

DVC: Teaching and Learning and DVC: Planning and Campus Operations (Vanderbijlpark)

FEEDBACK ON THE 16 MAY 2022 STRATEGIC WORKSHOP ON ACADEMIC PLANNING OF DISTANCE PROGRAMME OFFERING

The strategic workshop of 16 May 2022 on planning for Distance Education (DE) at NWU served as point of collected reflections and directions for NWU enrolment plan for 2019 -2025 (with 2022 as mid-year review for the enrolment planning). At the 2022 DHET National Workshop on Enrolment planning (20 April 2022) it was noted that with the Education ACE and NPDE phase-out, there had been a resulting decline in student numbers experienced in DE. While sectorally DE enrolments in Education had declined, other areas have increased (for example, Humanities programmes at Unisa are up 30000 students). Points to ponder from the 16 May NWU Workshop on DE included the following:

- a) Income from Distance Education at NWU suggests it is still profitable but is also declining. In 2019 income stood at R340 million, but by 2023 it is anticipated to decline to R220 million.
- b) As income declines, the administrative support cost of DE becomes more expensive (in 2021 the cost was R10 072 per distance student support compared to R3 882 per contact student support). At present, the single largest distance education support expense is the cost of textbook provision (R3051.88). If this were to be accounted for in fees, it would reduce costs considerably. That noted, NWU need to ask the question whether our current model and structure is sustainable.
- c) New investment in DE needs to be considered in relation to a high degree of certainty in the uptake. New investment in Contact Education (CE) needs to be considered in relation to either expanding current areas of high demand or developing new areas where a high degree of certainty in the uptake is also experienced. In DE as well as CE new areas of development need also to be managed in relation to a careful stewardship of the PQM so that human resources costs do not escalate.

Our awareness of the changing nature and forms of (new) work also played a role in thinking through the positioning of the NWU's DE (and contact) offering in mid-2022. Although the sustainability of the academic project must also be seen in the context of how higher education institutions respond to new work patterns, forms and areas of work in the market, the historical reputation and footprint of the NWU in DE has led to the opportunity of the Workshop to reflect especially on DE in the period following Covid-19.

1 Opening questions raised at the Workshop related to the future of Distance Education with need to critically reflect on the following:

- i. Faculty Integrated Teaching-Learning Plans (FITLPs) – what is the enabling factors/restricting factors that need to be addressed as regards programme development, approval and positioning in the market?
- ii. What is the target market of NWU with respect to DE? NWU needs to be responsive to cater for the market needs and adopt adaptive planning mandate. Openness of the market for NWU to continue to offer current programme offering in distance mode or think differently in

terms of HEQSF. DHET noted more articulation possibilities, allowing for consideration of more PG Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas. There is a need to define and understand the market and plan for specific niche programmes in response to the market. SCAS forms and FITLPs do provide space for a situation analysis to be conducted as part of the NWU approval process.

- iii. Is the NWU Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) in line with market needs? Is the NWU marketing of distance programmes adequate?
- iv. How to create a competitive advantage for NWU?
- v. Short-, medium- and long-term thinking and how to be prepared with a series of discussions to follow from the inputs from workshop of 16 May 2022.

The May 16 workshop aimed to:

1. Inform new enrolment planning;
2. Take note of and inform existing and new programme planning;
3. Reflect on the impact of the challenges affecting programme approvals and market uptake;
4. Indicate a way forward in terms of NWU Strategy Alignment and possible NWU Strategy revisions and
5. Mandate identified role-players to take forward the process associated with the above.

2 Proposed strategic plans for NWU regarding DE for - short-, medium- and long-term planning

2.1 Inform new enrolment planning

The meeting noted the following:

- That there had been a sharp decline in DE enrolments over the 5-year period 2018 – 2022. NWU had delivered on new programme development to compensate for this decline, in the Faculty of Education, but uptake had not met expectation as the programmes were not funded by DBE and DHET as in the past.
- Furthermore, in choosing to offer aligned programmes in both contact and distance mode we are risking an internal competition developing between modalities with students choosing the cheaper distance option rather than coming to campus and paying contact fees. That said, it was evident that the demand expressed by the market justified the need, by opting to offer niche programmes in distance mode only.
- NWU had huge competitive advantage pre-Covid, but competition increased post-Covid as other universities entered more fulsomely the DE market.
- Faculty of Theology noted that DE in the past was about accessibility and that the university offered quality programmes to promote this goal, not only with profit intentions in mind.
- DE after 2025 should not over promise and under deliver. The higher education sector learned much from Covid-19 pandemic, as many offerings are already in the online space. Programmes should be strategically chosen – (in other words, alignment to NWU Strategy remains important). Furthermore, NWU should not only “chase numbers”, but also bring fundraising and business development closer to academic programme planning.

2.2 Inform existing and new programme planning

In designing of new programmes, DE programmes should be designed as such from the start and need to be evidently market responsive in the distance mode.

- Development of niche areas offering specialist programmes, certificates and diplomas that are multi-disciplinary and responsive to new market trends. For example, a possible BA Law and Environment and support professions like BSc in Nursing and Engineering.

- Faculty of Health Sciences adopted the strategy to develop several niche programmes that are currently not offered elsewhere – focused programmes with no duplications in terms of the contact/distance modality: for example, PG Diploma and Advanced Diplomas in Dietetics.
- Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences has the development of a general BCom in process and noted that it is vital to stimulate growth going forward.
- With Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences there is potential in BSc IT as they currently have a high number of contact applications, with Honours programmes in IT and Cyber Security in exploratory phase, but the practical component of the programmes needs to be catered for.
- Niche programmes targeted at the international market: the university needs to reconsider its commitment to openness of registrations. Previously at NWU it was possible to have more than one intake a year, but since 2018 all programmes (whether offered simultaneously in the contact and distance mode like the BEd or not) had only one possibility for an admission and registration period. If more than one intake was possible it would be possible to attract international students from different countries. It was further noted the SADC and international markets offer much to be explored. NWU should reconsider open distance learning, offering more registration opportunities or the option of continuous registration (out of box thinking with less restriction is needed, however not ignoring the funding model and capacity needed for such progressive developments).
- The meeting noted that there is an emerging need in DE for generalist undergraduate degrees (BA, BCom, BSc) with limited modules in terms of majors available to students (in other words, NWU should be cautious about offering in DE multiple specialisation combinations).
- Other areas where market needs have emerged in the last 4 years: Information systems, Computing, and STEM for postgraduate development. In Education: the BEd in TVET lecturer development. Professional Postgraduate Diplomas are in high demand for students coming from diverse fields: in Nursing with Specialisations in Nursing and Health Promotions and Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting. Research master's degrees that are structured and taught.
- Rethink DE model and the presentation of the programmes consider catering for shorter certificates and diplomas targeting individuals already in the workforce (an opportunity for the UCE and BS).

2.3 Reflections on the impact of challenges for the NWU DE Offering

The meeting noted the following nuances in terms of enrolment planning:

- The decline in student numbers was not necessarily a market issue only. Faculties also imposed limits on student enrolments in relation to their capacity to support new programme offering (in other words, staffing constraints in terms of workload).
- Staffing and remuneration are challenges with new programme creation, especially niche programmes. Support departments need to be optimised to render efficient service in support of the new programmes developed.
- Duplication of modules means growing numbers in both contact and distance modality. Currently there is not adequate administrative support within Faculties – if numbers are there, the resources should be allocated more effectively.
- Learning Support Centres need to be equipped where programmes with practical component are concerned as it can mean a cap on DE applications.

2.4 The way forward taking Covid pandemic into account

- Reconsider target market, NWU needs to aim for a broader UG distant market. The target market for each course has historically also been aimed in line with the available courses, also focusing on "adult learners" e.g. the SAPS for the policing course and/or nurses for the nursing courses.
- NWU should rethink its current DE model – for example converting LSCs into high tech learner hubs, currently the costs are high and students do not “pitch-up”.
- 4IR allows for efficient use of add-on technology, making DE more accessible.
- Rethink the Policy on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to assist students enrolling in the programmes.
- Offer assistance to students who failed, to get back on track with DE.
- DE offering should be flexible in terms of assessment and not simply a duplication of the contact mode because the rhythms of DE are different to those of contact education. Covid-19 had the effect of making the NWU more flexible in terms of accommodating student needs and challenges, but this “assessment anytime and anywhere” also had implications for academic integrity of programmes and academic quality of assessments and posed an even greater risk for programmes which were aligned (like the BEd).
- From a planning perspective, faculties and support departments need to reflect on:
 - i. The future financial sustainability and stewardship of DE – costly provision of textbooks and LSCs.
 - ii. New programme planning development and the link to the market – arising from experience of Covid-19 (list of current new programme requests listed table 3.1 in report dated 13 May 2022).
- Deep situational analysis needed in each faculty environment, especially concerning new qualification programme development. These developments need to reflect in FITLPs to be supported where resources are concerned.

2.4.1 In terms of future marketing of DE:

- Currently broad-based multimedia marketing for lead generation takes place, after which the CRM system are utilised to convert these prospects into applications and then later registrations.
 - Current focus on union/professional bodies related marketing – market to teachers/workers in the field.
 - Webpages and marketing materials are updated continuously concerning content on the various channels and tools including website, WhatsApp, CRM, brochures etc.
- A Request for Proposals (RFP) will be advertised for SADC recruitment. This will amplify the presence of the NWU marketers that will be visiting these countries on a periodic basis in line with the strategy.
- More collaboration is needed internally to NWU, as the silo approach does not work. Ensure that colleagues from SALA, T-L and Marketing coordinate activities to coordinate the communication during about/during the student offering/journey, address challenges and utilise opportunities.
- To ensure that the admitted student numbers are in line with the enrolment target considering the historic attrition between acceptance and registration and account for the “loss” of accepted students.

2.5 Role players in further planning imperatives for DE: Finance, CRM, UDL, SALA, Faculties

- Applications are evident, but funding continue to remain an issue. Prospective students are not always aware that NSFAS can fund DE students, but the question remains whether NSFAS has the capacity.
- **Faculties and CTL:** Hybrid learning makes alignment between DE and CE programmes possible and might prove to be more sustainable for NWU with DE the way to go in future, as financial constraints are huge to consider.
- **UDL and Faculties and Finance:** Remove textbooks and source online? NWU needs to be sensitive to students as all online platforms do not offer all textbooks to buy. Developers of new modules should be mindful on how textbooks are going to be sourced.
- **IT Support and Finance:** Zero rating of university websites has facilitated access in the last two years, but access is important to consider in terms of fees if it becomes expensive for students.
- **Finance and Faculty of Engineering:** reconsider the fee structure when compared to other institutions. Current qualifications in place, for example the PG Diploma in Industrial Engineering, can be more expensive but are subject to NWU business rules (at present the business rule is that DE programmes fees should not exceed 70% of contact fees). For the planned PG Diploma in Nuclear Technology with an international target market, pricing should justify the type of programme. Business rules to be evaluated.
- **Finance and Faculties:** Higher fee structures should be considered in the following instances:
 - a) The PGDip (Industrial Engineering) started in 2022. Great interest from market, and fees possibly too low.
 - b) Set differentiated class fees for international students (also beyond Africa) for our PGDip (Nuclear Science and Technology).
 - c) Recognise that the paper-based offering of programmes remains attractive and set fees that differentiate between paper-based provision and self-paying text purchasing programmes. Currently paper-based students is about 50% of total DE enrolments.
 - d) Cost the fee increase associated with book-provision and either phase out or increase fees accordingly.
- **CRM “Fundraising/ Business Development” and UDL** to move closer to programme planning in Faculties so that there is targeted exploration of securing funding from corporates for their employees to enrol for programmes: offer fee discounts for corporate or state-funded (SETAs included) programmes to make this an attractive offering to the market
- **Finance and CRM** to be involved in FENG tender as part of Phase II of the Eskom Programme. This entails also postgraduate studies (research and training) as a significant part of this tender. The Director for the School of Industrial Engineering is coordinating this process. UDL has been included. Similar opportunities from – for example SETAs - are often sent through to the Faculties from the NWU Fundraising (within CRM).
- **Finance, SALA, UDL:**

Set up a joint TT to cost the sustainability of the support staff complement and make recommendations as regards optimisation of staff.
- **Finance:** needs to model the comparative values of further investment in distance education programmes in relation to income generation levels and to provide information sufficient to consider, from a strategic perspective, the possible expansion of contact and distance education so that management is better able to make strategic decisions about where future investment should best be located.

- **Management:** to reconsider the NWU Strategy emphasis on SET skills in light of evidence of historical and present demand for humanities and social sciences programmes going forward.

3. Mandate identified role-players to take forward the planning process

The meeting reached consensus that an additional workshop has to be arranged where:

- a) Faculties present refined planning concerning programme development;
- b) UDL (SALA) and UDL (T-L) present on capacity and resources planning following a consultation process with Finance and People and Culture; and
- c) Management inputs are sought on a possible reconsideration of the NWU Strategy in terms of the focus on SET subjects with recognition of new areas of knowledge and transdisciplinary research and work emerging in the market.