



**ACTEA STANDARDS AND  
PROCEDURES FOR ACCREDITATION  
OF OPEN, DISTANCE AND e-  
LEARNING (ODEL) PROGRAMMES**

**The Association for  
Christian Theological Education in Africa**

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## PREFACE

The Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA) recognizes the urgency of providing accreditation standards for Open, Distance, and electronic Learning (ODEL) programmes.<sup>1</sup> This document presents ACTEA standards and procedures for accreditation of theological education programmes at the post-secondary and post-graduate level, offered through distance and online modes.

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<sup>1</sup> In this Document “e-Learning” is deliberately spelled with a lowercase “e” and upper case “L” to emphasize the notion that *learning* is more important than the use of technology.

# PART I. INTRODUCTION

The format of theological education once offered strictly in-person at a residential seminary, has expanded with manifold non-traditional means. Many more people are embracing distance, online or blended modes of learning. While some students prefer intensive, short-term programmes, others find only evening or weekend formats suitable to their schedules. Many full-time students increasingly are interested in education which does not require uprooting from their families and local communities and the familiarity of workplaces and churches. Open education, that is education that attempts to overcome the barriers of time, distance, age, place, pace, and space, in the educational process, is also gaining popularity. Through open education students may enrol anytime and take courses at their own pace.

Institutions embracing these non-traditional models of learning need to think about quality measures. High quality in open, distance and online programmes can be developed in accordance with suitable standards. The guidelines provided in this document direct institutions in the process of designing, developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating open, distance and technology-enhanced education for purposes of excellence in theological education (and/or Christian higher education). ICETE's *Standards and Guidelines for Global Evangelical Theological Education*, referred to as SG-GETE 2019, provides a template for such accreditation standards. This document, therefore, contextualizes the SG-GETE 2019 for use by ACTEA institutions.

The common terminologies used in this document include,

**Open Education:** refers to education that overcomes the barriers of time, distance, age, place, pace, space, etc.

**Distance Learning:** refers to any instructional model in which the teacher and learners are geographically separated during part or all the learning process. Under this broad definition, diverse instructional models may be classified as subsets of distance education, including correspondence studies and programmes totally or partially technologically mediated

**Online Learning:** refers to web-based instructional models that are mediated by the internet with no in-person physical interaction between instructors and students

**Blended/Hybrid Learning:** a hybrid instructional model that combines in-person instruction with periods of online or other modes of distance learning.

## PART II. PROCEDURES

### SUGGESTED CATEGORIES OF APPLICATION OF ACTEA ODeL STANDARDS

<b>Institution Classification by Programme</b> <i>[categories among ACTEA institutions in November 2020]</i>	<b>Accreditation Status Sought by Institution</b>	<b>ACTEA Requirement</b>
1. ACTEA accredited resident programme(s)	Add non-accredited ODeL programme(s) with same nomenclature as accredited programme(s)	Comply with ACTEA ODeL Standards <i>[each paragraph of ODeL Standards is ODeL specific]</i>
2. ACTEA Associate Status accredited resident programme(s)	Add non-accredited ODeL programme(s) with same nomenclature as accredited programme(s)	Comply with ACTEA ODeL Standards <i>[note consideration under item 2 of "Rationale for Application" if the ODeL programme is accredited, but not by ACTEA]</i>
3. Recognized ODeL programme(s) without ACTEA accreditation	Apply for ACTEA accreditation of ODeL programme(s) only	Comply selectively with ACTEA ODeL Standards <i>[paragraphs for compliance to be specified upon ACTEA review of prior accreditation process]</i>
4. ACTEA Affiliate Status Accreditation of resident programme(s)	Apply for ACTEA Affiliate Status Accreditation of ODeL programme(s) with same nomenclature as Affiliate Status resident programme(s)	Comply with similar Affiliate Status Accreditation Standards based upon ODeL Standards
5. No ACTEA accreditation nor other recognized accreditation of resident or ODeL programme(s)	Apply for Affiliate Status ACTEA Accreditation of ODeL programme(s)	Comply with ACTEA ODeL Standards for Affiliate Status accreditation

## RATIONALE FOR THE APPLICATION OF ACTEA ODeL STANDARDS

- 1) *The nature of the ACTEA ODeL Document.* ACTEA ODeL Standards is a standalone document. Accordingly, the ACTEA ODeL Standards do not duplicate the ACTEA Standards 2011 (of course, neither do ODeL Standards contradict ACTEA Standards 2011). Hence, each paragraph of the ODeL Standards uniquely assesses ODeL programmes, and each paragraph requires self-evaluation by the institution and assessment by ACTEA. No paragraph can be legitimately bypassed in consideration of ACTEA ODeL accreditation, even if the programme(s) in resident format already possesses ACTEA Accreditation. ACTEA maintains that an ODeL programme is substantially distinct from a resident programme, even when such respective programmes share the same nomenclature. Thus, ACTEA accredited institutions should comply fully with ACTEA ODeL Standards in order to be awarded ACTEA accreditation for ODeL programmes.
- 2) *Adjustment of the ODeL application for Associate Members.* ACTEA ODeL Standards should be considered for institutions which may already possess recognition, i.e. government accreditation by higher education commissions for ODeL programmes. This category parallels the ACTEA Associate Status Accreditation where ACTEA has streamlined the accreditation process for ACTEA member institutions so that the accreditation by ACTEA does not duplicate efforts by the institution (i.e. duplicating the self-evaluation and reporting already required in the government higher education accreditation award). Thus, the accreditation process for ODeL programmes, having recognition from higher education commissions of the host nation, may be streamlined upon ACTEA review of that respective higher education commission accreditation process.
- 3) *Application by Affiliate Members.* Institutions currently under ACTEA Affiliate Status Accreditation must begin their application for accreditation of ODeL programme(s) with the process for affiliate status accreditation of ODeL programme(s), which is similar to that process for resident programme(s). The institution must comply with the relevant paragraphs from the ACTEA ODeL Standards, which are essentially consistent with current ACTEA practice for Affiliate Status Accreditation Assessment.
- 4) *Accreditation of additional ODeL programmes of ACTEA institutions with Accredited ODeL Programmes.* Upon the completion of the 2020 edition of the ACTEA ODeL Standards this category of ACTEA institutions is not pertinent to the Procedures. Notwithstanding, ACTEA will develop streamlined Standards for this category of anticipated relevance.

# PART III. THE STANDARDS

## SECTION 1: ADMINISTRATION

1a. *Objectives.* Learning targets or objectives pursued by ODeL programmes must reflect the mission, vision and goals of the institution as a strategic means toward the accomplishment of these ends and be embraced by the administration and other stakeholders with support from the governing body. ODeL must be fully integrated into the educational programmes and strategic initiatives of the institution such that it is not a standalone entity. There must be evidence that teaching staff in ODeL programmes and administrative staff involved with or having oversight for the institution's ODeL programmes are familiar with and accept these objectives, and that steps are regularly taken to acquaint students in a practical manner with these objectives and their significance.

1b. *Governance.* The senior leadership overseeing ODeL programmes must be included in the institution's top management so that they are part of the top decision-making organ of the institution, and a committee should be constituted to manage ODeL programmes.

1c. *Administrative support.* The institution's administration and the governing council must fully support and embrace ODeL through institutional planning, budgeting, fund-raising, quality assurance processes, current operations, resource allocation, and future development. The institution should maintain an institutional culture that promotes and supports ODeL.

1d. *Systems and policies.* The institution must have policies guiding the engagement of teachers, facilitators, and mentors, and the approval of courses in the learning process. The institution should also ensure that appropriate systems and policies for managing course payments, enrolment, programmes and non-academic support services are in place and must ensure that programme and other types of information which are provided online are updated and accurate. The institution should ensure policies, processes, and resources are in place to support students with various learning needs.

1e. *Technical support.* The institution must ensure that it has qualified personnel who ensure that Learning Management Systems (LMS) and other related systems, for example Student Information Systems (SIS), function correctly, safely, and reliably. The institution should also provide adequate orientation and training in online education and Technology Enhanced Learning for all educators and staff involved in the design and teaching or delivery of online courses. Where the bulk of the system support is outsourced, there should still be someone in-house with the skills to help students.

1f. *Review.* The institution must have regular critical review and adjustments of its objectives, its curricular programme, its achievements, and performance. The institution should also apply a benchmarking methodology to assess and promote quality in both programmatic and institutional aspects of ODeL learning.

## SECTION 2: TEACHING STAFF

2a. *Recruitment policies.* The institution must have appropriate policies that ensure recruitment of academically and professionally qualified staff to administer and manage

ODeL programmes. The institution should also have policies and procedures for recruiting and supporting teachers, administrators and/or technicians as well as other staff members in local and extension campuses.

2b. *Number.* Student-instructor ratios should conform to best practices of the region where the institution is located.

2c. *Qualifications.* The institution must recruit or train faculty members and content developers with adequate qualifications (normally one qualification above the level at which the programme is offered) and demonstrable competencies in educational technology. At least one of such faculty members must have the primary responsibility to ODeL.

2d. *Teaching Staff Support Team.* The institution must recruit or train administrators, multimedia experts, and technicians preferably with a first degree or higher and demonstrable competencies in supporting and developing the chosen mode of delivery.

2e. *Responsibilities.* Assigned workloads to teaching staff should not be dependent upon delivery format; thus, clock hours of teaching per week and per calendar year assigned to a teaching staff in ODeL programmes should be comparable to that of traditional programmes. Notwithstanding, the institution should provide a well-reasoned workload allocation model for academic and administrative staff, preferably tied to a performance management system.

2f. *Compensation and Welfare.* The institution should have a policy governing intellectual property ownership and compensation both for faculty and student work. Staff salaries and other amenities should reasonably compare to prevailing scales for similar work in the local country and should be subject to regular review in light of economic changes.

2g. *Development.* The institution must provide initial orientation and training in online education and technology for all educators and staff involved in the design and teaching or delivery of online courses. The institution should also provide ongoing training and support to students, faculty, and staff members in the chosen mode of delivery.

### SECTION 3: FACILITIES

3a. *Administrative facilities.* Institutions running ODeL programmes alongside traditional programmes must have facilities suitable for the efficient administration of ODeL programmes. Normally this will mean a building or a set of offices that are clearly identified and that are under the direct control of ODeL. Physical facilities are not required for a completely online institution.

3b. *Study facilities.* For blended modes of delivery that require a physical space, the institution must ensure that adequate and readily available study facilities are provided on campus and on satellite campuses. The site, layout, structures, furnishings, and access to information technology should be suitable for the theological programmes offered by the institution, and appropriate to the local context. Arrangements for maintenance should be sufficient to ensure smooth operation of the facilities, and provisions for security should be suitable to the setting. The institution should demonstrate effective control of rented facilities during the scheduled class sessions. In the case of online formats, study facilities take the form of learning management and student information systems. The institution must design these to be robust, accessible, navigable, clutter-free, security-protected, and aesthetically appealing.

3c. *Technical infrastructure and support.* The institution must ensure that online learning is supported by technical infrastructure adequate for the programmes being offered. The institution must have qualified personnel who ensure related systems function correctly, safely, and reliably. The institution must also ensure there is proper data security, data backup, protection, and power backup systems. The institution should ensure that the technologies that undergird ODeL (i.e. LMS, SIS, internet access, a dedicated server or web hosting service, cyber security) are available, functioning properly and appropriate to meet the demands of the size of the institution and the number of users. The institution must ensure that students receive timely and effective technical support.

3d. *Library resources.* The institution must demonstrate sustainable arrangements for students and teaching staff to have full-text access to digital resources at an appropriate academic level for the programme being offered. The library holdings should be of a size and quality suitable to the theological education programmes of the institution. The institution should facilitate appropriate training and orientation in accessing and using digital resources. The institution must have policies, procedures, and mechanisms for fair use of library resources regarding copyright, sharing consent and intellectual property regulations.

#### SECTION 4: EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES

4a. *Programme integration.* ODeL programmes must evidence a holistic approach, which embraces concern for the students' spiritual and vocational as well as academic development. Institutions must demonstrate a strategic pastoral and educational commitment to active partnerships with local churches, organisations, and mentors to facilitate aspects of holistic learning that cannot adequately be provided to students online. A clear process and system to identify, approve, train, and resource local, on-the-ground partners and mentors should be in place and implemented for each enrolled student. The institution should have a liaison officer to supervise this process. Students and local mentors should be made aware of the process, its rationale, and their responsibilities through published documents. Remedies should be in place for cases where students are unable to identify local mentors. The institution must demonstrate, for each of its enrolled students, how local feedback and evaluation tools are being used to determine whether course and graduate outcomes are being achieved, and that growth in these areas is demonstrable in students' lives.

4b. *Programme Relevance.* The curriculum as a whole and the content of each course subject must show that ODeL programmes have not merely been borrowed from elsewhere, nor simply developed on an *ad hoc* basis, but that the institution has carefully planned the curriculum and each course subject to meet its particular objectives, for the Christian community it is serving, for the vocations for which the students are being equipped, and for the cultural context in which the students will serve. Learning interactions and learning tasks should encourage students to relate each course subject to the students' cultural, church and community contexts. The selection of learning resources should also show sensitivity to contextual relevance.

4c. *Student access and orientation.* The institution must ensure access to necessary learning resources and support services to all students, including mentorship, academic advising, research tools, and an adequate range of relevant learning resources. For post-graduate studies, learning resources provided or made available should enable students to achieve mastery in the subjects being studied by giving them access to an adequate

range of critical literature dealing with their field of learning, especially for research-based post-graduate degrees. Online course providers must ensure that all their students have access to an adequate range of relevant critical sources at the post-graduate level and an extensive range of such sources at the Doctoral level. Immediate access by students to one or more Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) should be provided for online post-graduate programmes. The SME may be other than the course teacher or facilitator. In addition, welcome, orientation and introduction elements must be provided for each course and programme. The students must know how to access technical, pastoral, learning or administrative support when needed.

4d. *Programme publication.* The institution's current theological education programmes, with the rationale for each, should be available and accessible. A syllabus for each individual course subject, updated regularly, must be available and accessible on the learning platform. An explanation of the institution's marking system should also be available and accessible.

4e. *Curriculum balance.* The content of the theological education curriculum of the institution must be justified in relation to the normal spread of subjects in the theological curricula of the pertinent academic level, with regard to biblical, theological, historical, practical, and general areas of study. There must also be neither significant omission nor undue overlap in the overall body of knowledge and skills being conveyed.

4f. *Content delivery.* Content delivery methods are chosen to ensure frequent active and varied student engagement with learning materials. Such delivery methods must be suitable for the caseload of students in each class, unit, or module and the level of technology available for both the lecturers and students.

4g. *Learning activities.* Each course must have a variety of learning activities. The learning activities must foster a safe learning environment for collaboration so that students may sense that they belong in the class and are heard with respect. The learning activities chosen must contribute intentionally to meeting lesson and course learning objectives and outcomes. Each course must include special provisions to support holistic educational outcomes (for both the course and the overall programme).

4h. *Guided practical experience.* ODeL programmes must incorporate into the curricular requirements arrangements for guided practical experience in the specific ministry vocations for which the individual students are being equipped. Such guided experience must be supervised on-site or remotely by qualified mentors, and this supervision must be monitored by the institution.

4i. *Student assessment and integrity.* The institution must have guidelines for collecting, monitoring, evaluating, and using information on students' holistic growth to help make better decisions. The institution must establish mechanisms for the provision of prompt and regular feedback to students. The institution should monitor student progress and drop-out rates with a view to remove unnecessary obstacles to student success and satisfaction in ODeL. The institution must have appropriate policies and mechanisms to safeguard against cheating, particularly plagiarism, and impersonation.

4j. *Admissions.* The institution must have policies, procedures, and materials for admission of ODeL students in compliance with the local national educational system and ACTEA Standards. Careful attention to the Christian character and Christian vocational experience of the applicants, in addition to their academic qualifications, must be considered. Christian character and vocational experience should be assessed in close

consultation with the church of which the applicant is a member. The institution should have clear policies, principles, and procedures for assessing prior learning and placing students within their study programmes. Mature entry admissions, i.e. seasoned Christian workers who lack full academic entry qualification, may be admitted to appropriate programmes in accordance with institutional policy but not exceeding 10% of total annual admissions into the respective ODeL programme. At the post-secondary level students transferring from one theological education programme to a higher one may transfer certain credits earned in the former programme as equivalent to credits required for the higher one, providing that the academic entrance requirements of the former programme are equivalent to the higher and the rigour of instruction, including course requirements, are also equivalent in both programmes. Priority in admissions to theological education programmes must be given to students who completed their secondary schooling in a recognised government institution or in an institution accredited by ACTEA or a similar agency.

4k. *Graduation.* ODeL programmes must show that consideration of the spiritual and vocational as well as the academic development of the student is an integral part of the evaluation procedures which determine the student's suitability for graduation. Graduation requirements must include satisfactory performance in the equivalent of a full-time course.

For post-secondary programmes, the graduation requirements must include satisfactory performance in a 3 or 4 year course for the degree, and a 2, 3, or 4 year course at post-secondary level for the post-secondary diploma. ODeL programmes must have a learning calendar that will require students to spend 1200-1800 hours of structured learning activity in each year of study for the duration of their programmes. The division of learning hours among the various learning activities must be appropriate to the method of instruction used.

If the entrance requirements in use for the post-secondary degree programme relate to a four year university course, then the degree programme must itself likewise be a four year course. Publications and credentials relating to an accredited post-secondary diploma programme must always specify whether it is a 2, 3, or 4 year programme. ACTEA encourages institutions to conform the names of their terminal theological credentials at the post-secondary level to the pattern or trend observable in that country or region.

Course-based post-graduate programmes must meet for an equivalent of 34-36 weeks a year, with an average of 12.5 clock hours or its equivalent a week in class or supervised study and a normal total workload of 40-45 hours of learning activity per week (i.e., 1200-1800 hours of structured learning activity per year including 425-450 clock hours of instruction or supervised study), or the equivalent in part-time, online, modular or distance study. Research-based post-graduate theological programmes must also incorporate 1200-1800 hours of research, writing and other structured learning activity per year, or the equivalent in part-time study over a greater number of years.

Nomenclature ascribed to post-graduate ODeL programmes and attendant durations for the respective post-graduate programmes should correspond to regional and international academic patterns with appropriate consideration of equivalent programme lengths under ODeL formats and in view of advanced standing based upon pertinent work, if applicable.

Post-graduate theological programmes in which final examinations or the submission of a thesis or project, rather than years of study or the accumulation of course credits, determines completion of the programme must have in place a system of external moderation of exams and/or examination of theses or projects equivalent to that of the national university system of the host country and acceptable to ACTEA.

Institutions offering distinct post-secondary and post-graduate theological education programmes may not teach students from the two levels in the same class while awarding credits at different levels.

4l. *Graduation ceremonies.* The institution must have arrangements for graduation ceremonies suitable for ODeL students. The institution must plan for the secure delivery of certification documents and transcripts.

4m. *Language.* The language of instruction for accredited ODeL programmes must be that in use in the local national system at the same level.

## SECTION 5: STUDENTS

5a. *Counselling.* The institution must have an organised arrangement whereby all students have adequate access to personal counselling, mentoring, academic advising, and encouragement by staff or designated local reflective practitioners.

5b. *Discipline.* Major disciplinary action must in every case be taken (i) in keeping with written procedures; (ii) with regard to written regulations plainly available to the students in print or online; (iii) on the basis of discussion and decision by a group rather than by an individual; (iv) with written records kept of action taken. Wherever possible such action should also be taken in consultation with the local reflective practitioner, the student's church, or the sponsoring body.

5c. *Community life.* The institution must foster community among students. This may be done through development of courses that require intentional interactions between student to student and faculty to student. For online courses, the faculty facilitator must be actively engaged in virtual interactions with students. The institution should also link students to local reflective practitioners, churches, academic advisors, and mentors.

5d. *Fees.* Student fees should be regularly reviewed to make sure that they correlate both with the financial needs of the ODeL programme and with the financial abilities of the students and their sponsors.