

**OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING POLICY FOR
TERTIARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN
SIERRA LEONE**

November, 2022

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Acknowledgments

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) created by an Act of Parliament in 2001 as the regulatory body for Tertiary Education in Sierra Leone is grateful to the Government of Sierra Leone for its unalloyed support in the performance of its duties. The Ministry of Technical and Higher Education serves as the Commission's line Ministry and is thus duly appreciated for its supportive role.

This series of workshops is a culmination of the TEC's approach to the Commonwealth of Learning to provide support for the review and fine tuning of the Commission's regulatory policy for Open and Distance Learning provisions through its President, Prof. Aisha Kanwar. Prof. Kanwar in her characteristic enthusiasm for the development of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the developing countries of the Commonwealth, readily approved a package of support for the TEC in May 2022 and assigned Prof. Frances Jean Agbu as the Focal point for COL's input which included support for:

a) an environment scan for ODL in Sierra Leone to identify gaps and lacunae in the current TEC's ODL Policy which was considered not robust enough. The identified gaps informed the guidelines for the next two phases of a four-part proposal.

The first workshop was successfully held on the 23rd of June 2022 with about 135 participants from the Institutions offering ODL programmes in Sierra Leone. The Minister of Technical and Higher Education gave the keynote address at the workshop. Six presentations were made to guide the process at the workshop. These were:

- a) Definitions, Modes, Challenges and Mitigation of Distance Education, E-learning and Online Provisions in Sierra Leone by Prof. Ekundayo Thompson, Professor of Education and former Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Sierra Leone.
- b) Environmental Scan and Status of ODL and Online Provisions in Sierra Leone. by Prof. Aliyageen Alghali, Former Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Njala University and Chairman, TEC.
- c) LMS platform: Its challenges and implementation in Sierra Leone by Mr. Victor Sesay. Director of Technology and Innovation, MTHE.
- d) Policy Guidelines for the provision of Online Education by International Providers in Sierra Leone. Presented by Prof. Edwin Momoh, Chairman Conference of Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology.
- e) Review and Amendments of the TEC Policy on Distance and E-Learning for Sierra Leone by Prof. Jonas Redwood Sawyer, Professor of Electrical Engineering and former Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Sierra Leone.
- f) Models and Framework for Effective Adoption in the Provision of Distance Education and E-Learning in Sierra Leone by Mr. Moses Musa Conteh, Quality Assurance Officer, University of Makeni.

The active participation and interactions at the workshop is duly acknowledged and appreciated.

A second workshop to prepare a more robust draft regulatory policy for the consideration of TEC and COL took place on the 31st October and 1st November 2022 in which 35 people participated.

In addition to part financing the workshop, COL also graciously provided a Consultant in the person of Emeritus Prof. Olugbemiro Jegede, the foundation Vice Chancellor of the National Open University of Nigeria and former Secretary General of the Association of African Universities.

A third workshop was held from 2nd to 4th November 2022 to provide guidelines for Programmes/Courses and Materials development for ODL delivery in Sierra Leone.

The fourth part of the COL's support package which will include infrastructural and materials provision to selected key institutions is yet to be fleshed out.

TEC is most grateful to COL for its support including the securing of the services of Emeritus Prof. Olugbemiro Jegede, to lead the facilitation in the second and third workshops. Emeritus Prof. Jegede provided excellent leadership and guided the processes of developing the *Policy and Guidelines for Programmes and Materials Development* exceedingly well, for which we are very grateful. In particular, the dedicated support of Professors Asha Kanwar and Jane Agbu is thankfully acknowledged.

The second and third workshops were chaired by Prof. Patrick Taylor and Prof. Abdullah Mansaray, and we are thankful to both of them for a job well done.

The participants in the two workshops lasting 5 days deserve our praise for the excellent interactive discussions, patience and diligence in the breakout sessions and in validating the draft documents. There was a show of dedication, commitment and sterling representation of their various institutions.

Let me also thank the Milton Margai Technical University for making the hall and the accompanying facilities available for our use.

The services of the TEC staff members on duty are recognised and much appreciated.

Finally, let me give a round of applause to all of us for the successful deliberations and a job well done.

Prof. Aliyageen M. Alghali
Chairman, TEC.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Association of African Universities
AU	African Union
AfDB	African Development Bank
BMAS	Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
CVCP	Conference of Vice-Chancellors and Principals
DE	Distance Education
DEC	Distance Education Centre
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
TEIs	Tertiary Education Institutions
IDL	Institute of Distance Learning
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MTHE	Ministry of Technical and Higher Education
NQA	National Qualifications Authority
NCTVA	National Council for Technical Vocational and Other Academic Awards
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OERs	Open Educational Resources
PS	Permanent Secretary
QA	Quality Assurance
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
RENs	Research Education Networks
RETRIDOL	Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance & Open Learning

R & D	Research and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TESSA	Teacher Education in Sub-Sahara Africa
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UU	Untrained and Unqualified
UN	United Nations
VC&P	Vice-Chancellor and Principal

KEY DEFINITIONS

Conventional institution: an institution mandated to offer traditional face-to-face learning programmes

Distance Education (DE): any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between tutors and learners being conducted through electronic or print media.

Gender Mainstreaming: a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally and inequalities are not perpetuated.

Inclusive Education: a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all through increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion both from education and within education. The goal is that the whole education system will facilitate learning environments where tutors and embrace and welcome the challenges and benefits of diversity. Within an inclusive education environment, learning is fostered by addressing individual needs and by giving every learner an opportunity to succeed. The ultimate goal of inclusive education is to end all forms of discrimination and foster social cohesion.

Distance Learning, labelled differently as 'Correspondence', 'Telematic', 'Distributed', 'E-learning', 'Online Learning', 'Virtual Learning' is a form of instruction by a mode other than the conventional face-to-face method. It is characterized by physical separation between the teacher and the learner, instruction delivered through a variety of media including print, and other information communication technologies.

Open Learning – is a form of learning which considers flexibility of and access to instruction in order to ensure wide availability of educational opportunities to all. Openness disregards age, previous level of academic achievement, and other factors which create artificial barriers to education as a life-long pursuit in a democratic environment.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL): an approach to learning that focuses on freeing from the constraints of time, cost, space and place whilst offering flexible learning opportunities. It allows to combine work and family responsibilities with study.

ODL Institution: an institution mandated to offer ODL programmes.

Open Educational Resources: 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.

Policy Harmonisation: the process of facilitating and adopting similar policy directives, taking into account differences between countries.

Private Sector Employers: these are employers from either the private sector or industry who collaborate with providers of education. ODL providers collaborate with them by offering programmes that are demand driven relevant to the socio-economic needs of the country.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) charged with the responsibility for the development of Tertiary Education in Sierra Leone, advise Government on tertiary education, provide an institutional liaison with Government and other stakeholder organisations offering assistance in the tertiary education sector and to ensure parity of the products of tertiary education institutions.

The responsibility for ensuring parity of the products of tertiary education institutions in Sierra Leone and in appreciation of the fact that education is the foundation and main driver of economic and social development, the TEC is committed to providing accessible, affordable and relevant high-quality education especially at the tertiary level.

The Open and Distance Learning Policy is to set the framework and parameters for providing enhanced access to affordable, inclusive and high-quality education to all.

1.1 Vision of TEC

The **Vision** of TEC is to be a dynamic regulatory agency acting as a catalyst for positive change and innovation for the delivery of quality university education in Sierra Leone.

1.2 Mission of TEC

While the **Mission** of TEC is to ensure the orderly development of a well-coordinated and productive tertiary education system that will guarantee quality and relevant education for national development and global competitiveness.

2.0 POLICY CONTEXT

2.1 Status of ODL in Sierra Leone - Distance Education

Distance Education is defined as any system of teaching and learning in which the learners are physically separated from their tutors for most of the time they are studying. The separation in space and time of teaching and learning is a basic feature of distance education. However, distance education in the Sierra Leone context includes some face-to-face study. In fact, it includes the need for some form of feedback and reinforcement, preferably through contact between learners and tutors or between learners and fellow learners, as an essential element.

Distance Education (DE) needs to be differentiated not only from conventional (face-to-face) classroom-based education but also from private study at home. What distinguishes distance teaching and learning from these others is that it is an institution-based activity that is consciously designed to effect predetermined learning outcomes in students at a 'distance'. Currently, efforts are being made to take the distance out of the learner's reach of educational or instructional availability. The term 'distance' may therefore have varied connotations and not necessarily restricted to spatial separation or difference with conventional education alone, as spelt out below. It is within this context that this policy is designed to provide standardised guidelines for all Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs) in Sierra Leone when delivering any of their programmes and courses through the distance mode.

For many the overriding benefit of distance learning is that it gives them access to an education that they would otherwise not have. There can be many reasons why a learner may

not be able to access existing provisions. These include: -

- a) Living a long distance away from a providing institution, e.g. in a remote or rural part of the country where there is no tertiary institution (college or university);
- b) being unable to travel to a centre, even if it is not very remote, e.g. there may be difficulty in getting regular transport to get to the learning centre on time; the learners may have family commitments which make it difficult to leave their homes;
- c) not being free to study at set hours, e.g. shift workers or those who travel a great deal in their work;
- d) physical disability making travel or classroom attendance difficult, e.g. wheel chair bound learners;
- e) overloaded provision, e.g. very large classes, unavailability of access due to closed admission or admission long waiting lists;
- f) Unavailability of a preferred programme of study.

Distance Education presents many opportunities for learners, among which are:

- a) bringing educational opportunities and learning resources within easy reach of the learners, e.g. workbooks, audio, cassettes, contact by telephone or the web;
- b) enabling learners to study at times that suit them;
- c) cost effectiveness. Distance learning has lower unit costs than face-to-face teaching, more learners can be taught for a given fixed budget;
- d) building capacity. One severely limiting factor on expanding education in a developing country such as Sierra Leone is the unavailability of a large number of qualified tutors. Distance education has proved to be a very effective way of training tutors, especially the so-called UU (untrained and unqualified) tutors and those in hard-to-reach-communities in Sierra Leone.

Other benefits to learners include the fact that the complex design processes necessitated by distance learning usually result in a higher quality of course materials and delivery systems than would be found in conventional classrooms.

While DE has great potential for making tertiary education more accessible, there are certain prerequisite conditions that must be satisfied to assure high quality delivery. DE is often likened to an industrial process involving different but interrelated or cascaded activities. They include course material development, instructional design, learner support services, For example, the preparation of distance learning courses tends to be a team activity, involving specialists, for example in curricular design, learning materials development, modes of delivery, etc. Most draft materials are reviewed by a panel of experts and some materials are tested before use. These processes tend to produce learning materials of a very high standard. These are then used within distance learning systems where tutors are trained in distance learning techniques, monitored and supported by experienced staff.

Unfortunately, the TEC Baseline Study on which these Policy Guidelines are predicated, found none of these in practice in all the institutions in Sierra Leone. What obtains is that the teacher training instructional materials (modules) that were produced in line with professional guidelines over two decades ago are still being used without any revision. The non-revision of the instructional materials could have been due to the paucity of professionally trained personnel in distance education in all the TEIs visited. In some institutions, the print materials are either the usual pamphlets produced by conventional classroom tutors, or text books that are photocopied and bound for use in distance learning programmes. This situation poses a grave danger to the quality of open and distance learning in the country, and, therefore, necessitates the formulation of precise guidelines to regulate their operation.

3.0 CHALLENGES FACING THE EDUCATION SECTOR IN SIERRA LEONE

3.1 The Current Situation

Sierra Leone began making its mark in higher education when Fourah Bay College was founded in 1827 and served for a very long time as the only institution of higher learning in the whole of the West African sub-region. It therefore earned the accolade, “the Athens of West Africa”. Over the years, increase in the population especially of the youth has grown but there has not been a corresponding development to meet the increasing demands for access to tertiary education. As a consequence, Sierra Leone has been constrained to fulfill its commitment to regional, global and continental goals and objectives in tertiary education.

3.2 Challenges of TEIs

The abysmally low access of less than 10% of the population in higher education indicates the need to do more with regard to widening access to higher education in Sierra Leone. The tremendous efforts by the Government in widening access to education at the basic level have not been matched by action at the tertiary level. This is evident by the transition rates from secondary school to tertiary education. The causes may include:

- a) Limited and sparse funding to implement development activities;
- b) Inadequate trained and qualified tutors;
- c) Lack of Infrastructure (physical structures i.e., classrooms, laboratories, libraries, washrooms);
- d) Lack of adequate and relevant teaching and learning materials;
- e) Lack of electronic devices to assist in teaching and learning;
- f) Credibility challenges (missing grades, falsification of results, late publication of results);
- g) Low level of accessibility to, and affordability (fee payments etc) of higher education opportunities;
- h) Lack of harmonisation of curricula and the absence of a Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) providing common grounds of equivalence and quality education across board;
- i) Lack of motivation and adequate reward especially to tutors (conditions of service);
- j) Lack of effective policies to guide actions;
- k) No accepted and efficient pathways to the implementation of Policies.

3.3 Key ODL Challenges

- a) Constrained accessibility limited ODL institutions;
- b) lack of trained and qualified tutors to facilitate ODL activities;
- c) poor sensitisation, advocacy and awareness of ODL;
- d) non availability of funds;
- e) inadequate and erratic power supply;

- f) poor internet connectivity;
- g) high cost of internet connectivity;
- h) unavailability of appropriate facilities for online teaching and learning.

4.0 THE SIERRA LEONE ODL POLICY

This section presents the rationale for developing an ODL policy for Sierra Leone; it also describes the policy development process. The goal and objectives of the policy framework are also presented. These are followed by guiding principles, the structure of the policy, the key policy focus areas, policy statements and the implementation mechanism.

4.1 Rationale for the Sierra Leone ODL Policy

The Policy on ODL is a response to the need to harmonise and provide a unified approach to the planning, development, delivery and evaluation of the ODL programme in Sierra Leone.

Over the years ODL has been a method used for the training and development of tutors. It supports inclusive education and caters for, particularly women and other disadvantaged groups in hard-to-reach areas. Thus, this provides a common framework upon which ODL programmes will be provided, evaluated, and supported by stakeholders drawn from the tertiary education landscape in Sierra Leone.

4.2 Policy Development Process

The development of the ODL Policy started with a stakeholders' engagement through a high-level consultative meeting on the theme "Strengthening Open Distance Education in Sierra Leone" which was held in June 2022 at the Milton Margai Technical University Campus at Congo Cross. This Consultative meeting which was organised by the TEC in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) attracted officials from MTHE, the CVCP chairman, former VC&Ps, Heads of Financial Institutions, Promoters of TEIs, and other stakeholders.

4.3. Goal and Policy Objectives

4.3.1 The goal of the ODL Policy is to increase access to quality tertiary education and training across Sierra Leone.

4.3.2 The overall policy objectives are to:

4.3.2.1 promote sustainable Open and Distance Learning development for all citizens in Sierra Leone.

4.3.2.2 increase access and success through quality, gender-sensitive and inclusive programmes and services across the country, delivered through Open and Distance Learning.

- 4.3.2.3 provide a regulatory framework which guides TEIs in the delivery of high quality ODL programmes;
- 4.3.2.4 create a conducive environment for the delivery of effective and efficient ODL programmes;
- 4.3.2.5 safeguard potential ODL learners from inferior qualifications and fraudulent providers;
- 4.3.2.6 ensure that off-shore providers of online programmes conform to professional standards, integrity and the laws governing quality tertiary education in Sierra Leone;
- 4.3.2.7 guide ODL institutions on the acquisition and use of appropriate teaching/learning materials.

4.4 Guiding Principles of the Policy

The ODL Policy is premised on the following 11 principles:

- a. **Openness: Sierra Leone** ODL institutions shall ensure that the implementation of programmes facilitates the reduction of barriers to entry/access.
- b. **Open Educational Resources (OERs):** ODL institutions shall ensure that learners and tutors have access to OERs.
- c. **Flexibility:** ODL institutions shall promote flexibility in the provision of ODL and ensure that ODL structures are dynamic and respond to the ever-changing demands and needs.
- d. **Learner-centeredness:** ODL institutions shall ensure that the learner is at the centre of all activities, that the environment is conducive to learning and that basic resources are at each learner's disposal.
- e. **Quality and relevance:** ODL institutions shall promote quality and relevant programmedevelopment and delivery.
- f. **Cost-effectiveness:** ODL institutions shall promote cost-effectiveness in the development and deployment of ODL.
- g. **Collaboration and partnership:** ODL institutions shall engage in collaboration and partnership in the areas of materials development,

learner support, quality assurance systems, research, exchange programmes, recognition of prior learning, credit transfer and the portability of qualifications.

- h. *Efficiency:*** ODL institutions shall uphold the principle that objectives be attained in the most efficient way to maximise returns from each unit of investment.
- i. *Equity:*** ODL institutions shall be guided by the principle of equity in the provision of programmes. The policy is also guided by the fundamental values of inclusivity, which seek to actively involve all social groups, including vulnerable persons and underserved communities.
- j. *Harmonisation and standardisation:*** ODL institutions shall facilitate domestication of the local and regional instruments to ensure harmonised and standardised approaches to the development and delivery of programmes through ODL.
- k. *Sustainable development:*** The policy is also guided by the fundamental values of sustainable development, which seek to actively involve all social groups in order to achieve health and decent livelihoods in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

4.5 Policy Statements

- a) All DE programmes offered by any TEI, at any level, must be duly approved by TEC.
- b) TEIs delivering courses through the distance mode must endeavour to provide and maintain the physical and human resource infrastructure at the level necessary to embark on distance education activity effectively as follows:
 - i. physical infrastructure for the delivery of DE courses shall include, headquarters, regional study centres, and where possible, district study centres;
 - ii. such centres shall be equipped with a small resource library

holding relevant reference materials and any other relevant electronic equipment that they can freely use during face-to-face periods or any other time during which they can access the centres for purposes of learning;

iii. examination centres or Local Contact for conduct of off-Campus Examination.

c) Admission requirements for DE programmes shall be the same as for regular campus-based ones of the same type/level. Such admission requirements shall be as determined from time to time by the TEC under its statutory Admissions Policy for TEIs.

d) There shall be established within the TEC a Quality Assurance Team (QAT).

4.6 Structures of the ODL Key Focus Areas

The ODL Policy has 13 key focus areas, each of which has the following elements:

4.6.1 **Issue:** An issue is a discrepancy between the prevailing situation and the most desirable situation.

4.6.2 **Issue justification:** This element describes why the issue is important enough that it deserves to be included in a policy on ODL.

4.6.3 **Policy statement:** This mandates the undertaking of a specified action and clearly spells out the entity that is accountable for ensuring the specified action is undertaken.

4.6.4 **Specific objectives:** These are specific activities that must be undertaken to ensure the defined issue is adequately addressed.

4.7 Key Policy Focus Areas

4.7.1 Key Policy Focus Area 1: Development and Implementation of Sustainable ODL Practices

Issue: The Education Sector Policies in Sierra Leone do not adequately support the development and implementation of sustainable ODL practices.

Justification: Due to the lack of a relevant policy framework, ODL has not been receiving adequate resources. The existence of a dedicated ODL Policy demonstrates the government's commitment and allows for the mobilisation and allocation of resources needed to support the expansion of access to education and training to more people in both rural and urban areas.

Policy statement: The Tertiary Education Commission shall create an enabling policy environment that promotes the development and effective implementation of ODL programmes and services.

Specific objectives:

- a) To establish a national ODL co-ordinating structure at the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).
- b) To mainstream ODL into the national education and training system.
- c) To link the ODL Policy to other relevant national policies.
- d) To align the ODL Policy with the country's regional, continental and global commitments to education.
- e) To ensure institutions providing programmes through ODL have developed their ODL institutional policies and implementation strategies.
- f) To ensure ODL institutions have functional coordinating structures in different regions of the country.
- g) To monitor the implementation of ODL institutional policy and standards.

4.7.2 Key Policy Focus Area 2: Governance and Management

Issue: The governance structures and management systems of most ODL institutions in Sierra Leone do not have the capacity to adequately respond to the development and mainstreaming of ODL. There is even an absence of an ODL governance structure at the ministerial level.

Justification: Most of the country's ODL institutions have the same governance and management structures as conventional institutions. Such structures and systems do not always provide for the flexibility and responsiveness often required by contemporary ODL institutions.

Policy statement: The Ministry of Technical and Higher Education shall facilitate strengthening of the capacities of ODL institutions to deliver their programmes and services through appropriate governance structures and effective management systems.

Specific objectives:

- a. To establish a dedicated Directorate of ODL at TEC.
- b. To develop responsive and effective governance structures and management systems for ODL institutions.
- c. To develop human resource capacity in governance, leadership and change management for ODL providers.
- d. To support the establishment of autonomous ODL institutions, including an Open University, if and when necessary.
- e. To establish regional ODL centres where necessary.

4.7.3 Key Policy Focus Area 3: Funding, Budgeting and Resource Mobilisation

Issue: ODL has not been adequately funded despite its relatively long history in Sierra Leone. This includes inequality in the funding of within the education system, particularly the underfunding of ODL institutions and the absence of sponsorships or scholarships for ODL.

Justification: ODL has the potential to contribute towards improved access, quality and equity. Inadequate ODL funding has constrained the development and delivery of programmes and services throughout Sierra Leone.

Policy statement: The Ministry of Technical and Higher Education and Training shall source and allocate adequate funds for ODL development and the delivery of quality programmes and services.

Specific objectives:

- a. To create a separate budget line for ODL provision.
- b. To establish dedicated scholarships for ODL in order to address discrimination and equity issues, especially relating to underserved communities, as well as the vulnerable and disadvantaged.
- c. To provide equality of opportunities through adequate funding of ODL institutions.
- d. To determine more affordable fees schedule in order to increase access.
- e. To facilitate the development and diversification of an ODL funding model.
- f. To facilitate the mobilisation of additional funding for ODL development and delivery from other partners sources.

4.7.4 Key Policy Focus Area 4: Staffing, Training and Development

Issue: ODL institutions in Sierra Leone lack appropriately qualified ODL staff for the development and delivery of ODL.

Justification: For effective ODL delivery, staff should be appropriately trained and qualified. Currently, most of the staff in ODL institutions are not trained in the field of ODL.

Policy statement: The Tertiary Education Commission shall ensure that institutions offering programmes through ODL recruit and train ODL staff adequately. TEC shall ensure that staffing levels and mix match enrolments and programmes diversity.

Specific objectives:

- a. To facilitate the recruitment and training of staff for ODL institutions.
- b. To institutionalise continuous professional staff development in ODL institutions.
- c. To identify and explore opportunities for ODL staff development through linkages, communities of practice, exchange-study visits and in-service training.

4.7.5 Key Policy Focus Area 5: Public Perception of ODL

a) Issues:

- a. There is lack of confidence by the stakeholder because the programmes lack parity.
- b. All ODL programmes currently done by all institutions are not accredited by the TEC.

b) Justification:

Public perception is important because they are the consumers.

c) Policy Statement:

MTHE should support TEC in the implementation of the policy and there shall be a QA unit in each institution that will give stakeholders the confidence that the inputs, processes and outputs are in line with their expectations.

d) Specific Objectives:

- a. National public sensitisation and awareness raising on the quality assurance through the various media (including local languages).
- b. To ensure that all current programmes are immediately submitted for accreditation by the TEC.
- c. To ensure that all future programmes are submitted within adequate time for the review and approval of the TEC before the programme is rolled out by the institutions.

4.7.6 Key Policy Focus Area 6: Learner Support Services

a) Issues:

- a. This is an issue that cuts across their academic provisions and practices.
- b. TEIs do not have enough support in terms of teaching and learning materials, access to library both manual and electronic.
- c. Very little face to face contact time between the learners and instructors.
- d. Very little or no support in terms of guidance and counselling for learners.
- e. Lack of learning and physical access to the learning centres for the physically challenged.

b) Justification:

- a. These issues must be addressed to enhance the quality of ODL delivery in HEIs.
- b. All statutory and legal regulations enhancing access to education, gender equality and disability should be adhered to for improvement of ODL delivery.

c) Policy Statement:

Institutions must address all of the above issues for an efficient and effective delivery of ODL.

d) Specific Objectives:

- a. Ensure that facilities, infrastructure and resources are in place for effective ODL delivery.
- b. Ensure that all physical structures being used for ODL programmes should also meet the minimum requirement for the persons with disability.

4.7.7 Key Policy Focus AREA 7: Curriculum Development

a) Issue:

There is a dearth of harmonised ODL curricula.

b) Justification:

Harmonised curricula will ensure that ODL will be effectively delivered and standardised across all institutions.

c) Policy Statement:

It is mandatory for all ODL programmes to be standardised and harmonised.

d) Specific Objectives:

- a. Conduct annual or bi-annual capacity development workshops for curricula reviews.
- b. Provide feedback mechanisms to evaluate ODL curricula, i.e., to adopt the BMAS curricula development practices for harmonisation and standardisation.

4.7.8 Key Policy Focus Area 8: Research Development and Dissemination

a) Issues:

The TEC Needs Assessment Survey reveals that research outputs are low in the higher education institutions as a result of lack of institutional support and low trained staff levels.

b) Justification:

Without R & D, quality ODL programmes will be severely constrained.

c) Policy Statement:

Action towards promotion of R&D is urgent.

Specific Objectives:

Mobilise and provide funding for R&D.

4.7.9 Key Policy Focus Area 9: Quality Assurance Systems

Issues

Quality Assurance Systems are central to the delivery of ODL. In the prevailing situation, there is little conformity to QA in the HEIs in Sierra Leone. The functionality of QA ranges from non-existent to fair. As a result, monitoring, evaluation and tracking systems for teaching, learning and graduate performance are challenging. There is poor sensitisation among staff on QA matters as the culture of QA management is still relatively new within the system. The facilities and services to drive QA in ODL are rudimentary and challenging.

Justification

When ODL is implemented without strong QA systems, it leads to poor quality teaching and learning, and learning outcomes are compromised. QA services need to be coordinated as quality is a continuous process. If QA is well administered, then most of the problems currently being faced in the implementation of ODL including the monitoring and evaluation components will be addressed.

Policy Statement:

Every HEI shall set up a well-structured and functioning QA Unit. QA policies shall be developed in key areas to facilitate a high quality environment for the teaching and learning of ODL in HEIs. In addition, TEC should strengthen its coordinating mechanism for QA with a view to assuring complementary standards of QA for ODL in all HEIs.

Specific Objectives

1. To develop QA policies in all HEIs that are aligned with the TEC ODL policy.
2. To strengthen QA systems and standards for the ODL teaching and learning environment in all HEIs.
3. To strengthen the capacity of TEC to coordinate monitor and evaluate QA systems across the HEIs.
4. To develop the capacity of QA Units in all HEIs to internally monitor and evaluate ODL programmes.
5. To build the capacity of stakeholders to continuously improve QA systems.

4.7.10 Key Policy Focus Area 10: Inclusive Education

Issues

Inclusiveness is an emerging reality in the educational ecosystem of Sierra Leone. Currently, there is gender imbalance and inequity in the proportion of females to males in almost all levels of the education sector (specifically, dearth of female tutors and learners). In addition, the participation of persons with disability at the HEIs (both tutors and learners) is low.

Justification

It is important that in the ODL Policy, all efforts be made for inclusiveness and diversity to incorporate all mentors and related to gender, persons with disability and vulnerable persons in disadvantaged communities.

Policy Statement

A learning environment will be created where no one is disadvantaged because of gender, disability, socio-economic status and or location and all mentors and are able to participate in an enabling and friendly environment.

Specific Objectives

1. To promote training for staff for inclusive leadership and enhancement of special skills for inclusiveness and access.
2. To support diversity, equity, and inclusion in HEIs through learner support services and the infrastructure.
3. To establish flexible admission policies to encourage marginalised persons including persons with disability.
4. To encourage equal opportunities for women and persons with disability.

4.7.11 Key Policy Focus Area 11: Application of ICT in ODL**Issue:**

ICT is critical to the implementation of ODL. Currently, there is poor ICT usage in all HEIs in the delivery of ODL. Monitoring of the HEIs reveals that more efforts have to be made to apply ICT in ODL in the HEIs.

Justification

For Sierra Leone to be contemporary, and for the successful delivery of ODL, ICT usage must be pivotal. All HEIs must effectively use ICT in ODL as a support to the administrative processes, course delivery and interactions between learners and tutors.

Policy Statement

HEIs shall facilitate enhanced availability, capacity and utilisation of ICT for the efficient and effective delivery of programmes and services through open and distance learning modes. Personnel shall be trained in the production of ICT materials.

Specific Objectives

1. To increase the capacity of tutors to manage e-learning programmes in all HEIs.
2. To increase access to ICT services in all HEIs.

3. To improve the ICT facilities including connectivity in all HEIs.
4. To increase energy efficiency (e.g. solar power) in learning centres in disadvantaged areas.
5. To develop teaching and learning materials compatible with the ODL teaching delivery.

4.7.12 Key Policy Focus Area 12: Institutional Capacity

Issue

ODL is faced with a number of institutional capacity challenges. In the current situation, there is a mismatch between capacity and capability and a gap between intention and action. This has resulted in ODL classes being conducted sometimes in secondary schools with little access of the learners to course materials and other facilities such as laboratories and workshops. Most of the tutors are also not trained in the design and development of ODL teaching and learning materials.

Justification

For the ODL programmes to offer quality education, it is necessary for TEC to regularly evaluate HEIs to ensure that they have the institutional capacity to do so.

Policy Statement

HEIs shall demonstrate the capacity to effectively manage ODL in various dimensions such as: financial resources, infrastructure, technology, instructional design, support for learners, assessment of learners' work and evaluation of the curricula.

Specific Objectives

1. To support the professional development of staff in HEIs.
2. To monitor HEIs to develop basic infrastructure such as resources centres, laboratories and supportive technologies.
3. To provide the financial capacity and support for quality learning outcomes in Open and Distance education in HEIs.
4. To provide student support through counselling services for learners in the ODL programme.

4.7.13 Key Policy Focus Area 13: Legal and Regulatory Framework

Issues

Education is central to the growth and development of a nation. The Education Sector benefits from a number of Acts and Policies which underpin the nation's growth and human capital development. Open and Distance Learning has been playing a role in the educational system but it is currently unregulated and fraught with a lot of difficulties.

Justification

For ODL to play a key role in the education system, it is important for a regulatory policy specific to ODL be developed and implemented across the HEIs. Legal instruments, policies and international conventions and treaties the country has signed form the legal and regulatory scene in the education system. The ODL Policy is developed against the backdrop of the other policies and acts that have been developed and are being implemented in the education system.

Policy Statement

Policies and Acts that form the legal and regulatory framework include: The Tertiary Education Commission Act, 2001 and the accompanying Statutory Instrument of 2008 are major legal documents that provide the regulatory framework for the ODL policy. TEC is the national regulatory organization and the generality of the functions of the TEC, as enshrined in 7 (1) of the TEC Act 2001, include “to advise government on tertiary education” and “to ensure parity of the products of tertiary education institutions”. The Statutory Instrument of 2008 further empowers the TEC to set out standards for the HEIs, including “the minimum number and duration of programmes at the certificate, diploma or degree level that ought to be offered”. (Section 5 (1) (b)); and in 5 (1) (d) determine “the standards of proficiency assessed in terms of content and contact hours which learners are expected to attain in respect of a certificate, diploma or degree programme”. Other supporting Acts include: The Education Act, 2004, the TSC Act, 2011, the NCTVA Act of 2001, the Polytechnic Act, 2001, the Disability Act, 2011, the Radical Inclusion Policy, 2021 and the Universities Act of 2021. Policies include: the Education Sector Plan, the 2010 and the New Education Plan.

Specific Objectives

1. To provide a legal and regulatory framework consistent with the laws of Sierra Leone.
2. To identify a set of policy alternatives for ODL operation.

3. To provide direction and leadership in ODL in HEIs by TEC.
4. To devise strategies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the operation of ODL in HEIs.

5.0 IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISMS

The successful implementation of the Sierra Leone ODL Policy requires high-level political support at national, ministerial and institutional levels. It requires the strengthening of existing structures and the incorporation of new structures that deal with ODL. This section describes the implementation and coordination mechanisms for the Sierra Leone ODL

Policy and clarifies specific roles and responsibilities for implementing structures at the political (ministerial) and operational levels.

The main policy players in terms of implementation include:

- a. **Chairman, Tertiary Education Commission:**
 - provides the overall leadership and technical insight and oversight in the implementation of the policy framework
 - mobilises resources for effective implementation of the policy by the responsible persons
 - calls for and initiates the processes and procedures for the review of the Policy on Open and Distance Learning from time to time as necessary.
 - reports to Cabinet on progress in the implementation of the policy
- b. **Director of ODL:**
 - facilitates the implementation of the Sierra Leone ODL Policy through capacity building in the relevant office bearers
 - through various structures coordinates, supervises, monitors and evaluates the implementation of the policy at the national and institutional levels
- c. **Sierra Leone Higher Educational Institutions:**
 - spearhead the implementation of the ODL regulatory Policy through broad-based participation
 - through relevant structures, periodically report progress to the

Commission.

d. Monitoring and Evaluation:

- The Tertiary Education Commission monitors and evaluates the implementation of this ODL Policy through the Director of ODL. Through its various structures, the TEC is expected to cascade the M&E exercise to all institutions offering programmes through ODL. This will enable the collection of similar M&E data to comprehensively report on and strengthen ODL systems at all levels and to share with key stakeholders such as COL and RETRIDOL.
- The national M&E framework will ensure that implementation of the ODL Policy is undertaken systematically in obtaining relevant basic information; feedback on the progress of Policy implementation; curricular and programme process; resources; programme performance; ICT; information, education and communication; and gender mainstreaming and inclusive considerations.

e. Directorate of ODL

- A Directorate of ODL should be established within TEC.
- A Director of ODL should be appointed and will report to the Chairman of the TEC.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The development of this Open and Distance Learning Policy for Sierra Leone consisted of a series of intense activities which included workshops, studies, research and environment scan. The result of all the above is a comprehensive but succinct document which reflects the desire of Sierra Leone to pursue the establishment of an open and distance culture in the country, due to a number of past and contemporary reasons.

The document will also serve as a guide to the implementation of the Policy as well as its regulatory framework to be overseen by the TEC. The world is gravitating towards the mainstreaming of ODL as a virile means of achieving a sustainable development in line with the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the success of which will impact on reducing unemployment, eliminating poverty to the barest minimum and combating illiteracy.

The Open and Distance Learning Policy of Sierra Leone has set, in no unmistakable terms the framework and parameters for providing enhanced access to affordable, inclusive and high-quality education to all.