FACT SHEET

DIGITAL LEARNING

SOUTH AFRICA'S EVOLVING INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

Digital learning is prominent in the learning and development agenda of organisations, especially with the COVID-led global and local shift to remote working. For the HR practitioner, the challenge lies not only in the design, delivery and desired outcomes of digital learning, but also how it fits within the South African education and skills development landscape, in order to ensure that digital learning is recognised for the individual and the employer. The HR practitioner needs to engage with the national institutional framework, that is, the South African legislation and the regulations, policies and guidelines of relevant departments and various statutory and non-statutory institutions.

This Fact Sheet helps the HR practitioner to navigate the education and skills development landscape. It begins with the discussion on defining digital learning and outlines the differences between digital and contact or face-to-face (f2f) learning. It then discusses the evolving South African institutional framework and focuses on the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations' (QCTO) position and its quality guidelines. Thereafter, the Fact Sheet discusses the need for credentialing and what it could entail.

DEFINING DIGITAL LEARNING

Digital learning may seem straightforward at first sight, but it is an evolving and multidimensional construct. There is no single or universal definition that is agreed upon (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2020). The various definitions of it are informed by the perspective of the relevant discipline/function and the organisational purpose, context, and institutional practices for example. It is interchangeably used with terms such as 'online learning', 'web-based learning', 'mobile learning', and 'online communities'; and evolved from the earlier use of the term 'electronic learning' or e-learning. Some differentiate digital and e-learning as the latter is said to be limited to learning through the use of the internet, whereas others may subsume e-learning, online learning, web-based learning, and mobile learning under digital learning as they all use some form of digital technologies whether it be offline or online.

The various definitions can be clustered in terms of their focus, whether the attention is on the:

- various digital technologies and platforms, whether offline or online;
- various ways in which communication and learner engagement can be mediated by technologies;
- various ways in which learner progress and personalisation can be managed by technologies, including the use of gamification[1];
- various ways in which learning can be delivered, mediated and assessed;
- pedagogical assumptions, processes, systems, and implications.

The CIPD in the UK defines digital learning as "learning that's facilitated, enabled or mediated using electronic technology for the explicit purpose of training, learning or development in organisations" (2020). They describe this as an inclusive definition as it includes technologies and technology products that do not require connection to any network. An exclusive definition in contrast restricts digital learning to learning that is delivered only through the internet or an intranet.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) refers to "e-learning" and defines it as a "mode of teaching and learning that makes use of technology-mediated features" (2017, p5). Similarly, the 2014 Good Practice Guide by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) focuses on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) technologies in supporting and mediating teaching and learning. The Guide goes further and locates the use of ICT technologies along the continuum of campus and distanced-based education, noting that the distinction between the two is blurring. Given this blurring, the Guide differentiates digitally supported, internet-supported, internet-dependent, and fully online programmes. This is illustrated below.

Extent of ICT support

No digital support	Digitally supported	Internet-supported	Internet-dependent	Fully online
Offline		Online		
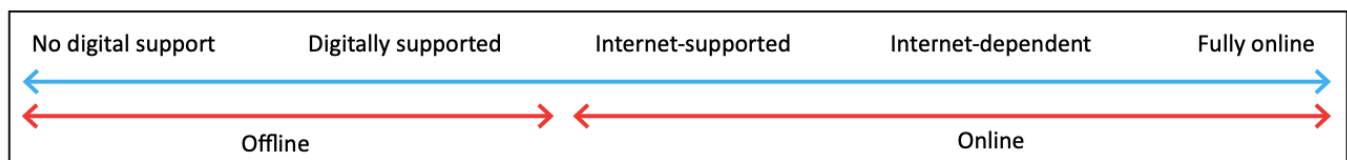
Source: CHE (2014, p10)

Relatedly, the QCTO refers to e-assessment and defines it as the "use of electronic systems for the development, operation and delivery of accredited qualification assessment or the collection of performance evidence, which contributes to the awarding of a unit or an accredited qualification" (2016, p11). This means that it includes "any type of assessment that has an electronic component and incorporates one or more of e-testing, e-portfolios and e-marking" (ibid).

[1] See the factsheet on the *Changing Talent Assessment Landscape* for a discussion on gamification and its difference from what is referred to as gamified.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DIGITAL AND CONTACT LEARNING

In general, learning providers are content experts, especially in South Africa, where much of training and learning is aligned to unit standards. However, content expertise may be insufficient when offering digital learning offerings, even when the offerings are of a blended nature, because the role of the training provider becomes more that of a facilitator. We discuss this further on in this section.

There are many differences in offering learning f2f and in a digital format (Damoense, 2003). One of the main differences between f2f learning and online learning is that in f2f learning the learning facilitator interacts with the learners in real time. Thus, any questions or clarifications that the learner has can be addressed immediately. Online learning, on the other hand, allows people to learn in their own style and pace. Learning providers who play various roles in offering learning must therefore sufficiently understand pedagogy, andragogy and the application of pedagogy and andragogy in face-to-face (f2f) learning and online learning. Insufficient understanding of such concepts can cause learning offerings to be ineffective and of poor quality.

PEDAGOGY AND ANDRAGOGY

Simply put, pedagogy is seen as the science and practice of child learning and andragogy as the science and practice of adult learning.

Historically, pedagogy has received a lot of interest as child learning was more commonplace than adult learning. Etymologically, pedagogy relates to teaching children (Greek: peda – paidi – child; ago – guide). When teaching children, much of the focus is on the teacher, as children need a guide. Therefore, in pedagogy, the teacher assumes responsibility for ensuring that learning is wholesome and effective and for evaluating progress. The role of the teacher is highly relevant in child learning as a child comes to the learning environment with little life experience. Furthermore, pedagogical principles are utilised also in institutions of higher education whereby learning is prescribed and sequenced, taking into account the needs of a young adult (Delahaye, Limerick, & Hearn, 1994). In fact, the perspective that people are done learning once they complete studies at school and an institution of higher learning is still widespread, although becoming less popular.

With our changing times, learning is evolving, and life-long learning is recognised as essential. This is where andragogy becomes relevant. Andragogy (Greek: andras – adult; ago – guide) takes into consideration learning from an adult perspective. The term 'learning facilitator' becomes more relevant in andragogy, as opposed to 'teacher' or 'instructor'. Andragogy requires self-evaluation and direction by the learner. The learner uses life experience as a foundation. Learning is triggered by any number of life experiences and not necessarily led by a designated instructor. Furthermore, adults learn from the learning facilitator, but also from one another. Learners see a problem or knowledge gap and organize topics around life/work solutions. Finally, adult learners are motivated by intrinsic means, which include self-esteem, quality of life, problem-solving, and the quest for recognition. Topics are completed by mastery. Thus, adult learning facilitators are expected to build on existing knowledge and are required to understand diverse backgrounds (Pew, 2007).

The above principles imply that digital learning is well-suited for adult learning. Digital learning is highly self-directed. While the learning facilitator can direct and share various resources and create opportunities to learn from one another in a group, learners need to be highly motivated to be successful when it comes to digital learning. If a digital learning designer/facilitator/assessor does not appreciate these aspects, digital learning may be designed ineffectively.

Yet another difference between f2f learning and digital learning is that the instructor involved in f2f learning conveys information while a digital learning instructor facilitates learning. The instructor is not in focus; the learner is. Facilitators need to take into consideration diverse communication skills, learning styles, and digital literacy levels when designing learning material. Also, learners are highly dependent on facilitation, clarification and feedback provided in digital learning. Thus, a lot of planning goes into digital learning.

In unpacking these differences, one cannot ignore certain context-specific factors in South Africa. One of the primary considerations with respect to the South African audience is the quality and quantity of network data access required of the learner. Device capacity must also be considered when designing content and making various learning resources available. Furthermore, many learners in the South African market are either working or are continually aspiring to be working, part-time or full time. Thus, opportunities for learners to engage with the material asynchronously should be considered. In other words, the learning material may be posted at a time, downloaded at another time and the learner may engage and peruse the content at a different time. Furthermore, there needs to be good alignment between what is being taught and what is being practised. Providing effective assessments is another considerable challenge.

EVOLVING SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

As digital learning, defined inclusively, evolves so does the national institutional framework and the understanding and capabilities of public, private and non-profit stakeholders and organisations utilising digital learning. In the South African context, organisations utilising digital learning need to take cognisance and meet the compliance requirements of legislation and the evolving policies and guides from statutory bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training, SAQA, CHE and QCTO. Policies and guides from the relevant SAQA registered Professional Bodies also need to be taken account of. The table below lists some of these for reference.

LEGISLATION	• National Qualifications Act • Skills Development Act • South African Qualifications Authority Act • Further Education and Training Act • General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act
POLICIES AND GUIDES	• *White paper for post-school education and training: building an expanded, effective and integrated post-school system* • *National Policy and Criteria for Designing and Implementing Assessment for NQF Qualifications and Part-Qualifications and Professional Designations in South Africa* • *CHE's Distance Higher Education Programmes in a Digital Era: Good Practice Guide* • *QCTO Policy on Accreditation of Skill Development Providers* • *QCTO Guidelines for the Standards of eLearning for Registered Qualifications on the OQSF* • *QCTO Summary of Guidelines on E-Learning and E-Assessment on the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) Applicable during the National COVID-19 Lockdown*

## QCTO POSITION ON E-LEARNING AND E-ASSESSMENT

The QCTO acknowledges that digital learning or electronic learning (e-learning) has changed and will continue to change education. It focuses on the delivery of digital learning and the accreditation thereof given its potential to expand access and increase the "openness and flexibility" (QCTO, 2019a, p14) of education:

> "The QCTO is cognisant of the above hence SDPs are accredited to deliver occupational qualifications either via face to face contact mode or via a blended mode of delivery with contact and distance delivery" (ibid).

However, the QCTO also acknowledges that in the South African context access is not a simple issue, as noted in the previous section. There are critical "questions around access, affordability, adequate school-based support and teacher development" (2019a, p6) and on pedagogy and andragogy.

Drawing on the 2014 Good Practice Guide[2] by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the QCTO differentiates the delivery of digital learning on the nature of participation from being optional to being fully required as follows: web-supplemented (WS), web-dependent (WD), and fully online (FO) programmes. The below grid from the CHE Guide is useful and provides a mechanism to differentiate the use of digital learning in corporate campus and distance-based education and programmes. Examples of how different programmes can be located in the grid are presented by different alphabets:

A. Distance education/off campus/independent study
B. Mixed mode/off campus
C. Part time/on campus
D. Fully online/off campus
E. On campus/mixed mode
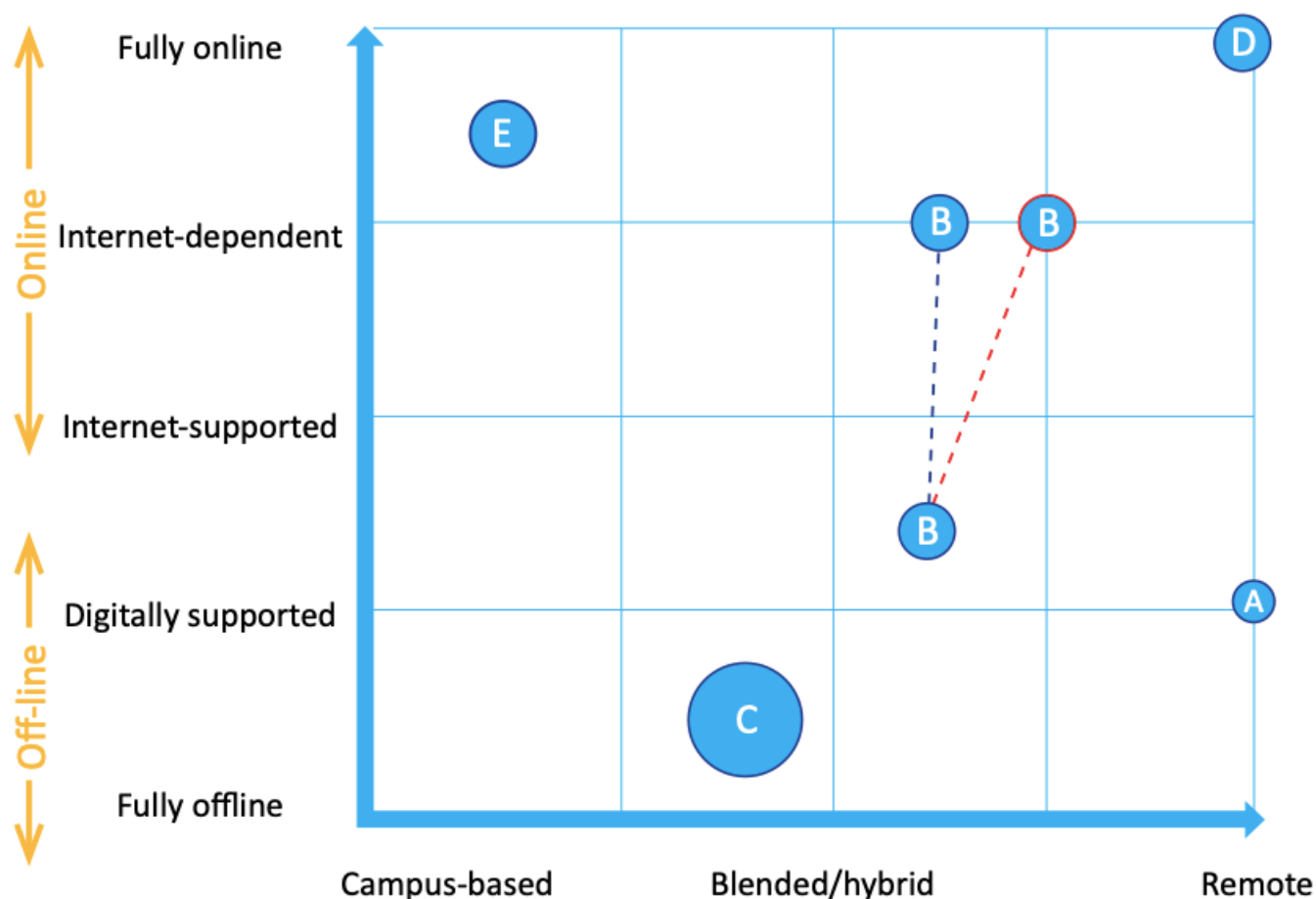
Source: CHE Guide (2014, p11)

The QCTO sets out quality guidelines for web-supplemented (WS), web-dependent (WD), and fully online (FO) programmes as described in the table below.

INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND VISION	The Skills Development Provider (SDP) has a clear vision and mission that reflects its academic commitments, the needs of the learners and of society.
PLANNING	Sufficient planning of technology supported courses takes place before learners are registered. The planning process takes into account the technology available and the profile of the course target group.
MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION	The Institution has a clear process of internal programme management to ensure programme quality.
TRAINING PROGRAMME AND COURSE DESIGN AND REVIEW	Programmes are designed and developed to meet the needs of learners and stakeholders, and to encourage access to quality education; assessment methods, effectively assess and measure learners' achievement of the stated learning outcomes of the programme.
STAFFING AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT	The human resource provision is appropriate for the education and training services provided. The Skills Development Provider (SDP) offers appropriate staff development support that equips the personnel to perform their tasks effectively.
LEARNER SUPPORT	Learners are supported by the provision of a wide range of opportunities for tutoring at a distance through the use of various forms of technology. Contact tutoring, e-tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and the stimulation of peer support structures are employed to facilitate their holistic progression.
INTEGRITY OF ONLINE LEARNING PROGRAMMES	Effective systems are put in place to ensure that (a) cases of plagiarism are detected and (b) the right learners are rewarded.
LEARNER ASSESSMENT	Assessment and evaluation are essential features of the teaching learning process that are properly managed, and reflect institutional, and national standards. Assessment and evaluation are based on the stated programme objectives.
MONITORING LEARNER SATISFACTION AND PROGRESS	The Skills Development Provider (SDP) tracks learners in order to identify at-risk learners and provide support before they drop out or fail.
ADVOCACY	A high degree of professionalism and ethics is exercised in the advertising of programmes by the Skills Development Provider. Information provided to potential learners is true and not misleading.
COLLABORATION	Institutional partnerships and collaborative relationships for mutual benefits are recommended.
COLLABORATION	Continuous development of educational programmes and services is influenced by research.

Source: QCTO (2019b)

The QCTO also provides guidelines for e-assessment[3]. However, these are restricted to formative assessments and low stakes summative assessments. The QCTO has reservations on, and at present does not allow for, e-assessment in high stakes or final summative assessments in the completion of an OQSF qualification, such as the External Integrated Summative Assessment (EISA). This is the case for now during the COVID pandemic as well. The QCTO will pronounce on their developments towards allowing e-assessments.

> "[The EISA] is not amenable to e-assessment and CANNOT be assessed via electronic/remote assessment alone at this stage. The QCTO is rapidly moving to open up avenues for e-assessment for the EISA and will provide updates to the sector as soon as possible" (capitalisation in original, QCTO, 2020, p2).

[3.] As noted previously, it defines e-assessment as the "use of electronic systems for the development, operation and delivery of accredited qualification assessment or the collection of performance evidence, which contributes to the awarding of a unit or an accredited qualification" (2016, p11). This means that it includes "any type of assessment that has an electronic component and incorporates one or more of e-testing, e-portfolios and e-marking" (ibid).

NEED FOR CREDENTIALING

Credentialing refers to a systematic approach to verifying a provider's qualifications. Credentialing establishes criteria for fairness, quality and competence for professional services provided. It is a process by which an entity, with authorisation and qualifications to do so, grants formal recognition to, or tracks the recognition status of individuals, organisations, institutions, programmes, processes, products or services that meet predetermined and standardised criteria (Knapp, Anderson, & Wild, 2015).

Accreditation and certification – what is the difference?

Accreditation refers to the approval granted by an institution (usually non-governmental) to a programme or an institution offering services, according to defined standards for a specific duration.

Certification is a process through which individuals who demonstrate a level of knowledge and skill that is required in their profession, are identified to various stakeholders.

Thus, individuals may be certified, while organisations and programmes may be accredited.

In digital learning, credentialing would relate to the collection and verification of a learning provider's competencies and qualifications to offer digital learning. The criteria that must be verified include, but are not limited to, relevant training, understanding of online learning needs of South Africa, and academic background. A credentialing process may be utilised by online learning organisations as part of their process to allow practitioners to design, facilitate and assess online learning, and to participate in a large network of learning providers and organisations offering digital learning services that have a need to hire or otherwise engage learning providers (Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson, & Kabin, 2001).

It is therefore important that learning providers, both organisations and individuals, understand the various concepts before engaging in digital learning. Therefore, experience in offering digital learning can also be effectively utilised for credentialing learning providers. Currently, in South Africa, learning providers can engage in digital learning without credentialing and, in fact, without certification. The SABPP is currently engaging several stakeholders on credentialing and will formally launch a National Institute on digital learning to address the need for credentialing.

Credentialing ensures that:

- Digital learning principles are applied sufficiently in a short course or a longer-term qualification offered by a learning provider.
- Learners are receiving not just content, but a systematic approach to digital learning, which ensures that the focus is on the learner, considering the various aspects that must be considered for effective digital learning.
- Learning providers have undergone an assessment of their ability to deliver digital learning.
- Learning is being facilitated by providers whose qualifications, training, experience, and ability to facilitate digital learning are acceptable.
- All learning providers offering digital learning solutions are held to the same standard.
- A community of learning providers who update themselves regularly on practice and policy changes is created.

Thus, credentialing must not be limited to individuals, who may play the role of designer, facilitator, assessor or reviewer. Programmes may also be accredited to check that they meet digital learning standards under different categories.

Another element within digital learning that should be considered for credentialing are the various learning platforms on which various courses are made available. The various aspects of the platform that may be considered for credentialing include the availability of tools for interaction and assessment, support for multiple formats, usability, attractiveness, scalability and ability to process and analyse data generated through the platform.

LEARNING PROGRAMMES

- Distance education
- Mixed mode (off campus/on campus)
- Fully online

INDIVIDUAL

- Designer
- Facilitator
- Assessor
- Reviewer

LEARNING PLATFORM

- Access to multiple tools for interaction and assessment
- Supports multiple formats
- Usability and attractiveness
- Scalability
- Enables data processing and analysis

CONCLUSION

The HR practitioner needs to engage with digital learning in a strategic and systematic manner, especially in the current context, as we envision future possibilities for delivering learning opportunities, making these accessible, and formally recognising them. The HR practitioner must consider the various aspects of digital learning discussed in this Fact Sheet before engaging providers or offerings. The practitioner not only needs to consider digital learning from the perspectives of the learner, programme, platform, and organisational outcomes, but also from the national education and skills development perspective. The Fact Sheet helps the HR practitioner to unpack critical issues and questions on digital learning in relation to its deployment, compliance, and formal recognition within the national institutional framework. Furthermore, the Fact Sheet identifies the need for credentialing in digital learning, especially in relation to the learner, learning programme, and learning platform. The SABPP is actively engaging stakeholders on this and will continually advise the HR community of developments. One such development is the formal launch of a National Institute for digital learning.

SABPP members have the opportunity to earn 1 CPD point for reading the factsheet and answering 3 simple questions by following the *link*. We hope that you enjoy the read!

EARN 1 CPD POINT
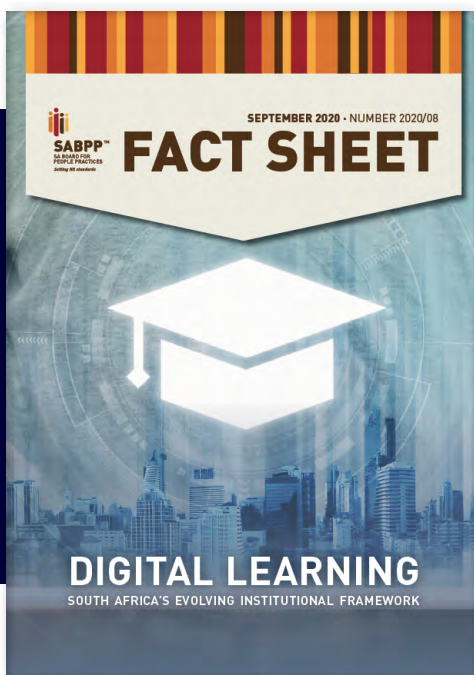
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PREVIOUS EDITIONS OF THE
FACT SHEET

2019

Month	Title
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March	QUALITY COUNCIL FOR TRADES AND OCCUPATIONS
April	RECENT TRENDS ON REMUNERATION GOVERNANCE
May	THE PROTECTED DISCLOSURES ACT
June	HR SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS
July	CREATING A SPEAK UP CULTURE AT WORK
August	JOB PROFILES
September	ETHICS HOTLINE MANAGEMENT: BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR SOUTH AFRICAN EMPLOYERS
October	DISABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT: THE SABPP DISABILITY PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE STANDARD
November	FACING THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION: WHAT ARE SOUTH AFRICA'S CONSTRAINTS?
December	NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK ACT AND THE 2019 AMENDMENT ACT

2020

Month	Title
February	HR'S PLACE IN THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION
March	INNOVATION AND DISRUPTION DILEMMAS FOR FIRMS AND THEIR HR FUNCTIONS
April	CORONAVIRUS AND COVID-19
May	WORKFORCE TRANSITION ISSUES FOR THE DIGITAL, GREEN AND CRISIS-LED TRANSFORMATIONS
June	HR'S ROLE IN SHAPING LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW NORMAL
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