that have obtained financial support to implement their digital plans	MS On-going
		2. Prepare guidelines for institutions that wish to offer ODL courses for the first time	2. Number of institutions in each MS that are offering ODL for the first time	MS and National Council of ODL December 2023
	2. Completion rate among students increased	3. Prepare guidelines for institutions that wish to enhance the provision of ODL	3. Number of institutions in each MS excelling at ODL	MS and National Council of ODL December 2023
		4. Assist institutions to prepare their ODL strategic plan including the digital transformation plan	4. Number of institutions in each MS that have their ODL strategic plan	SADC Secretariat ODL experts
	3. Online examinations conducted effectively	5. Support institutions to acquire proctored examination system and train their officers.	5. Number of institutions having traditional in-person or centre-based exams that also offer online examinations	MS and online examinations experts

Strategic Objective 5: Promote effective use of ICT in ODL programmes across Member States				
Results		**Actions**	**Indicator**	**Responsibility and recommended timeline**
Outcome	**Output**			
Institutions in MS can offer ODL courses using ICT tools	Institutions in MS with necessary digital tools, including virtual labs, to offer ODL courses effectively operationalised	1. Regularly conduct ICT needs assessment surveys	1. Set of ICT tools used to offer ODL courses	MS 2023, 2025, 2027
		2. Organise workshops for resource persons on development of ICT tools such as Learner Management System (LMS) and Student Information System (SIS) using open sources like MOODLE	2. Number of resource persons trained in the development of ICT tools	MS and SADC Secretariat December 2023
		3. Encourage MS to subsidise the cost (e.g. tax-free) of digital tools and bandwidth	3. Cost of using digital tools to offer ODL courses	MS On-going
		4. Organise workshops to train educators and other resource persons like authors of ODL materials to use ICT tools	4. Number of resource persons trained	MS and SADC Secretariat December 2023
		5. Advise MS on the acquisition and use of virtual labs for primary, secondary, post-secondary and tertiary institutions	5. Number of institutions having virtual labs	MS and SADC secretariat

Strategic Objective 6: Enhance Professional Development				
Results		**Actions**	**Indicator**	**Responsibility and recommended timeline**
Outcome	**Output**			
Empowered team of academics and non-academics from primary, secondary, post-secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational institutions in both public and private sectors, leading and managing the delivery of ODL programmes	1. Human Resource capacity developed by end of 2022 for a first group	1. Conduct assessment for capacity building at all levels	1. Skills and competencies assessment report prepared by MS	MS June 2023
	2. Plan for Continuous capacity building delineated	2. Assist MS to develop human resource development plan	2. Human resource development plan	MS and SADC Secretariat June 2023
	3. Effective teacher education provided	3. Conduct train-the-trainer capacity building sessions for teachers	3. Number of teachers trained	MS December 2023
	4. Effective non-academic training provided	4. Conduct train-the-trainer capacity building sessions for non-academics	4. Number of non-academics trained	MS December 2023

Strategic Objective 7: Establish and maintain a database of ODL and subject experts				
Results		Actions	Indicator	Responsibility and recommended timeline
Outcome	Output			
Validated and peer-reviewed processes and courses offered at primary, secondary, post-secondary, TVET and tertiary education levels	A pool of resource persons that can be tapped into for several purposes including peer-reviewing courses and processes, quality assurance, instructional design of learning materials, advice on digital equipment, and external examination identified.	1. Invite experts to submit their credentials after validation by local authorities so that the same could be made available to all MS through a database hosted regionally	Number of experts registered in the database	MS Experts can join at anytime Regional database is set-up by December 2023
		2. Establish and maintain a national database of experts in each MS. The national databases will be merged to form the regional database.	Number of MS that have established national database of experts	MS National database is set-up by June 2023
		3. Inform all MS and ODL institutions about the database and encourage them to use it	Number of MS and institutions enlisting the services of experts from the database	MS On-going

Strategic Objective 8: Make ODL Courses Accessible to all through the establishment of repositories of ODL courses and OERs				
Results		**Actions**	**Indicator**	**Responsibility and recommended timeline**
Outcome	**Output**			
ODL courses accessible to all	1. Repositories of ODL courses created	1. Each MS establishes a national repository of ODL courses	1. Number of MS that establish a national repository of ODL courses	MS December 2023
	2. Repositories of OERs created	2. Each MS establishes a national repository of OERs	2. Number of MS that establish a national repository of OERs	MS December 2023
	3. Regional (SADC) repositories of ODL courses and OERs created	3. Establish regional (SADC) repositories of ODL courses and OERs using the national repositories	3. Establishment of the regional (SADC) repositories of ODL courses and OERs	MS December 2024
	4. Well-designed ODL courses developed	4. Develop ten well designed full ODL courses including those in highest demand like teacher education that can be used freely by MS	4. Number of ODL courses established	MS and SADC Secretariat December 2024

Strategic Objective 9: Establish a strong quality assurance mechanism for ODL courses				
Results		**Actions**	**Indicator**	**Responsibility and recommended timeline**
Outcome	**Output**			
Quality assured ODL courses that meet agreed standards	1. Quality mechanism that is used to design, develop, and deliver excellent ODL courses developed	1. Develop an agreed quality assurance model and mechanism that set the standards for all phases, from development of curriculum to the delivery of the programmes and assessment	1. Quality assurance model and mechanism developed	MS December 2024
		2. Validate the mechanism with experts	2. Number of MS using the quality assurance mechanism	MS June 2025
	2. ODL courses aligned with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs)	3. Work with quality assurance and qualifications authorities to secure the necessary recognition and accreditation of the ODL courses	3. Number of ODL courses aligned with NQFs and RQFs	MS December 2025

Strategic Objective 10: Strengthen ODL research in the region				
Results		**Actions**	**Indicator**	**Responsibility and recommended timeline**
Outcome	**Output**			
Research-based innovative ODL practices shared with all	1. Research on ODL conducted regularly at institutional, national, and regional levels	1. Conduct survey to identify issues that must be researched	1. Number of relevant issues reported by each MS	MS December 2025
		2. Identify ODL experts willing to conduct research either on an individual basis or in teams	2. Number of experts willing to conduct research and number of research projects completed	MS December 2025
		3. Institutions encouraged and supported to conduct research on ODL–related fields	3. Number of ODL-related research conducted in each MS	MS On-going
		4. Funding agencies are encouraged to earmark funds for research in ODL-related fields including PhD scholarships	4. Number of funding programmes and PhD scholarships dedicated to ODL related fields	MS and SADC Secretariat December 2023
		5. Conduct research to assess and improve the input of part-time resource persons	5. Number of research studies conducted to assess the impact of enlistment of part-time resource persons.	MS and SADC Secretariat On-going
	2. Research findings are shared	6. Conduct national and regional workshops to disseminate research findings and share experiences among experts	6. Number of publications shared	MS and SADC Secretariat On-going

6.0 Implementation and Monitoring Mechanisms

The successful implementation of this Regional ODL Strategic Plan (2022-2030) depends on the delineation of effective implementation mechanisms. The implementation mechanisms define the key stakeholders and their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of the Strategic Plan. It also provides guidance on how the Strategic Plan will be financed and monitored.

The Implementation of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan will follow the SADC structures as described below.

Stakeholder roles and responsibilities

The successful implementation of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan requires the involvement of all key stakeholders with well-defined roles at both national and regional levels. To this end, it is important to provide an outline of the roles of all key stakeholders.

Member States

Member States shall include Ministers of Education and Training, Ministers of Gender, Ministers of Finance, Project Steering Committee, and National Council of ODL.

Ministers of Education and Training
The SADC Ministers of Education and Training shall oversee the implementation of this Regional ODL Strategic Plan by providing policy direction and monitor its implementation.

Ministers of Gender and Women Affairs
- Provide technical expertise on gender mainstreaming and other cross cutting issues and backstopping services to all ODL institutions; and
- Monitor implementation of gender mainstreaming strategies in Open and Distance Learning programmes

Ministers of Finance
- Provide technical expertise on budgeting and resource mobilisation for the successful implementation of the ODL Strategic Plan; and
- Monitor and evaluate utilisation of financial resources.

The SADC Secretariat:
The SADC Secretariat's role shall emanate from the Directorate of Human and Social Development Directorate. Specifically the Education and Skills Development Unit will be directly involved and it shall:

- Provide overall governance and technical oversight in the implementation of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan;
- Facilitate capacity building in Open and Distance learning and mainstreaming cross cutting issues in line with the Strategic Plan;
- Mobilise resources for the implementation of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan; and
- Ensure that implementation of ODL programmes takes cognisance of gender and other cross cutting issues.

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The SADC Council of ODL and National Council of ODL

The regional and national councils would have the capacity and responsibility to make policy decisions related to ODL. These councils will develop guidelines for the implementation of the policies. The national councils will be linked to each other as well as to the regional council. They will also play an advisory role for the local ODL institutions, especially those negotiating digital shift due to pandemic, riots and disasters, on best practices and minimum acceptable norms.

Other stakeholders including development partners

Other stakeholders include UN Agencies, bilateral donors and development partners, local and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations and communities, the private sector and research and training institutions.

UN Agencies and other Inter Cooperating Partners (ICP)

Their roles will vary but will include:

Providing technical and financial resources for the implementation of the ODL programmes in the SADC region

- Support resource mobilisation to assist in implementing ODL activities; and

- Facilitate information sharing on ODL programmes in the region

Local and international donors, and NGOs shall:

- Advocate for strengthening of ODL structures in the region;

- Augment resources to ensure implementation of the Strategic Plan at national levels;

- Assist in disseminating best practices on ODL within the region and beyond;

- Provide additional human resources as needed to support implementation of Regional ODL Strategic Plan; and

- Support integration of gender and other cross-cutting issues in the implementation of ODL programmes.

The private sector, and research and training institutions:
Their role will include participation as mutual partners with public institutions in the provision of ODL.

Teacher/trainer associations, parent bodies and student/learner organisations

Because teachers/trainers/facilitators, parents/guardians and carers and learners are crucial stakeholders and partners in open and distance learning for lifelong learning, strategies to ensure their active participation and support will be integral at organisational, institutional and system levels. Dedicated programmes for teacher/trainer continuous professional development and training, dedicated parent/guardian/carers support programmes in ODL interventions targeted at children as part of family support and learning environments within homes as pedagogic spaces and engaging with learners to foster learner agency will be important strategic considerations at institutional and system levels.

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Funding Mechanisms

Implementation of the Strategic Plan requires additional financial resource allocation by each Member State. Funding for implementation of activities in the Strategic Plan is expected to be allocated within the national budgets of each Member State, if these activities are not currently provided for in Ministries' of Education budgets.

Member States shall endeavour to:

- Identify areas that need additional financial resources are identified and advocated for, with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including UN agencies, donors, development partners, and NGOs; and

- Ensure that each area that needs improvement is costed. Examples could include the costing of implementing the advocacy campaigns and collaborative initiatives, development of national ODL research agendas, policy development and its implementation, strengthening ODL institutions among others.

7.0 Monitoring and Evaluation

It is important to note that the Strategic Plan Matrix also serves as the Implementation Plan for the Regional ODL Strategic Plan. In order to effectively use the Strategic Plan Matrix, time frames have been assigned to all outcomes, outputs and actions. Monitoring and Evaluation will be done at both the MS and regional levels. The SADC Council of ODL and the National Councils of ODL will be called upon to play pivotal roles in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of this plan.

At the national level, Member States will prepare operational plans that are consistent with the Strategic Plan Matrix. The national plans will have clear milestones for each output which will facilitate objective reporting of progress including on outputs that have not been fully realised. Member States will, on a yearly basis, prepare and submit national progress reports through their National Council of ODL to the SADC Council of ODL. The reports will be eventually submitted to the SADC Secretariat.

The SADC Secretariat will use the national reports to produce a regional progress report, which will be submitted to the Sectoral Ministers Meeting for review and endorsement. This regional progress report will be integrated with the SADC ODL Annual Report that will be based on the core ODL indicators contained in the Regional ODL M&E Framework.

The integrated Regional ODL Report will contain trends, levels and patterns on key educational outcomes; key achievements; challenges encountered; and solutions that will have been applied to address these challenges. The integrated Regional Report will be shared with the stakeholders.

The major reason for sharing national practices and intricacies is to create a platform for MS to learn from each other and how best the region can make use of the strategic information contained in the report for decision-making with a view to enhancing the effectiveness of ODL programmes in the SADC Region.

In 2025, it is proposed that a Mid-Term Review (MTR) on the implementation of the Regional ODL Strategic Plan will be conducted. The purpose of the MTR will be to take stock of key achievements, adherence to the key outcomes, outputs and actions articulated in the Strategic Plan Matrix, efficient utilisation of resources, lessons learned during implementation and review the relevance of the Strategic Plan given any emerging issues.

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Output Based Programme Budget

The budget below is indicative for all the 15 Member States to effectively implement ODL programmes which are guided by the Regional ODL Strategic Plan. The total budget is USD$**57,634,500**. It is expected that the requisite funding for the implementation of the present Plan will be sourced from Member States contributions and International Cooperating Partners (ICPs).

		Activities	**USD**
	1.1	Strategic dialogue with MS on the enabling factors for successful ODL	1,400,000
	1.2	Organise training sessions for key stakeholders of MS aimed at developing national ODL strategic plan	1,000,000
	1.3	Assist MS to develop their ODL strategic plans	600,000
	1.4	Support conventional universities to adopt ODL mode so as to enhance access to a larger number of students	2,250,000
	1.5	Support Primary, Secondary, Post-secondary, and TVET schools to offer courses in ODL	9,000,000
	1.6	Encourage MS to include strategies to have inclusive education for all including females and disabled persons in the ODL strategic plans.	0
	1.7	Organise training for officers of regulatory bodies including qualifications, and quality assurance authorities.	1,000,000
	2.1	Conduct ODL awareness campaigns on the benefits and advantages of ODL among stakeholders including employers at level of each MS	3,375,000
	2.2	Advocate for increased female enrolment in male dominated programmes	270,000
	2.3	Conduct tracer/satisfaction studies with ODL students at Primary, Secondary, Post-secondary, and TVET schools	2,025,000
	2.4	Form ODL Alumni Associations	405,000
	2.5	Promote success stories related to ODL	270,000
	2.6	Establish advisory committee comprising employers and ODL institutions	0
	3.1	All MS officially set up the team of ODL champions and stakeholders. This group will constitute the National Council of ODL	810,000
	3.2	Representatives from each National Council of ODL will form part of the SADC Council of ODL	108,000
	3.3	Continuously empower and support the ODL champions and stakeholders	450,000
	3.4	Carry out benchmarking exercise to enhance ODL courses at primary, secondary, post-secondary, TVET and tertiary education levels. Document best practices across MS	540,000
	4.1	Advise MS to provide financial and technological support to institutions	0
	4.2	Prepare guidelines for institutions that wish to offer ODL courses for the first time	30,000
	4.3	Prepare guidelines for institutions that wish to enhance the provision of ODL	
	4.4	Assist institutions to prepare their ODL strategic plan including the digital transformation plan	75,000
	4.5	Support institutions to acquire proctored examination system and train their officers.	450,000
	5.1	Regularly conduct ICT needs assessment surveys	50,000
	5.2	Organise workshops for resource persons on development of ICT tools such as Learner Management System (LMS) and Student Information System (SIS) using open sources like MOODLE	236,000
	5.3	Support ODL institutions to acquire and/or develop digital tools	7,500,000

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5.4	Encourage MS to subsidise the cost (e.g. tax-free) of digital tools and bandwidth	0
5.5	Organise workshops to train educators and other resource persons like authors of ODL materials to use ICT tools	236,000
5.6	Advise MS on the acquisition and use of virtual labs for primary, secondary, post-secondary and tertiary institutions	7,500,000
6.1	Conduct assessment for capacity building at all levels	75000
6.2	Assist MS to develop human resource development plan	75,000
6.3	Conduct train-the-trainer capacity building sessions for academics	836,000
6.4	Conduct train-the-trainer capacity building sessions for academics	836,000
7.1	Invite experts to submit their credentials after validation by local authorities so that the same could be made available to all MS through a database hosted regionally	100,000
7.2	Establish and maintain the database of experts	54,000
7.3	Inform all MS, ODL institutions about the database and encourage them to use it	0
8.1	MS establish a national repository of ODL courses	611,000
8.2	MS establish a national repository of OERs	150,000
8.3	Establish regional (SADC) repositories of ODL courses and OERs using the national repositories	104,000
8.4	Develop ten well designed full ODL courses including those in highest demand like teacher education that can be used freely by MS	2,700,000
9.1	Develop an agreed quality assurance model and mechanism that set the standards for all phases, from development of curriculum to the delivery of the programmes and assessment	35,000
9.2	Validate the mechanism with experts and MS	236,000
9.3	Work with qualification authorities to ensure that ODL courses are pitched at the right level	0
10.1	Conduct survey to identify issues that must be researched	50,000
10.2	Identify ODL experts willing to conduct research	0
10.3	Institutions encouraged and supported to conduct research on ODL –related fields	1,732,500
10.4	Funding agencies are encouraged to earmark funds for research in ODL-related fields including PhD scholarships	8,640,000
10.5	Conduct research to assess and improve the input of part-time resource persons	150,000
10.6	Conduct national and regional workshops to disseminate research findings and share experiences among experts	270,000
	Mid Term Review 2025-26	1,400,000
	Total	**57,634,500**

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