**Empowering Learners through Open Learning**

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One often hears the term Open Distance Learning - or ODL. This term implies that Open Learning and Distance Education are almost the same, or are closely associated in some way.   
However, these two terms cannot simply be conflated. Ideally we should strive to *open* all education, including education that uses distance methods for its delivery. However, it cannot be assumed that all distance education *is open*.

Open learning is an approach to all education that enables as many people as possible to take advantage of affordable and meaningful educational opportunities throughout their lives through:

* sharing expertise, knowledge, and resources
* reducing barriers and increasing access
* acknowledging diversity of context

Key open learning principles include:

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

These principles should be applied in order to develop meaningful educational opportunities, regardless of the 'mode of delivery' used. Sometimes learners do not enjoy proximity to conventional learning centres, or if they do have access to classes and courses near to the place whether they live, they may be working, or have family responsibilities which render them unable to attend fixed face-to-face classes at a centralised venue. Or, they may simply prefer to study in their own environment, at their own pace. To provide access for these learners, education programmes should be designed using open learning principles.

Learner support is necessary to ensure not only that learning is **flexible**, and **accessible**, but also that learners have a **fair chance to succeed**. In other words, the principles of open learning have to be considered together, and in tension with each other. Sometimes increasing flexibility increases access, but reduces the amount of support that is possible, and decreases the chances of learner success. Equally, enabling greater access by relaxing admission requirements may require the inclusion of a greater support component which could then result in delivery that is less flexible.

There are a number of factors that impact on the degrees of openness (Prinsloo, 2012). These include national legislation, the learning assumed to be in place, the character of the institution, the character and nature of the discipline, etc. Degrees of openness often do not depend on the educator but are outside their control. Openness relates not only to access, but to open support, open technologies, open curricula and open accreditation. The other aspects of openness to consider include:

* How often can students register?
* Do students have a choice with regard to the form of assessment e.g. multiple choice, portfolio, essay?
* Are there set assignment and examination dates or can students choose dates when they are ready?
* Is there a wide range of student support options from which students can choose?
* Is student support accessible and affordable?
* How open are the technologies used? Can students access learning environments and resources from a range of devices?
* How prescriptive are curricula? How much choice do students have? What are the implications of the options?
* How open is the accreditation students will receive? Is it nationally and internationally recognised?
* How open are the curricula and exit points? Or are students left with nothing if they decide not to complete the ‘complete’ qualification?
* To what extent do the programmes open up the future for students?