AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

REVIEW OF MAKERERE UNIVERSITY DISTANCE LEARNING POLICY: ALIGNMENT WITH REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

by
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ABSTRACT
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Open distance and e-Learning (ODeL) is becoming an important approach to expanding access to higher education and providing flexible learning opportunities particularly in contexts where geographical, infrastructural and institutional constraints affect participation. In Uganda, Makerere University established an institutional policy framework for ODeL as part of its efforts to expand access to flexible and technology supported higher education. However, there remains limited systematic policy research examining how the University's ODeL policy corresponds with established regional and international reference points. This study therefore reviewed the Makerere University Open, Distance and e-Learning Policy to examine its major components, assess its alignment with regional and international best practices and identify gaps relating to access, equity, technology integration and student support. The study employed a qualitative documentary policy review design. Scholarly literature was identified and screened using a PRISMA guided process while benchmark, regulatory and comparative policy documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to ODeL quality, governance and practice. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis and comparative policy analysis. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework served as sensitising theoretical lenses during policy coding and interpretation. The findings indicate that the Makerere ODeL Policy provides a broad institutional framework covering governance, access, equity, quality assurance, programme and course design, teaching and learning, technology and infrastructure, learner support, staff development, assessment, financing and monitoring and evaluation. The policy demonstrates substantial alignment with selected regional and international reference points particularly in governance, quality assurance, learner support, staff development, technology and programme development. However, areas requiring further strengthening include contemporary approaches to digital equity and accessibility, technology integration, learner participation in quality improvement and the operational detail of student support. The study concludes that the 2015 policy provides a substantial institutional foundation for ODeL but would benefit from periodic review and updating in response to developments in digital higher education. The findings provide evidence informed directions for policy refinement and contribute to the growing literature on institutional ODeL policy in Uganda and Africa.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACDE	African Council for Distance Education
ACFODE	Action for Development
APA	American Psychological Association
CoI	Community of Inquiry
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DICTS	Directorate for ICT Support
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IITE	Institute for Information Technologies in Education
IODeL	Institute of Open, Distance and e-Learning
LMS	Learning Management System
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
ODeL	Open, Distance and e-Learning
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
RQ	Research Question
QA	Quality Assurance
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNISA	University of South Africa

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has significantly reshaped higher education from developing countries to developed countries. Open Distance E-learning has emerged as a significant tool in the effort to improve access and enhance flexibility in learning across various levels. Globally, many universities have integrated digital learning systems into their strategic frameworks especially after the COVID-19 pandemic that triggered rapid adoption of online education (OECD, 2020; UNSECO, 2021).

In sub-Saharan Africa, Open Distance e-learning provides opportunities to address infrastructure shortages, geographical barriers and increasing enrolment pressure (World Bank Group, 2020). In Uganda, Makerere University has adopted institutional structures and policies to coordinate ODEL delivery. Despite these developments, there are concerns on the coherence, adequacy and effective implementation of this policy framework. This proposal aims at conducting a systematic policy review of Makerere University Open Distance E-learning (ODEL) policy with particular emphasis on examining its alignment with regional and international best practices in digital higher education governance, quality assurance, infrastructure development and student support.

Problem Statement

Open distance and e-Learning is becoming an increasingly important component of higher education systems as universities seek to expand access, provide flexible learning opportunities and respond to changing technological and educational needs. However, the existence of ODeL programmes or technologies does not in itself

establish that an institution has a coherent policy framework for providing equitable, quality and sustainable ODeL. The challenge is particularly significant in African higher education where access to digital infrastructure and educational resources remains uneven. Research has shown that inequalities in resources and students' circumstances can affect participation in digitally mediated higher education (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Osei-Tutu et al., 2025). Research on online and distance learning has also demonstrated that effective provision depends on factors extending beyond technology including course structure, teaching practices, learner support, staff capacity and institutional arrangements (Kandemir & Kılıç Çakmak, 2021; Martin et al., 2020). Makerere University has an established ODeL policy that provides an institutional framework for governance, access, quality assurance, programme and course development, technology, learner support, staff development, assessment, financing and monitoring (Makerere University, 2015). The policy therefore provides an important foundation for ODeL provision at the University. However, the policy was approved in 2015 and the digital higher education environment has developed considerably since then. Despite the importance of institutional policy to ODeL development, there remains limited systematic policy research examining the extent to which Makerere University's ODeL Policy corresponds with relevant Ugandan, regional and international reference points. Existing literature has frequently focused on issues such as technology adoption, infrastructure, student access, online learning experiences or emergency remote teaching rather than undertaking a comprehensive examination of the institutional policy framework itself (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Kisanga & Ireson, 2015). This creates an important knowledge gap. Without a systematic examination of the policy's provisions against established reference points, it is difficult to determine

which aspects of the policy correspond with recognised ODeL quality and policy principles and which areas may require strengthening. In particular, questions remain concerning how the policy addresses access, equity, technology integration and student support in relation to contemporary ODeL expectations. The problem addressed by this study is therefore not simply the absence of an ODeL policy at Makerere University but the limited systematic evidence concerning the policy's content and its alignment with relevant regional and international best practices. Addressing this gap is important for understanding the policy foundation upon which Makerere's ODeL development is based and for identifying areas that may warrant future policy refinement.

Significancy of the Study

This study is significant because;

ODeL has become an important mechanism for expanding higher education access and flexibility. However, the benefits of ODeL depend on more than the availability of digital technologies. Issues such as quality assurance, course design, learner support, staff capacity, digital equity and institutional governance influence the conditions under which ODeL can function effectively. A policy review can therefore provide a broader understanding of how these interconnected dimensions are addressed within an institutional framework.

The study is also justified by the continuing importance of equity in digital higher education. Evidence from African higher education indicates that access and quality remain affected by infrastructural and spatial inequalities (Osei-Tutu et al., 2025). The experience of emergency remote teaching also demonstrated that digital learning can expose or reproduce existing inequalities when students and institutions

have unequal resources (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). Examining access and equity provisions within Makerere's ODeL Policy can therefore contribute to understanding whether the policy provides an adequate foundation for inclusive ODeL.

Additionally, the study is timely because the digital higher education environment has changed since the Makerere ODeL Policy was approved in 2015. Developments in online teaching, digital learning resources, student support, accessibility and emerging technologies create new policy considerations. Makerere's subsequent ODeL development, including its approved Masterplan, further demonstrates the continuing institutional relevance of ODeL. A systematic review of the 2015 policy can therefore provide a useful evidence base for understanding its continuing relevance and areas for future refinement.

The study addresses a gap in the literature by approaching ODeL from an institutional policy perspective. Rather than examining only student experiences, technological adoption, or teaching practices, the study considers how these dimensions are represented within the University's formal policy framework. This approach provides a basis for connecting institutional governance with pedagogical, technological, quality assurance, access and learner support considerations.

Objectives, Expected Outcomes and Research Questions

General Objective

To critically analyze Makerere University’s Open Distance and E-learning policy and assess its alignments with regional and international best practices.

Specific Objectives

To analytically examine the content, structure and scope of the ODeL policy of Makerere University with a set of analytical frameworks.

To assess policy's alignment with regional and international ODeL policy frameworks based on established quality indicators.

To identify policy gaps related to access, equity, technology integration and student support.

To suggest evidence based recommendations based on comparative policy analysis and literature.

Research Questions

1. What are the major components of the Makerere University ODeL policy?
2. To what extent does the ODeL policy align with regional best practices?
3. To what extent does the ODeL policy align to international best practices?
4. What gaps exist in relation to access, equity, technology integration and student support in regards to the best practices?

Expected Outcomes

A comparative policy analysis highlighting strengths and weaknesses in the policy.

Practical recommendation aligned to Makerere University context.

Contribution to scholarly work on institutional ODeL policy reviews in digital higher education.

Study Scope

The study literature included articles focusing primarily on Africa and other low and middle income country contexts, peer reviewed studies from developed countries setting for international bench marking, policy and guidance documents from internationally recognised organisations concerned with open, distance and e-learning and digital higher education. The study did not involve interviews, surveys,

observations or other primary data collection from students, staff, administrators or policymakers. Accordingly, it does not make claims about implementation effectiveness or stakeholder perceptions.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) is becoming an increasingly important mode of higher education delivery particularly as universities seek to expand access, improve flexibility, respond to technological change and provide learning opportunities to students who may be geographically, economically or socially constrained from participating in conventional face to face education. The development of ODeL has also transformed the responsibilities of higher education institutions from simply providing physical learning spaces to designing systems that integrate digital technologies, appropriate pedagogies, learner support, quality assurance, institutional governance and continuous monitoring.

The growth of ODeL has been particularly significant in Africa where expanding demand for higher education exists alongside persistent constraints related to infrastructure, financing, geographical access, staff capacity and digital inequality. Consequently, ODeL has increasingly been viewed not only as an alternative delivery mode but also as a mechanism for widening participation in higher education. However, expansion alone does not guarantee quality or equity. Institutional policies need to establish appropriate governance arrangements, quality assurance mechanisms, technology infrastructure, staff development systems and learner support structures.

The literature reviewed in this chapter therefore considers ODeL from global, African, East African and Ugandan perspectives. Particular attention is given to the five core policy dimensions underpinning this study: governance and institutional leadership, quality assurance, access and equity, technology integration and student support.

Related dimensions are also considered because they influence the effectiveness and sustainability of institutional ODeL systems.

The chapter begins by conceptualising ODeL and discussing its development within higher education. It then examines international literature followed by African, East African and Ugandan scholarship. The chapter subsequently reviews regional and international approaches to ODeL quality and policy benchmarking, identifies the research gap, and presents the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Community of Inquiry (CoI) frameworks that guide interpretation of the policy under review.

Conceptualizing ODeL Policy in Higher Education

Open Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) refers to structured approaches to teaching and learning that combine openness, distance education and technology supported learning. It encompasses online learning, e-learning, mobile learning, blended learning, flipped learning and other technology mediated approaches. In Uganda, Ouma and Musiimaami (2023) emphasise that ODeL should not be narrowly understood as internet-based learning as distance education may use both electronic and non electronic technologies. UNESCO (2021) similarly recognises distance and online learning as important approaches for expanding access to higher education and supporting lifelong learning.

Within higher education, ODeL policy refers to the institutional framework that guides the planning, organisation, implementation and management of these forms of learning. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (2017), such policies define governance structures, institutional responsibilities, quality assurance arrangements and monitoring mechanisms. ODeL policy may therefore address interconnected areas such as governance, quality assurance, curriculum and teaching, technology and

infrastructure, learner support, staff development, access and equity and monitoring and evaluation. For this study, ODeL policy is understood as the institutional framework governing the provision and management of open, distance and e-learning within a university.

ODeL in Higher Education: A Global Perspective.

Globally, ODeL has evolved from a peripheral alternative to conventional education into an increasingly important component of higher education systems. Its expansion reflects several transformations in higher education, particularly the growing use of flexible and technology-mediated approaches to expand access, support lifelong learning and respond to changing learner populations.

The growing importance of ODeL has been reinforced by international developments in higher education. UNESCO (2021) identifies distance and online learning as important approaches for expanding access to lifelong learning while the World Bank (2020) reports that digital transformation is increasingly embedded within higher education reform agendas, particularly in developing regions seeking to address access constraints and infrastructure limitations. These developments indicate the growing integration of technology supported learning into broader higher education systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of remote and online learning worldwide. The rapid shift from conventional classroom based teaching to remote forms of delivery demonstrated the capacity of higher education institutions to use digital technologies to maintain educational provision during periods of disruption (OECD, 2020). At the same time, the experience highlighted differences in institutional preparedness, infrastructure, connectivity and learner access. The pandemic therefore

represented an important turning point in the development of digital learning, contributing to its increased visibility within institutional and higher education reform agendas.

The expansion of ODeL is also reflected in the growth of research examining online teaching and learning. Martin et al. (2020) through a systematic review of 619 articles published between 2009 and 2018 identified substantial growth and diversity in online teaching and learning research. Their review identified research themes relating to learners, instructors, courses and institutional or organisational contexts. Importantly, the authors highlighted the need for further research on organisational issues, including leadership, policy, management, access, culture, equity, inclusion and ethics. This suggests that the development of ODeL within higher education involves institutional and organisational considerations alongside developments in teaching and technology.

The expansion of ODeL has also raised important questions about access and equity. While technology mediated learning can enable universities to reach learners who may be unable to participate in conventional campus based education, access to ODeL is influenced by factors such as connectivity, digital resources, affordability and digital skills. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) demonstrate that technological availability alone is not sufficient to ensure equitable learning outcomes particularly in contexts where digital inequalities already exist. Trotter et al. (2021) similarly emphasise the importance of institutional support systems and organised responses to access disparities. These findings indicate that the expansion of ODeL can create new opportunities for participation while also exposing or reproducing existing inequalities.

The literature further indicates that the growth of ODeL has implications for institutional preparedness and capacity. Kisanga and Ireson (2015) identify

organisational preparedness, staff capacity and strategic planning as important factors in the successful adoption of e-learning. As universities increasingly incorporate ODeL into their educational provision, institutions must therefore respond to the organisational, technological and human resource requirements associated with its implementation.

Overall, the global literature demonstrates that ODeL has become an increasingly significant feature of contemporary higher education. Its development has been driven by the pursuit of greater flexibility and access, advances in digital technologies, changing learner needs and more recently, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the literature also demonstrates that the expansion of ODeL presents challenges relating to digital inequality, institutional preparedness, infrastructure, staff capacity and learner support. These global developments provide an important context for examining how individual universities formulate and implement ODeL policies within their own institutional environments.

Governance and Institutional Leadership

Institutional governance is central to the sustainability of ODeL. Online learning requires coordination between academic units, quality assurance structures, information technology departments, instructional designers, administrators and senior university leadership. Consequently, ODeL cannot be effectively managed if responsibility is left exclusively to individual lecturers or isolated technical departments.

Martin et al. (2020) identify organisational support as an important area requiring further attention within online learning research. Their findings suggest that institutional leadership, policy and organisational culture influence the conditions within which online teaching and learning can develop. Similarly, Gregory and Salmon (2013)

argue that universities need structured approaches to professional development and institutional support for online teaching. Their work highlights the importance of contextualised professional development, mentoring and incremental innovation. These findings suggest that governance of ODeL should extend beyond establishing an online platform to creating institutional structures that support academics and other personnel responsible for designing and delivering online learning.

The governance dimension is therefore important when reviewing Makerere University's ODeL Policy because the policy establishes an institutional structure through the Institute of Open, Distance and e-Learning (IODeL), assigns responsibilities to academic units and senior university organs and provides for coordination with technology and quality assurance functions. The literature provides a basis for examining whether these structures correspond with broader expectations of institutional ODeL governance.

Quality Assurance in ODeL

Quality assurance is one of the most consistently discussed dimensions of ODeL. The expansion of distance and online learning has generated concerns about whether programmes delivered through ODeL can provide educational experiences comparable in quality to conventional programmes. Latchem (2016) argues that quality assurance systems for open and distance learning should incorporate both general higher education standards and criteria specifically responsive to the characteristics of ODL. These include considerations of access, equity, learner diversity, learning resources, student support, technology and outcomes. Quality assurance should therefore not be reduced to checking institutional inputs, it should also consider processes, outcomes and the experiences and needs of learners. The African Council for Distance Education

quality assurance framework similarly demonstrates the importance of institutional level quality assurance across multiple dimensions including institutional leadership, learners, human resources, programme design, course design, learner support, assessment, infrastructure and collaboration. This multidimensional approach allows the study to consider quality as an integrated institutional responsibility rather than a narrowly academic or technical function.

East African scholarship also raises questions concerning the effectiveness of quality assurance systems. Khamis and Scully (2020) examining a quality assurance framework in East Africa, argue that quality assurance frameworks may sometimes emphasise comprehensive lists of criteria without sufficiently demonstrating how the indicators relate to teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. This is an important consideration for ODeL policy because the existence of a quality assurance framework does not automatically demonstrate that quality improvement is occurring. Research from Tanzania further illustrates the relationship between ODL expansion and quality assurance. Studies of the Open University of Tanzania identify challenges associated with infrastructure, specialist expertise and the development of appropriate ODL quality assurance mechanisms (Kisanga and Ireson, 2015), ODL therefore creates the need for quality systems that recognise the particularities of distance learning while maintaining broader academic standards. The literature suggests that an effective ODeL policy should therefore address at least four related aspects of quality assurance: clearly defined institutional responsibilities, ODeL-specific quality criteria, continuous monitoring and improvement and evidence concerning learner and programme outcomes.

Access, Equity and Inclusion in ODeL

One of the strongest rationales for ODeL is its potential to expand access to higher education. Distance and online modes can enable participation by learners who face geographical, employment, family, financial or other constraints that make conventional campus attendance difficult. However, the literature also demonstrates that technological access is uneven. ODeL can therefore simultaneously expand access and reproduce existing inequalities when learners lack appropriate devices, connectivity, electricity, digital skills or learning support. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) examining emergency remote teaching and learning in South Africa, demonstrate how inequalities in resources and social conditions affected students' ability to participate in digitally mediated education. Although their study emerged from the COVID-19 emergency remote teaching context and should not be treated as a direct evaluation of sustainable ODeL systems, it provides important evidence concerning the relationship between digital learning and structural inequality. Osei-Tutu et al. (2025) in a systematic review of higher educational access, quality and equity in Africa, similarly identify infrastructure, spatial disparities and other structural conditions as important issues affecting higher education access. Their review also recognises ODL as a potential mechanism for expanding access while emphasising the broader institutional and infrastructural conditions required to make access meaningful.

From a policy perspective therefore, access should not simply mean the formal availability of an online programme. Meaningful access requires consideration of affordability, connectivity, accessibility, digital skills, inclusive course materials, learner support and the needs of disadvantaged groups.

Technology Integration and Digital Infrastructure

Technology is a defining component of contemporary ODeL but technology itself does not guarantee effective learning. Effective ODeL requires appropriate infrastructure, reliable connectivity, suitable learning platforms, digital learning materials, technical support and staff capacity to use technology pedagogically. Kisanga and Ireson (2015) identify infrastructure, financial constraints, inadequate support, limited e-learning knowledge and resistance among staff as significant barriers. Their findings demonstrate that technology adoption is closely connected to organisational readiness and human capacity. Ouma and Musiimaami (2023) as well identify high equipment costs, limited bandwidth, expensive internet data, inadequate staff and student skills and insufficient institutional policies as barriers to ODeL adoption in Ugandan tertiary institutions. They consequently recommend investment in ICT infrastructure, institutional ODeL policies and training for staff and students. Githinji et al. (2023) provide further Ugandan evidence from Clarke International University. Their study of 485 students found that ICT and e-learning support, ODeL training and orientation, self-enrolment capability and ownership of a computer or smartphone were associated with students' ability to navigate the e-learning platform. This evidence reinforces the argument that technology infrastructure and user support need to be addressed together.

Recent Makerere based research also indicates the importance of pedagogical rather than purely technical technology integration. Tayebwa et al. (2026) studying discussion forums within Makerere University's e-learning environment found that discussion forums supported behavioural and collaborative aspects of self regulated learning while areas such as goal setting, help seeking and self evaluation were less

consistently supported. Their findings suggest that digital platforms require intentional pedagogical design and active facilitation rather than merely being made available to students. Consequently, technology integration within ODeL policy should encompass infrastructure, platforms, accessibility, digital content, technical support, staff capacity, pedagogical design and continuous improvement.

Student/learner Support

Learner support is an important determinant of successful participation in distance and online education because ODeL students may experience greater physical and social separation from academic staff and peers than students in conventional programmes. Walsh et al. (2024) in a systematic literature review of online academic student support in higher education, found that effective support was associated with outcomes including engagement, access, satisfaction, performance, motivation, self-efficacy, retention and course completion. Their review demonstrates that student support should be understood as an integral part of online education rather than an optional service. Edisherashvili et al. (2022) similarly demonstrate the importance of supporting self-regulated learning in distance education. Distance learners often need to manage their time, organise learning activities, monitor progress and seek assistance with less immediate physical contact with instructors. Institutional policies therefore need to provide structures that support learner autonomy while maintaining opportunities for academic interaction. The importance of learner guidance is also evident in research on distance learning structure. Kandemir and Kılıç Çakmak (2021) in their systematic review of distance learning, identify technology, flexibility, assessment, guidance and curriculum as important components of the structure of

distance learning. Their findings suggest that learner support cannot be separated from course design, assessment and technological arrangements.

Ugandan research further supports this position. Githinji et al. (2023) found that ICT and e-learning support and ODeL orientation were associated with students' ability to navigate online learning platforms. This suggests that student support should begin before students encounter difficulties and should include orientation, technical support and continuing academic assistance.

ODeL in Africa

ODeL has particular strategic importance in Africa because higher education systems continue to experience strong demand for university education alongside constraints in infrastructure, financing, geographical access and institutional capacity. Osei-Tutu et al. (2025) through a systematic review of higher educational access, quality and equity in Africa, demonstrate that questions of access cannot be separated from infrastructure, geographical inequalities and institutional capacity. ODL can provide opportunities for expanding access but the benefits are dependent on the conditions under which programmes are designed and delivered. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) similarly show how unequal access to resources can influence participation in digitally mediated higher education. Their findings highlight the importance of considering digital inequality when discussing ODeL policy. Across African contexts, research therefore suggests several recurring policy concerns such as sustainable infrastructure, institutional financing, staff capacity, quality assurance, learner support and equity. These concerns are especially relevant to institutions attempting to move from emergency or project based digital learning toward sustainable ODeL systems. African literature also demonstrates that ODeL policy needs to reflect local realities.

Approaches developed in highly resourced systems cannot simply be transferred without considering differences in connectivity, device ownership, electricity access, financing and institutional capacity. Regional benchmarks are therefore useful because they allow comparison while maintaining sensitivity to African higher education conditions.

ODeL in Uganda

Uganda has experienced growing adoption of Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) in higher education, although implementation remains constrained by institutional and infrastructural challenges. Ouma and Musiimaami (2023) found that ODeL adoption among Ugandan tertiary institutions was still limited, with major barriers including the high cost of equipment and internet access, inadequate bandwidth, limited staff and student skills, practical programme requirements, and insufficient institutional policies. Evidence from Clarke International University similarly indicates that students' ability to use online learning platforms is influenced by access to ICT and e-learning support, ODeL training and orientation, and ownership of suitable devices (Githinji et al., 2023). At Makerere University, Olum et al. (2020) also documented both opportunities and barriers associated with e-learning during the COVID-19 period.

Recent Ugandan scholarship increasingly highlights the importance of policy and regulatory frameworks in shaping the quality and sustainability of distance education. Muweesia and Mayanja (2025), for example, examined the influence of regulatory frameworks on the quality of distance education in Uganda, while emerging research at Makerere continues to examine pedagogical aspects of online learning, including the use of discussion forums to support self-regulated learning (Tayebwa et al., 2026). Collectively, these studies suggest that ODeL in Uganda is moving beyond

basic technology adoption towards broader concerns relating to institutional policy, learner support, staff capacity, quality assurance, and online pedagogy.

Within this national context, Makerere University adopted its ODeL Policy in 2015 to guide the mainstreaming of ODeL within its academic programmes. The policy establishes institutional arrangements through the Institute of Open, Distance and e-Learning (IODeL) and addresses key areas including governance, quality assurance, technology infrastructure, staff development, learner support, programme development, study materials, and monitoring and evaluation. These provisions demonstrate that Makerere recognised ODeL as an institution wide function requiring coordinated academic, technological and administrative support.

The continued development of ODeL at Makerere provides a relevant contemporary context for reviewing the 2015 policy. In March 2026, the University launched its ODeL Strategic Plan and initiated development of a dedicated ODeL facility, alongside plans to strengthen e-learning infrastructure and staff capacity for digital content development. ODeL is also identified as part of Makerere University's 2026–2030 strategic direction. These developments indicate that ODeL remains an active institutional priority and reinforce the relevance of examining whether the existing policy remains aligned with evolving regional and international expectations. The present study, however, focuses specifically on the 2015 Makerere University ODeL Policy and does not evaluate the new ODeL Strategic Plan or the KOICA-supported initiative. The recent developments are included only to provide institutional context and demonstrate the continuing relevance of ODeL policy at Makerere University.

Regional and International Best Practices in ODeL

The regional and international literature identifies a number of interrelated principles that characterise effective ODeL systems. The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) provides a comprehensive regional benchmark covering institutional vision and planning, leadership and management, learners, human resources, programme and course design, learner support, assessment, infrastructure, research and collaboration. Similarly, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) emphasises institutional responsibility for quality, access, equity, diversity, student participation, benchmarking and continuous quality improvement (Latchem, 2016). UNESCO's international benchmarking work further highlights quality, equity and inclusion, technology, collaboration and social impact while Knyazeva and Pushkareva (2023) demonstrate the value of benchmarking for identifying good practices while recognising differences in institutional and national contexts. Experiences from established ODeL institutions including the University of South Africa (UNISA) and The Open University in the United Kingdom reinforce these principles. Their approaches demonstrate the importance of institutional governance, quality assurance, learning design, learner support, technology, interaction and continuous institutional improvement. These experiences are not intended to provide models for direct replication at Makerere University, rather they provide comparative evidence of practices that can inform the assessment of institutional ODeL policies within their respective contexts.

Across these regional and international benchmarks, seven interconnected best-practice areas emerge: (1) governance and institutional leadership, (2) quality assurance and continuous improvement, (3) access, equity and inclusion, (4) technology and learning infrastructure, (5) curriculum, course design and pedagogy, (6) learner support

and staff development, and (7) monitoring, evaluation and institutional learning. Together, these areas demonstrate that effective ODeL is a whole institution responsibility requiring coordination between academic, administrative, technological, and quality assurance functions.

Synthesis of the Literature

The literature indicates that effective ODeL depends not on technology alone but on coherent institutional systems linking governance, quality assurance, access and equity, infrastructure, pedagogy, learner support, and staff capacity. Meaningful access requires more than connectivity, while effective learning depends on appropriate course design, interaction, assessment and support. Quality assurance and staff development must therefore be continuous and responsive to changing technologies and learner needs.

Overall, ODeL policy is best understood as a dynamic and interconnected institutional framework requiring continuous monitoring and review. These dimensions provide the analytical foundation for examining the extent to which Makerere University's ODeL Policy aligns with the requirements of effective, inclusive, and sustainable ODeL.

Research Gap

The literature provides substantial evidence on ODeL, including online learning, technology adoption, quality assurance, learner support, self-regulated learning, access and digital inequality. However, much of the empirical research, including studies from Uganda, focuses on implementation challenges, technology access, adoption and learner experiences rather than systematic analysis of institutional ODeL policies. Three related gaps emerge

First, much of the empirical literature focuses on implementation, adoption, learner experiences or technological barriers, rather than conducting detailed institutional policy analysis. For example, Ugandan studies have examined ODeL adoption and student navigation of online platforms but relatively limited research has systematically examined the content and structure of a major Ugandan university's ODeL policy against multiple regional and international benchmarks.

Second, existing studies often examine individual dimensions such as technology, quality assurance or student support separately. There is less integrated analysis examining how governance, quality assurance, access and equity, technology and learner support are brought together within an institutional ODeL policy.

Third, there is a contextual and temporal gap. Makerere's existing ODeL Policy was developed in 2015 while the university is now implementing a new strategic direction for ODeL that includes an ODeL master plan that highlights infrastructure development and staff capacity building. This creates a timely opportunity to examine the strengths and policy level gaps of the existing framework in light of contemporary ODeL expectations.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a systematic analysis of the Makerere University ODeL Policy and comparing its provisions with selected regional and international literature, frameworks and institutional benchmarks.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two theoretical frameworks, the Universal design for learning and the community of inquiry framework (CoI). This is because they address two key aspects of Open, Distance and e-learning (ODeL), inclusive learning design and quality of online learning environments. As institutional ODeL policies guide how

digital learning is designed, delivered and supported, these frameworks provide appropriate viewpoints for assessing whether Makerere University's ODeL policy aligns with regional and international best practices.

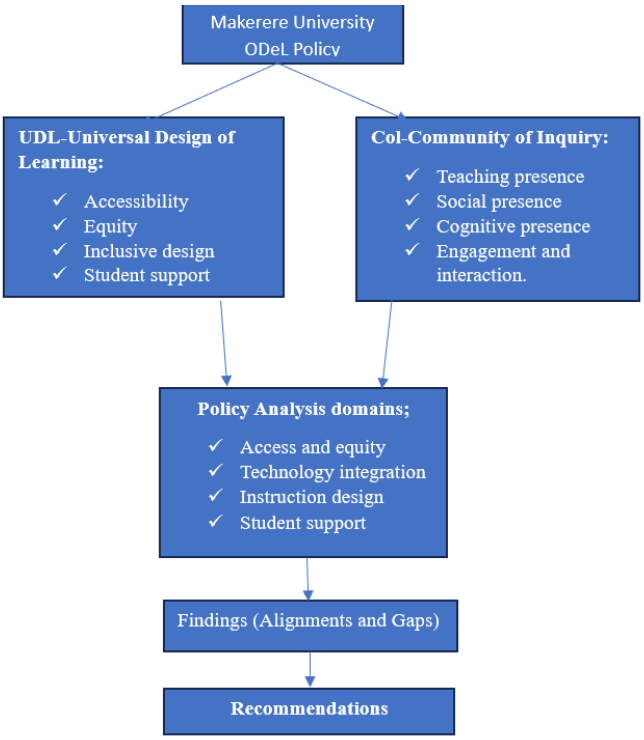
The Universal Design for Learning focuses on the development of inclusive and accessible learning conditions through flexible instructional design. It suggests that learning systems should provide various means of engagement, representations and expressions in order to support diverse learners (CAST, 2018). Research indicates that implementing universal design principles in online learning enhances accessibility, learner engagement and participation (Al-Azawei et al., 2016; Rao et al., 2014). In this study, UDL guided the evaluation of policy provisions related to accessibility, equity, inclusive learning material and student support.

The Community of Inquiry framework explains successful online learning as a result of the interplay among teaching, social and cognitive presence (Garrison, 2011). It guided the evaluation of the policy provisions in terms of designing courses, instructor facilitation, student interaction and academic support. Together, the frameworks enable conducting an overall assessment of the inclusiveness and pedagogical quality of Makerere University's ODeL policy.

Below is a simple conceptual representation showing how both frameworks intersect in figure 1;

Figure 1

Relationship between UDL and CoL



Integration of UDL and CoI

UDL and CoI are complementary rather than competing frameworks as described below;

UDL asks in broad terms, Has the learning environment been designed to accommodate learner variability and provide meaningful opportunities for access, engagement and expression?

CoI asks: Does the learning environment create conditions for teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence that support meaningful learning?

When combined, the frameworks provide a useful conceptual lens for examining institutional ODeL policy. For example, a policy provision concerning learner support can be considered through UDL in terms of whether different learner needs are

recognised and through CoI in terms of whether support facilitates participation and meaningful engagement. Similarly, a policy provision concerning course materials can be examined through UDL in terms of representation and accessibility and through CoI in terms of whether materials contribute to teaching and cognitive engagement.

The integration can therefore be represented as follows: UDL (access, learner variability, flexibility representation, engagement, action and expression) + CoI (teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence) = (UDL + CoL) Together (inclusive, flexible, supported and meaningful ODeL)

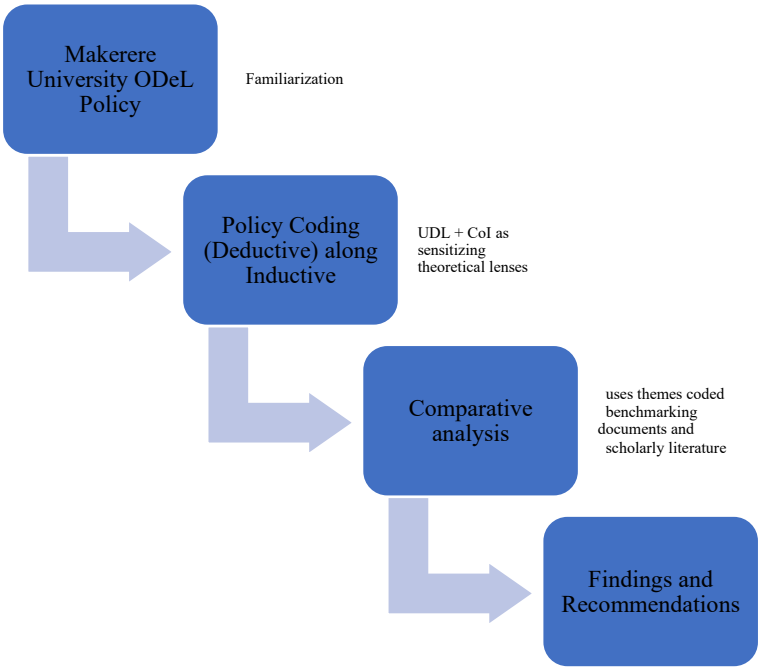
This integration provides the conceptual basis for the study's thematic coding. UDL and CoI serves as sensitising frameworks during the thematic analysis of the Makerere ODeL Policy. At the same time, the analysis remains open to themes that emerge inductively from the policy, particularly institutional dimensions such as governance, financing, monitoring and quality assurance that cannot be reduced to either theoretical framework.

Conceptual Relationship of the Study

The conceptual logic of the study is that the Makerere ODeL Policy contains provisions that can be coded and organised into major themes. UDL and CoI provide theoretical lenses for interpreting provisions concerning inclusive access, learner variability, teaching, interaction and meaningful learning. Other themes emerge inductively from the policy itself. The themes are then examined against two complementary forms of evidence. First, the PRISMA-selected scholarly literature provides research evidence concerning ODeL practices, challenges and institutional requirements. Second, national/regional and international benchmark documents provide formal or authoritative reference points for policy comparison.

Figure 2

Conceptual framework



This conceptual relationship in figure 2 directly supports the four research questions. Research Question 1 is addressed by identifying and thematically organising the major components of the Makerere ODeL Policy. Research Questions 2 and 3 are addressed by benchmarking the themes emerging from the policy against regional and international reference points respectively while using scholarly research to contextualise and interpret the comparison. Research Question 4 is addressed through a focused synthesis of the evidence relating to access, equity, technology integration and student support.

Chapter Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that quality ODeL is multidimensional. It involves governance, quality assurance, access and equity, technology infrastructure, programme and course design, teaching and learning, learner support, staff development, assessment, and monitoring and continuous improvement. Global literature demonstrates the expansion of online and distance learning while highlighting the need for greater attention to organisational and policy dimensions. African and Sub-Saharan African literature demonstrates that infrastructure, affordability, bandwidth, technical support, staff capacity and equity remain important challenges. East African and Ugandan literature further demonstrates the importance of institutional policy, quality assurance, learner support, staff preparation and technology access. The literature also reveals that ODeL policy cannot be assessed only by identifying whether individual components exist. The quality and comprehensiveness of the provisions matter. In particular, access must be considered alongside equity; technology alongside pedagogy and support; and quality assurance alongside continuous institutional improvement. The review identifies a specific gap concerning systematic policy level examination of Makerere University's ODeL Policy and its alignment with regional and international best practices. This gap is particularly timely given Makerere University's continuing ODeL development and the launch of its ODeL Strategic Plan in 2026. To address this gap, the study adopts UDL and CoI as complementary theoretical frameworks. UDL provides a lens for examining inclusive access, learner variability, flexibility and accessibility while CoI provides a lens for examining teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence and meaningful online learning. These frameworks inform the coding and thematic interpretation of the

Makerere ODeL Policy while allowing additional policy specific themes to emerge inductively. The resulting conceptual framework provides the foundation for the methodological approach in Chapter III where the policy is thematically analysed first, the resulting themes are then benchmarked against regional and international reference points and interpreted using relevant scholarly evidence and the specific areas of access, equity, technology integration and student support are synthesised.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology used to examine the alignment of the Makerere University Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) Policy with regional and international best practices. The study adopted a qualitative documentary policy-review design. The Makerere University ODeL Policy constituted the primary document and was examined through thematic content analysis and comparative policy analysis. Scholarly literature was identified and selected through a PRISMA 2020 guided process and used to contextualise and interpret the policy themes. Authoritative regulatory, benchmark and comparative policy documents were used as reference points for assessing regional and international alignment. The analytical process combined deductive and inductive coding. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework provided sensitising theoretical lenses for interpreting relevant policy provisions while inductive coding allowed important institutional dimensions not adequately represented by either framework to emerge from the policy itself. The resulting themes were subsequently interpreted using the scholarly literature and compared with selected regional and international reference documents. This process enabled the study to determine areas of alignment and areas requiring strengthening without making claims about policy implementation or effectiveness. The chapter presents the research design, context of the study, documentary sources, search and selection procedures, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data collection tools, coding procedures, thematic analysis, benchmarking strategy, trustworthiness, ethical considerations and methodological limitations.

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand and interpret the content, structure, provisions and underlying priorities of an institutional policy rather than measure variables statistically. The primary interest was in identifying what the Makerere University ODeL Policy provides for, how these provisions are organised and how they correspond with established regional and international reference points. The study did not involve surveys, interviews, observations, experiments or other forms of primary data collection. Instead, it relied on documentary evidence consisting of the Makerere University ODeL Policy, selected scholarly publications and authoritative benchmark, regulatory and comparative policy documents. Documentary analysis is appropriate where documents constitute meaningful sources of evidence about institutional policies, practices, priorities and decision Documentary policy review design

The study used a qualitative documentary policy review design. The design was selected because the central object of inquiry was the Makerere University ODeL Policy and its relationship to established ODeL standards and practices.

The design involved four interconnected analytical activities:

1. Systematic identification and selection of relevant scholarly literature
2. Thematic analysis of the Makerere University ODeL Policy.
3. Comparative benchmarking of the resulting policy themes against regional and international reference documents and
4. Focused synthesis of gaps relating specifically to access, equity, technology integration and student support.

The study therefore did not treat the scholarly literature review as the primary unit of analysis. Rather, scholarly literature provided an evidence base for interpreting the policy while the Makerere ODeL Policy remained the primary object of analysis. PRISMA was used to make the identification and selection of scholarly evidence systematic and transparent. Additionally, thematic content analysis and comparative policy analysis were used to analyse the policy itself.

Role of theory in the research design

The theoretical orientation of the study was based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. UDL was used as a sensitising framework for examining policy provisions relating particularly to access, equity, learner differences, learning materials, learner engagement, flexibility and assessment. UDL emphasises the design of learning environments that anticipate learner variability and provide multiple means of engagement, representation and action and expression (CAST, 2018). CoI was used to interpret policy provisions relating particularly to teaching and learning, course design, interaction, learner support, facilitation, staff preparation and learning communities. The CoI framework conceptualises meaningful online learning through the interaction of teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000).

The two frameworks were not treated as exhaustive classifications of the Makerere policy. Instead, they informed deductive coding where their concepts were directly relevant. Provisions concerning governance, financing, institutional accountability, monitoring and evaluation and other policy matters were allowed to emerge through inductive coding. This combined approach avoided forcing every policy

provision into a theoretical category while still ensuring that the theoretical frameworks played a meaningful role in the analysis.

Context of the Study

The study focused on Makerere University in Uganda particularly its institutional policy framework for Open, Distance and e-Learning. Makerere University adopted its ODeL Policy in 2015. The policy states that it aims to mainstream ODeL into academic programmes in order to increase access to 'flexible and quality technology supported learning' and identifies ODeL as a strategy for increasing access to flexible education for both male and female prospective students.

The policy applies to matters concerning the 'conceiving, designing, developing and implementing/running ODeL programmes and eLearning activities' at Makerere University. It therefore provides a suitable institutional document for examining how Makerere conceptualised ODeL, its governance, delivery, quality assurance, technology, learner support, staffing, financing and monitoring. The policy also recognises ODeL as requiring distinctive structures and conditions because ODeL learners may have limited or no physical contact with university staff. It identifies interactive print and online self study materials as central to successful ODeL provision and recognises the right of staff and students to know the modes of delivery and requirements associated with courses and programmes.

The policy established an institutional structure centred on the proposed transformation of the Department of Open and Distance Learning into the Institute of Open, Distance and eLearning (IODeL) with university wide oversight and backstopping responsibilities. The study focused on the policy document as approved in 2015. Subsequent Makerere ODeL developments were treated as contextual evidence of

the continuing importance of ODeL rather than incorporated into the formal policy corpus.

Sources of Documentary Data

The documentary corpus consisted of three categories of sources:

1. The primary Makerere University ODeL Policy
2. Scholarly publications identified through a systematic literature identification and screening process and
3. Authoritative benchmark, regulatory and comparative policy documents.

The final documentary corpus comprised seventeen documents. These consisted of ten scholarly publications, six benchmark, regulatory and comparative documents and the Makerere University ODeL Policy as the primary policy document. Scholarly publications provided empirical and conceptual evidence concerning ODeL and related dimensions of quality, access, technology, learner support, teaching and equity. Benchmark, regulatory and comparative documents provided formal reference points for comparison. The Makerere policy constituted the substantive policy text subjected to thematic and comparative analysis. The six benchmark, regulatory and comparative documents were selected purposively because they provide relevant Ugandan, African and international reference points for ODeL quality assurance, governance, access, learner support and institutional policy and because they are authoritative sources directly related to the study questions.

Table 1
Documents Summary Table

Category	Document/Author/Year	Role in the study
Primary policy	Makerere University ODeL Policy (2015)	Primary object of analysis
Ugandan/regional regulatory benchmark	National Council for Higher Education (NCHE, 2019), Minimum Standards for Open Distance and E-Learning Programmes	Ugandan regulatory reference point
African/regional benchmark	African Council for Distance Education (ACDE, 2024), Quality Evaluation Toolkit for Higher Education in Africa	African quality assurance reference point
International benchmark	Commonwealth of Learning (COL, 2009), Quality Assurance Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes	International/Commonwealth QA reference point
International comparative source	Latchem (2016), Open and Distance Learning Quality Assurance in Commonwealth Universities	Comparative ODL quality assurance evidence
International benchmark	UNESCO IITE (2023), Benchmarking for Open Universities: Guidelines and Good Practices	International benchmarking reference point

International institutional policy	University of South Africa (UNISA, 2018), Open Distance e-Learning Policy	Comparative institutional policy reference
Scholarly evidence	Czerniewicz et al. (2020)	Equity and inequality in digital learning
Scholarly evidence	Edisherashvili et al. (2022)	Self regulated learning and distance learning
Scholarly evidence	Gregory and Salmon (2013)	Professional development for online teaching
Scholarly evidence	Kandemir and Kılıç Çakmak (2021)	Structure in distance learning
Scholarly evidence	Kisanga and Ireson (2015)	E-learning adoption in Tanzania
Scholarly evidence	Martin et al. (2023)	Online teaching practices
Scholarly evidence	Martin et al. (2020)	Online teaching and learning
Scholarly evidence	Ofulue et al. (2024)	Resilient ODeL systems in Africa
Scholarly evidence	Osei-Tutu et al. (2025)	Higher education access, quality and equity in Africa
Scholarly evidence	Walsh et al. (2024)	Online academic student support

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Scholarly literature was retrieved from google scholar, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and supplemented by searches of relevant relevant institutional and international organisation websites for authoritative policy and benchmark documents. The search focused on literature addressing ODeL, open and distance learning, online learning, quality assurance, access, equity, technology integration, teaching and learning, learner support, staff development and related higher education policy concerns.

A broad search string was used to identify relevant documents to the study: (“open and distance learning” OR ODeL OR “distance education”) AND (“quality assurance” OR quality OR standards) AND (“higher education” OR university) AND (“framework” OR “Guidelines” OR best practices)

The search produced an initial pool of literature after which records were screened against the predefined eligibility criteria. The study did not assume that all retrieved studies were directly relevant merely because they addressed online or distance learning. Relevance to higher education ODeL and to the policy dimensions examined in the study was required.

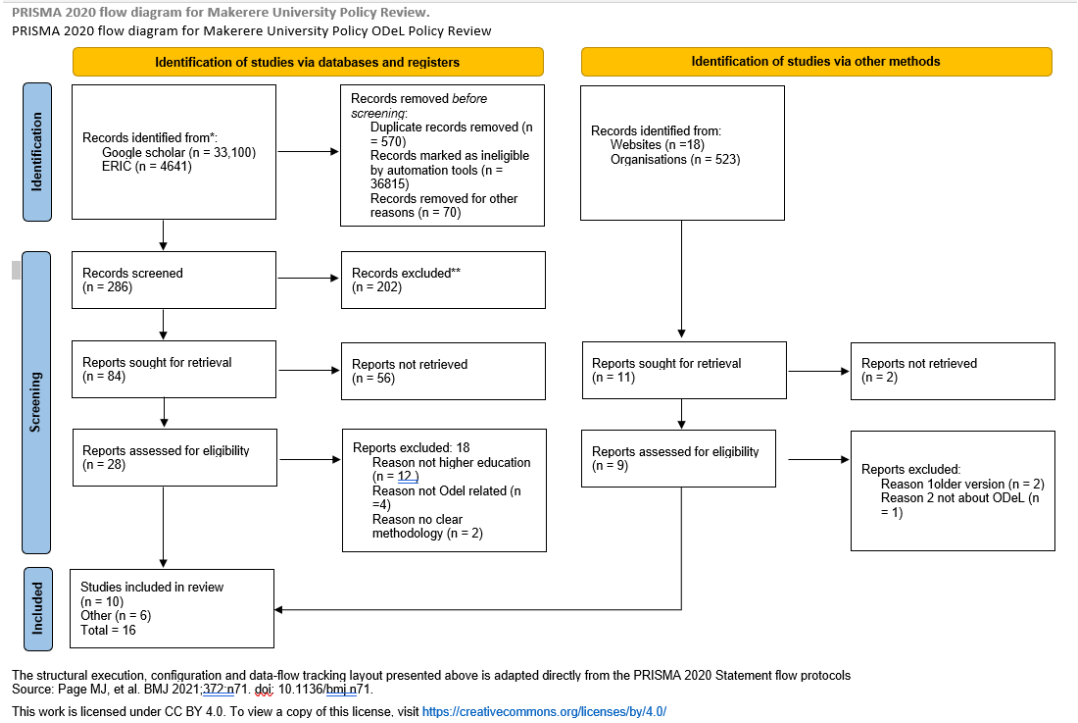
PRISMA Guided Identification and Screening

The identification and screening of scholarly literature followed the principles of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA was used to structure the identification, screening, eligibility assessment and final inclusion of scholarly publications. It was not used as the method for analysing the Makerere policy. The process involved, identifying

potentially relevant scholarly records, removing duplicate or otherwise unsuitable records, screening titles and abstracts, reviewing full texts against the eligibility criteria, excluding studies that did not meet the established criteria and retaining studies that directly contributed evidence relevant to the research questions and analytical themes. The final scholarly evidence base consisted of ten publications and six policy and benchmark documents as illustrated below.

Figure 3

PRISMA flow Diagram



The structural execution, configuration and data-flow tracking layout presented above is adapted directly from the PRISMA 2020 Statement flow protocols
Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.
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Inclusion Criteria

1. Studies addressing open distance and e-learning (ODeL) ODL, distance education or online learning in higher education.

2. Studies addressing at least one Makerere university ODeL policy relevant area: governance, quality assurance, access/equity, technology, curriculum/course design, teaching and learning, assessment, learner support, staff development or monitoring and evaluation.
3. Peer reviewed journal articles and relevant scholarly book chapters.
4. Studies available in full text.
5. Publications in English.
6. Relevant regional and international policy/framework documents from authoritative organisations and academic institution's official websites were considered separately as benchmark sources, particularly UNISA, ACDE, COL and UNESCO.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Studies focused exclusively on primary or secondary education.
2. Studies about general ICT adoption with no meaningful connection to ODeL.
3. Studies focused solely on emergency remote teaching without relevance to sustainable ODeL
4. Publications without accessible full text.
5. Duplicates.
6. News articles, blogs, opinion pieces and other non authoritative sources.
7. Studies that did not contribute to any of the identified ODeL policy components

Data Collection Tools

Two principal documentary analysis tools were developed: a documentary extraction matrix and a policy coding manual.

Documentary extraction matrix; A documentary extraction matrix was used to systematically record information from the selected scholarly, benchmark, regulatory and comparative documents. The matrix reduced the risk of relying on disconnected notes and provided a consistent basis for comparing evidence across documents.

Policy Coding Manual

A policy coding manual was developed specifically for the Makerere ODeL Policy. The manual specified the major analytical dimensions, theoretical lenses and coding principles.

The coding process used both deductive codes that was informed by UDL and CoI and inductive codes, generated from significant policy provisions not adequately represented by those theoretical frameworks. The coding manual was treated as an evolving analytical tool. Initial codes were reviewed while becoming familiar with the complete policy document and related codes were consolidated into broader themes

Table 2

Illustrative Coding Manual

Policy text/excerpt	**Theoretical lens**	**Emerging theme**
"A formal learning method which employs flexible approaches to learning and teaching by enabling learners to be separated by time and space from their tuition institution."	UDL	Access and flexible learning
"The University shall promote and support the efficient delivery of ODeL programmes using multiple media that meet men and women learner preferences and abilities."	UDL	Equity and inclusive learning resources

"The University shall permit student-centered and decentralised support systems and assessment methods on ODeL-delivered programmes."	UDL	Learner centred support and assessment
"Staff participating in the running of ODeL-delivered courses and programmes are trained in ODeL pedagogy and andragogy."	CoI - Teaching Presence	Staff development and teaching capacity
"Provide oversight to academic units while developing/reviewing proposals and curricula for programmes to be offered through ODeL."	CoI - Teaching Presence	Programme and course design
"The University shall allocate adequate human and financial resources to the ODeL so as to enable it carry out its mandate."	Inductive	Financing and resource mobilisation

Data Analysis Procedures

Familiarisation with the Policy Document

The analysis began with repeated reading of the Makerere University ODeL Policy to develop familiarity with its structure, terminology, objectives, guiding principles, implementation provisions, institutional responsibilities, technological provisions and monitoring arrangements. Attention was given to the entire policy rather than selected sections so that important provisions would not be overlooked because of an initially predetermined coding framework.

Initial Coding of Policy Provisions

The next stage involved identifying meaningful units of policy text. A meaningful unit was a sentence, clause, paragraph, or group of closely related provisions that expressed a specific institutional expectation, principle, responsibility, mechanism, or requirement.

Initial codes were descriptive and remained close to the policy language. Examples included: flexible learning, open admission, gender balance, multiple media,

student centred support, staff ODeL training, curriculum oversight, technology mediated materials, quality assurance, bandwidth, financial resources, monitoring and reporting. This stage was important because it reduced the risk of imposing theoretical concepts on the policy before understanding what the policy itself contained.

Thematic Analysis

The study used a hybrid deductive inductive thematic analysis strategy.

The analytical sequence was; Makerere ODeL Policy to initial policy coding followed by UDL- and CoI-informed deductive coding plus inductive coding from which major policy themes developed and these followed interpretation using PRISMA-selected scholarly evidence and benchmarking against regional and international frameworks and reference documents to assessment of alignment and areas requiring strengthening then focused gap synthesis of access, equity, technology integration and student support from which conclusions and recommendations emerged.

Deductive coding through UDL: UDL informed coding where policy provisions concerned learner variability, access, flexibility, learning materials, engagement, participation or assessment. Three broad UDL principles guided interpretation:

1. Multiple means of engagement, provisions concerning learner participation, motivation, choice, flexibility and sustained engagement
2. Multiple means of representation, provisions concerning learning materials, formats, media, accessibility and presentation of information.
3. Multiple means of action and expression, provisions concerning learner participation, assessment, demonstration of learning and flexible ways of responding (CAST, 2018).

The UDL framework therefore sensitised the researcher to provisions relevant to access and equity without assuming that the policy explicitly used UDL terminology.

Deductive coding through CoI; CoI informed coding of provisions relating to the quality of the online learning environment. The analysis considered: teaching presence, including course design, instructional planning, facilitation, academic guidance and staff preparation. social presence, including interaction, communication, collaboration, community and learner belonging and cognitive presence including inquiry, reflection, discussion, critical thinking, and meaningful learning (Garrison et al., 2000). CoI was used as a sensitising lens rather than as a rigid classification system.

Inductive coding; Inductive coding was used when important policy provisions were not adequately captured by UDL or CoI. This was particularly important for institutional dimensions such as: governance and institutional management, financing and resource mobilisation, institutional accountability, monitoring and evaluation, policy implementation structures and formal quality assurance arrangements. For example, the policy states that the University shall allocate adequate human and financial resources to ODeL. This provision was coded under financing and resource mobilisation rather than being forced into a UDL or CoI category. Similarly, the policy requires regular monitoring and annual review of implementation. These provisions were coded under monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement.

Following initial coding, related codes were grouped into broader analytical themes as they were analytically interconnected. For example, technology was considered in relation to access and equity while staff development was considered in relation to teaching quality and institutional capacity. The final working themes were; governance and institutional management, access and flexible learning, equity and

inclusion, quality assurance, programme and course design, teaching and learning, technology and infrastructure, learner/student support, staff development and capacity building, assessment, financing and resource mobilisation and monitoring and evaluation and continuous improvement.

Use of Scholarly Literature

The ten PRISMA-selected scholarly publications were used to interpret and contextualise the themes generated from the Makerere policy.

The scholarly literature was not treated as a formal scoring framework. Instead, it helped answer questions such as how has the issue been discussed in ODeL scholarship? What challenges or enabling conditions have researchers identified? How does the Makerere policy provision compare with documented research evidence? What aspects of the policy are supported by or require further consideration in light of the literature for example, literature concerning digital inequality and access was used to contextualise the policy's provisions on flexible delivery, multiple media and technology. Literature on online student support was used to interpret the policy's provisions concerning learner support centres and academic and administrative support. Research on online teaching and professional development was used to interpret provisions relating to staff preparation and ODeL pedagogy.

Comparative Benchmarking

After the major policy themes had been established, they were compared with the selected benchmark, regulatory and comparative documents. The comparison considered whether the Makerere policy addressed a particular dimension, addressed it comprehensively, provided institutional mechanisms or responsibilities, recognised

contemporary considerations relevant to the dimension and corresponded with relevant regional or international reference evidence.

Regional benchmarking. Research Question 2 was operationalised through comparison with African/regional evidence and the Ugandan regulatory context. The NCHE (2019) standards provided the national regulatory reference point. They address areas including governance, infrastructure, course and materials development, learner support, staffing, assessment, and monitoring and evaluation. The ACDE (2024) toolkit provided an African quality-assurance reference point, including institutional management, learners, human resources, programme and course design, teaching and learning, learner support, assessment, infrastructure, and institutional development. The regional analysis was supplemented by African and East African scholarly evidence from the selected literature.

International benchmarking Research Question 3 was operationalised using the selected international and comparative sources; the COL toolkit (Commonwealth of Learning, 2009), UNESCO IITE (2023), Latchem (2016) and UNISA (2018) provided complementary reference points concerning ODeL quality assurance, governance, learner support, programme and course design, technology, assessment and continuous improvement. The use of several reference documents reduced reliance on any single institutional model and allowed the analysis to identify recurring areas of policy attention across different ODeL contexts.

Alignment Assessment

The study did not use numerical scores or rankings to determine policy alignment. Instead, the following qualitative categories were used:

- Aligned if the Makerere policy clearly addresses the relevant dimension in a manner consistent with the reference evidence.
- Partially aligned if policy addresses the dimension but does not encompass all of the relevant aspects identified in the reference evidence.
- Requires strengthening if the policy recognises the issue but provides limited specificity, mechanisms or contemporary detail in relation to the reference evidence.
- Not clearly addressed if no sufficiently explicit provision was identified in the policy in relation to the particular dimension.

These categories were applied to documentary evidence and not to the effectiveness of policy implementation. Therefore, an alignment finding did not mean that Makerere had necessarily implemented the provision successfully.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility was strengthened through repeated reading of the complete Makerere ODeL Policy, systematic coding, use of multiple documentary sources and comparison of findings across scholarly, regulatory and institutional evidence. The use of both UDL and CoI prevented the interpretation from depending on a single theoretical perspective while inductive coding reduced the risk of excluding important policy dimensions that fell outside the two frameworks.

Dependability was supported by documenting the search criteria, inclusion and exclusion criteria, documentary corpus, coding procedure, analytical themes and alignment categories. The coding manual provided a consistent basis for interpreting

policy provisions. The same analytical principles were applied across the relevant sections of the policy.

Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in identifiable documentary evidence rather than personal opinion. The use of direct policy excerpts in the coding manual demonstrates how conclusions were connected to the actual policy. External scholarly and benchmark documents were used to contextualise and compare the policy rather than to replace the primary evidence.

Ethical Considerations

The study relied exclusively on documentary sources and did not involve human participants, personal interviews, surveys, observations or collection of identifiable personal data. The primary policy document was an institutional policy document. Scholarly publications and official benchmark documents were treated as documentary sources and acknowledged through appropriate citation. The study maintained academic integrity by accurately representing source content, distinguishing direct policy provisions from analytical interpretations and applying APA 7th edition citation and referencing conventions.

Methodological Limitations

First, the study relied on documentary evidence and therefore did not include the perspectives of students, academic staff, administrators or other ODeL stakeholders. Consequently, the findings describe the policy's provisions and documentary alignment rather than stakeholder perceptions. Second, the study analysed the policy and assessed its alignment rather than implementation effectiveness. The presence of a provision in the policy does not establish that the provision has been implemented, adequately resourced, consistently applied, or experienced by learners. Third, the benchmark

documents differ in purpose, geographical context, institutional setting and level of specificity. For example, NCHE represents a national regulatory context, ACDE represents an African quality-assurance perspective while COL and UNESCO provide broader international reference points. The study therefore interpreted recurring principles rather than assuming that all sources constituted identical standards. Fourth, the scholarly literature selection was subject to the search strategy, databases, eligibility criteria, availability of full text and language restrictions. Consequently, relevant studies that did not meet these criteria may not have been included. Finally, the Makerere ODeL Policy was approved in 2015 while ODeL continues to evolve in response to technological, pedagogical and institutional changes. The analysis therefore distinguishes the content of the 2015 policy from subsequent institutional developments.

Methodological Strengths

Despite these limitations, the methodology has several strengths. First, the study combines thematic policy analysis with comparative policy benchmarking allowing it to move beyond simply describing the Makerere policy. Second, the hybrid deductive inductive approach provides both theoretical structure and openness to themes emerging from the policy itself. Third, the use of UDL and CoI provides theoretically informed interpretation of learner centred, inclusive, teaching, interaction and support related provisions and finally the use of NCHE and ACDE alongside international sources provides a more contextually grounded comparison than relying exclusively on international standards.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overview of Documentary Findings

The Makerere University ODeL Policy contains a broad institutional framework covering the establishment and governance of ODeL, admission and access, financing, staffing, study materials, programme delivery, quality assurance, student support, technology, institutional responsibilities, monitoring and policy review.

The policy's overall statement establishes ODeL as an institutional strategy for increasing access to “flexible and quality technology supported learning” and identifies access for both male and female prospective students as an important objective (Makerere University, 2015, p. 1). The policy further states that its scope covers the conception, design, development, implementation, and running of ODeL programmes and e-learning activities (Makerere University, 2015, p. 3). This broad scope indicates that the policy was intended to operate as an institution wide framework rather than as a policy limited to a particular programme or department. The analysis therefore found that the policy contains provisions corresponding to all twelve major themes identified in this study. However, the depth and specificity of provisions vary across themes as illustrated in the analytical table below;

Documentary Analytical Matrix

Table 3

Documentary Analytical Matrix: Makerere Policy Themes, Benchmarks and Scholarly Evidence

Major policy theme	Evidence from Makerere ODeL Policy	Six benchmark/regulatory/comparative documents	Relevant scholarly evidence	Analytical finding/RQ
1. Governance and institutional management	The policy provides for transformation of DODL into IODeL and assigns university wide oversight and backstopping functions to IODeL. It also establishes roles for Council, Senate, management, QA, colleges, schools, and academic units (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 4, 8–11).	NCHE (2019) emphasises governance and management; ACDE (2024) addresses management, leadership and organisational culture; COL (2009) addresses management and institutional planning; UNESCO IITE (2023) emphasises institutional benchmarking; Latchem (2016) stresses institutional QA systems;	Martin et al. (2020) identify institutional, instructional, technological and learner factors across online learning research; Ofulue et al. (2024) identify institutional resilience and capacity as important for ODeL systems.	**RQ1:** Clearly established. **RQ2/RQ3:** Broad alignment.

		UNISA (2018) provides an institutional ODeL policy framework.		
2. Access and flexible learning	ODeL is intended to increase access; the policy recognises flexible approaches and separation by time and space, provides for open admission while ensuring gender balance, modular study, multiple exit avenues, and decentralised delivery (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 1–4, 6).	NCHE (2019) addresses access, learner needs and delivery arrangements; ACDE (2024) includes learners and access; COL (2009) considers access and learner diversity; UNESCO IITE (2023) benchmarks access and learner-oriented provision; Latchem (2016) links quality ODL with learner access; UNISA (2018) is built around ODeL as a flexible mode.	Czerniewicz et al. (2020) show that access to digital learning is affected by inequality; Osei-Tutu et al. (2025) identify persistent African disparities in access and infrastructure; Kisanga and Ireson (2015) identify technological and institutional barriers to e-learning adoption.	**RQ1:** Strong provision. **RQ2/RQ3:** Substantial alignment. **RQ4:** Contemporary digital access dimensions require further specification.
3. Equity and inclusion	The policy requires gender informed ODeL management, recruitment, staff	NCHE (2019) recognises learner diversity and accessibility requirements; ACDE (2024) includes	Czerniewicz et al. (2020) highlight structural digital inequalities; Osei-Tutu et al.	**RQ1:** Explicit equity provisions.

	development and student support, requires gender balance in open admission, and calls for multiple media that meet male and female learner preferences and abilities (Makerere University, 2015, p. 4, 6).	learners and inclusion; COL (2009) addresses diverse and disadvantaged learners; UNESCO IITE (2023) supports inclusive benchmarking; Latchem (2016) considers learner centred quality; UNISA (2018) provides for inclusive ODeL provision.	(2025) identify persistent access, equity and quality disparities in African higher education; Edisherashvili et al. (2022) emphasise learner differences in self regulated distance learning contexts.	**RQ2/RQ3:** Broad alignment. **RQ4:** Accessibility, disability, affordability and digital participation could be more explicit.
4. Quality assurance	The policy requires ODeL provision to align with the University Quality Assurance Framework and establishes an ODeL quality	NCHE (2019) includes QA and monitoring; ACDE (2024) provides extensive African QA standards; COL (2009) provides institutional and programme QA	Osei-Tutu et al. (2025) report concerns about weak enforcement of QA in African higher education; Martin et al. (2020) identify quality-related	**RQ1:** Strong formal provision. **RQ2/RQ3:** Strong

	assurance unit responsible for monitoring quality learning (Makerere University, 2015, p. 7).	criteria; UNESCO IITE (2023) focuses on benchmarking and good practices; Latchem (2016) focuses on ODL QA; UNISA (2018) embeds quality within institutional ODeL.	teaching and design factors; Ofulue et al. (2024) identify institutional systems and resilience as areas requiring sustained attention.	documentary alignment. **RQ4:** Greater specificity in learner facing quality indicators could strengthen the policy.
5. Programme and course design	The policy requires technology-mediated study materials before programme approval, institutional study-material standards, accreditation of materials, programme review, curriculum oversight, and	NCHE (2019) specifies course design, outcomes, activities, interaction and review; ACDE (2024) includes programme and course design; COL (2009) addresses programme and course development; UNESCO IITE (2023) considers	Kandemir and Kılıç Çakmak (2021) identify structure as an important issue in distance learning; Martin et al. (2020) identify course design and instructional approaches as major areas of online learning research;	**RQ1:** Clearly addressed. **RQ2/RQ3:** Broad alignment.

	student-centred delivery (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 6–9).	teaching and learning quality; Latchem (2016) addresses quality assurance in programme design; UNISA (2018) provides an ODeL policy framework for programme delivery.	Martin et al. (2023) identify deliberate design of asynchronous and synchronous modalities.	
6. Teaching and learning	Staff must receive ODeL pedagogy and andragogy training; the policy emphasises self-study materials, student-centred delivery, facilitation, and support for academic units (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 4–9).	NCHE (2019) addresses teaching, interaction and qualified ODeL staff; ACDE (2024) includes teaching and learning; COL (2009) addresses programme/course design and human resources; UNESCO IITE (2023) benchmarks teaching and learning; Latchem (2016) links quality to institutional teaching systems; UNISA (2018) provides an ODeL institutional framework.	Gregory and Salmon (2013) emphasise professional development for online university teaching; Martin et al. (2020) synthesise research on online teaching and learning; Martin et al. (2023) highlight purposeful blending of asynchronous and synchronous modalities.	**RQ1:** Strong provisions. **RQ2/RQ3:** Broad alignment.

7. Technology and infrastructure	The policy requires appropriate educational technologies, adequate bandwidth, technical backstopping by DICTS, technology-mediated materials, and continuous movement toward ICT-intensive delivery (Makerere University, 2015, p. 6, 9–10).	NCHE (2019) includes internet access, technical help desks, backup, maintenance, reliability, privacy and security; ACDE (2024) addresses infrastructure and learning resources; COL (2009) includes infrastructure and learning resources; UNESCO IITE (2023) includes technological and institutional benchmarking; Latchem (2016) considers infrastructure within QA; UNISA (2018) supports technology-enabled ODeL.	Kisanga and Ireson (2015) identify infrastructure and institutional barriers; Ofulue et al. (2024) emphasise resilient systems; Martin et al. (2020) identify technology as a recurring dimension; Czerniewicz et al. (2020) demonstrate how unequal digital access affects participation.	**RQ1:** Explicit infrastructure provisions. **RQ2/RQ3:** Broad alignment. **RQ4:** Learner-side affordability, device access, connectivity resilience and digital literacy require greater specificity.

8. **Learner/student support**	The policy defines student support as a "culture of care"; requires academic and administrative support, decentralised support, learner support centres, student sensitisation and oversight of support services (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 2, 6, 8–9).	NCHE (2019) specifies orientation, academic socialisation, guidance, course support and post-course support; ACDE (2024) includes learner support and progression; COL (2009) has a dedicated learner-support criterion; UNESCO IITE (2023) includes learner-oriented institutional benchmarking; Latchem (2016) treats learner support as central to quality; UNISA (2018) provides institutional support structures.	Walsh et al. (2024) identify improvements in engagement, access to support, satisfaction, performance, motivation, self-efficacy and retention across online support studies; Edisherashvili et al. (2022) highlight support for self-regulated learning.	**RQ1:** Strong provisions. **RQ2/RQ3:** Substantial alignment. **RQ4:** More differentiated and digitally responsive support mechanisms could be specified.
9. Staff development	The policy requires ODeL pedagogy training,	NCHE (2019) requires appropriately qualified and	Gregory and Salmon (2013) directly emphasise	**RQ1:** Strongly

and capacity building	continuous professional development, specialist ODeL roles, instructional designers, LMS specialists and other professional staff (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 5–9).	continuously developed ODeL staff; ACDE (2024) includes human resources; COL (2009) includes human resource development; UNESCO IITE (2023) considers institutional capacity; Latchem (2016) connects QA with staff capacity; UNISA (2018) supports ODeL institutional capacity.	professional development for online teaching; Martin et al. (2020) identify instructor-related factors as a major research area; Ofulue et al. (2024) identify institutional capacity and resilience as important.	articulated. **RQ2/RQ3:** Broad alignment.
10. Assessment	The policy provides for formative and summative assessment, student-centred and decentralised assessment methods, and academic-unit responsibility for assessment	NCHE (2019) provides detailed expectations concerning moderation, formative feedback, diverse assessment and academic integrity; ACDE (2024) includes assessment; COL (2009) includes learner assessment; UNESCO IITE	Martin et al. (2020) identify assessment as a recurring online learning research area; Martin et al. (2023) provide evidence on online teaching practices; Kandemir and Kılıç	**RQ1:** Present but less detailed than some benchmarks. **RQ2/RQ3:** Broad

	(Makerere University, 2015, p. 6, 9).	(2023) considers learning and assessment; Latchem (2016) situates assessment within QA; UNISA (2018) provides institutional ODeL policy context.	Çakmak (2021) highlight structure in distance learning.	alignment. **RQ4:** More explicit contemporary assessment principles could strengthen the policy.
11. Financing and resource mobilisation	The policy provides for internally generated resources, government/development-partner support, grant proposals, resource sharing, adequate human and financial resources, and continuous capital	NCHE (2019) addresses financial and human resources; ACDE (2024) includes planning and institutional resources; COL (2009) includes vision, planning and institutional capacity; UNESCO IITE (2023) considers institutional sustainability; Latchem (2016) treats	Ofulue et al. (2024) identify institutional resilience and capacity as significant concerns; Kisanga and Ireson (2015) identify institutional barriers to technology adoption; Osei-Tutu et al. (2025) identify structural disparities affecting	**RQ1:** Explicit resource provisions. **RQ2/RQ3:** General alignment.

	investment (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 4–5).	institutional QA within organisational systems; UNISA (2018) provides an institutional policy basis for ODeL.	higher education access and quality.	
12. Monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement	The policy requires monitoring, annual review, annual data production, triennial policy review, monitoring/implementation matrices, and publication of policy progress reports (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 11–12).	NCHE (2019) includes monitoring and evaluation; ACDE (2024) emphasises quality monitoring; COL (2009) focuses on continuous improvement; UNESCO IITE (2023) uses benchmarking for institutional improvement; Latchem (2016) emphasises QA as continuous improvement; UNISA (2018) provides an institutional policy framework for ODeL.	Ofulue et al. (2024) emphasise resilient systems and institutional learning; Osei-Tutu et al. (2025) identify QA enforcement as an African higher education challenge; Martin et al. (2020) demonstrate the importance of continuous research into online learning practices.	**RQ1:** Clearly established. **RQ2/RQ3:** Strong conceptual alignment. **RQ4:** More learner-centred outcome indicators could strengthen monitoring.

Findings by research question

Findings for Research Question 1: Major Components of the ODeL Policy

Governance and institutional management. The policy establishes ODeL as an institution wide function rather than a programme confined to one academic unit. It provides for the transformation of the Department of Open and Distance Learning into the Institute of Open, Distance and eLearning (IODeL) with responsibility for ODeL oversight and backstopping across the University (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 4, 7–8). The policy assigns responsibilities to Council, Senate, the Vice Chancellor and management, the Directorate of Quality Assurance, colleges, schools, academic units, staff and students. Academic units are responsible for running ODeL programmes while IODeL is responsible for coordination, support, oversight, training, curriculum and materials oversight, student support, technology support, partnerships and planning (Makerere University, 2015, pp. 8–11). The finding for RQ1 is therefore that governance is a major and clearly articulated component of the policy.

Access and flexible learning. Access is central to the policy's stated purpose. The policy explicitly identifies ODeL as a means of increasing access to flexible higher education. It defines ODeL in terms of flexible approaches that separate learners from the institution by time and space and provides for decentralised off campus delivery. The policy also permits open admission for ODeL programmes while requiring gender balance, allows modular study and multiple exit avenues and recognises multiple modes of delivery. Thus, the policy establishes access not simply as physical admission to the University but as a structural characteristic of ODeL delivery.

Equity and inclusion. Equity is reflected primarily through gender responsiveness and recognition of learner differences. The policy requires ODeL

delivery, staff development, recruitment and student support to be gender informed. It also requires multiple media to meet the preferences and abilities of male and female learners (Makerere University, 2015, p. 4, 6). The policy therefore contains explicit equity provisions. However, the documentary evidence is more specific about gender than about other dimensions of digital inclusion such as disability, affordability, device ownership, connectivity disparities or digital literacy.

Quality assurance. Quality assurance is formally institutionalised. The policy requires ODeL provision to be consistent with the University's Quality Assurance Framework and establishes an ODeL quality assurance unit responsible for monitoring quality learning. Quality is therefore not presented only as an aspiration rather the policy establishes a dedicated institutional mechanism for quality oversight.

Programme and course design. The policy contains extensive provisions on programme and course design. Before approval of an ODeL programme, appropriate technology mediated study materials must be developed. Study materials are required to conform to an institutional house style and to be accredited before use. The policy also provides for curriculum oversight and review by IODeL. The policy therefore treats course and materials development as institutional quality processes rather than solely as individual lecturer responsibilities.

Teaching and learning. The policy requires staff involved in ODeL to receive training in ODeL pedagogy and andragogy. It also requires ODeL trained academic staff to teach or coordinate ODeL programmes and identifies course design, content development, facilitation and student support as areas of capacity development (Makerere University, 2015, p. 5, 6). The policy additionally identifies interactive print

and online self study materials as central to ODeL provision and permits e-learning to support both ODeL and conventional programmes.

Technology and infrastructure. Technology is embedded throughout the policy. The University is required to equip academic units with appropriate educational technologies, ensure adequate bandwidth, maintain technologies through DICTS and progressively upgrade delivery and support toward greater use of ICT. The policy therefore recognises technology as an institutional infrastructure requirement rather than an optional addition to ODeL.

Learner/student support. Student support is a substantial component of the policy. The policy defines student support as a "culture of care" intended to help students complete their programmes within the stipulated time (Makerere University, 2015, p. 2). The policy provides for academic and administrative support, decentralised support systems, student sensitisation, learner support centres inside and outside the country and institutional oversight of student support services.

Staff development and capacity building. Staff development is addressed through continuous ODeL pedagogical training, specialist professional roles, capacity building and recognition of ODeL activities within promotion criteria. The policy identifies educational technologists, distance education specialists, e-learning specialists, multimedia experts, graphic designers, instructional designers, LMS specialists and system developers among the professional roles required to support ODeL.

Assessment. This is addressed through formative and summative assessment requirements and the provision for student centred and decentralised assessment methods. However, compared with the level of detail devoted to governance, staffing,

and technology, the policy provides fewer explicit details concerning contemporary assessment practices such as online assessment security, academic integrity mechanisms, feedback standards, accessibility of assessment and assessment analytics.

Financing and resource mobilisation. The policy identifies several funding sources, including internally generated resources, government and development partner support, grant funding and resource sharing. It also requires adequate human and financial resources and continuous capital investment to support ODeL development. Financing is therefore an explicit institutional policy component.

Monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement. Monitoring and evaluation are formally embedded in the policy. The policy requires regular monitoring, annual review, annual production of supporting data and triennial policy review. It also requires monitoring and implementation matrices to serve as strategic action plans. The policy consequently contains a continuous-improvement orientation rather than treating policy adoption as a one time event.

Findings for Research Question 2: Alignment with Regional Best Practices

The regional analysis used ACDE's African quality assurance framework, the Ugandan NCHE standards and relevant African/East African scholarship.

Governance. The Makerere policy's institutional governance structure is broadly consistent with the governance orientation of the NCHE standards and ACDE quality framework. Both reference systems recognise the importance of institutional responsibility, leadership, organisational structures and quality oversight. Makerere's creation of IODeL, allocation of responsibilities across university organs and requirement for programme level ODeL coordination provide explicit institutional mechanisms. The regional finding is therefore broad alignment in governance.

Access and equity. Makerere's emphasis on flexible delivery, open admission, decentralised provision, gender balance, multiple media and modular study corresponds with the regional emphasis on widening participation. However, the comparison also reveals a distinction between formal access and effective digital participation. The Makerere policy recognises access but does not provide comparable detail on learner side affordability, devices, connectivity costs, digital literacy or differentiated accessibility. The finding is therefore substantial alignment with an area requiring strengthening in the contemporary dimensions of digital equity.

Quality assurance. Makerere has a formal ODeL QA unit and links ODeL quality to the University QA Framework. This corresponds strongly with NCHE and ACDE expectations concerning institutional QA systems. The regional literature nevertheless identifies continuing concerns about the enforcement and effectiveness of quality assurance in African higher education (Osei-Tutu et al., 2025). This creates an important distinction: the documentary finding demonstrates policy level alignment but it does not demonstrate the effectiveness of QA implementation.

Technology. Makerere's requirements for educational technologies, bandwidth, technical support, technology mediated materials and continuous ICT upgrading correspond with regional ODeL expectations. At the same time, African scholarship identifies infrastructure, institutional capacity and digital inequality as continuing barriers (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Kisanga & Ireson, 2015; Ofulue et al., 2024). The regional finding is therefore policy level alignment combined with a need for more explicit attention to learner side technology conditions and resilience.

Learner support. The policy's learner support centres, academic and administrative support, decentralisation, student sensitisation and “culture of care”

correspond strongly with NCHE and ACDE expectations. This is one of the more clearly articulated dimensions of the Makerere policy.

Staff development. Makerere's requirement for ODeL pedagogy training and specialist professional roles aligns with NCHE and ACDE expectations concerning qualified and appropriately supported staff. The policy's emphasis on continuous capacity building also corresponds with the scholarly evidence that online teaching requires specific professional preparation rather than simply transferring conventional teaching practices to digital environments.

Overall, the Makerere ODeL Policy demonstrates substantial documentary alignment with Ugandan regulatory and African/regional ODeL reference points. The areas of strongest convergence concern governance, quality assurance, access and flexible delivery, learner support, staff development and institutional technology. The principal areas requiring strengthening are not necessarily absent from the policy. Rather, they concern the specificity and contemporary breadth of provisions addressing digital equity, learner side technology access, accessibility, resilience and measurable learner centred quality indicators.

Findings for Research Question 3: Alignment with International Best Practices

Commonwealth of Learning. The Makerere policy corresponds with major institutional and programme areas identified by the Commonwealth of Learning (2009) including management and leadership, learners, human resources, programme and course design, learner support, assessment, infrastructure, and continuous quality improvement. Makerere's governance structure, learner support arrangements, staff development, technology provisions and QA mechanisms therefore demonstrate broad documentary convergence with the COL framework.

The UNESCO IITE (2023) benchmarking perspective reinforces the importance of institutional structures, learner centred provision, quality, technology, teaching and learning, and continuous improvement. Makerere's policy provides for many of these areas. Its principal difference is that some contemporary dimensions of open university development are expressed at a relatively general policy level rather than through detailed performance indicators.

Latchem (2016) treats quality assurance as an institutional and continuous process rather than a one time compliance exercise. Makerere's requirement for an ODeL QA unit, monitoring, annual review, data production and periodic policy revision corresponds with this orientation.

UNISA provides a useful comparative institutional reference because it is a large African open and distance learning institution. The Makerere policy shows convergence in its emphasis on institutional structures, flexible learning, learner support, technology, staff capacity and quality. However, institutional context differs substantially between Makerere and UNISA. Therefore, similarities should be interpreted as areas of policy convergence rather than evidence that the two institutions require identical structures or operating models.

Overall, the finding highlights that the Makerere ODeL Policy demonstrates broad international documentary alignment across the principal dimensions examined. The strongest commonalities are governance, quality assurance, programme and course design, learner support, staff development, technology, assessment and continuous improvement. The principal issue identified through comparison is not a fundamental absence of these areas but a difference in the level of specificity and contemporary detail with which some areas are addressed.

Findings for Research Question 4: Gaps in Access, Equity, Technology Integration and Student Support

Access. The policy strongly recognises access through flexible learning, open admission, decentralisation, modular study and multiple delivery modes. The documentary gap therefore does not concern the absence of an access principle. Rather, the gap concerns access conditions beyond institutional admission. The policy could more explicitly address issues such as affordability of devices and connectivity, minimum digital access requirements, digital literacy, connectivity interruptions and mechanisms for supporting learners experiencing technology related barriers.

Equity. The policy explicitly addresses gender and learner preferences and abilities. However, the documentary evidence gives less explicit attention to disability accessibility, socioeconomic inequality, digital poverty, language and differentiated learner needs. The gap is therefore best described as limited specificity in the operationalisation of equity rather than absence of an equity commitment.

Technology integration. Technology is strongly represented in the policy through bandwidth, educational technologies, technology mediated materials, e-learning, ICT intensive delivery and DICTS technical support. The principal gap concerns the learner facing the dimension of technology integration. The policy is stronger on institutional infrastructure than on detailed provisions concerning learner devices, affordability, connectivity resilience, digital skills, accessibility of digital platforms and materials, privacy, cybersecurity and continuity during technology disruptions.

Student support. This is one of the more developed areas of the policy. It includes a culture of care, academic and administrative support, decentralised systems, learner support centres and institutional oversight. Nevertheless, the policy could provide

greater specificity concerning differentiated support for learners with varying levels of digital literacy, self regulation skills, connectivity constraints, disability related needs and different patterns of engagement. The gap therefore concerns differentiation and contemporary responsiveness rather than the absence of student support.

Consolidated Findings Matrix

Table 4

Consolidated Findings Matrix Table

Research question	**Principal finding**	**Documentary evidence**	**Alignment interpretation**
RQ1: Major components	The policy contains twelve major dimensions covering institutional, pedagogical, technological, learner and quality related areas.	Full Makerere ODeL Policy	Broad and comprehensive policy scope
RQ2: Regional alignment	Strong convergence with Ugandan and African reference points in governance, QA, access, support, staff development and technology.	NCHE, ACDE, African/East African scholarship	Substantial alignment; contemporary digital equity requires strengthening

RQ3: International alignment	Broad convergence with COL, UNESCO, Latchem and UNISA on governance, QA, course design, learner support, technology and staff capacity.	Six benchmark/comparative sources	Broad alignment
RQ4: Gaps	Gaps are mainly in specificity and contemporary detail concerning digital access, equity, learner side technology, accessibility and differentiated support.	Comparative synthesis	Requires strengthening rather than complete absence

Discussions

Discussion of Research Question One: Major Components of the Makerere University ODeL Policy

The first research question sought to establish the major components of the Makerere University ODeL Policy. The analysis identified twelve interconnected themes: governance and institutional management, access and flexible learning, equity and inclusion, quality assurance, programme and course design, teaching and learning, technology and infrastructure, learner support, staff development, assessment, financing and resource mobilisation and monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement.

The breadth of these components indicates that the policy was designed as an institutional framework rather than simply as an ICT or technology policy. This is evident from its treatment of organisational structures, staffing, programme development, learner support, quality assurance, technology, financing and monitoring. The policy establishes the Institute of Open, Distance and e-Learning (IODeL) as an institution wide structure responsible for coordination, capacity building, curriculum and materials oversight, student support, educational technology, partnerships and monitoring. It also assigns responsibilities to academic units and other university structures (Makerere University, 2015).

This finding is consistent with the literature showing that effective ODeL involves more than the availability of technology. Martin et al. (2020) for example, identified learner, course and instructor and organisational levels as important dimensions in the online learning literature. Similarly, Kandemir and Kılıç Çakmak (2021) found that distance learning research encompasses technological, structural, flexibility, assessment, guidance and curriculum dimensions. The breadth of the Makerere policy therefore corresponds with the multidimensional character of ODeL identified in the wider literature.

The governance provisions are particularly significant because the policy does not locate ODeL responsibility solely within individual lecturers or technical departments. Instead, it establishes institutional structures and responsibilities intended to coordinate academic, administrative, technological and quality related functions. This is consistent with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) quality assurance framework which treats management, leadership, organisational culture, human resources, programme development, learner support, assessment, infrastructure and institutional

planning as interconnected components of quality assurance (Commonwealth of Learning, 2009). The ACDE (2024) framework similarly places institutional leadership, management, learners, human resources, programme design, teaching and learning, learner support, assessment, infrastructure and continuous improvement within a broader quality framework.

The policy's treatment of access and flexibility also demonstrates that ODeL was conceptualised as an institutional mechanism for widening educational opportunity. The policy identifies ODeL as a means of increasing access to flexible and quality technology supported learning and provides for decentralised modes of study, open admission, modular learning, multiple exit points and learner support (Makerere University, 2015). These provisions indicate that access was conceived not only in geographical terms but also through flexibility in how programmes could be organised and delivered.

The equity component strengthens this orientation. The policy explicitly requires attention to gender in staff development, recruitment and student support and refers to maintaining gender balance in relation to open admission (Makerere University, 2015). This is important because access to ODeL does not automatically produce equitable participation. Research on higher education in Africa indicates that access, quality and equity remain interconnected challenges with infrastructure and spatial disparities continuing to affect participation (Osei-Tutu et al., 2025). Similarly, evidence from South African higher education has shown that digital forms of learning can reproduce existing inequalities when differences in resources and circumstances are not adequately addressed (Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

Technology is another central component of the policy. Makerere identifies bandwidth, educational technologies, technical support, maintenance and collaboration with DICTS as important elements of ODeL delivery (Makerere University, 2015). However, the policy does not conceptualise technology as an end in itself. Rather, technology is connected to course materials, teaching, assessment, learner support and institutional coordination. This is consistent with Kisanga and Ireson (2015) whose study of Tanzanian higher learning institutions identified infrastructure, financial constraints, inadequate support, insufficient e-learning knowledge and resistance to change as interconnected challenges in e-learning adoption. It also corresponds with Kandemir and Kılıç Çakmak's (2021) finding that technology is closely connected with other structural elements of distance learning.

The learner support provisions further demonstrate that the policy adopts a relatively broad conception of ODeL. Makerere describes student support as a "culture of care" aimed at completion and provides for learner support centres, academic and administrative assistance, student sensitisation and decentralised support structures (Makerere University, 2015, p. 2). This orientation is supported by the wider literature. Walsh et al. (2024) in their systematic review of online academic student support found that support was associated in the reviewed studies with outcomes including engagement, access to support, satisfaction, academic performance, motivation, self efficacy, retention and course completion. Edisherashvili et al. (2022) likewise emphasised the importance of support for self regulated learning in distance education.

The policy also gives considerable attention to staff development. It requires staff involved in ODeL to receive relevant training and identifies specialist roles such as educational technologists, distance and e-learning specialists, multimedia personnel,

instructional designers and learning management system specialists (Makerere University, 2015). This is consistent with Gregory and Salmon (2013) who emphasised contextualised professional development, mentoring and practical preparation for online university teaching. The finding therefore suggests that Makerere's policy recognises that institutional ODeL capacity depends not only on infrastructure but also on the knowledge and pedagogical capacity of staff.

Overall, the answer to Research Question One is that the Makerere ODeL Policy provides a relatively comprehensive institutional framework covering academic, technological, organisational, learner, human resource, financial, quality and monitoring dimensions. The significance of this finding is that the policy provides a broad foundation from which ODeL can be organised across the University. At the same time, the breadth of the policy should not be interpreted as evidence that all provisions have been implemented or are equally developed in practice. The documentary analysis establishes the policy's intended institutional architecture not its implementation outcomes.

Discussion of Research Question Two: Alignment with Regional Best Practices?

Research Question Two examined the alignment of the Makerere ODeL Policy with regional and Ugandan reference points. The comparison indicates substantial alignment across several areas, particularly governance, quality assurance, learner support, staff development, programme and course design, technology infrastructure and monitoring. However, the comparison also identified areas in which the Makerere policy could be strengthened through greater specificity, more explicit contemporary approaches or stronger mechanisms for continuous improvement.

Governance and institutional management. The Makerere policy demonstrates substantial correspondence with the governance expectations contained in both the ACDE (2024) quality evaluation toolkit and the NCHE (2019) minimum Standards for ODeL Programmes. Makerere establishes IODeL as an institution wide structure with responsibility for coordination, curriculum and materials oversight, staff capacity development, student support, educational technology, partnerships and monitoring (Makerere University, 2015). NCHE similarly emphasises governance, institutional responsibility, staffing, resources and monitoring as components of ODeL provision (National Council for Higher Education, 2019). This alignment is important because regional quality assurance approaches increasingly treat ODeL as an institutional responsibility rather than an isolated teaching modality. The Makerere policy's governance architecture therefore provides a foundation for coordinated ODeL provision. However, the policy predates more recent developments in digital higher education. Consequently, some aspects of contemporary digital governance including more detailed institutional mechanisms for digital quality management and technology enabled continuous improvement may require further elaboration in subsequent policy instruments.

Access, flexibility and equity. The Makerere policy aligns with the regional emphasis on widening access and providing flexible forms of higher education. Its provisions on open admission, decentralisation, modular study, multiple exit points and technology supported learning correspond with the access oriented purpose of ODeL (Makerere University, 2015). The policy also explicitly recognises gender considerations, this provides a basis for interpreting access through an equity lens rather than simply as an increase in enrolment. This finding is consistent with Osei-Tutu et al.

(2025) whose systematic review identified persistent challenges relating to access, equity, infrastructure and spatial disparities in African higher education. It is also consistent with Czerniewicz et al. (2020) who demonstrated that the rapid expansion of digitally mediated learning can expose existing inequalities in access to resources and participation. The alignment is therefore stronger at the level of policy intent than at the level of detailed mechanisms for addressing all forms of digital inequality. The Makerere policy recognises gender and access but provides less explicit detail on contemporary dimensions of digital equity such as differentiated connectivity constraints, device affordability, accessibility requirements for learners with disabilities and alternative modes of access where digital connectivity is unreliable. The finding is not that these concerns are necessarily absent from Makerere University as a whole but rather that they are not sufficiently explicit within the 2015 ODeL Policy to establish a comprehensive contemporary digital equity framework.

Quality assurance. The Makerere policy demonstrates substantial alignment with regional quality assurance expectations. It requires ODeL provision to operate in accordance with the University's quality assurance framework and establishes an ODeL quality assurance function. It also assigns responsibilities for programme and materials oversight, monitoring, review and reporting (Makerere University, 2015). These provisions correspond with NCHE (2019) which identifies programme approval, course and materials development, learner support, assessment, infrastructure, staffing and monitoring as important areas of ODeL quality. They also correspond with the ACDE (2024) framework which treats quality as a multidimensional institutional process involving leadership, programmes, teaching and learning, learner support, assessment, resources and continuous improvement. The alignment is therefore not limited to the

existence of a quality assurance structure. It extends across several of the substantive areas through which ODeL quality is ordinarily experienced. Nevertheless, the documentary evidence also suggests a need for stronger articulation of learner participation and feedback within continuous quality improvement. This is relevant because quality assurance in contemporary ODeL is not only an institutional compliance function rather it also involves systematic use of evidence to improve learner experience and educational provision.

Technology and infrastructure. The Makerere policy aligns with NCHE's emphasis on reliable technological infrastructure and technical support. Makerere provides adequate bandwidth, DICTS technical support, educational technologies, maintenance and technology mediated course materials (Makerere University, 2015; NCHE, 2019). These provisions establish an institutional basis for technology supported ODeL. The scholarly literature reinforces the importance of this area. Kisanga and Ireson (2015) identified poor infrastructure, financial constraints, inadequate support and insufficient knowledge as barriers to e-learning adoption in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. Kandemir and Kılıç Çakmak (2021) similarly found technology to be a prominent component in research on the structure of distance learning. The regional comparison therefore suggests that Makerere's policy appropriately recognises technology as an institutional rather than purely technical concern. The main area requiring strengthening is the specificity with which contemporary digital learning environments are addressed. The 2015 policy could not fully anticipate subsequent developments in online learning, digital accessibility, rapidly changing learning technologies and the increased importance of resilient digital infrastructure. These

developments strengthen the case for periodic policy updating rather than indicating that the original policy lacked a technological foundation.

Learner support and staff development. The Makerere policy is substantially aligned with regional expectations concerning learner support and staff capacity. NCHE (2019) emphasises orientation, academic and social support, counselling, course support and assistance throughout the learner journey. Makerere similarly provides for learner support centres, academic and administrative assistance, student sensitisation and decentralised support (Makerere University, 2015). The literature provides further support for the importance of this alignment. Walsh et al. (2024) found that online academic support can contribute to engagement, access to support, satisfaction, academic performance, motivation, self efficacy, retention and completion. Edisherashvili et al. (2022) similarly highlighted the need to support students' cognitive, motivational, metacognitive and emotional dimensions of self regulated learning. The Makerere policy also aligns with regional expectations for staff development. Its requirement for ODeL training and its recognition of specialist roles correspond with NCHE (2019) and ACDE (2024). Gregory and Salmon (2013) further support the importance of contextualised and practical professional development for online teaching. Thus, Research Question Two is answered by concluding that the Makerere ODeL Policy demonstrates substantial alignment with regional and Ugandan reference points, particularly in institutional governance, quality assurance, learner support, staff development, programme design, technology, and monitoring. The principal areas requiring strengthening concern the specificity and currency of mechanisms for digital equity, accessibility, learner participation in quality improvement and contemporary digital learning environments.

Discussion of Research Question Three: Alignment with International Best Practices?

Research Question Three examined the alignment of the Makerere ODeL Policy with international reference documents, particularly the Commonwealth of Learning quality assurance framework, UNESCO's benchmarking guidance, Latchem's work on quality assurance in Commonwealth universities and the University of South Africa's ODeL Policy. The comparison indicates that the Makerere policy shares many of the broad principles evident in international ODeL quality frameworks. These include institutional planning, leadership, programme and course development, learner support, assessment, infrastructure, human resource development and continuous monitoring. The similarities suggest that the 2015 Makerere policy was conceptually consistent with the broader international understanding of ODeL as a comprehensive institutional system.

Institutional governance and quality assurance. The Commonwealth of Learning (2009) identifies institutional vision and planning, leadership and management, learners, human resources, programme and course design, learner support, assessment, infrastructure and continuous institutional development as interconnected quality areas. The Makerere policy addresses most of these areas explicitly. Similarly, UNESCO IITE (2023) emphasises benchmarking as a mechanism through which open universities can examine institutional processes and performance across multiple dimensions. The Makerere policy's requirements for annual monitoring, reporting and periodic policy review are therefore consistent with the principle that ODeL quality requires systematic institutional review. The comparison nevertheless indicates a difference in emphasis. The Makerere policy establishes monitoring and reporting mechanisms but its 2015

formulation provides less detail than more recent international approaches might provide on the systematic use of learner generated evidence, digital learning analytics, accessibility and continuous evidence based improvement. The finding should be interpreted in relation to the age of the policy: the document was approved in 2015 whereas digital learning environments and quality assurance expectations have continued to develop.

Programme, course design and teaching and learning. Makerere requires ODeL programmes and materials to be appropriately designed, reviewed and accredited and it identifies interactive and technology supported learning materials as important elements of ODeL delivery (Makerere University, 2015). These provisions correspond with the COL (2009) emphasis on programme and course design and with Latchem's (2016) discussion of quality assurance across open and distance learning institutions. The finding also corresponds with international scholarship. Martin et al. (2020) found that online learning research encompasses course, instructor, learner and organisational dimensions while Martin et al. (2023) demonstrate the value of deliberately combining synchronous and asynchronous modes in online teaching. The Makerere policy allows for technology mediated and flexible learning but it does not provide the same level of detail that contemporary literature can offer regarding specific online teaching modalities and pedagogical configurations. This difference should not be interpreted as evidence of misalignment. Rather, it indicates that the policy establishes broad institutional principles while leaving some pedagogical details to subsequent guidelines, procedures, or institutional practice.

Learner support and the learner experience**.** The Makerere policy's learner support orientation is consistent with international quality frameworks. The emphasis on

decentralised support, academic assistance, student sensitisation and a “culture of care” reflects a recognition that ODeL students require structured institutional support rather than simply access to learning materials (Makerere University, 2015). This finding is reinforced by international scholarship. Walsh et al. (2024) identified multiple benefits associated with online academic support while Edisherashvili et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of structured support for self regulated learning in distance contexts. The alignment is therefore evident not only in formal policy comparison but also in the wider evidence base concerning the learner experience. However, the policy could be more explicit about the full range of learner support functions required in contemporary online and distance education. These may include systematic academic advising, digital skills support, accessibility services, early identification of students at risk of disengagement and structured mechanisms for learner feedback. NCHE (2019) already points toward some of these requirements, particularly monitoring of learner progress and identification of at risk students.

Human resources and professional development. Makerere's requirements for ODeL training and specialist roles are broadly consistent with international expectations concerning staff capacity. The policy recognises that effective ODeL requires pedagogical and technical expertise rather than simply transferring conventional teaching practices into digital environments (Makerere University, 2015). Gregory and Salmon (2013) similarly argue for professional development approaches that are contextualised, practical and supported through mentoring. This reinforces the finding that Makerere's emphasis on staff preparation is consistent with international evidence. At the same time, contemporary ODeL increasingly requires continuing professional

development rather than one time training, particularly as digital technologies and pedagogical practices change.

Overall, the Makerere ODeL Policy demonstrates substantial conceptual alignment with international ODeL quality principles. Its strongest areas of correspondence are institutional governance, quality assurance, programme and course development, learner support, staff development, technology, assessment and monitoring. The areas requiring strengthening are mainly those associated with the evolution of digital higher education since 2015. These include more explicit digital accessibility, systematic learner feedback, contemporary online pedagogical approaches, evidence informed continuous improvement and clearer mechanisms for responding to emerging technologies. The international comparison therefore suggests that the policy provides a sound broad framework but would benefit from updating and greater operational specificity.

Discussion of Research Question Four: What Gaps Exist in Relation to Access, Equity, Technology Integration and Student Support?

Research Question Four focused specifically on four dimensions emerging from the research problem: access, equity, technology integration and student support. The discussion of these gaps is based on the combined findings from the regional/Ugandan and international comparisons. It therefore does not constitute a separate independent analysis of the policy rather, it synthesises areas where the policy's provisions were less explicit, less detailed or less contemporary in relation to the selected reference points.

Access. The Makerere policy clearly identifies access as a central purpose of ODeL. It promotes flexible and technology supported learning, open admission, decentralised delivery and alternative modes of study (Makerere University, 2015).

Thus, the main access gap is not the absence of an access objective. Rather, the gap concerns the level of detail concerning the conditions that make access meaningful. Access to an ODeL programme depends on more than admission. Learners must be able to obtain appropriate devices, connectivity, learning materials, technical assistance and academic support. The literature on African higher education demonstrates that spatial, infrastructural and resource inequalities can continue to constrain equitable participation even where formal access opportunities have expanded (Osei-Tutu et al., 2025). The findings therefore support an interpretation of access as a continuum extending from admission to participation, progression and completion. Makerere's policy establishes the first part of this continuum strongly but subsequent policy development could articulate more explicitly the institutional mechanisms for supporting learners throughout the ODeL journey.

Equity. The policy explicitly recognises gender considerations in recruitment, staff development and student support and provides for gender balance in open admission (Makerere University, 2015). This is an important strength because it demonstrates that equity was incorporated into the policy rather than treated solely as an outcome of expanded access. However, the contemporary meaning of digital equity extends beyond gender. It also includes socioeconomic circumstances, geographical location, disability and accessibility, availability of devices, connectivity, digital skills and the ability to participate meaningfully in online learning. Evidence from African higher education indicates that infrastructure and spatial disparities continue to affect equitable participation (Osei-Tutu et al., 2025) while Czerniewicz et al. (2020) demonstrate how digital learning can reproduce broader social inequalities. The gap identified in this study is therefore primarily one of comprehensiveness and

explicitness. The policy recognises equity but a contemporary ODeL framework could articulate more clearly how different forms of digital disadvantage should be identified and addressed.

Technology integration. Technology is strongly represented in the Makerere policy through bandwidth, educational technologies, DICTS support, technology mediated learning materials and the development of ICT-supported ODeL (Makerere University, 2015). Consequently, the finding is not that technology is missing from the policy. The gap concerns the transition from technology availability to technology enabled learning quality. International and regional literature shows that successful online learning depends on the interaction between infrastructure, pedagogy, staff capacity, learner support, course structure and institutional systems (Kandemir & Kılıç Çakmak, 2021; Martin et al., 2020). Kisanga and Ireson (2015) similarly demonstrate that infrastructure problems cannot be separated from financial, technical, managerial and human-capacity issues. The policy could therefore be strengthened by providing more explicit principles for contemporary technology integration, including accessibility, continuity of learning during technology disruptions, interoperability of systems, systematic use of learning platforms, digital learning resources and mechanisms for evaluating whether technologies are improving teaching and learning. Such provisions would connect technological investment more explicitly with educational purpose.

Student support. Student support is one of the more strongly represented dimensions of the Makerere policy. The policy's reference to a “culture of care,” learner support centres, academic and administrative support, student sensitisation and decentralised services demonstrates that student support is recognised as a core

component of ODeL (Makerere University, 2015). The gap therefore relates less to recognition and more to the breadth and operational detail of support. Contemporary evidence indicates that online academic support may influence engagement, satisfaction, academic performance, motivation, self efficacy, retention and completion, although the specific forms of effective support vary across contexts (Walsh et al., 2024). Edisherashvili et al. (2022) further indicate that distance learners may require structured support for different dimensions of self regulated learning. The Makerere policy could therefore provide greater specificity regarding academic advising, digital literacy, counselling, accessibility support, early identification of students requiring assistance, online communication and mechanisms for obtaining and responding to learner feedback. NCHE (2019) provides relevant regional expectations concerning orientation, counselling, academic support and monitoring of learner progress.

Synthesis of Research Question Four

The four gaps should therefore not be interpreted as four areas that are absent from the policy. In each case, the Makerere policy contains relevant provisions. The principal issue identified by the analysis is that some dimensions require greater specificity, broader contemporary coverage or clearer operational mechanisms when compared with the selected regional and international reference points. This is because the policy was approved in 2015 and reflects the ODeL environment and policy concerns of that period. The subsequent evolution of digital learning provides a reasonable basis for reviewing whether the policy remains sufficiently comprehensive for current and emerging ODeL requirements.

Alternative Interpretations of the Findings

First, the absence of a detailed provision in the 2015 ODeL Policy does not necessarily mean that Makerere University lacks such a provision institutionally. Related requirements may be contained in other university policies, regulations, guidelines, strategic plans or operational documents. The current Makerere policy repository, for example, now contains an approved ODeL Masterplan and other current academic and institutional policies. The present study did not treat these later documents as substitutes for the 2015 policy because its purpose was specifically to review the selected ODeL Policy.

Second, differences between Makerere and international benchmarks do not automatically constitute deficiencies. ODeL policies operate within different regulatory, financial, technological, geographical and institutional contexts. A provision appropriate for a large open university may not translate directly to another institution without contextual adaptation. The purpose of benchmarking in this study was therefore to identify areas of correspondence and potential strengthening rather than to assume that one policy model should be copied wholesale.

Third, the study's findings concern policy alignment rather than implementation effectiveness. The presence of a provision in the policy demonstrates institutional intent or formal policy direction but it does not demonstrate that the provision has been implemented consistently, adequately resourced or experienced positively by learners and staff. This distinction is particularly important for conclusions relating to technology, learner support, quality assurance and staff development.

Finally, the age of the policy provides an important contextual interpretation. The Makerere ODeL Policy was approved in October 2015 (Makerere University,

2015) while the digital higher education environment has subsequently changed considerably. The findings concerning contemporary gaps should therefore be interpreted partly as evidence of the need for policy updating rather than simply as evidence that the original policy framework was inadequate.

Interpretation Through UDL and the Community of Inquiry Framework

From a UDL perspective, the Makerere policy contains provisions that support flexibility, multiple forms of learning materials, learner centred delivery and attention to gender and learner diversity (Makerere University, 2015). These provisions can be interpreted as supporting the UDL principle of designing learning environments that anticipate learner variability rather than relying exclusively on one mode of participation or representation. However, the policy does not explicitly organise its accessibility provisions around the contemporary UDL framework. The theoretical interpretation therefore identifies an opportunity to make accessibility and learner variability more explicit in future policy development. The CoI framework provides a complementary interpretation. The Makerere policy's provisions on staff preparation, course development, teaching, assessment, learner support, interaction and academic guidance relate particularly to teaching presence. Its provisions for learner support, communication and decentralised learning structures can also support social presence. Course materials, learning activities, assessment and learner engagement relate to cognitive presence. However, because the policy is an institutional policy rather than a pedagogical framework, CoI should not be treated as a test that the policy must explicitly contain all three presences.

The theoretical analysis therefore reinforces rather than replaces the documentary findings. UDL helps explain the policy's implications for learner

variability, access and inclusive design while CoI helps interpret the relationship among course design, teaching, interaction and learning. Governance, financing, quality assurance and monitoring remain important dimensions that require analysis beyond these two theoretical perspectives.

Chapter Summary

This discussion examined the findings question by question. Research Question One established that the Makerere ODeL Policy is a broad institutional framework encompassing governance, access, equity, quality assurance, programme and course design, teaching and learning, technology, learner support, staff development, assessment, financing and monitoring and evaluation. Research Question Two showed substantial alignment between the Makerere policy and regional/Ugandan reference points, particularly in governance, quality assurance, technology, learner support, staff development and access. Areas requiring strengthening mainly concerned the specificity and contemporary coverage of digital equity, accessibility, learner participation in quality improvement and technology enabled learning. Research Question Three similarly found substantial conceptual alignment with international ODeL quality principles. The main areas for strengthening relate to the evolution of digital learning since the policy was adopted in 2015 including contemporary accessibility, learner feedback, online pedagogical approaches, evidence based continuous improvement and emerging technologies. Research Question Four synthesised these comparisons to identify gaps in access, equity, technology integration and student support. Importantly, these were not areas that were wholly absent from the policy. Rather, the findings indicate areas where existing provisions could be made more explicit, comprehensive, contemporary or operationally detailed. Conclusively, the discussion indicates that the

Makerere ODeL Policy provides a broad institutional foundation for ODeL and demonstrates substantial alignment with the selected national, regional and international reference points. At the same time, the findings support the need for continued policy review and refinement as the technological, pedagogical, accessibility and learner support dimensions of higher education continue to evolve.

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

The first research question identified twelve connected policy themes: governance, access and flexibility, equity and inclusion, quality assurance, programme and course design, teaching and learning technology and infrastructure, learner support, staff development, assessment, financing and monitoring and evaluation. The policy therefore provides a broad institutional foundation for ODeL with responsibilities spanning academic, technological, administrative and quality assurance functions (Makerere University, 2015). The policy substantially corresponds with the selected regional and Ugandan reference points, particularly in governance, quality assurance, programme development, learner support, staff development, technology, assessment and monitoring (African Council for Distance Education [ACDE], 2024; National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2019). Areas for strengthening include more explicit treatment of contemporary digital equity, accessibility, learner participation and technology enabled learning. The policy also demonstrates substantial conceptual alignment with the selected international references in institutional planning, course development, learner support, assessment, staff development, infrastructure and quality assurance (Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Latchem, 2016; UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education [UNESCO IITE], 2023). The principal opportunity is to update the detail of provisions to reflect changes in digital learning, accessibility, online pedagogy, learner feedback and emerging technologies since 2015. The fourth research question synthesised gaps in access, equity, technology integration

and student support. These areas are addressed in the policy, but some provisions could be more explicit and operational. Priorities include access beyond admission, accessibility and digital inequality, the pedagogical purpose and reliability of technology and coordinated academic, administrative, technical and accessibility support.

Broad Conclusions

Based on the findings, the study draws four broad conclusions.

First, the Makerere University ODeL Policy is a comprehensive institutional policy framework that addresses the principal organisational, academic, technological, learner and quality related dimensions required for ODeL provision.

Second, the policy demonstrates substantial alignment with the selected regional and international best practices particularly in governance, quality assurance, programme and course development, learner support, staff development, technology, assessment and monitoring.

Third, the areas identified as gaps are predominantly areas where the policy could be updated, expanded or made more explicit rather than areas that are completely absent from the policy. This is particularly evident in relation to contemporary digital equity, accessibility, technology integration, learner participation and student support.

Fourth, the study concludes that policy alignment should not be equated with implementation effectiveness. Because the study relied on documentary evidence, it can establish what the policy provides for and how those provisions compare with selected reference points, but it cannot determine the extent to which the provisions have been implemented or experienced by students and staff.

Overall, the study concludes that the 2015 Makerere ODeL Policy provides a strong broad foundation for institutional ODeL development while its age and the continuing evolution of digital higher education create a clear rationale for periodic review and strengthening.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study employed a documentary policy review and did not collect primary data from students, academic staff, administrators or other stakeholders. Consequently, the study cannot establish how the policy has been implemented, how consistently its provisions are applied or how students and staff experience ODeL at Makerere University. The findings should therefore be understood as conclusions about the policy document and its alignment with identified reference points rather than conclusions about institutional performance.

Second, the study relied on a defined documentary corpus comprising the Makerere ODeL Policy, selected scholarly literature and benchmark, regulatory comparative documents. Although systematic identification and screening procedures were used for the scholarly literature, the resulting evidence base cannot represent every relevant publication or ODeL policy framework worldwide.

Third, the benchmark documents were developed in different institutional, national and regional contexts. Consequently, differences between Makerere's policy and a particular benchmark do not necessarily mean that the Makerere provision is inappropriate. The comparison was used to identify areas of correspondence and potential strengthening while recognising contextual differences.

Fourth, the Makerere ODeL Policy was approved in 2015. Some aspects of the policy therefore predate subsequent developments in digital higher education. This creates a temporal limitation because contemporary expectations concerning online learning, accessibility, digital equity, emerging technologies and learner support have continued to evolve.

Finally, the study focused specifically on the selected ODeL Policy and did not undertake a comprehensive review of all Makerere University policies, regulations, guidelines, strategic plans or operational documents that may contain additional provisions relating to ODeL. Therefore, the identification of a gap in the 2015 policy should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that the University has no related provision elsewhere.

These limitations do not invalidate not invalidate the findings. Rather, they define the scope within which the conclusions should be understood and indicate areas that could be addressed through future empirical and policy research.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Review and update the ODeL Policy. The comparison identified a need for more current and explicit provisions across the policy, particularly given its 2015 approval date. Makerere University should periodically review and update the 2015 ODeL Policy to reflect developments in digital higher education. The review should retain the policy's existing institutional strengths while strengthening areas that have become increasingly important including digital accessibility, equity, online pedagogy, learner support, emerging technologies and evidence based quality improvement.

Strengthen digital access and equity. The policy supports access and gender responsiveness, but the analysis identified limited operational detail on broader digital inequality and accessibility. Future ODeL policy development should adopt a broader understanding of access that extends beyond admission to meaningful participation, progression and completion. The policy should provide clearer mechanisms for addressing connectivity, device access, geographical disparities, affordability, disability and accessibility and other forms of digital inequality.

Strengthen technology integration. The policy recognises bandwidth and technology supported materials, while the comparison identified scope to connect infrastructure more explicitly with accessible pedagogy and learning quality. Technology planning should be explicitly connected to teaching and learning objectives. Future policy and implementation frameworks should address the accessibility, reliability, sustainability and educational value of digital technologies rather than focusing primarily on infrastructure provision.

Strengthen comprehensive student support. Makerere should continue strengthening learner support across academic, administrative, technical and accessibility dimensions. Student support mechanisms could include structured orientation, digital skills support, academic advising, counselling, technical assistance, early identification of learners requiring additional support and systematic learner feedback.

Strengthen quality assurance and continuous improvement. ODeL quality assurance should continue to move beyond formal compliance toward systematic and evidence based improvement. Learner feedback, programme review, assessment

evidence, monitoring data and other relevant evidence should inform regular ODeL improvement processes.

Sustain staff development. Continuous professional development should remain an institutional priority. Training should address not only technical skills but also online pedagogy, inclusive course design, assessment, learner engagement, digital accessibility, student support and emerging technologies.

Strengthen monitoring, evaluation and learner participation. The University's existing monitoring and review provisions could be strengthened through clearer indicators, regular evidence collection and mechanisms for incorporating learner and staff perspectives into ODeL quality improvement. This would help connect policy intentions with evidence of institutional progress.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study has several implications for ODeL policy and practice. At the institutional level, the findings suggest that Makerere can build on the existing policy architecture rather than developing ODeL policy from the beginning. At the quality assurance level, the findings highlight the importance of integrating learner experience, accessibility, technology, teaching quality and institutional processes within continuous improvement. At the learner level, the findings reinforce the need to conceptualise access as meaningful participation rather than admission alone. At the staff level, the findings demonstrate the continuing importance of pedagogical and digital capacity development. The study also has implications beyond Makerere University. Other higher education institutions developing or revising ODeL policies may benefit from considering governance, access, equity, technology, teaching and learning, learner

support, staff development, assessment and continuous improvement as interconnected components of institutional ODeL policy.

Contribution of the Study

The study contributes to ODeL scholarship by examining ODeL through an institutional policy perspective. Much of the literature on digital and distance education focuses on technology adoption, learner readiness, infrastructure or teaching practices. This study instead examines how these issues are brought together within an institutional policy framework.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of combining documentary thematic analysis with comparative policy benchmarking. The use of UDL and CoI as sensitising frameworks also provides a way of interpreting access inclusion, teaching, interaction, learner engagement and support while allowing inductive themes such as governance, financing and monitoring to emerge from the policy itself. The study further contributes a structured comparison of the Makerere policy with Ugandan, African and international identified frameworks and literature documents. It identifies areas of substantial alignment while distinguishing between existing policy provisions and areas requiring further policy development.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should complement the findings of this documentary study with empirical investigation. Studies involving students, academic staff, administrators and ODeL support personnel could examine how the provisions of the policy are implemented and experienced in practice. Future research could also investigate the effectiveness of specific learner support mechanisms, the relationship between digital access and learner progression, staff experiences with ODeL professional development

and the role of technology in teaching and assessment. A longitudinal policy study would also be valuable. Such research could examine the relationship between the 2015 ODeL Policy and subsequent Makerere ODeL developments including the University's later ODeL Masterplan and strategic initiatives. This would provide evidence of how ODeL policy has evolved over time and how institutional policy responds to changes in technology, pedagogy, learner needs and higher education priorities.

Conclusion

This study set out to review the Makerere University ODeL Policy and assess its alignment with regional and international best practices. The findings demonstrate that the policy provides a broad and institutionally oriented framework addressing the major dimensions of ODeL provision. It is substantially aligned with the selected regional and international reference points particularly in governance, quality assurance, programme and course development, learner support, staff development, technology, assessment and monitoring. At the same time, the study identifies areas where the policy could be strengthened to respond more explicitly to contemporary ODeL realities. These include digital equity, accessibility, technology integration, learner support, learner participation in quality improvement and evidence based continuous improvement. The central conclusion is therefore not that the Makerere ODeL Policy is either adequate or inadequate in absolute terms. Rather, the evidence indicates that it provides a substantial institutional foundation while requiring continued review and refinement as the ODeL environment evolves. The distinction between policy provision, policy alignment and policy implementation is fundamental to interpreting this conclusion. The present study establishes the first two and assessing the third requires empirical research beyond the scope of the documentary review. The study therefore provides a basis for continued

policy dialogue and future empirical investigation into how Makerere University's ODeL policy is translated into institutional practice and learner experience.

APPENDIX

Coding Manual

No.	Actual policy text/excerpt	Theoretical lens	Emerging theme
1	"A formal learning method which employs flexible approaches to learning and teaching by enabling learners to be separated by time and space from their tuition institution."	UDL	Access and flexible learning
2	"The University shall promote and support the efficient delivery of ODeL programmes using multiple media that meet men and women learner preferences and abilities."	UDL	Equity and inclusive learning resources
3	"The University shall permit student-centered and decentralised support systems and assessment methods on ODeL delivered programmes."	UDL	Learner-centred support and assessment
4	"Staff participating in the running of ODeL delivered courses and programmes are trained in ODeL pedagogy and andragogy."	CoI – Teaching Presence	Staff development and teaching capacity
5	"Provide oversight to academic units while developing/reviewing proposals and curricula for programmes to be offered through ODeL."	CoI – Teaching Presence	Programme and course design
6	"ODeL students are integral members of the University Community."	CoI – Social Presence	Learner inclusion and community
7	"The University shall allocate adequate human and financial resources to the ODeL so as to enable it to carry out its mandate."	Inductive	Financing and resource mobilisation
8	"The University shall ensure that there is adequate bandwidth to support ODeL and eLearning programmes."	Inductive	Technology and infrastructure

9	“The University shall promote and support provision of quality ODeL programmes in line with the goals of the University's Quality Assurance Framework.”	Inductive	Quality assurance
10	“Regular and timely monitoring of progress regarding this Policy shall be carried out by the IODeL…”	Inductive	Monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement

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