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Stakeholders' Views on the Introduction of a Mature Age Pre-entry Support Programme at the University of Eswatini

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Abstract

Universities, the world over, continue to seek ways of enhancing access into university programmes for often marginalised groups. Mature Age Entry (MAE) programmes are often utilised as alternative admission routes to admit mature and working adults into the university. However, without adequate preparatory support applicants often fail the mature age entry examination and are not admitted. The study sought to examine views of key stakeholders on the need and nature of a pre-entry support programme for mature age applicants with the aim to come up with a suitable training model in the context of the university. The study utilised a convergent parallel mixed methods research design. A total of 40 stakeholders (representatives of relevant Government ministries, current students, applicants who were not successful in previous MAE examination, lecturers and university administrative staff involved in MAE examinations) were purposively identified to participate in the study through semi-structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. In addition to demographic information, the research instruments asked participants about the need or demand for the programme, programme structure, entry requirements, and training model, inter alia. Quantitative data were analysed through percentages using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS). Content analysis was used for qualitative data. The majority of consulted stakeholders supported the introduction of a pre-entry training programme to support mature age entry applicants prior to the examination. The identified content areas for support include English language, mathematics, sciences, and commerce subjects. The stakeholders advocated for a novel training model using blended, self-directed learning materials adopting the open and distance learning approach. //

The paper presentation will conclude by inviting conference participants to share experiences about mature age entry programmes from their different contexts. // Paper ID 2017

Key words: Mature age entry, open access, pre-entry support, stakeholder, university

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Institute of Distance Education (IDE) at the University of Eswatini (UNESWA) intends to introduce a Mature Age Entry (MAE) Pre-Entry Training Programme commencing in the 2019/2020 academic year in an effort to increase access and promote lifelong learning (Longworth, 2004) for mature applicants. This initiative is in response to the university's repackaged strategic plan of 2018 - 2022 which aspires to have "50% growth in student numbers on all programmes offered" by the university (University of Eswatini, 2018, p.16). The aim of the pre-entry training programme is to support and prepare MAE examination applicants in order to increase the pass rate in the examination which would in turn increase student enrolment into the various university programmes offered at UNESWA in general and IDE in particular. Increasing university enrolment through IDE supports the policy objective of the Eswatini's National Education and Training Sector Policy of 2018 "To optimise access to HE (Higher Education) through expansion/strengthening of open and distance learning" (Ministry of Education & Training, 2018, p.50).

The quest to provide access to more citizens is however faced by a number of challenges. The University of Eswatini has the challenge of limited infrastructure that resulted in placing high cut-off points for admissions consequently denying access to otherwise qualifying candidates. However, the introduction of open and distance learning at UNESWA in 1994 has given the university an opportunity to open access, and admit more qualifying students for different programmes. In addition to opening access through IDE, the university uses the Mature Age Entry route for students' admission. This route allows access to mature applicants who do not meet the requirements of six passes with five credits (Grade C or above) needed for direct entry.

Applicants who are admitted through the mature-age entry route are required to:

- be 22 years or older;
- have completed 'O' Level/SGCSE/IGCSE or equivalent with at least four (4) passes;
- write a MAE examination, not only for English Language, but also for combined subject areas in selected disciplines: Commerce, Science and Mathematics or an aptitude test; and
- attain a minimum of 50% in each paper.

The trend of applications received by UNESWA for MAE examinations, number of candidates who have passed and those who have been admitted for the last 5 years is shown in the Table 1 below.

Table-1: Admissions through MAE examination for the last 5 years

Year	No. of Applications Received	Percent (%) of Candidates who passed	Percent (%) of candidates admitted from those who passed
2015-16	263	20.9%	100%
2016-17	1976	6.6%	79%
2017-18	2699	10.5%	80%
2018-19	1007	7.3%	100%
2019-20	475	24.4%	100%

Table 1 shows that though there was an increase in applicants' numbers from 2016/ 2017 academic year, there is a sharp decline in 2019/2020 academic year. This decline can be attributed to the low success rate which might be a result of lack of support for the MAE examinations. The Institute therefore proposed to offer a Short-Term Training Programme for the candidates who wish to be admitted through the MAE examination, and this study was undertaken to support this proposal.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Assess stakeholders' views about the need and nature of the proposed training programme's structure and model
2. Explore challenges likely to be faced by candidates of the proposed training

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mature Age Entry: what is it?

Mature Age Entry is an alternative way of having access to higher education for people who do not have the relevant high school certificates to qualify them into university. Hillman and Robinson (2016) asserted that higher education is not just for school leavers, the 18-year-olds, but it is also for the mature adults with the basic secondary school qualification. According to Kenny, Kidd, Nankervis and Connell (2011), mature student is someone who starts an undergraduate degree aged 21 years and above. Mature study offers a valuable second chance to get the desired qualification for the world of work. And many universities have made an effort to increase access to higher education by strengthening this route.

Literature shows that statistics of students who access education through this route has gradually increased. For example, 23.3% of undergraduate students in Canada were mature students who were 25 years and above (Statistics Canada, 2013). Table 1 in this paper also shows that the intake through the MAE route has increased. These statistics show that there is a growing need for higher education by mature students. Countries like Ireland, Italy and New Zealand envisage a further increase in the population of mature students in institutions of higher learning by 2025 and beyond. Similarly, the University of Eswatini repacked strategic plan of 2018-2022 shows that widening access for increased student enrolment is one of its key objectives.

Stakeholders' views about introduction of new programmes

According to Sustainability Series (2009, p.4), a stakeholder is an individual or a group of people with an interest in the success of an organisation in fulfilling its mission. Freeman, Harrison, Wicks and Colle (2010) define stakeholders as a group of people that are influenced by the successes and failures of an institution, directly or indirectly. Institutions have basically two types of stakeholders who each play a critical role in improving the outcome of an organisation; these are internal and external stakeholders (Janmaat, McCowan & Rao, 2016; Matkovic, Tumbas, Sakal & Pavlicevic, 2015). Internal stakeholders are responsible for the daily operations of an organisation while external stakeholders are those people outside the daily operations of the institution yet have strong interest in the outcomes of the organisation. Matkovic et al. (2015) classify university stakeholders into curriculum stakeholders and professional stakeholders. Curriculum stakeholders are key informers and drivers of the content, method of delivery, evaluation requirements, and scope of the curriculum that qualifies for a certain profession. Educational institutions need a strong stakeholder engagement in their different activities, such as the introduction of new programmes, curriculum development, and programme review since stakeholders contribute invaluable information regarding the needs and requirements in educational processes (Matkovic et al., 2015). They describe professional stakeholders as having a wider interest in a specific profession, which include graduate attributes, work capabilities, trajectories for career development and other related competencies. In this study, curriculum stakeholders were involved.

In a study conducted by Matkovic et al. (2015) in the analysis phase of a curriculum development model at a university in Serbia, the results showed that collaboration with stakeholders provided significant recommendations, critique and advice in developing a curriculum model that was responsive to the needs of the community. Similarly, stakeholders' involvement in the introduction of the Mature Age Entry pre-examination preparation in the University of Eswatini was an important process. The participating stakeholders in this study

were involved in open dialogue through focus group discussions. Janmaat et al. (2016) report that involvement of stakeholders in dialogue is usually through qualitative interviews.

Challenges faced by mature age students

The increased number of mature students in institutions of higher learning has implications for all practitioners. To fulfil the desires of these mature students and enhance their experiences, lecturers need to understand their expectations. O'Carroll, Ennis, Loscher, Ryan, and Dixon (2017) observed that while mature students were self-motivated to learn, and were critical in their approach to learning, they also had challenges which mired their learning experiences such as lack of adequate funds for their studies due to family responsibilities, poor management of study time, and lack of organisational skills, among others. Montgomery (2009) argues that mature students perform better in their studies compared to their younger counterparts, and they bring in a wealth of experience to their studies. Heagney and Benson (2017) also noted that institutions did not give mature students adequate support to retain them. Universities therefore need to create a supportive environment for these students to succeed because access without success does not add any value to the education system and the society at large (Kenny, et al., 2011)

METHODOLOGY

Research design, sample and sampling procedure

The study used a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell, 2014) to simultaneously collect both quantitative and qualitative data, separately analyse the data, compare the results, and make interpretation as to whether the results are supporting or contradicting each other. Forty stakeholders were purposively identified based on their involvement in and relevance to the MAE examination. The stakeholders included representatives of relevant Government Ministries, current students from different faculties admitted through MAE, applicants who were not successful in previous MAE examinations, and university staff involved in this examination. Government ministries were the Ministry of Education and Training responsible for tertiary education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security in charge of the administration of aptitude tests in the country. University staff were from Faculty of Humanities, Commerce, and Science and Engineering; Admissions Office; University Planning Centre; and IDE. The involvement of stakeholders was essential to ensure relevancy, success and sustainability of the programme.

Survey questionnaire

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to solicit stakeholders' individual views about the introduction of the training programme. It consisted of demographic questions and scale-based questions on a five-point Likert Scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree about the nature of the programme and training model.

Focus Group Discussion schedule

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted to obtain in-depth information representing collective stakeholders' view. The FGD schedule was semi-structured and consisted of four focus areas: Need and reasons for wanting a Pre-entry training for MAE examination; entry requirements, programme structure, and training model as well as challenges. Stakeholders discussed all questions in groups.

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Scientist (SPSS) was used to analyse quantitative data using percentages. Content analysis was employed for qualitative data.

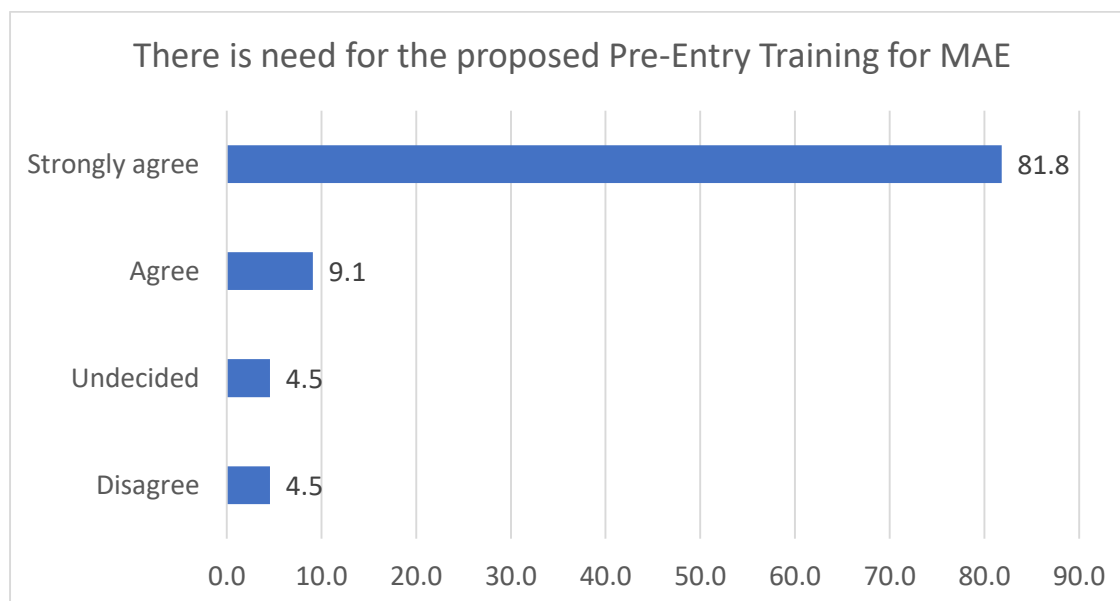
RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Sample profile

A total of 22 out of the 40 stakeholders completed and returned questionnaires yielding a response rate of 55%. A majority of the respondents (62%) were female and 38% were male. The respondents varied in age with a majority being in the 41-50 age bracket (36.4%) or 31 – 40 years (31.8%). Very few (9.1%) were less than 30 years while others were above 50. Their designation included lecturers which were the majority (59%), students (14%), and other representatives (27%). For the FGD, there were 25 participants, 11 males and 14 females, and again females were slightly more than males.

Need for the Pre-Entry Training Programme

Figure 1 presents the results about the need for the programme in percentages.



About 91% of the stakeholders strongly agreed or agreed that there was need for the pre-entry training programme. FGD results were consistent with the quantitative results as all groups were of the view that the pre-entry training programme should be introduced. Their reasons for supporting the change were that the ‘*Pre-training will give candidates a rough picture of what to expect in the examination, build confidence as students will know what they will be facing in the test, bridge the gap between the candidates last interaction with education content and exam*’ and hopefully increase pass rate.

Stakeholders’ views about the nature of the training programme structure and model

Entry requirements

Table 2: Entry Requirements

Statement	% Agreed (SA+ A)

The age entry requirement should remain 22 years or older	68
Applicants should have completed 'O' Level/SGCSE/IGCSE or equivalent with at least four (4) passes	82
MAE examination should consist of English language, combined subject areas in selected disciplines (Commerce, Science, and Mathematics)	73
Prior learning should be recognized	68

SA = Strongly agree; A = agree

The results in Table 2 show that stakeholders generally agreed with entry requirements but there was variation with regard to the age limit and recognition of prior learning as about a third disagreed or were undecided. Consistently, qualitative results from both the questionnaire and FGD indicated suggestions for modifications. Those were:

- The age entry could be 21 years due to the fact that most children complete school at the age of 16 or 17 years
- Consider relevant experience
- Prior learning should substitute the O'level, IGCSE entry requirements
- Also add papers for all possible relevant fields
- Have standalone papers such as math for commerce instead of finding a "subtle" and strong mathematics paper under a commerce
- The aptitude test should not be a criterion for admission but the subject papers. Students are not admitted due to failing aptitude tests yet they passed subject tests are put at a disadvantage

Structure of the Training Programme

The stakeholders were asked what subjects should be part of the MAE Pre-Entry Training Programme. They agreed with the proposed subjects as follows: English language (91%); Mathematics (82%); Combined Science - Biology, chemistry & physics (73%); Combined Commerce - Business Studies, Accounting & Economics (86%); and Aptitude or Programme-specific special papers (68%). Qualitative data indicate that stakeholders suggested that science subjects should be separated for purposes of preparation, and examination papers should be subject specific.

Training Model for MAE Pre-entry Training Programme

The stakeholders were asked if the training should be offered through Blended Learning. Figure 2 presents the results in percentages.

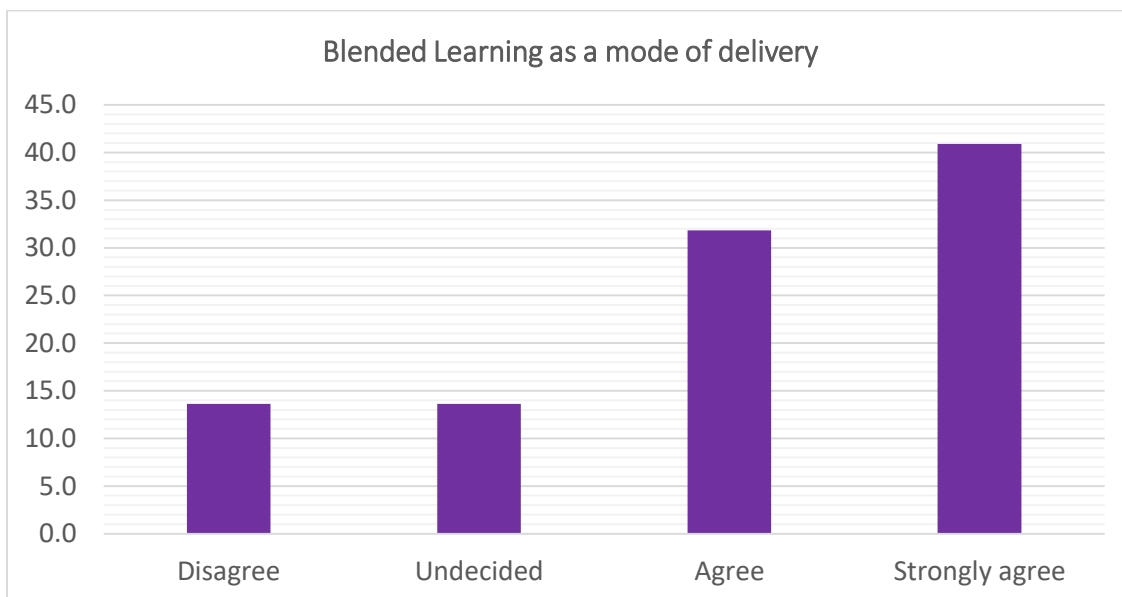


Figure 2: Preferred mode of delivery

About 73% of the stakeholders agreed or strongly agreed that the pre-entry training should be offered through Blended Learning. Similarly, during the FGD stakeholders unanimously supported that view. Their reasons for the confirmatory results were that Blended Learning brings about flexibility in learning and follows trends for the current generation of students which uses technology and social media.

Table 3 displays the stakeholders' responses about the period and duration of delivering the training.

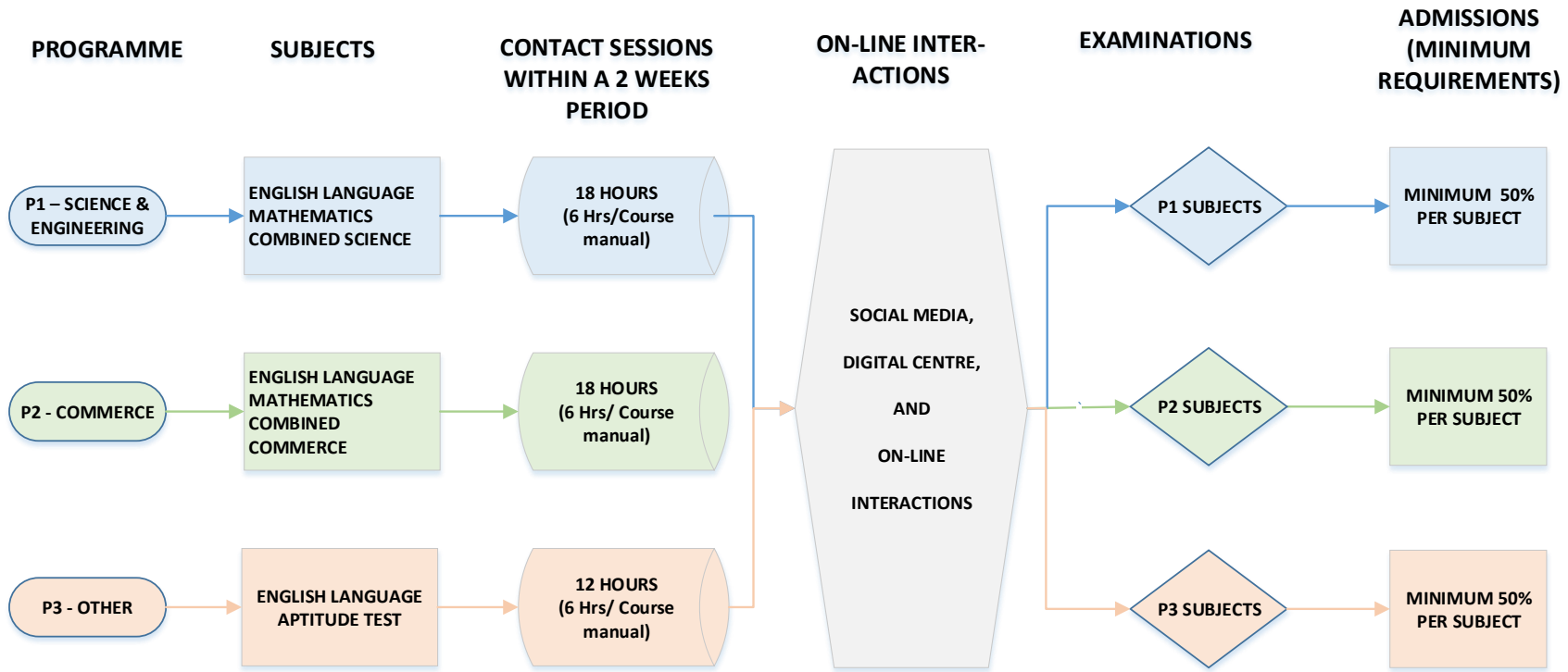
Table 3: Training period

Statement	% Agreed (SA+ A)
Training should take place during the first/second week of November (including study break)	64
Duration of the training should be two weeks	64
Within the two weeks, each manual (course) should be allocated 6 hours	68

SA = Strongly agree; A = agree

For all the items in Table 3, about a third of the stakeholders were undecided or disagreed with the statements on the period of training. During the FGD, the stakeholders explained that there should be follow up support after the two weeks contact sessions. Some were in agreement with the proposed November while others were of the view that the training should be offered in January. One group said '*November timing is not suitable because it is the busiest time in the institution and besides, we need manpower to coordinate this training*'. The reasons were that the training would be provided by the same course lecturers teaching full-time. While others argued that teaching in November would result into a large gap between the training and the examination which is normally written in January. Others said there should be more than one block sessions, support system from instructor remotely after block session, and remuneration for online support. The training model which still needs further interrogation by the Institute and stakeholders is presented in Figure 3 on the next page.

PRE-ENTRY TRAINING PROGRAMME MODEL FOR MATURE AGE ENTRY



Challenges likely to be faced by MAE pre-entry training programme

The stakeholders highlighted challenges which candidates for the pre-entry programme are likely to face. Those related to the mode of delivery, difficult level of the content, inadequate support from Instructors, and accommodation and travelling costs which might be incurred during the face to face sessions. They noted that there might be inadequate infrastructure to accommodate all students for face to face sessions. While online learning would allow them to learn from home, there could be no internet services. They added that since some of the MAE applicants are unemployed, they may also not have the necessary mobile devices to support their learning or access learning materials.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that an overwhelming majority of the stakeholders supported the proposal of introducing a MAE pre-entry training programme to support applicants in preparation for the MAE examination. This finding might be attributed to the stakeholders' involvement with the MAE examination and awareness of the persistently low success rate. The positive stakeholders' view could be an indication that the new programme would be relevant and meet the needs of the community (Matkovic et al., 2015).

The results show that stakeholders still feel the proposed training model could be improved by considering the suggested modifications in entry requirements such as further reduction of entry age from 22 to 21 years, introduction of subject papers for all programmes of study, and not using Aptitude test results to determine admission or not. The university has to consider recognition of prior learning or relevant work experience, learning from other institutions of open distance learning who consider this criterion. This assertion emanates from the fact that recognition of prior learning is one of the guiding principles of open and distance learning which the Institute has to uphold.

The training period and duration also emerged as an issue. It is important that stakeholders reach consensus on this issue particularly those involved in the teaching who are the implementers of the programme. Such decisions should be taken to the best interest of the candidates who are the client and their satisfaction becomes crucial in determining the desired impact and sustainability of the programme.

The findings also revealed anticipated challenges which candidates might face during the MAE pre-entry training both the face to face session e.g. travelling and accommodation costs and online interaction e.g. high internet costs or inaccessibility of the internet. This finding of MAE students experiencing challenges is similar to the findings of O'Carroll et al. (2017) who averred that mature students had challenges such as lack of adequate funds for their studies due to family responsibilities, poor management of study time, and lack of organisational skills which hindered their learning experiences. They contended that lecturers should create a supportive environment for these students to ensure success. Access without success is no good for the individual, institution and society, they argued.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper concludes that the participating stakeholders supported the introduction of the MAE pre-entry training programme. They agreed with most of the proposed aspects of the training programme but suggested modifications which the university has to consider pertaining to entry requirements and training model ensuring involvement of key stakeholders. It also emerged that trainees are likely to experience some challenges during the training. The following recommendations were made:

- The management of the University of Eswatini and Institute of Distance Education in particular should work towards implementing the pre-entry training programme commencing in the 2019/2020 academic year.
- An internal stakeholders' meeting should be held to deliberate on the concerns with regard to the training model and make the necessary adjustments to have a training model suitable to the context.
- The Institute should find ways of assisting students bore the costs that might be incurred during the face to face session or online interactions such as negotiating for cheaper internet bundles with service providers.
- The university should reconsider the decision of not recognizing prior learning or relevant work experience as an entry requirement. Prior learning is one of the guiding principles of open and distance learning.

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