



UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

PLAN FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING IN 2022

November 2021

ulwazi



On campus

**BLENDING ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS
LEARNING AND TEACHING**

INTRODUCTION

In late 2019 Senate and Council approved the *Wits Learning and Teaching Plan 2020-2024* (<https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/learning-and-teaching/documents/Wits%20Learning%20and%20Teaching%20Plan%202020-2024.pdf>)

This plan has the following focus areas:

1. Increasing flexible and life-long learning opportunities
2. Enhancing academics as university teachers
3. Strengthening institutional capacity for curriculum development and renewal
4. Diversifying assessment methods
5. Expanding post-graduate education
6. Expanding innovative formal and informal learning spaces
7. Using data analytics to promote student success

The 2020-2024 plan provides the broad framework within which annual learning and teaching plans are developed, both at institutional and at faculty levels.

CONTEXT

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck and the country went into lockdown on 27 March 2020, Wits had already planned to move to blended learning and to increase our fully online academic offerings as part of focus area 1.

Wits responded to the initial hard lockdown by using our Learning Management System (LMS) as a platform for offering our courses in an online mode. Academic, professional, administrative and support staff put in enormous effort and worked long hours to enable Wits students to continue with their academic programmes throughout 2020. Essential to being able to achieve this was the commitment, collaboration and creative problem-solving displayed by Wits staff.

As we had to move so quickly from contact to online mode, the approach we adopted was Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). To a large extent, this entailed creating and curating educational resources that were made available to students on course sites on the LMS, as well as designing and delivering assessment tasks using the tools available in the LMS.

While we managed to conclude the 2020 academic year, the LMS we were using, Sakai, was not designed for the heavy usage we required. Our ICT staff were constantly on alert, trying to ensure that the system did not crash, especially during the end of semester assessment periods. It took enormous effort and skill on their part to keep the system up and running. In support of our Learning and Teaching Plan, we had already begun the process of selecting a new, more modern LMS in 2019. During 2020 the need for this became dire, and the process was accelerated. In December 2020 we obtained Canvas, a powerful LMS with a very large international user community.

Due to the loss of school days in 2020 and the late availability of National Senior Certificate results, the start of our 2021 academic year was delayed by a month to 8 March. This gave us two months to implement Canvas, which we branded “ulwazi”, across the university as our new LMS¹. We managed to do this by using an agile project management approach to harness

¹ Courses that began before 15 February moved to ulwazi later in the year.

the expertise and commitment of dozens of people working together across the university, including technical, academic development, administrative, professional and academic staff. Students were also involved in helping to develop resources and to offer support for students.

During 2020 and 2021 we appointed several new staff to assist staff and students with teaching and learning in an online mode. These staff, together with the new LMS and growing confidence and skill among academics to teach in an online mode, are enabling us to increasingly adopt good practices in online course design, pedagogy and assessment.

We now have an opportunity to reflect on what we have learnt since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 and, in the context of our approved 2020-2024 learning and teaching plan, formulate our 2022 learning and teaching plan.

TRANSITIONING TO BLENDED LEARNING IN 2022

According to Joosten et al²,

Blended learning is instruction that blends technological, temporal, spatial, and pedagogical dimensions to create actualized learning.

In this model,

- “technological” ranges from no or lean technology to rich technology
- “temporal” ranges from real time or synchronous to over time or asynchronous
- “spatial” ranges from same or near space to remote or distant
- “pedagogical” ranges from passive or instructor-centred to active or student-centred.

The particular way in which these four dimensions are blended has a strong influence on the effectiveness of an educational activity in promoting student learning, and therefore needs to be carefully considered. Joosten et al (2021) go on to say,

The strategic thinking needed in blending a course through instructional design allows faculty and instructors to carefully align the learning objectives with the instructional modality and technologies that would be more effective for the students with the opportunity to still come to campus or meet in real time (e.g., synchronously) when needed. This strategic integration allows for something greater and better than a random mix and match of activities — **quality**.

As the number of people who are vaccinated against COVID-19 grows in South Africa, so do the opportunities to gradually allow more on-campus activities. That means that we can start to offer a blend of online and on-site educational provision.

However, since the trajectory of the virus is uncertain, including possible new mutations, we still need to ensure that appropriate safety measures are in place. This includes screening everyone who wishes to come onto campus, ensuring good ventilation, limiting numbers of occupants and ensuring physical distancing in inside spaces, as well as regular sanitising and the wearing of masks. The sections below indicate how we can build on what we have learnt

² Joosten, T., Weber, N., Baker, M., Schletzbaum, A., & McGuire, A. (2021). *Planning for a Blended Future: A Research-Driven Guide for Educators*. [Report] Every Learner Everywhere Network. Retrieved from: <https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/>

amidst the changing circumstances to continue teaching and learning safely and effectively in 2022. They pertain to all students, both full-time and part-time.

Teaching in an online mode

Notwithstanding our goal of providing students with an optimal blend of modes of educational provision, we recognise that under current circumstances we cannot centre our planning around face-to-face, or even synchronous online, teaching and learning. Our course designs must be sufficiently flexible that our plans do not get derailed by having to switch modes rapidly should circumstances require it, for example, if there is another wave of the virus and new lockdown restrictions are imposed. For this reason, all courses need to be designed such that they can be offered remotely.

However, after almost two years of remote teaching and learning, we should no longer employ Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) as a pedagogical approach. In 2020 we had no choice but to rapidly provide educational materials and teaching in an online mode, based largely on what we had been doing in contact mode. Now, however, we need to move to designing our courses appropriately for different modes of provision.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a great deal of time was devoted to preparing and delivering lectures, sometimes multiple times to different groups of students. Going forward, good course design will allow us greater flexibility in the mode of provision, as well as enabling us to create reusable educational resources³. In the longer term, this will save lecturers time and help them create more streamlined courses with a better flow that will be easier for students to navigate, and can reduce their sense of being overloaded.

If at some point it becomes safe to do so, we may consider also offering in-person classes to small groups of students, particularly for interactive educational activities.

In planning our courses for 2022 and going forward, first and foremost, the courses need to be designed, offered and assessed in ways that are effective in helping our Wits students achieve the course learning outcomes and ultimately become successful graduates.

In 2022 we will make use of research-based practices to guide online course design, pedagogy and assessment. We will also increase the number of courses and programmes offered in a fully online mode. Staff from the CLTD and the Quality and Academic Planning Office (QAPO) are collaborating to support and assure high quality course and curriculum design. Fully online academic offerings will be peer reviewed through Quality Matters, the highly regarded international body for the quality assurance of online education.

Below is a list of specific considerations for 2022:

1. All courses need to have a course site on ulwazi.

³ <https://dkit.ie.libguides.com/RLOs>; Philip Hardie, Peter Donnelly, Elizabeth Greene, Aine McHugh, Kate Coveney, Brian Murray, Siobhan Brereton,

The application of reusable learning objects (RLOs) in preparation for a simulation laboratory in medication management: An evaluative study, Teaching and Learning in Nursing, 2021 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1557308721000457#bib0033> accessed 2021/09/06.

Ulwazi is integrated with SIMS, so sites are automatically created for all active courses, and courses are automatically populated with registered students.

During 2021, a number of excellent resources were created to help academic staff design their ulwazi course sites. These resources can be accessed from the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development (CLTD) and faculty Teaching and Learning Units. Learning designers from CLTD and faculties run webinars and offer online courses throughout the year, and are also available to help lecturers individually or in groups. In addition, as a member of the Canvas Community, Wits staff have access to all of the resources developed by this international user group.

2. As part of good online pedagogy, synchronous sessions should be utilised for interactive sessions with students.

Presentations, be they lectures, voice-over PowerPoint presentations or other forms of conveying information, should, as far as possible, be provided in an asynchronous format, preferably divided into separate files of about 5-15 minutes in duration. Where possible, files should be compressed to reduce data demands. When appropriate, podcasts, accompanied by a document if needed, can be provided as an alternative to videos, as they use far less data.

3. Course design and pedagogy should help students feel a sense of belonging and be inclusive of students who are differently-able and who have diverse needs.

Research over the past four decades has shown that one of the most important predictors of student success is whether students feel a sense of belonging in their institution, as opposed to feeling alienated⁴. In addition, students' primary site of engagement with the institution is the class. Yet it is easy for students to feel that they are just a number, especially in large first-year classes. Elements of course design that cultivate a sense of belonging among students are therefore important.

The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines⁵ is a valuable resource for helping course designers to accommodate the needs of students who are differently-able. In addition, it is likely that, as in the past, a substantial number of Wits students will only be able to access ulwazi and the internet via a mobile device. Ulwazi has a built-in accessibility checker and the Canvas Community has guidelines for developing sites that are mobile friendly. CLTD also offers support in these areas.

4. Course design should promote considerable student engagement, through a variety of activities and media.

Interactions among students and between students and the lecturer are important, and should be incorporated into teaching strategies, making use, where possible, of the affordances of ulwazi and other educational technologies available at Wits. Such

⁴ Tinto, V. (2014). Tinto's South Africa lectures. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, Volume 2(2), 5–28.

⁵ <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

interactions support active learning, while also increasing the sense of belonging referred to above that is so important for student success.

5. Where possible, and especially in first year and/or large courses, online tutors should be appointed.

These tutors should go through one of the formal tutor training programmes offered by the CLTD or faculty Teaching and Learning Units. Synchronous sessions in which tutors interact with small groups of students should be encouraged. Tutors can also interact with students asynchronously through discussion forums and written exchanges. For example, in writing intensive courses, students write letters to the tutors (Writing Fellows) about their writing tasks, and the Writing Fellows respond to students' letters and to their writing tasks.

6. Lecturers should indicate the times at which they will be available to students for online or telephonic discussions or support.

While students may contact lecturers asynchronously via ulwazi or email as needed, there are times that they may want to speak to a lecturer. Ad hoc sessions can be arranged to suit both parties, but scheduled virtual "office hours" are also important.

Experiential learning

One important difference in 2022 from the previous two years is that, as far as possible, students will participate in in-person experiential learning. This may include, for example, practicals in laboratories, studio work, clinical work and field trips.

Specific considerations include the following:

1. Where facilities and resources allow, experiential learning activities should be scheduled as frequently as is necessary for promoting optimal student learning.

In many cases, this will be weekly. However, experiential learning needs to be formally scheduled so as to prevent clashes with other scheduled activities.

2. Adjustments may need to be made to timetables and venue configurations to ensure that COVID-19 health and safety protocols are observed.

The use of facilities throughout the day (not only mornings or only afternoons) should be encouraged and supported.

3. A review should be undertaken by Schools that have experiential learning activities of how much time students actually need to spend in dedicated venues in order to carry out these activities.

For example, in the past, practicals were often scheduled for three hours. However, students might have spent some of that time reading before doing an experiment, or

writing a report afterwards. Thus the time that students are required to be in the laboratory may be much less.

4. Other forms of in-person educational activities may be scheduled for small groups of students in venues in which all COVID-19 protocols are followed.

This might include, for example, microteaching or physical performances. In-person classes may also be offered to small groups of students, particularly for interactive educational activities.

Assessment

Diversifying assessment is another focus area in our 2020-2024 Learning and Teaching Plan. Our move to an online mode of educational provision in 2020 provided an unanticipated impetus to accelerate progress in this area. Going forward, we have an opportunity to capitalise on a growing body of research and practice related to using a variety of forms of assessment to promote and measure student learning.

New *Senate Standing Orders on the Assessment of Student Learning* are being developed that will support the use of diverse forms of assessment. In that document, four categories of assessment are defined:

- Diagnostic
To identify students' prior knowledge/understanding/skills
- Formative
To monitor students' learning during the course and provide feedback
- Summative
To measure the achievement of learning outcomes
- Cumulative
To monitor and measure students' growth over time in component knowledge and skills, culminating in a product/performance.

Specific considerations include the following:

1. Student learning should be monitored regularly throughout a course, with useful feedback provided to students to help them improve their understanding.

As far as possible, this should be done remotely, drawing on the affordances of ulwazi and other technologies.

2. Where possible, the measurement of students' achievement of learning outcomes – summative assessment – should be done using a variety of formats during the semester and not only in a single, high-stakes assessment at the end of a course.

In many courses, the achievement of one or more of the learning outcomes can be measured at appropriate points during the semester, rather than waiting until the end of the semester. In addition, not all learning outcomes are best measured using the same

type of assessment. For example, the ability to identify and apply key principles to solve a problem cannot be assessed in the same way as the ability to find, evaluate and synthesise information from a variety of sources to construct an argument related to a particular issue.

3. Careful consideration needs to be given in deciding under what circumstances and for what reasons students should be required to write a sit-down, timed or end of semester examination as opposed to other forms of summative assessment.

While there are some aspects of some courses that may require synthesis of learning outcomes developed over an entire semester that need to be measured in a limited period, this is not true for all learning outcomes in all courses.

4. Where appropriate, cumulative assessment should be encouraged.

In this form of assessment, a large task is divided into components. Students work on each component and receive feedback and a mark for it, which constitutes part of their continuous assessment mark. The components are then integrated into a final product or performance, which constitutes a summative assessment. Examples of where this approach can be used include: a long essay or mini-research report, project, creative work, or portfolio of work accompanied by a reflective narrative. Cumulative assessment is less prone to breaches of academic integrity than some forms of summative assessment, particularly those which involve right or wrong answers to questions that are the same for all students.

It is recognised that there are challenges in preventing breaches of academic integrity when assessments are conducted remotely. However, international experience is demonstrating that there are no effective technological solutions to prevent this if students are determined to cheat. More effective interventions include education, positive peer pressure, support and changing the nature of the assessment tasks. Providing more assessment tasks of lower weighting also helps to reduce the pressure to cheat. In 2022 Wits will develop an Academic Integrity Policy, together with educational resources for staff and students to promote academic integrity.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Good course design, sound pedagogy and a variety of assessment tasks, accompanied by useful feedback, all contribute to a positive student learning experience.

Student academic support will continue to be offered by Faculty Teaching and Learning Units and by centrally coordinated online student support.

Business Intelligence Services (BIS) will continue to develop its Artificial Intelligence models of student persistence and multiple dashboards that enable Faculty Student Advisors and other relevant staff to reach out proactively to students who may need support.

For students who do not have good internet connectivity or a home environment that is conducive to studying, an online booking system will be put in place that will enable students to book a study space on campus for specific dates and times. Available venues will be centrally identified through the Property and Infrastructure Management Division (PIMD), including

venues that were used for large lectures in the past. A system will be put in place to ensure that the booking system and COVID-19 protocols are adhered to in the venues.

In line with focus area 6 of Wits' Learning and Teaching Plan, expanding innovative formal and informal learning spaces, we will also create, identify and resource a number of informal learning spaces across campus where students can study alone or with peers, have a snack, relax, access the internet and feel supported and encouraged to stay on campus for most of the day to study and connect to the university community. Other universities in South Africa and abroad have found that most campuses have dozens of unused spaces – foyers, stairwells, and other nooks and crannies – that, with the addition of chairs or couches and perhaps some tables, can easily become informal learning spaces. This work will be explored under the auspices of the new office of the DVC: Systems and Operations.

The Post-Graduate Affairs Office will continue to expand its academic support for students in the form of webinars, resources and other activities.

Counselling, both remote, and when possible, in-person, will be available for all students, UG and PG, as will support from the Disability Rights Unit and the Gender Equity Office.

A Student Employment Office will be managed by the Counselling and Careers Development Unit, which will enable staff across the university to post short-term employment opportunities on a designated internet site. Students will be able to search the available jobs and apply directly to the unit that is offering the job.

New first year students who have just completed secondary school will have had a very disrupted last two years of schooling. As a result, the transition to university will be even more challenging than normal. Wits will therefore run a 3-week, compulsory, structured first year transition programme for all new first year students called Gateway to Success. This programme will integrate academic and student life components. It will comprise a combination of academic content on ulwazi, digital and other academic skills, life skills and on-campus social, community-building and orientation activities. The transition programme will take place immediately prior to the start of the first teaching block in 2022. All new first year students will also be assigned to a mentor group, facilitated by a trained mentor who is a senior student in their faculty. The mentor project will be run by Student Affairs in collaboration with faculty student support units.

CARPE DIEM

From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Wits community, staff and students, has shown itself to be resilient and innovative. We have weathered lockdown and its associated constraints and challenges and have been able to not only continue to provide sound academic programmes and a great deal of support to students, but also to learn and grow. Teaching and learning under lockdown conditions have catapulted us into a new world, one in which we cannot do things the way we always did, and in which we must learn to do many new things. While this has often been stressful and tiring, it has also opened up opportunities for innovation, creativity and imagination, and at a pace we would not have thought possible two years ago.

We enter 2022 with much more knowledge, skill and experience, and better tools than we had two years ago, to be able offer good quality, flexible learning opportunities and support to our students. Carpe diem.

